

# Children of the Damned; First Draft

01

## The Ides of March, some year

This wasn't planned.

Not even a little bit.

I was given a talisman and told it would work. I was led to believe that the mission upon which I embarked would be a simple affair of driving off the creature with the talisman and that would be that.

I would be home by supper.

I was not, in fact, home by supper. In fact, I'm still en route to supper as I write this. Though, I'll perhaps arrive a number of suppers from now. The way has been long and hard and I am tired.

Sore.

Broken.

The engagement with the creature was not a "that would be that" kind of engagement. It was ...

Strenuous.

Troublesome.

Tiresome.

EXHAUSTING.

The monstrous thing held its ground despite all I did. I attacked in a flurry; it would slip away from my attacks. I readied a powerful attack; it parried. It seemed to sense the next move I would make well before I even decided my course of action. It was harrowing. And yet I fought on. I fought on, doubting my abilities, shaken to my foundation. I fought on because that was all I knew to do. There was too much at stake. Too much to lose. I wasn't going to allow this horrendous being to have its way to the extent that I could disallow it.

I was prepared to give over my life in this struggle.

In the end, the creature's will broke. It receded. Withdrew. I had won! A hard fought, strenuous, and exhausting battle was won. Despite the incredible joy I felt at the victory accomplished, I was tired to the very depths of my soul. Everything in my being screamed to rest. To sleep. To withdraw.

The battle had lasted almost a week.

Six days after I arrived, I was returning home. Famished, worn thin, nearly broken, I was on my way home.

Am on my way home.

The road has been challenging as well, though not nearly as tiresome as the battle with the creature. However, I am still recovering from the ordeal, which has made the challenges that have arisen all that much more tiresome. I long for my bed. I long for the rest that will return to me all of the energy that has dried up and awaits true regeneration. But I have some way to go yet, until I can slumber long, deep, and in peace.

---

## The Ides of April, later that year

The abbey draws ever nearer. I can feel it in my bones, keenly. There is anticipation in my arrival, as the approach has been very slow, arduous, and difficult. I am not one to be given over to the sword, but I did, repeatedly, on almost every leg of our journey home. So much so, that the armorer among us has taken to calling me “Monsignor Warrior.”

I’m no warrior! Despite this, the armorer has made for me a gift of a sword.

We plod slowly across the wastes, and I am grateful that the masters sent me along with this small contingent of warriors. They have proven to be most proficient in their line of duty, and cheerful companions.

Very cheerful.

They were not witness to the monstrosity I dealt with, to the deep emotional hell into which I was plunged time after time after time. How fortunate they were to be commanded to stand guard and not to partake in the battle directly! Their smiles and their laughter warms my cold and bitter heart; this in turn gives me hope that I will return to experience joy. Eventually.

For now, I sit in silence and appreciate the banter and laughter that surrounds me. Every day has brought violence, and yet the camaraderie holds strong. The armorer’s nickname for me even warms my heart! I feel welcome among these strangers, and it slowly draws me back to understanding what that felt like before I left the abbey.

I’ve come to realize something very vital on this return journey: I may have won the battle; I may have beaten the beast back; but I did so at great sacrifice to myself.

A part of me is missing. Or, perhaps, several parts. I struggle to recall what those parts were, often enough. Then I sit among these warriors who fight day after day and night after night—sometimes I among them—and feel like I can return those pieces of myself.

And those pieces come. But they don't settle. They simmer. They slip and parry. They lie just beyond my reach. I am able to recall what they feel like, but I no longer experience them.

What have I become?

What am I *becoming*?

The abbey approaches. Or, rather, we are approaching the abbey. I can feel it, keenly. It is there, and we will soon arrive.

---

## April 17th, that same month

We arrived at the abbey today.

Something is wrong.

Something is wrong; arriving didn't feel right. I didn't feel as I hoped I would upon arriving, filled with relief, filled with gratitude.

Instead, I arrive wary and suspicious. Paranoid, even. Something is wrong, and I don't know if that something is me or something in the abbey. The wrongness pervades the depths of my soul; it sits in my bones; it lingers at the edges of my thoughts. At any moment, I shall be accosted by the wrongness of which I'm aware. And yet, nothing strikes; nothing comes. We arrived and were well received; I was guided to my rooms with all the pomp of a returning hero; nothing in my room was amiss. Nothing amiss in my room, in the quarters, in the abbey. I am exhausted in my entire being and want for nothing more than sweet, deep, slumber. But I cannot sleep.

I have lain awake for hours.

The sword I was given, I clutch it tightly to my chest at the hilt. The sword lies in its scabbard, but already I am well versed in drawing the blade on a breath, as necessity drove me to learn on our return journey. The air around me swells and dissipates, teasing me to believe that there is something and nothing there, all at once. But this has always been the air in my chamber. The wrongness is hiding behind the moving air.

The wrongness is hiding behind the stone walls. The wrongness is hiding deep within the abbey itself.

---

## April 27

I have watched my pious brethren closely since my arrival. They're all entirely unaware that something is wrong in the abbey. I have spoken to some of my closest and wisest of associates; I have asked them to test my sanity. They all corroborated one another's diagnosis: I am as healthy of mind as the best of them. I speak to them of the withdrawal of the experience of joy; they tell me I need to sleep. I speak to them of echoes that arise from the marble; they tell me I should be more pious. To every concern I voice, they provide a reasonable enough excuse.

Reasonable enough.

I am unable to convey the dreary depths of sadness I feel. I am unable to share my experience of absolute hopelessness. Returning home was supposed to alleviate me of this depression! And yet, here I am, more than a week home, and continue to lie awake at night, clutching my sword, and willing the darkness to recede.

I've come to believe that it is by my sheer will alone that darkness is kept at bay. I understand this may be madness, but I cleave to that belief; for what other reason would I be made to remain conscious, despite the exhaustion I am consumed by? I grow more and more mad by the moment, and yet here I lie, awake and alert, and ready to combat the wrongness that may, at any moment, come forward.

---

## May 1

I saw the being again last night.

The creature with which I fought. It returned to my dreams and conversed with me as if I had never driven it away. The first time this happened, I bolted immediately awake. Now, I sit with the creature in my dreams and let it spew its nonsense until it is spent and withdraws of its own accord.

Except last night.

The creature drove me into such fury! Fury as I have never experienced before! I believed myself beyond experiencing any real emotion after the original ordeal. But here was anger and frustration rising to fury in such a torrent as I had never known was possible. Here was the extremities of my experience with emotion, the extremities and beyond. I howled. I screamed. I cried. I mourned. I even laughed, maniacal though it sounded. I awoke to incredible pain and terror, feeling it in such intense closeness. Ah, but the intensity of feeling! I could naught but find pleasure in it, being so far removed from emotion as I had been for the past several weeks. I reveled in it.

I was consumed by it.

And when I was spent, the creature withdrew of its own accord.

I knew I had not banished it with my tirade, my words, my feelings. It had watched me be overcome by sensation and then had left of its own volition. And in its withdrawal, I was left with the knowledge and understanding that this creature had done worse than end my life. Far worse. This creature had embedded within me a darkness that was all consuming. I was a former shell of myself, and I knew it. And within me, that darkness was growing to fill the space I once fully occupied.

The ordeal with the creature had left me tainted; it returns to me in my dreams to taunt me as such. I thought I had won the ordeal. I now think otherwise.

The wrongness in the abbey grows everyday. It grows within me. And I feel helpless to stop it.

## O2

### Summer Solstice

The sun hangs directly overhead. Its heat is intense. It drains me, sapping me of every last mite of strength that remains. The air lies heavy around me. I am parched. I am hungry. But I am committed to my penance.

This thing that lives inside me, this darkness, this emptiness, it grows. It consumes everything from within: nutrients, moisture, joy, fear, anger. Anything that arises within is completely consumed, and it grows.

All that is left to me is to starve it.

Countless days and hours I spent attempting to make myself understood by my superiors, all to no avail. I feared this darkness would overtake the abbey. I sought desperately to explain the danger that existed among us, within me! Naught more was done than to relegate me to the most obscure tasks, taking me well out of proximity to my brothers.

At least this was beneficial, though not in the way my superiors anticipated. They sought to isolate me to silence me as a punishment for my doubt; I knew my isolation meant that I could not infect any other with the darkness I bore. The all-consuming emptiness.

The isolation, however, only served to make me even more paranoid.

I said my prayers often and with great fervor. I took part in innumerable cleansing ceremonies. I fasted. I performed my duties diligently and with great piety. Or, rather, with as great a piety as I understood. Nothing helped. No light from above poured into me, breaking the darkness and filling the emptiness. No warmth erupted from within to melt the ice that grew thicker around my heart, my bones, my soul. Every waking moment was one small step, ever descending into deeper darkness. Nothing I did in all I was taught helped. I began to lose hope.

Now I stand firm in what I believed was my final willful act to find healing. I have left the abbey that I might not infect those around me, my loving brethren, with the darkness I carry. I'd read of the Buddha, Siddhartha, sitting beneath the bodhi tree until he achieved enlightenment. I'd studied the teachings of Christ and knew he had gone into the desert for forty days and withstood the best the devil had to offer. My own desires were nothing so lofty as to find transcendence nor to face off with the devil. Nay, my plight was one of inner healing. I wanted merely to feel again. Surely I would be granted this meager wish at such great exertion as I would make in my fast.

Christ fasted for forty days; I would fast for eighty if I had to! Anything to make this darkness within recede. Anything at all.

Now I stand firm, the sun above me, desolation around me, hunger and thirst within.

And the darkness.

The emptiness.

The void.

I will fast alone in this wasteland until this void is starved; until this void recedes of its own volition, no longer able to sustain itself on my thoughts and emotions.

---

## Thirty Days Later

Weak fool that I am! In my hunger, in my despair, I broke my fast. My desire to live has overcome my desire to defeat the Void, and now I feel completely powerless over myself, over this thing. It has won, taking me over until my very will has been subverted to its own.

My faith has not saved me. Nay, my faith has damned me! "Banish the creature," they commanded. Like a fool, I rushed to obey. And I failed.

I thought I won. I thought I had beaten the beast back, weakened it, then banished it. I know now the truth of my experience. Knowing I was exhausted, it led me to believe that I had defeated it. While my guard was lowered, it sank its teeth into me, its claws. It took hold of the very fiber of my being and has been unraveling me ever since. Now I stand overtaken, unraveled, completely undone.

And oh so absolutely *famished*.

I pray that no one will find me, that they will all stay far away, that I may not share this curse with anyone. I pray for this, while simultaneously willing someone to arrive that I may feed on and infect them. I want to survive. I want others to suffer alongside me.

I want to prove to my superiors that my condition was real, by way of making them experience it directly. Oh, what a wretched, bitter man I have become! None so strong in the faith would

succumb to these thoughts, and yet here I stand, broken and mad, wishing ill toward my fellow man.

I once prayed for healing. I once prayed for light, for warmth. Now I pray that I might be struck down for the evil thoughts I harbor, for the ill feelings I am drawn to, and the darkness that thrives within. I am naught more than a hallowed out vessel in which the void resides.

And I hunger so.

---

## Autumnal Equinox, Several Years Later

The weather has turned cold, but it disturbs me not. No cold compares to the ice within. Cold, rain, ice, nor snow affects me. I have left my place of isolation in search of food, and as I have traveled, the seasons have changed.

I have not traveled far, though where I have been, I have left a deeper wasteland than when I arrived.

I am completely insatiable. In my wake are streams of bodies, individuals whose lust for life I sucked dry and swallowed whole, leaving them naught more than empty husks and shadows of their former selves. With no pomp, and no pleasure, I drained each and every human I came across. At first unwillingly. Unwillingness, however, soon turned to desperation. Now, with each individual I consume, I realize ever more clearly that there is not enough of them in the world to drive this hunger away.

I once hungered for vegetables and grain. Now I hunger for emotion, and any will do.

---

## All Hallow's Eve

A grand festival was taking place in the locale through which I passed on the eve of All Saint's Day. It is said that on this eve of all eves, the veil is thinnest between the living and the dead. I cannot say if this is true. In my state, I felt I was long dead; there was no veil where I was concerned. I walked among the living, appearing as warm and lively as ever, but empty and dark within.

Cold and dead inside.

The festival was set to begin at twilight, in a clearing in the wood adjacent to the small town. I had arrived in time to be invited to the event. The small town was deeply superstitious and the townspeople all encouraged each other and their guests to partake in the festivals to promote

the general welfare of their locale. Woe is them! For by inviting me to join in their festivities, they have unwittingly damned themselves. The demise they wished to avoid, they had attracted.

Still, there was a still small quiet part of my former self that hoped against hope that I might yet find freedom at the hands of a healer during this festival.

This, of course, did not happen. There is a reason why hope was packed away among all the evil things in Pandora's Box. My hope led me to the festival, in which a veritable feast awaited: a feast for the void within. I am ashamed to admit it, but I consumed so many people that night! I was stealthy at first, taking individuals from the fringe and luring them away to their demise. But with each one, the emptiness only grew.

I needed more.

I grew careless. Then reckless. Dropping any guise of civility, I overtook any one I immediately came upon. Soon, there were townspeople at my back with torches and pitchforks, clubs and knives. But I had grown strong by then. Driven by the immeasurable darkness within, I was forceful beyond reason. Though many stood against me, I broke them, one by one. I broke them and fed on them.

What a feast! The terror at one point reached a frenzied crescendo, and at its peak I experienced for the first time the sensation that others have described as an orgasm.

Nothing could possibly feel as good.

However, this feeling didn't last long. Nay, no sooner had I experienced it, the feeling quickly receded, swallowed whole by the void. I looked around to see how many people remained to be consumed. What lay before me was a field of empty husks, soulless eyes, drained bodies. What lay before me was yet another wasteland.

I looked down to find a young man attempting to pry my arms away from an older woman. The woman still lived, she was conscious, she was filled with fear! There was yet a meal to be had. The young man, however, was filled with fear, anger, and sorrow. Tears poured from his eyes as he sought to liberate this woman from my grasp. He was crying, shouting, begging.

He was begging.

He begged me to let her go. He bargained with me, offering his own life in exchange for hers. For the first time across those long and heavy years, I felt warmth. I released the woman and took him into my arms. I felt joy rise up from within. Was it sacrifice that would free me from this inner icy hell? Without waiting to consider this, I sank my teeth into the young man's neck.

I was immediately flooded with the purest, sweetest, most raw of emotions; emotions the likes of which I had not experienced in what felt like lifetimes. I drank them all in. I was an empty vessel ready to be filled to the brim and experience life whole once again. Yet, I realized before I



emptied him completely, that this was no different than the hundreds that had come before. And just as with those hundreds that came before, I was returning to him some of the darkness that resided within. I realized this and fought to do the young man a favor by ending his life. I drank with more fervor, willing to empty him not just of this warmth, but of his very life's blood.

Sensing my intention, realizing this would not be another victim, the void stirred within and came rushing out of me and into the young man. I was powerless to stop it. In one swift rush of emotion, I felt warmth well up within me. Had I passed on this curse?

The young man fell limp in my arms. I carefully lowered him to the ground, ashamed that I was unable to spare him from the hell that I carried within. I kneeled down beside him and wept, out of shame and terror for being so weak, but also out of joy that I could weep once again, a joy in which I was also ashamed.

The young man stirred a moment later. He was lucid, his eyes were intelligent. They were not the eyes I was used to seeing in the victims I had left strewn behind. His eyes were full of life. I suddenly became excited. Could it be? Could it be that the curse was lifted? I dared to hope. I dared to believe that I was free. I would pay for my crimes, but I would do so willingly if it meant that the curse was broken and the creature was gone.

My hopes were dashed in the moments that followed. First, my joy and shame were slowly eaten away by the ever-consuming darkness lying within. Second, the young man didn't appeal to me in the same way he had before I had eaten him. He was lucid, true, but he was empty, being consumed from within as well. We now both carried the malady. We now both carried the demon.

The void within had lessened dramatically, but this did not justify my sharing of it. I knew that regardless, the void would continue to consume all from within and grow to its former size. This young man and I are now naught more than incubators for an incalculable and insidious evil.

03

## Some years later, decades maybe

The young man walked beside me, head held high, posture impeccable. If there had been any ill will toward me, the young man never once exhibited it. Over the weeks and months that we moved together, I had witnessed in his character such astounding honor and valor. Our conversation, strained at first, had burst wide when he came to realize I shared the darkness he carried within. When he learned of the amount of time I had spent with the void consuming me, his face radiated such sorrow and pity. Though he struggled with the emptiness himself, there was still some empathy remaining, and he spent it on me.

Oh what foul luck, that I should make a companion of one who was a far better human than I! I, who had laid waste to hundreds of people over the years of surviving under the curse of this darkness, I deserved no pity! Yet there he sat, emanating sorrow. I felt it; I could smell it.

In the beginning, I once raged at him, demanding he reveal his hatred of me. His response? That he held no such feelings of me, but instead was grateful that I allowed him to take the place of his mother. He thought I was a wandering demon, and that bargaining was his only means of reaching me. I replied that I was no demon, just a man made into a monster.

To this day, he believes I am some demi-spiritual being.

Maybe I have become something supernatural. I am certainly something preternatural. Both he and I. When the darkness flooded into him, the young man had taken on strength akin to my own; his eyesight, hearing, and sense of smell were becoming keener.

We could communicate telepathically.

Not clearly defined thoughts, more impressions and sensations than anything tangible, but it was a means of communicating that was extrasensory. We hunted by impression, often determining our course of action through a series of complicated combinations of impulses that we continued to refine over the years.

There was a camaraderie between us that I had not felt since before I faced the demon, decades ago. Ages past, it seemed, I was a friar in an abbey. I was surrounded with others like me, brothers in the faith who had taken their vows alongside me. Vows that did nothing to prevent my fall from grace; my fall from humanity.

I sometimes wondered if my superiors knew what would transpire, if they anticipated the situation to turn out the way it did. Surely I was a willing fool in whatever ends their schemes worked toward. Whether it was to banish a demon or return with it, I had been prepared to do anything that was asked of me. I only wish now that I had known the costs before accepting my assignment. I went the fool; I returned and brought back darkness. I had done nothing to lessen the presence of hell upon this earthly plain. Instead, I carried hell across the face of it, allowing its tendrils to seep into the very hills and stones where I laid my head to rest.

Now, two carried this darkness across the face of the earth. Early on we made a pact that we would refrain bringing others to share our fate unless the need was too great. And should we be driven to it, to be most discerning of who we turned. Feeding upon the souls of the vibrant and living left a touch of the darkness upon them. Some recovered; many did not. Regardless, they were incapable of spreading the darkness themselves. Those that recovered felt their emotions return, albeit slowly. Those who did not simply withered away. However, leave any random person with the power to spread this emptiness at will? That was playing dice with the continued survival of this entire world. All it would take was some petty, angry, despondent, or

evil being to set off a chain of events that would see this devouring inner presence proliferate unmitigated. Best not leave this to chance, we decided.

Thankfully, in pouring the darkness into the young man and sharing this emptiness with him, my hunger for feeling had dramatically dissipated. Where once I had hungered for the souls of my fellow man to the extent where I consumed several per day, I could now go days without succumbing to the hunger. One life would sustain me for some time, and more and more often, I was able to draw only so much as to satiate myself for the moment, to stave off the hunger just long enough to break myself away from the meal before taking too much. My young companion, however, did not fare as well. Though he was not nearly as famished as I had been in my early days, he still fed daily, and more than once on most days.

But no matter how frequently we fed, the darkness was ever present, the emptiness ever consuming, the void ever growing. It may be years yet, but we will one day each bring another in to share this curse.

That is not now, though. In the present, we are deciding where to sleep for the night. We have walked and ridden far, and our own bodies and those of our horses were spent. We would pick a stable and bed down for the evening in some wayfare tavern, far removed from larger settlements. We needed to do so quickly. The sun would soon rise, and with it, its ever-present energy-sapping rays of light, of hope.

I no longer dared to hope. The famous poet would later say, in centuries to come, “abandon hope, all ye who enter.” Abandoning hope was the first indication that I was truly losing my humanity. It was one of the last bits of emotion that remained to me, and I willingly released it. I could feel no joy at its release, but neither would I ever again feel betrayal when hope failed me. The rising sun often reminded the young man and I that we were once capable of experiencing warmth within. It was a painful reminder, painful to the point of it being tangible, somatic. It made my skin crawl. I felt ill. The young man described similarly unpleasant reactions with regard to the sun. The sorrow we shared at the recognition of emotions lost to us was often too great to bear. We mutually decided to avoid the sun whenever possible.

The dawn arrived, and we slowly settled into our rooms as the light broke over the horizon. I’m caught off guard while in the process of drawing the shutters closed. As light pours in through my window, as I face the rising sun, I am filled with immeasurable dread; never again will I experience happiness, joy, warmth. I finish closing the shutters, drawing the curtains, and I am off to bed. Tonight—or today, rather—I will sleep like the dead.

I may as well be. I am naught but cold, dark, and empty within. I am a skeleton in a coffin six feet interred, a shell and a void, walking around in the guise of a human, complete with human speech and mannerisms.

I sleep a heavy sleep, and dream heavy dreams.

---

## Later that night

We made a serious mistake.

We moved carelessly. Our direction was to move ever forward, never turning, never circling, and certainly never returning to any place we had fed. The risk of being discovered was too great. Yet here we were, acquiring lodging in a hamlet long forgotten by us.

We, however, had not been forgotten by its residents.

I awoke to the smell of a small crowd approaching the inn. It was this scenario I avoided at all costs; the bloodlust was often too great when so many people were so closely packed and worked up into a frenzy. The aroma of their anger was delicious, and it stirred the monster within. Before I could be overwhelmed by it, I was up in a flash, gathering my things and rushing to the young man's room to rouse him.

The young man was already awake and alert. However poorly I slept due to the ever-present darkness, the young man had not my many more years of acclimating, and so often slept far worse. If he slept at all. He was awake and ready for action when I entered his room, though not the action I preferred he be ready for.

He was hungry. He was ready to feed.

I expressed to him the trouble we would find ourselves in and emphasized the details of our sure victory over such fearful beings. He eventually conceded his bloodlust and we left, slipping out a service entrance while avoiding coming into contact with any human soul. The night was our domain; we moved comfortably in it. Once out of close quarters, we were able to slip past most people with ease, arriving at the stables and removing our horses with some trickery, distraction, and a great deal of subterfuge. When we were far enough from the village to avoid arousing attention, we mounted our steeds and flew away, riding like the wind to relieve ourselves of the arresting desire to consume the lives of those we rode away from.

As we rode, I was filled with premonition. I saw us riding directly into a trap laid by neighboring villagers and countryside dwellers. I saw us being bound and caged, humiliated and tortured. Then burned alive. And as we each burned, the void within only grew with more fervor.

What could we possibly do to avoid such a future?! The prospect of being tortured and humiliated bothered me little when compared to the pitched fervor of hunger of the gnawing void within. Given the choice, I would spare myself from the experience of both.

We rode through the night, and I turned this vision over and over again in my mind. Finally, as the first rays of light of the following day cast themselves over the horizon, I resolved to finally do what my companion had so wisely suggested quite some time ago: we go into hiding.

Permanently.

## O4

The chanting increased, the shouts and cries condemning me to death. I was pulled roughly from the cart in which I stood bound, unable to see through the hood tied firmly over my head. The burlap felt rough against my neck and forehead, but I had only a moment to consider it before I was hoisted onto a wooden platform. The shackles that bound me felt increasingly heavy. The weight of the iron was the only thing that dragged at me, however. The angry cries fed the darkness within. Though I carried this cold, deep, dark, void within, I no longer felt tired. The emotions swirling around me gave rise to the ever-present hunger within, driving me onward. Blinded and bound, I was guided to my demise, and I bore it all with patience and serenity. I felt nothing. I was not tired. This was my fate, and without fear upon which exhaustion could feed, I would have felt at peace, if not for the hunger gnawing within.

I was secured tightly to what felt like a giant pole. What felt like blocks of wood were being piled at my feet. The workers all made comments toward one another while hurling curses toward me, but I was unbothered by them. I knew what I had done, no matter the reason why .i had done it. Judgement had arrived and I was ready to receive it. I cared not who dealt the killing blow.

With wood piled high to my thighs, I sensed the workers move away. And then further away still. A priest had been summoned to oversee these affairs, and he spoke now, making the final convocations and condemning me to death as an agent of the Devil himself. With his final words, I felt heat move into my vicinity from all around me. There was a loud crack as many of the blocks of wood surrounding me picked up the heat. In another moment, I was consumed by the flames.

And I felt nothing.

The heat was naught more than a nuisance. This I could bear if it would silence the hunger within. But the hunger only grew. The crowd's emotion surged in elation as they watched their monster burn. And this elation whipped this deep dark hunger into a frenzy. I wasn't dying! Nay, I was becoming angry. The emptiness allowed me a taste of what I once felt, and it was welcome. Any emotion was welcome.

The crowd was elated, pleased, ecstatic! So much delicious emotion rolling and swaying around me, and the anger growing within. I shifted. I tested my bonds. The iron was becoming soft in the heat. Nay, perhaps I always had the strength to break free from these shackles. Whatever the case, the hunger within reached a fevered pitch, driving my anger to extremes. In a moment, I was free. And in the next, I feasted.

I ripped away the ashy tatters of the burlap hood and leaped for the closest humans which stood as close to the fire as they dared. The first few fell to me with no struggle, entirely unprepared

for the onslaught. The next few were vaguely becoming aware that something was wrong but unsure of how to act. They fell to me next. As the crowd began to understand what was happening, the joy and elation, the ecstasy in celebration quickly turned to terror. Those first few humans were delicious. But as fear consumed the crowd, the feast became ever more delectable. I charged into the midst of them like an animal, tearing and rending flesh and lapping up blood. Their monster was loose and there was nowhere they could escape to.

I came upon the priest as he was attempting to flee. The coward threw anything and anyone into my path to get away. Woman and children were pulled into my path but I had my sights set. With a few strenuous bounds, I caught the priest. I wrapped him tightly in my arms, pulled his head to one side and tore into his neck.

I awoke with a start on the cold, stone floor, sweating. Thank whatever gods remain that it was just a dream. I breath slowed down as the night terror passed and I was once again my cold, empty self. I looked around the dimly lit chamber. The young man was slumbering not far from me, blood pooling beneath his face as it trickled from his open mouth.

A pool of blood.

I bolted upright. Though my skin was nearly as smooth as it always was, I noticed the faint traces of lacerations and burns, deep wounds that had been inflicted and were slowly healing. The fact that I felt fear rising within did not bode well with me either. No no no no no! I leapt from my place on the floor and rushed to the door, throwing them open in face of the sun, caring not for its light bearing down on me. I stepped into that light and looked around.

Carnage was all around me.

Bodies littered the area across the sweep of space that was visible to me. There must have been hundreds strewn across that field. I sank to my knees, a wail of despair rose from my lips, anguish welling within. And to my deepest shame and regret, I relished and reveled in the experience of these emotions. I vacillated between sorrow, joy, and shame.

And just as quickly as these emotions arose, they vanished, swallowed by the void. I sat there, hips to my heels, an empty husk of who I once was, unable to feel any more sorrow at the atrocity I had committed. That we had committed, true, but I played a part. All these people, they did not know of the all-consuming darkness within. They were all blissfully unaware of the insatiable hunger that guided my every movement, that drove my every behavior. In their ignorance, they knew not the monster they dealt with. They sought to punish me, not realizing that I was already being punished day after day, hour after agonizing hour. They did not—nay, *could not*—understand this coldness being so great as to render their own machinations meaningless. Despite this all, they failed to end me. I saw sweet release on the horizon, and it was mercilessly pulled away from me. I watched the hunger consume me. I watched it take control, my own will weak and defenseless against it.

There was a time when I could have cried at committing such an abominable act of violence. But I felt nothing. The slightest vestige of emotion was always summarily snatched away from me. Unless I had fed to the brim, and then fed until I was bursting. I was a monster, and I was powerless to stop myself.

The door opened behind me. The young man slowly stepped out into the sunlight. I knew the exact moment when he, too, realized what he had done, for I heard his knees hit the stone. If he felt anything at all, then he too was dealing with that horrid mix of revulsion, sorrow, joy, and shame. If he felt nothing, then he was experiencing this through the memory of sorrow.

I turned to look at him. He met my gaze as he always did with those dark, empty eyes. I felt his psychic impulses searching for confirmation that this really did happen. He too did not want to believe this. I shook my head. Disbelief, denial, delusion, they would only prevent us of acknowledging our own part in this massacre. I shrugged. We maintain some level of our humanity by taking accountability. He nodded. That was that.

We went through the painstaking process of cleaning up our mess. One by one, we checked the bodies for clothing we could wear and valuables we could use, then piled them over the unused wood that remained from the day before. After a few false starts, we lit the funeral pyre. I do not know if the young man prayed to any god; I never asked, he never spoke of it. As we stood there, watching the pyre burn, I made a silent prayer in the tradition of my old faith. May God watch over and protect these poor souls as they cross to the other side; a journey which, I was now sure of, I would never be allowed to make myself.

We returned to the small stone hut to sleep through the few hours that remained of the day. We woke at twilight, and busied ourselves breaking up and spreading the ashes of the bodies over the blood-soaked grounds. We worked diligently; though we had caused much destruction, I prayed that something beautiful would grow from out of the ruins. When we finished, we gathered our things and some horses and wandered away.

## 05

We traveled east, moving higher into foothills and mountains wherever we could. We bartered and sold the extra horses and what valuables we gathered as we progressed. Though it didn't bring in much, what we managed to collect kept our horses fed, which kept us moving. For years, we had moved from one place to the next with naught but the clothes on our backs, the horses we rode, and spare change for food and lodging. This had changed somewhat after our recent massacre. Our shared desire was to find a secluded region in which to settle, one totally devoid of humans. To this end, we procured a coach and a wagon, along with all manner of tools and supplies for building a hut or house; whatever it was we would eventually call home.

Settlements thinned out, the further east we moved. Once we noticed it took us days to pass from one village to the next, we began to look for a likely place to park our meager caravan. Our

journey took us high into a mountain range, through a slender, overgrown pass. As we carved our way through, we found an abandoned road that split from the main pass and ended on a wide plateau overlooking a great valley below. Hamlets littered the countryside, but appeared to be a safe enough distance away—only the most desperate hunger would drive us to cross the divide and feed from any of these places.

We fervently hoped that our commitment to seclusion would prevent us from seeking out food through even the worst of the hunger pangs we felt.

We busied ourselves to clearing away as much of the flora and debris that littered the small expanse. Once this was accomplished, we set to unloading the wagon. With the area clear and supplies prepared, we were ready to construct the shelter under which we would live out our final days, whatever those days may look like. However, one problem remained.

Neither of us knew how to build a house.

After some time discussion on how to approach the issue, we agreed that perhaps it may be best to hire artisans to accomplish this simple—yet formidable, due to our lack of competency—goal. We gathered what coin we had and I set off in search of the closest settlement whereby I might find craftsmen willing to come and do the work. Though secluded as the plateau was, the young man remained behind to keep an eye on our supplies and feed the horses.

Finding willing craftsmen was no easy task. The mountain range in which we desired to settle was said to be haunted, or worse, the domain of an incredible evil. It was not lost on me, this irony of the coincidence that the young man and I would choose to settle in a region that was whispered of in deep superstition. If only these people knew the truth! If there was no great evil that existed there before, there certainly did now. In spite of the reputation of the region, I postured as a man of faith. Conversing over flagons of mead and wine in taverns and inns late at night, I haggled with the villages, claiming I would work to ward away evil if only they would help me get settled where the evil appeared to be concentrated.

I was met with such absolute disbelief and fear. Some people laughed at me. I took no ill feelings from these responses. First, feeling anything was well beyond me now, so long had it been since I last fed. Second, it was difficult to speak with conviction about which I had absolutely no belief and having little to no exercise in spreading falsehoods. I may have once been a man of faith, but that was a lifetime ago. But if only they knew! Warding evil may not have been the truth, but in helping us establish ourselves in such a secluded spot, I believed these people would be helping themselves be rid of us. I dropped the act of clergyman and instead appealed to their fear: with their help, I would receive the machinations of the evil on their behalf. I would, in essence, be their sacrifice to whatever evils had taken hold in the mountain pass.

One settlement found this agreeable. Almost too agreeable, but I thought not much of this, as I was happy to have finally earned their trust and receive the help I so desired. They mounted a



team of several craftsman, their wives, and a few strongmen to see them safely arrive at the site and return upon this project's completion. Together, we made the arduous climb to the plateau.

Travel was slow, as I insisted that we travel only under the cover of darkness. I used the excuse that I suffered from a rare malady of the skin that made travel by day unbearable. Though there was some apprehension of traveling at night, they conceded to this arrangement. I was puzzled at their willingness to so easily go along with my requests, but decided I would find in due time why they acquiesced with naught much more than puzzled expressions and shrugs.

Conversation was lively and hope swirled all around us. It was difficult to temper the hunger within, but I managed to rein it in and maintain a serene posture. I was, at first, confused as to why this troupe felt so, but then all was made clear: man's greed knows no boundaries. It soon came out that this excitement was due to the prospect of reopening trade routes. If the evil in the mountains could be dispelled or at least satiated for a time, then the village would prosper as a result of gaining access to routes and goods that no other settlement had access to.

This posed a problem. If this mountain pass became a regular trade route, none passing through would be safe from the hunger for long. I could let this play out—allow the trade routes to reopen, and over time, after enough travelers had disappeared, watch them close again out of the sane superstition and fear. This was not agreeable to me, however. I would need to find a solution.

This excitement was short-lived. While the troupe had started off with a great deal of energy, their mood turned somber as the weight of superstitious fear settled over their shoulders across the miles.

After a few days travel, we arrived at the plateau. All was as I had left it. The young man was close to the edge at the end of the plateau, seated in meditation. I would not have been surprised to find that he done so the entire time I was gone, breaking only to feed and exercise the horses. However, I did not ask. He was calm and controlled, and the horses were unharmed.

We did what we could to keep the hunger contained when we were in full control of ourselves.

The troupe circled their wagons close to the entry of the plateau and began to unload supplies. It was nearing dawn when they had finally unloaded everything and settled their camp. In speaking with the foreman, I pointed out our wagon, that the young man and I would be resting there during the day and provided clear instructions that we were not to be disturbed, as this malady from which he and I suffered was worse in daylight and spread easily if not closely contained. This aside, they were welcome to work day or night, or both as they saw fit. Any concerns could be raised at twilight or just before dawn if they chose to work only during the day. This only served to heighten the superstition and fear in the foreman, as was evident by his expression, but he schooled himself well enough and relayed the information to the rest of the troupe. Finally, we all settled down as dawn broke.

The craftsmen were stellar at their jobs. It seemed that we had no sooner arrived than they were nearing completion of our abode. While it was no grand affair, it was still far more than the young man and I had considered. Together with what we had provided and what they were able to source from the surrounding woods, they had built what appeared to be a humble tavern. The building sat close to the plateau's entrance, and contained a spacious common room, kitchen, and a number of rooms—far too many for them all to be of use to just the young man and I. Alongside this building, open-air stables were erected. Our horses would have shelter, our wagon and carriage would be safely stored, and the young man and I could live quietly away from bustling locales.

Yet I was suspicious, and I brought my suspicions to bear upon the foreman. Appealing to his superstition and sense of self-preservation, I made it clear that the evil residing in these lands was not to be taken lightly. They had built a wayfare place for travelers to rest on their journey from one side of the mountains to the other. However, no such rest would take place. Any who stopped en route would be in grave danger of death, or worse. He laughed a little fearful laugh at the idea that anything could be worse than death. I told him that on the morning after the completion of the building, we would have an accord with the troupe, and I would show them myself what “worse” looked like.

That morning arrived. As the craftsmen awoke and the troupe began striking camp, I appeared to them and cast off my cloak under the rays of light spreading over the horizon. The somber mood quickly turned sour; fear and terror clouded their faces at the sight of what I had become. Decades of hiding away from the sun, of reducing food intake as a result of altered cravings, and the outward expression of the inner turmoil I daily faced had changed me. In dark taverns and inns, under cover of a closely held cloak, it was easy to pass myself off as another human. But out here under the sun, all misdirection was lost. My body, once plump and round, was now emaciated, my skin pulled taught across my bones, my cheeks hollow, my eyes empty and lifeless. My skin, once darkly browned from my work in the gardens of the abbey, was now white and ashy, though smooth and almost translucent. I heard gasps; I heard names. Some called me ghost. Some called me demon. All crossed themselves.

I admonished them, explaining that I kept the evil at bay by allowing it to feed upon me. By remaining alone on this mountain, the young man and I kept the darkness from traveling into the nearby villages. And all at once, an idea formed in my mind: if they intended to reopen and repurpose this pass, they would need to provide the evil thing with sustenance. Once a month, bring us two of the worst among you, I told them. Those condemned to death should be brought to die on this plateau. Do this, I told them, and we would work to keep the pass open and safe for travel.

The foreman said nothing. Instead, they abandoned their camp and fled the plateau. I sensed their fear, and struggled to school myself, to keep from flying after them and dragging back their slowest.

Later that week, I awoke in the evening to find two men, hooded and bound, chained to a stake driven deep in the center of the plateau. They lived. They wept. I sent an impression of these men to the young man who soon joined me. Taking one man each, together we fed. Once we had drained them of all feeling, of all life, we threw their bodies onto a small pile of wood and burned them, a fire that was seen far across the wild expanse of the countryside that lay in the mountains' shadows. We stood beneath the full moon, watching the fire burn, unaware that we shared this moment with countless others who wondered at the fire from below.

That night, I did not know what we had begun, but it had begun. We had created something beyond our control. Or reckoning.

## 06

Our plan worked like a charm! The young man and I remained at our plateau, venturing out only to forage or exercise the horses. Otherwise, anything we needed was brought to us on the full moon of each month. The mountain pass was reopened and travelers and merchants all passed through unassailed. Villagers across the countryside whispered of humans-become-monsters as part of a great sacrifice that was renewed on the full moon of each month to keep the evil in the mountains at bay.

The fire we lit to burn the corpses we fed on served to feed these rumors, creating a sort of frenzy across the country. As all manner of goods poured into region, as villages turned into towns, we began see bonfires sprout up in celebration as we lit our own. Sprinkled across the countryside, we saw more and more fires alight with each passing year.

We began to see supplicants arrive from the villages and towns below. Individuals who had personally gained from the increase in trade or whose family's lives had improved. We were careful to stay away from these supplicants, though their high emotion sparked fevered hunger within us. These supplicants came and went, often bringing gifts of their own. As the months passed, more and more of these pilgrims arrived and moved on. We had need for naught.

The village that had originally worked with me to create our homestead had grown wealthy; their faith in my endeavor had proven lucrative. They regularly sent emissaries, former craftsmen-turned-politicians to appeal to me to open the plateau as a resting place to the merchants that traveled over the pass. These dealings took place at twilight, and only with the former foreman and his two closest associates. Everything was relayed by them between myself and the young man, and the other interested parties that traveled as representatives of their respective locales.

I resisted at first, but as part of their appeal—with no mention that this was part—they began to deliver twice as many bodies on the full moon. I was reproachful during their next visit; lives were no simple a thing as to be thrown away in exchange for something so arbitrary as a waypoint, I admonished. They argued that as their village had grown, so had criminal activity

increased; the threat of being brought to the mountain was a powerful deterrent, but only so far as that threat was made real. Most were suspicious of what we did here with the criminals provided to us. But as they never returned, nor were ever seen or heard from again, it was a suitable threat. Commit the worst atrocities and be fed to the devil, they told their constituents.

They weren't entirely wrong.

The hunger relished the extra helping. When the young man and I fed from our second person each, there was joy and pleasure sprinkled in among the subtle pacification of the hunger that occurred after each feeding. I was driven by this teasing of emotion to finally acquiesce to a rest stop. But certain conditions would first need to be met.

The tavern they had built would not suffice as our place of residence; we could not guarantee the safety of any traveler so long as we resided next to them. Nay, a crypt must be built. I haggled with the ambassadors to have a dwelling built into the mountainside. They argued about the extent of the work. I argued the temptation would prove too great otherwise; their trade would shrivel up as quickly as it had begun once merchants learned they were unsafe to stay at the waypoint. Along with this request, I included a series of very specific demands, many of which dealt with the security of the crypt and the handling of the criminals that were delivered for our sustenance. These discussions were made ever more complicated by the arrival and inclusion of priests from various factions. Apparently, as news of our great sacrifice spread, so did our notoriety. These people were worshipping us as heroes. What madness! And yet, here they were, emissaries of a growing faith whose practitioners wanted to do their part in the continued success of this region.

After much negotiation, the ambassadors eventually agreed to have a stone hut built that would open to a stairway leading into the depths of the mountain. They would build it in the middle of the plateau. Furthermore, I demanded that we have full privacy on the full moon when the offerings were provided. This brought up more requests: the priests wanted an altar built at the sight of the fire on which the fire would be raised. And they wanted to preside over it. I adamantly discouraged this, appealing to their sense of reason and self-preservation. Fool that I was to think any person of deep religious belief would be reasonable! I should have known better; I was once one among them. The priests were determined. I voiced my concerns about the extent to which they would be involved. But as everything was working according to plan and our hunger was kept at bay, I eventually allowed it. Send us women to hold the ceremonies, I told them. They at least would have compassion over the souls offered to us in supplication. The priests fervently agreed. Temple coffers were opened across the region and numerous locales contributed to the construction of the crypt and the altar. Construction was soon begun, and it was not long before the work was completed.

During construction, the young man and I made camp high above the plateau, where we could better control the impulses that originated from the hunger within. We watched from afar, with our heightened senses, all that was being done on the plateau. Each month on the night of the

full moon, the plateau was made deserted save for the four criminals bound to the stake close to where the altar would be built. The young man and I would slip down onto the plateau, have our feast, then leave the bodies to the women who arrived to light the fire and cast the bodies into it. When construction was completed, the young man and I struck camp and stole into the crypt.

At first, the arrangement worked splendidly. The offerings were chained to an iron ring directly in front of the door of the hut. Living quarters were erected for the women that would serve as priestesses far from the hut and the tavern. A gate was raised that separated the tavern from the rest of the plateau. There were only two standing rules with regard to taking rest or residence on that plateau: no man could step onto the plateau unless they were delivering the humans to be sacrificed, and the plateau was to be abandoned on the night before the full moon, when the young man and I would feed. Two simple rules to which adherence should have been easy.

For a while, they were obeyed. Travelers of all stripes would step off the path and remain a night or two at the tavern before moving on. They were warned not to cross the threshold established by the gate. The keepers of the inn were hardy folk from the town which had originally built it, and were clear in their instructions to guests. They rotated often, with no set of keepers remaining for more than a fortnight at a time. As part of our agreement, a small portion of their profits were turned over to us. In addition to this humble sum, we required that criminals who were brought as sacrifice have their belongings sold and that money kept on their persons as added penance for their crimes. This often amounted to very little, but every so often, someone of rank would be revealed as vile enough to be delivered into the mountains. With our needs being few, our coffers grew quickly.

However, this drew unwanted attention. As our coffers grew, so did the reckless courage of a few locals. On one occasion, we caught a few men attempting to gain access into the crypt. Even during the day, when our slumber was deepest, our heightened senses picked up the exertions of men as they worked to broach the seal of our stone hut. In a fury, I unsealed the door and the young man and I set ourselves loose upon them. There must have been at least a dozen of them. We made short work of them, tearing them apart and eating their souls as they desperately attempted to flee.

The women who served as priestesses had witnessed the entire affair. Afraid of what the men would do to them, they had shuttered themselves in. Upon hearing their howls and cries of pain, they had come to witness their plight. The young man and I noticed this and were mortified, despite the rush of emotions and vibrancy we felt at having fed on such a fine meal. We dropped the limp bodies we held and stood staring at the women who stared at us in return. I expected them to run screaming.

I learned to never underestimate the strength of devotion of the faithful. The young man and I, once heralded as heroes, became their gods that day.

One of the women slowly approached. I could sense her apprehension; I could smell her fear. The young man and I signaled to each other through our psychic connection, and I was comforted that we were in agreement to not bring harm to these women. I attempted to send comfort in the same way to the woman who approached, unaware that I was trying to communicate with her as I had communicated with the young man. Though I did not know if my impressions came across as intended, there was a noticeable change in her demeanor. She stepped forward with a little less fear, a little more confidence, and when she was only a few feet away, she sank to her knees and lay prostrate before us. The other women followed.

The young man and I just stood there, under the hellish sun, unsure of what to do. Finally, the first woman rose and asked what we required of them. Speaking plainly, I told them we wanted the heads removed and the bodies hung around the hut, as an example to trespassers. The heads should be put on stakes and placed at the threshold between the hut and the tavern as additional warnings to any who would dare consider stepping across. At the next full moon, I gave them permission to burn the bodies and the heads with the next sacrifice. And I gave them permission to tell whatever tale they found fit to tell with regard to the bodies of robbers.

This seemed well with them. The young man and I returned to our slumber. At twilight, I rose and stepped forth from the crypt to see if my desires had been fulfilled. The women were clean and precise; the area appeared as if no struggle had taken place, with the grounds cleansed of blood and bone. The bodies were nailed to wooden slats that were raised against the four sides of the hut. The heads were raised at regular intervals along the threshold to our portion of the plateau. I could see the wary eyes of travelers as they paused entering or exiting the tavern, taking in the gruesome display. Though I was cloaked in the shadow of the mountain, my figure was still visible in the moonlight. I felt the fear of these people as they quietly moved around the grounds of the tavern and stables. The young man came to see the women's handy work as well, and I could feel his amusement at their craftiness and at the travelers' concerned visages and fear.

This may be enough for now, I projected to the young man, but it wouldn't be an effective deterrent forever. With one final look around, I resolved to arrive at a solution before anything more malevolent occurred, and returned to the crypt.

## 07

An embassy comprised of various members from different towns soon arrived, full of concern. The priestesses were non-plussed at the requests to remove the heads from the threshold and the bodies from the hut. The men whose heads were so garishly displayed had attempted to defile the very grounds upon which lived their gods. They reminded the townsfolk of the work their gods did to hold the darkness in the hills at bay.

This did not sit well with the townsfolk. Many considered abandoning the offerings altogether; who among them still believed evil spirits dwelt in these mountains? There were, however, a

few among them who were present on the day following the completion of the tavern. They remembered the beings that had revealed themselves. They remembered the malady that lived a stone's throw away. They knew what was at stake should they terminate their agreement. And they held sway over the group. They spoke of ill-tidings and unknown consequences should they fail to fulfill their end of the bargain. Would they all return to the lives of fear they endured before the lighting of that first bonfire so many years ago?

The townsfolk, though uncomfortable, conceded that nothing untoward had slipped down the pass in recent years, that whatever spirits existed in the hills seemed to be appeased. The priestesses reprimanded the ambassadors, calling them impotent in their ability to provide a suitable defense. Despite their best intentions, men with no regard for the well being of their towns and countryside were able to trespass against their living gods in the most vile of ways. Some of the members present were family of the deceased; they cried out against such claims, refusing to believe their kin would arrive with hostile intent. They repeated their desire to have the heads and bodies removed from the area. Standing their ground, the priestesses assured the townsfolk that come the next full moon celebration, the bodies and heads would be removed and offered in supplication alongside the offerings that were delivered.

The kin became heated; the rest of the delegation worked to bring peace to the negotiations. While there was general agreement that the offerings would continue to arrive, there was concern about posting a guard. A growing concern among was how much they would be expected to give up and provide as the years wore on. The initial excitement of their growing wealth was beginning to wear off; ingratitude and greed were rearing their heads.

The two groups separated and decided to continue discussions the following evening. This was all related to myself and the young man by the lead priestess later after that first night of discussion. I relayed to them the importance of finding a peaceful path forward. Over the many years I lived with this gnawing darkness within, I had done what I could to minimize harm to my fellow man. I worked tirelessly to separate myself from them, to spare them the knowledge of my existence, to spare them the experience of my hunger. The hell into which these people would be plunged would be worse than they could ever imagine, should this hunger reach its fevered pitch and drive me from this remote place to feed.

Do what you can, I encouraged the priestess. See that they see. The very fabric of this world relies on it.

The following night, the delegation and the priestesses met once again. There was, however, no bargaining. The townsfolk asked, once again, that the heads and bodies be removed, and that they would consider posting a guard, that they needed to return with these terms and discuss them in their respective locales. They left that night, without further discussion.

This was ill boding. I sensed that things would turn foul. When the priestess finished relaying the message, I dismissed her, encouraging patience. Let us see what comes of these discussions.

That full moon, there was no offering given.

The young man and I stood before the empty iron ring. The priestesses had dutifully removed the bodies and prepared for the funeral pyre, but showed deep concern with regard to how we would respond to this conscious choice of the townspeople below. Though the hunger rose within, before turning to any rash decisions, I imparted to my companion instructions to search the pass. Perhaps the offering had been waylaid. The young man collected one of our horses and rode away. In the meantime, I asked the women to refrain from placing the bodies of these men on the altar. The fire was only to be lit when the original terms of our agreement were fulfilled. Terror gripped the hearts of the women at hearing this. A few of them were old enough to remember what life had been like before the pass had been reopened. Wide eyes bore down on me. I quietly assured them, both verbally and telepathically, that no harm would come to them on my part.

The young man soon returned. He had met with a few travelers approaching the pass and they all knew nothing of any such offering. One even recalled that the offerings had been canceled by their town. I became flustered. Frustrated. I could sense the young man's bitterness and desire. We shared a look. That we each could feel anything was not a good sign. How strong would these emotions grow before we were consumed by them? How far would we go to consummate these feelings and resolve them, to gain that sensation of pleasure once again, to vacillate between ecstasy, self-revulsion, and shame? I instructed the priestesses to return to their respective homes and deliver unto their people a message: so long as the fire was not lit on this plateau, the devils of this mountain would be allowed to run free. The women gathered their meager belongings and left that very night.

When the last priestess had left, the young man and I turned our attention to the tavern. The smell of joy and carefree pleasure was always emanating from within, but never was it so delectable as it was on this night. The anger that arose from within became so great, that despite our feeding on those dozen of thieves earlier in the month, I was ready to feast on whatever soul was at hand. I knew I was being manipulated by the darkness within, but I was powerless to stop it. Despite my years of seclusion and meditation, no resolve of my own could overcome the puppeteer's machinations, the control the darkness within was able to exert over me with such ease. Though I no longer felt sorrow, I yet remembered it, and I clung to that memory fiercely, though to no avail. With swift precision, the young man and I blocked the exits to the tavern, save the one that served as the entrance, and together we strode in, uncloaked.

The first to see us barely had time to open their mouths to scream before we tore into them. Shouts, cries, and curses arose, and one by one they were all cut off. It was over in a matter of moments: every man and woman had their limbs crushed and their tongues cut out, unable to do anything more than choke out their defiance as we proceeded to feed.



Well, almost everyone. We spared two children. They watched in terror as we each raised a body from which to drink, draining it of life and tossing it aside, moving calmly to the next. When we were finished, I knelt down and gave the children a message to pass on to their elders: each night that a fire was not lit on the altar, a pair of lives would be taken from their towns. The two children were then seated on one horse, which led by my companion who rode another. At the base of the mountain, the children were removed from the horse and sent off on their own. While they traveled, I set to work tearing the heads from the bodies in the tavern and raising them at the entrance to the plateau. I then piled the bodies along the side of the pass.

Let any and all travelers know fear, and refrain from stopping at this waypoint.

Two days later, the delegation returned with a contingent of soldiers. They arrived during the day, thinking to catch us unaware. I sat inside the door that opened into the stone hut, at the top of the stairs. The young man was not far, hiding in the hills to the side of the plateau. My awareness was spread out over the plateau, and what I sensed was echoed by what my companion saw. My companion, and also, my new pets. As the soldiers surrounded the hut, a great howling arose all around them. I sensed their fear, I *felt* their hackles rising. The scent of their fear was powerful! I was amazed at this extension of my own senses, and the vibrancy of it. I turned my attention to the leader and commanded it to strike. In the moments that followed, I was aware of a large pack of wolves streaming in from one side, pouring through the trees, running straight toward the men that surrounded the hut. The men turned to face this threat and were rushing to protect their charges when I felt the impression from my companion: he had unleashed his pack as well.

The soldiers had no chance. As they raised their arms to face the threat from one direction, they were overtaken by a threat from another. The wolves tore at their throats, at their limbs. The men fell at the fringes, though this bought the others time to regroup. It was then that I rose and opened the door, stepping into the sun to face the captain and the men that remained to me. I can only imagine what they perceived. I snatched glimpses of it through impressions of their emotion but was not yet strong enough in this power to piece together a full picture. Still, their terror revealed to me all I needed to know.

They knew they were damned.

The wolves had stopped attacking at our respective commands and were circling the remaining soldiers and those of the delegation. This was wrong. I knew this wrong, but what did that matter. Time after time I was carried away by the tides of emotion, incapable of exerting my own will over them. This time, it was haughtiness and anger. This time it was righteous retribution.

“And Jesus said to Peter, ‘he who lives by the sword dies by the sword.’”

No sooner had these words left my lips, any spark of hope that remained to these men was forfeit. For what power did their god hold over a monster who invoked the very scriptures

against them? Several fell to their knees and wept. The wolves kept any from running.

I approached the captain, slowly, quietly, methodically. I stopped a few feet from him, just out of his reach. I breathed heavily. He stared at me, terror and darkness clouding his inner vision. I turned from him and walked toward the delegation, my companion joining me from the opposite direction. Between the two of us, we pulled and fed on a few of them, watching as the others screamed and writhed, unable to fight, unable to run, unable to act. One among them managed to slice their own neck; I threw that one to the wolves. When the young man and I had eaten our fill, we turned away from the few that remained of the delegation. I approached the captain and told him in no uncertain terms that if he, or any other soldier for that matter, stepped foot on this plateau ever again, they would witness this carnage take place in their very towns.

I instructed them to leave the bodies of the fallen and admonished them on future action. Any further communication would take place through their temples. And we expected our offerings to begin again, at sevenfold our original ask. They turned and left without another word.

## 08

The wolves were not my idea. The young man broached the topic as we considered how best to deal with the aftermath of our massacre of the tavern guests. Dogs had for centuries served as man's guardian and protector. Why not train a pack of dogs to be our guardians ourselves?

I was doubtful of the efficacy of this suggestion. My first, very human, concern was for the well being of the animals. I feared they may prove to be too much of a temptation to have near. My companion countered with the knowledge that we kept horses that remained strong and healthy and were largely unaffected by their presence. Likewise, there was a small group of women that had lived in close proximity, and we had managed to refrain from consuming them as well. So long as we fed regularly, the young man argued, those in our vicinity and in our care remained untouched by the evil residing within.

They were fair points.

My second concern was how we would go about training them in such short time. Fearing that we may eventually become dependent on the land around us, the young man admitted to experimenting with feeding upon smaller animals. I was incensed, or rather, my mind recoiled at learning of this. But he assured me that he spared the animals any suffering; as they were small, he consumed and killed them quickly. What he was most reticent to impart was that he had also played with turning a few of the them. I would have been angry were I capable of feeling anything; angry and repulsed. The young man could sense the direction of my thoughts and was immediately penitent. Though he knew it had been wrong, he had experimented anyway; there had to be a way to end this malady, to kill the demon within. What he discovered

was at once fascinating and terrible: if he turned a creature, he could destroy it by taking its head off.

The memory of revulsion is what I experienced at learning of this, though I felt nothing. I inquired as to why I hadn't felt the change myself, explaining the outflow of the darkness that occurred when I turned him. He shrugged, describing a similar experience but it being on so minuscule a scale as to hardly be noticeable. Speaking as if this was the most casually topic to discuss in the world, he ventured to suggest that the larger the creature, the greater outflow. The idea sickened me, though of course, I felt nothing. Yet he was adamant: let us turn a wolf and see. We keep it contained and if it lies out of our control, we destroy it.

I asked him why he hadn't divulged the information on how we might be destroyed. He responded by telling me to examine myself closely, that I already knew the answer to that question. So I did; of course, this infernal being that resided within kept close control of our actions and manipulated our motives. The young man and I had naught but the illusion of autonomy. We were in control insofar as it meant our continued existence. This had been proven time and time again. But this also raised another question, for the young man destroyed the creature he turned. The difference, he told me, was impulse. The moment he created it, he destroyed it. Comprehension came swiftly; for he or I to kill one another or ourselves required premeditated effort. It would never work.

We were truly damned.

All this time, I had held on to the final vestiges of what remained of my humanity, hoping against hope that I may one day be freed from this prison. The longer I lived, the more I fed, the greater my desire to find a solution to my plight. I had even carried with me the talisman I was given so long ago, eager to find in it some repose. I knew I had not exhausted every resource available, but I feared returning to the church to discover that my former superiors had intentionally created the monster that I became. In the halls of our libraries existed innumerable tomes that dealt with the occult. I could return and seek assistance, but I feared to be captured and made use of for whatever machinations they dreamed, should it turn out true that this was their intended course.

What did it matter that I hid? That I ran? If they had, indeed, set this series of events in motion intentionally, it would only be a matter of time before I was found out and they came for me. Word would travel far of what the massacres we had committed on our way to this once secluded spot, and then again of the threat we posed to the communities that thrived below us.

Nay, all that remained to me was to accept my plight.

Oh how weak of will that I was! Were these truly my own thoughts? Or were these thoughts the infernal machinations of the emptiness that resided within? I did not know! I was no longer able to discern what yet remained to me of my own free will and what was held well within the grasp of the darkness. I stayed up that night in vigil and prayer. I sought clarity; I wanted peace!

But no clarity or peace was to be found, not that night, nor across the decades prior. In the morning, I gave the young man and his abysmal idea my blessing. It appeared I had resigned myself to embodying the hunger fully. Whatever remained of my humanity slipped away that afternoon as we caught and turned a pair of wolves.

The wolves healed quickly; partially due to our attempts at minimizing how much damage we did to their bodies, partially due to already having awareness of the process. As they came around, the memory of sadness gave way to fascination: while I was not able to control the animals' impulses, I was able to direct their attention and influence their actions. The wolves maintained a level of agency similar to my companion and I, but would bend to our will without too much effort on our part. Furthermore, the hunger was once again dramatically reduced, now having four forms to thrive on instead of only two. We set about testing the limits of our command over the animals, and quickly learned we held very little unless we impressed our will upon them greatly. However, with some practice we were able to bind them to the singular purpose of servitude. I felt strongly that our bonds with these animals would improve over time. Satisfied with what we learned that day, we set about turning several more wolves and weaving together our own packs through the night.

The events of the following day have already been relayed.

With the captain and his men, and the remaining members of the delegation gone, we set about cleaning the plateau. We spared some of those not yet dead so as to feed them to the wolves, letting them absorb what life force yet remained. As each beast satiated itself, the young man and I felt satiated ourselves. Of course, this feeling of satisfaction did not last—it never did—but this provided us with the knowledge that any one of us that fed, man or beast, fed us all. This was an important detail I failed to understand in my earlier days traveling with the young man; I realized I was able to keep the hunger at bay for many days at a time, not because I had become more proficient at schooling the hunger, but because the hunger we shared was being fed when the young man would feed. This feeling of satisfaction was extended to us both.

We decapitated the bodies once they were drained completely, and piled them on the altar. We then commanded the wolves to wait on the far side of the plateau while we burned down the tavern. The wolves lazily padded over to the edge, settled down, and spent the afternoon and early evening grooming themselves and each other, and napping.

## 09

We made good on our word. Despite the massacres on the plateau, caravans continued to cross the pass; we sent our wolves to harry the unwary merchants, those who thought they could spare themselves any trouble by simply avoiding the plateau. We impressed deeply upon the wolves that they should return with no more than two bodies, and to refrain from injuring anyone else however possible. It was unnecessary to impress upon them that they should protect each other; the darkness within would see to that, beyond their own survival instincts.

Fear spread of the growing danger in the mountains. It didn't take long before the caravans began traveling with armored guards. Townspeople began sending hunting parties into the pass to keep it clear of the wolves. This worked to our advantage as, for the time being, there was no need to travel down out of the pass to claim our victims; they were unwittingly provided to us. The hunting parties quickly trickled to a stop, and with them, the caravans.

The settlements may not have starved from the ended trade, but unable to keep the darkness in the mountains at bay, they would be forced to flee the region or die trying to stave off the killings and kidnappings. This time, their adversary was known to them. I had tried to remove myself from the world of man entirely. Failing that, I had tried to be kind in my dealings and clear in my actions. However, nothing would satiate the greed of man, and their greed and pride had forced my hand. I would show them that there was a hunger far more insatiable than their greed.

Their greed soon gave way and their pride soon gave out.

The next full moon, our priestesses returned, bloody and broken, but with fourteen captives in tow. Working alongside the women, we chained the captives to the iron ring and then helped the women get settled. We learned that upon returning to their respective locales, the women were teased and berated. The temples had closed their doors and there was nowhere to turn. Fearing for their lives, they admonished the townsfolk to heed their warnings and offer supplication to the gods on the mountain. For this, they were beaten and starved. When travelers and merchants began disappearing, when hunting parties failed to return in full, when trade dried up, only then were the temple doors thrown open once again, the priestesses reinstated, and the offerings taken up once again.

I looked into their fearful and weary faces. I saw pain reflected across the lot of them. My companion and I were silently conversing through it all, and we came to an accord: gathering the women after they had settled, we offered them a choice. Live as humans, and we would provide what protection and succor we could, or cross the divide and become like us and be able to protect themselves.

The women were largely interested in the transformation. I went to great lengths to describe what they would be giving up and what they would be receiving in return. I described the hunger in detail, explaining the dissolution of reason and ego in the process, how even in that moment I was unsure if this was a boon given consciously of my own true volition or directed manipulation of the darkness within. They looked on us with terror and awe; would they become the very thing they feared?

The women unanimously accepted. They described the terror they experienced in being cast from their homes, in being abused and belittled by the communities they once cherished. The people below will only answer to monsters, they said; and so, they were prepared to become the monsters those people would answer to.

It seemed my transformation was complete; I no longer cared to protect humanity from this darkness within.

I turned them that night. Fourteen women; fourteen captives. I showed them how to feed, how to take life completely, how to absorb the essence, in much the same way I had taught the young man. The feeling of a deep hunger satisfied filled us all to the brim. Such elation and ecstasy at such a meal! The wolves howled in delight, the women flushed with pleasure. It lasted for no more than a moment, but what incredible bliss that moment was. We relished in its memory, and then the wailing began. The women were becoming aware of the terrible sacrifice they had made. Some sank to their knees in a hollow gesture of sorrow. Others pleaded for us to end them. I shared my thoughts with them through silent impressions: there was no turning back. There was no end. I warned you. You insisted. Now you are damned.

We all were.

I eventually cut the wailing short; we had work to do. There was the matter of our agreement with the people down below. Though monsters we were, we would hold to our part of the bargain. The offering had been made and consumed. Now the fire must be lit. Working together, the women, and my companion and I tossed what remained of the bodies over the rotting corpses already piled on the altar. Together, we gathered and prepared the wood for burning. The wolves leapt and ran around us as we combed the forest for tinder and fire wood; they lounged before the altar as we stuffed kindling in and around the bodies and piled the wood high over them. And when the fire blazed, there arose such a foul smell, we were all forced to back away. The stench soon passed, however, and we stepped to the edge of the plateau, looking over the countryside below us.

One by one, bonfires rose from the various towns in response to our own. The covenant was carried out and made complete once again. Were I able to feel anything at all, I would have felt such deep sorrow. I had lost my way. I was no longer human. I was no longer compassionate. Once, long ago, I was a man of cloth in service to my fellow man. Now, I stood far above my fellow man, demanding their servitude. Were I able to feel anything at all, I would have felt revulsion and horror, anger and sadness, and such unfathomable pain. But I felt nothing. Not one of us standing at the edge that night felt anything at all. We watched those fire alight with no joy. We stood together, a coven of monsters, hollow and empty, puppets of a will that transcended our humanity and bent us each to its will. The fire consumed the bodies as the hunger consumed our souls.

In truth, we were all damned.

## 10

The next few years moved forward slowly. In accepting my station and situation, so did I become acclimated. In contrast to clinging to my humanity, in which I was hollow and forlorn

in my memory of empathy and willful desire to *feel*, I became stoic and steadfast. I no longer shunned the sunlight. With the rekindling of the fire came a renewed faith among those who resided below us, and a new contingent of priests and supplicants made their way to the plateau. Though the women dealt with these pilgrims directly, the young man and I no longer hid. To witness beauty was to observe the rays of light as they poured over the edge of the plateau with each sunrise, as well to appreciate the fiery tapestry of the evening sky with each sunset. Oh how I had missed the sunlight! As I no longer mourned the loss of my feelings, so did I no longer despise the sun.

Little by little, fear once again gave way to promise. The people of the valley below were thriving, and were devising ways upon which they might further capitalize on their successes. With goods of all kinds arriving through the pass, the people had become industrial, creating and exporting their own goods and services, which in turn gave way to even more riches. Towns grew into small cities. Small cities grew into larger ones. With success comes the peculiar feature of attracting all manner of people, some with benign motives, others with malevolent ones, and all with hope. We could sense it all in the larger caravans that traveled through the pass.

We on the plateau held a similarly peculiar influence in the livelihoods of those residing below. It is a rather strange thing to be living gods to a large community. With the supplicants came delegations with all manner of requests, most often for our blessings over one project or another. These we dismissed out of hand. What control could we exert over the machinations of man lest we be involved in them all, everywhere? Nay, we admonished them to take stock in the rule of fate: build however best they could and let events carry on as they would. This soon became a general rule across the land. We quickly learned that anything we said or did would be repeated, twisted, contorted, interpreted to meet the needs of the moment. We learned to say little when these delegations arrived.

We did, however, provide some support where their primary trade route was concerned. We had spies everywhere, and regularly sent out the wolves to patrol the pass, keeping it clear of brigands and ruffians who thought to make easy sport of the passing caravans. Trading hubs were responsible for the safety of travelers approaching the pass on either end, but all were confident in the safety of traveling through it. As a token of gratitude, we often found silver lining the pockets of those committed to us as offerings, cartloads of trinkets made of gold and precious stones, and lavish clothing. This was at first a humorous gesture. Of what need did we have for these riches? This soon became somewhat of an annoyance as these gifts slowly took over a good amount of space in our crypt.

It did feel nice to dress in fine clothes, however. Never once in my life had I ever experienced this luxury. None of us on that plateau had.

A waypoint was once again requested, but we denied the request. Instead, we commissioned a temple to be built on the plateau. We originally planned to create the structure ourselves, but

again, we were not masters of building or design. We met with craftsmen, intelligent but crafty men who were willing to throw caution in the face of terror and make demands that catered to merchants and politicians alike. We slaughtered these fools and hung their entrails over the entrance to the path that brought supplicants to the plateau. Let those craftsmen and merchants who dared cross that threshold hold higher regard for the gods of this land, and far greater respect. The next team of craftsmen were far more agreeable. We came to terms on a design that left us all rather pleased, and the merchants mostly appeased. The temple would be largely open, with columns that spread out to either side of the crypt's entrance and bleachers carved into the face of the mountain on either side of the plateau angled to face the alter and the fire. The crypt would be expanded to include living quarters for those who remained on the plateau—the young man and I, our priestesses, a small contingent of priests, and a bevy of servants—as well as space for our growing treasury. Behind the temple would be erected a giant hall from which a kitchen, reading room, guest rooms, and other amenities would branch.

The essence of the temple would be leisure and focus. Supplicants often arrived to serve and worship on the plateau, and to ensure the sanctity of the rights as postulated by the priestesses; we deigned to encourage this behavior. Furthermore, travelers seeking rest at the temple would find rest and succor, though they be inducted into the local mythology. A plain wood building was erected that would serve as our temporary quarters and construction was begun.

With regard to our growing wealth, we determined it served no purpose to mindlessly hoard the gifts we were provided; we began negotiating with lenders to invest our wealth in the local economies. Businesses were sprouting all around us. Through investing in the brightest among these, we would contribute to the overall success of the region; amplify our own holdings; and have these funds held in custody by reputable members of the financial markets, thus releasing a good amount of space on our spacious, yet limited, plateau. Well, reputable to us, anyway. While we dealt with men as men, they knew us as gods, and unforgiving ones at that. The rotting entrails along the side of the pass were proof enough of this fact.

## 11

It was not, in fact, all smooth sailing from this point forward. As construction began on our temple, we had no shortage of minor rebellions to quell and convenient mishaps to address. Humans sought to test our limits and would goad us in whatever creative manner they dreamed up. A large majority of the time, these were minor inconveniences, but there were greater trespasses: thirteen captives instead of fourteen, alleged miscalculation of costs for building supplies, attempted vandalism of our temporary dwelling. When we would look over the minor inconveniences, the tests escalated. We became tired of dealing with these petty occurrences and began doling out escalating punishment.

The first time we were shorted a captive, three of our priestesses traveled down to the closest city and dragged away one of their politicians in the dead of night. The third time it happened, the full force of our priestesses was felt as they swept across the valley tearing into exactly



fourteen people in each settlement below us. When the workers attempted to overcharge us for supplies the first time, we gave them a warning. The third time, we slaughtered the lot of them and instructed the foreman to hire a whole new team or share their fate. The vandals were dead on arrival; we began to punish sacrilege with impunity.

It seemed as though these humans *wanted* violence. Their gods were angry and vengeful gods who satiated their bloodlust. It was bizarre. I was not one who understood the human psyche very well; as a man of the cloth, I had struggled to understand why man would so flagrantly defy God and his fellow man and sin intentionally against both. The bloodlust which plagued the people below us was as much a mystery to me. It was almost as if they acted for the purpose of being punished, and being punished severely.

Perhaps we had unknowingly trained them to exist so.

We issued an edict, delivered through the network of temples that had been raised for our worship: push us to the limits of our anger, and we would flood the valley with the blood of every man and woman, and everyone in between, that resided in it, and we would make their children watch. Though we no longer felt anger, it was an emotion that most people below, if not all, could recognize and empathize with. This did not have the desired effect; instead, the people were whipped into a frenzy. That full moon, the celebrations that took place below as extension to the fire on the plateau raged with more carnage and fury than ever before. It was madness, and they all reveled in it.

This violence would have concerned my former self. But I felt nothing. My companions, the young man and the priestesses, had not yet given themselves over to the darkness completely, and so were appalled at the growing intensity of it. While they felt nothing, their memory pulled at them. Their delicate morality was still at play in their reasoning, and so their minds revolted against it. Even the priestesses, who had been dealt such damaging blows in earlier years could not fathom the excess they witnessed.

I merely shook my head. Empty and hollow being that I was, what place did I have to judge them? I had murdered and consumed thousands in the last century. What did a few bloodthirsty games and grotesque rituals matter to me? Let them have their play, as long as they extended the proper respect and such debauchery was kept well in hand.

The region continued to grow despite—or, perhaps, as a result of—this wild abandonment of basic human morality. Courtesy gave way to hedonism; pleasure became king. Their gods imposed no moral order and they relished in it. This is what led me to believe our very presence influenced life in the valley. Throughout history, anarchist societies had trended toward general well-being. Not so here. Here were demon gods that reveled in darkness and human sacrifice. Here was every dark desire made possible. And all during the full moon. This had an interesting effect on the hunger: while it was momentarily satiated when we fed, it withdrew a bit further as shrieks and laughter and wails and song rose from the cities when the fire was lit. How interesting that this thing within me could sense such pleasure and terror from such a distance.

The others felt it too. We all shared in the depths of the hunger as it grew and the ecstasy of emotion when we fed. As the festivals grew more wild and morbid, the hunger would withdraw further, for longer.

So of course, I encouraged this behavior.

Despite the simmering of the hunger, the priestesses condemned this behavior. They yet clung to their moral philosophies though they profited by my release of it. I could not blame them, however; I had held onto my own for nearly a century before finally letting go. I finally accepted that if there was a One True God, he had abandoned me to this evil. If that was the case, so be it. God needed his monsters. I would serve as a vessel for one. The priestesses did their part in holding me at bay. They intervened when I was working out the lunar calendar with a delegation of priests and priestesses representing the various temples below. I wanted the festivals extended, they demanded the festivals be pared down. We comprised on limiting the festivals to one night—the night of the full moon—but during that night, they could act as they wished. The temples in some cities chose to host and perform lavish ceremonies and sacrifices. Others promoted unmitigated pleasure and escape. All cities participated, and their citizens were free to worship however they wanted, and attend whatever event that pleased them.

One night of each month, but it was enough to fill us up and strengthen us. As the darkness absorbed this all, it continued to grow and grow and grow. We were contorted by it; reshaped. I was no longer averse to the sunlight, and so my skin bronzed over time. My companions did not fare similarly, as sunlight still teased them with hope; their skin remained milky white, almost translucent. Our limbs seemed to extend a bit farther, we each grew somewhat taller. We were lean but fleshy. We were unfathomably strong.

The wolves were changing as well, becoming larger and larger. There were other subtle changes taking place, a sort of *wrongness* I couldn't quite clearly express, but I was too concerned with my own transformation to give it much thought. The others noticed these changes as well, though they were ever so gradual. Our evolution was more apparent to those who made infrequent, but regular, visits to the plateau. Some of our ... clergy ... were acutely aware of how we shifted. Where once we were content with the lavish clothing we were provided as offerings, we soon required talented tailors to adequately produce clothing that would fit us appropriately.

Given the bloodthirsty nature our congregation had acquired, competition to become Tailor for the Living Gods was not exactly fierce. It was absolutely brutal. When faced with dismemberment or death—often times both—by competitors, most reputable tailors simply withdrew their applications to serve us directly. This posed a problem, as the ones who remained to murder and maim each other for the privilege were among the least skillful. At one point, I requested that all contenders be brought to the plateau so that we may judge their work and choose accordingly. Those that managed to survive or altogether avoid a knife in the dark were lined up at the edge of the plateau and fed to the wolves. We then sent word across official channels that no tailor would be chosen, and began searching for one covertly. This proved to

be easier than anticipated—most tailors who had withdrawn their applications earlier on, and having witnessed the bloodbath that ensued between those who competed, were all too eager to keep their mouths shut. We chose a few tailors out of the bunch and allowed them to serve us in rotation.

Most private services we required ended up operating in much the same way. We encouraged our construction team to shut their mouths about their suppliers, as this was becoming a problem. Likewise, we admonished their suppliers to keep their mouths shut about providing services to the gods on the plateau. It wasn't enough that a company be sanctioned by the gods to serve them directly; the greed and hedonism of man was at their peak in the valley, and many were willing to give up their own lives to put forward their names and services. The temples erected in our service were the only institutions that remained unsullied by such overt violence. The city-states each managed their own militias, and most merchants wealthy enough to do so hired private security forces. The average citizen learned early on that survival meant learning to fight, learning to kill, and learning to be clever. It was common to see children sparring with one another in the streets, and adults moving about with healthy paranoia. When everyone carried a knife and knew how to use it, most people were well-behaved.

Most. The more *ambitious* commoners were delivered as offerings each full moon.

It was beyond my understanding as to why anyone would consciously choose to live in these conditions, but here they were, an entire region filled people who were thriving under such brutality. It seemed that for every individual that emigrated, three immigrated. There was no shortage of people; there was no shortage of blood.

## 12

The cities in the valley eventually merged into a large nation-state. The region was divided into twelve districts, each directed by the temple that had been developed there. In that time, the others I had turned on the plateau had surrendered to the darkness within. It had beaten us all; we were now its willing servants. The priestesses that once dwelt on the plateau had decided to take the reins of worship from their acolytes and were now each a High Priestess of the Temple, and ruled over the districts as such.

The nation-state served the Temple. The Temple served us. Nay, we were the Temple. And the Temple was the State. The two were become one in a deliciously decadent Theocracy. The young man and I, along with the High Priestesses, comprised the Godhead. We ruled the spirit of the people as their gods, and we ruled their daily lives as kings and queens. Our word was law, and the people stumbled over themselves and each other to obey.

The Shrine of the Dark, what we christened the temple on the plateau, had been completed and was every bit as magnificent as we had hoped. Its splendor showered the valley below in a way the full moon fires had not: where the fires had exuded hope, the Shrine emanated success.

Where hedonism thrived, excess was rampant, and the glory of the Shrine encapsulated such excess as was encountered nowhere else. Thousands traveled across the known world to admire its beauty. Many often remained. Despite there being no active attempts to convert travelers to the Faith, those who remained were often fast converts. Those that survived were bound heart and soul to the Temple and their service to it. The Faith was all. The Faithful were many. The Temple grew.

The valley was becoming crowded. The Faithful began considering extending their territory beyond the pass. This led to interesting discussions. While the Faithful were an overtly violent kind of people, they had never been war mongers. Such was the nature of the darkness: it fed on emotional extremes. A lust for power was out of its element. It is a curious comment to make, provided the trajectory of my life over the past two decades. I can appreciate the irony. I am fully aware of the position I hold and how I arrived to be in it. The simple fact is that it was all a matter of consequence: the consequence of bathing in the greatest level of emotion available. Once it was massacre; now it is revelry.

What cared I to rule these people? Fools that they were, we had to hold to our tongues more often than not for the circus they'd make of anything we said. The young man, feeling satiated by exposure through the High Priestesses had withdrawn from the world entirely and simply slept in the crypt. The High Priestesses managed well enough on their own, though I would serve as final arbiter in any decision that came to a head. All was discussed psychically; across the decades, we had honed our telepathic communication to produce a complete language. We were able even to impress our will upon those humans in close proximity. We spoke only when we absolutely had to.

The people had found it eerie at first, that a decree made or edict passed in one district had passed in them all simultaneously. The High Priestesses never left their temples, and the lower priests and priestesses rarely visited those of other districts. The people came to believe that the God of the Shrine had expressed His Will through the High Priestesses. The local lore became their mythology, and they became The Faithful. And here I was, empty and hungry, anticipating the following full moon's festivals.

The offerings were no longer drawn up to the Shrine in full. Two captives were delivered regularly, to symbolize the humble origins of The Covenant. One captive was delivered to each of the High Priestesses. Fourteen to fulfill The Covenant each month. Our feeding symbolized its consummation. The young man and I no longer fed directly. We had no need. The High Priestesses drank from their cup, the wolves drank from ours. Furthermore, the High Priestess' proximity to the decadent festivals more than just satiated the hunger; we were filled to overflowing, all of us. Nay, the young man now slept, and had slept for decades. I just watched. And anticipated.

The Faithful were indeed densely packed, and it would be another several centuries before man would learn to erect buildings that would allow them to live one on top of the other beyond two

or three stories. So they sought to extend themselves beyond the pass. War was discussed at length in the Temples and meeting halls. However, they were all far too fiercely independent to organize themselves into a standing army. They ended up doing nothing as a nation. Rather, several families—often whole communities—simply moved, taking up residence in nearby settlements. They took their worship with them.

## 13

*I walked silently along a cobblestone road. It was night, if indeed this atmosphere could be called night. It was dark, to be more accurate. No stars shone in the clear sky; no moon. Where the dim light originated from that allowed me to see, I knew not. I knew only that I was walking, it was silent, and it was dark.*

*But my emotions were awhirl. I felt exuberant. Excited. Ecstatic! In my deep sense of self awareness, I knew these emotions were not my own, but I nevertheless reveled in them, so starved was I of feeling. This exultant feeling led me forward, deeper into the silence, deeper into the dark. The faint light that reflected off the cobblestones failed to wane as I pushed on, though I could sense the dark getting deeper, fuller, in a sense. It seemed the deeper I was plunged into the dark, the greater the elation rose from the emptiness within. If this excitement was a flame burning within me, I would be a bonfire in a few more steps.*

*There were no voices, only impressions, and through those I could sense the multitude of others surrounding me. I was not alone, and though the ecstasy that enveloped me was overwhelmingly powerful, in my deepest heart of hearts I felt fear. Some part of my old self yet existed, and it knew this was all wrong. This fear would have mattered some time ago, but now it was naught more than a whisper, while the elation was a wildfire! I was comfortable in the dark; I was at home. These others all around me were welcoming me, applauding me, thanking me. This kingdom in the dark had managed to gain a strong foothold through the emptiness within—and through its use of my being as its vessel. As more and more arrived to witness this spectacle, this vision of myself walking this cobblestone boulevard, they moved in closer and closer, packing tighter and tighter, until I walked within fairly tight circle, the circle moving with me. I felt a great multitude surrounding me, and it continued to increase in depth and breadth.*

*It occurred to me then that the reason for the insatiable lust and hunger that drove the emptiness within was not only because it was immeasurably greedy. This darkness within was sharing its bounty with these others that surrounded me. In return, these others lent their strength, their cunning, their power. We were symbiotic, these others and I. These others and the young man and the High Priestesses. Our preternatural abilities had a source; they were not, as I thought, some arbitrary evolution resulting from the dire need to feed driven by the darkness within. Nay, the chattering across these others, delivered as impressions that I clearly understood, left me without doubt that any supernatural instincts I possessed were not a development, but rather gifts given gradually as these others gathered to partake of the feast my kin and I provided. As the darkness within me spread to other humans, as the bounty increased, more*

*of these others arrived to share and contribute. The message was clear: drink more, feed more, and all of the power of the dark would be granted to me to use as I pleased.*

*The impressions became a sharp hiss from within: acquire more wild emotion, by any means necessary.*

I awoke with a start. The feeling of elation quickly dispersed; it was gone in a moment. I mourned the loss briefly, then I felt nothing. It was just a dream, a dark and terrible dream. I sat up. It has been quite some time since I last slept. Over the many years, in becoming stronger after each feeding, I arrived at a point where I rarely needed any sleep. More often than not I would sit in silent meditation, extending my preternatural awareness throughout the valley, listening to the murmurings of all those people, sensing the richness of all that emotion, and sipping from the seemingly endless well of feeling they offered. I took care not to take too much at any given time; though the well seemed endless, I was acutely aware of the consequences in taking too much all at once. So long as the full moon festivals were observed in their full splendor, and every citizen celebrating with complete abandon, the darkness within gleaned all it needed to subsist and expand.

I often wondered what stayed my hand from consuming the entire world and all of its inhabitants. Once upon a time, I held myself to such high standards of ethical behavior; I held such high regard for my fellow man. When this darkness took hold, I schooled myself for decades, holding tightly to the ethical framework to which I had committed myself. With no inner compass to guide me, with only the knowledge of what was right to guide me, I prevented myself from grasping at and feeding on everything and everyone around me. Perhaps that effort across those decades instilled in me the habits that kept the hunger at bay. I certainly held no ethical standards, no high regard for anyone, any longer. I cared for nothing and felt nothing with regard to it.

~~The High Priestesses yet held to some semblance of morality. Though they presided over the full moon festivals and directed the sacrificial ceremonies, they did so out of necessity. They understood the costs they incurred in becoming what I am, and they feared the consequences of a world overrun by the hunger, even if that fear was intellectual rather than deeply felt. It was a wonder they maintained their ethics despite the lack of emotion that came with the strength and the hunger. Though, in considering their dilemma, it was just as much a surprise that I had withstood succumbing to the hunger for as long as I had. Where I had withstood for decades, they could withstand for centuries, with some encouragement. And why should I not encourage them? They were my final, tenuous link to what once was my own humanity.~~

I was, however, too far gone. I had given in and given up and was sold heart and soul to the darkness within. I did as it bid, as it implied, as it suggested, as it commanded, though not at the scale it wished. I understood that some things were better accomplished over time. We grew stronger by the day, by the week, by the month, by the year. And we were timeless. What did a decade matter when this flesh only increased in vitality, when the capacity for knowledge became ever more abundant, when our mythology spiraled in acceptance? Time mattered for

nothing. The people on this plane proliferated beyond all comprehension; in time, the darkness would feed upon them all.

There was no hurry.

## 14

As the region had grown successful, so had it drawn the envious eyes of our neighbors. This was entertaining in some respects. It was only because of the opening of the pass that the wealth in the valley began to proliferate. This suggests that success was largely due to the importing of outside goods and services. Trade was abundant into and out of the valley. The travel industry was bustling as well; our neighbors were profiting highly from the people of all stripes who made their way to our region to give themselves over to the valley's hedonistic way of life. So from whence did the envy arise? It doesn't matter; the reality remains that greed has no bounds. The valley was generally well insulated from assault, and our neighbors would profit little from imposing sanctions. There was also a very healthy level of fear that lived within the hearts and minds of our immediate neighbors. Most knew what happened along the pass. Many had partaken in our monthly celebrations, and many more continued to do so.

Still, there was a general flow of jealousy and envy that floated through the pass and settled in the valley. The darkness reveled in it, allowing it to gather and concentrate before lapping it up during my daily meditations. Like a porous sheen that stretched out over the people and animals and buildings and clothing and jewelry and rocks and trees, my preternatural awareness absorbed all the ill feelings that drifted down from outside of the valley. For a time, this was enough, as it sufficiently sated the hunger for a moment and allowed our people to move without regard for the emotions of those that lived without.

Every heart that beats sends out vital information into the world. That information, it turns out, can be directed. I learned that if a thing can be directed, it can be put to use. Or, in this case, eaten. I learned that with the continued development of my preternatural abilities—or, rather, my increasing acquisition of them—I was able to glean more and more about the invisible workings on this plane of existence. And the greater my understanding and growing competency of my abilities, the more I was able to manipulate these invisible workings. From the echoes of my past, a piece of text would occasionally come to mind:

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

I had become a tool to command and manipulate those principalities and powers. I used them at my discretion, and to my sole benefit. That the young man, the High Priestesses, and The Faithful benefitted was a natural consequence of how I chose and acted. That we drew the jealousy and envy of nearby growing nations was a natural consequence to my wielding of these powers. But it wouldn't do to allow anyone to suffer needlessly as a result of the inflowing

jealousy and envy. If the people felt that we weren't sufficiently powerful to protect them against the machinations of neighboring countries, they would lose faith. We would be forced to pursue our agenda by less fulfilling means.

The single largest reason we encouraged such hedonism to thrive across these lands was that nothing was as delicious, as satiating, as joy and ecstasy. Fear, terror, and sadness made for fine meals, but were not nearly so filling on their own as were happiness and satisfaction. We moved by means of terror when necessary; we otherwise left the Faithful to their own devices.

This was simple enough to manage when the only issue that needed to be dealt with was the removal of the outside influence of jealousy and envy on the collective emotive pool in the valley. However, as our people began migrating into regions over the pass and outside the valley, they began to experience cruelty at the hands of neighbors in the areas they settled. They cried out to their gods, but their gods were far away. Feeling forlorn and abandoned, they in turn abandoned us.

We fed well on what was provided in the valley, but the hunger would not be limited by what I allowed it. It continued to increase, growing ever more powerful; the sensation of starvation I experienced in my early days existing with this hunger was nothing compared to the insatiable roar I experienced now. The valley was crowded with emotion, but it had its limits; space wouldn't allow an unending stream of people to continue to arrive. The behavior against our people who migrated would need to be dealt with. I could not, however, be everywhere at once, and I was not about to call for the creation of an army and begin giving orders. I knew all too well that once you begin giving orders, you would have to continue giving orders in perpetuity. And for someone to whom time mattered very little, in perpetuity meant a very long time.

I communicated with the High Priestesses regarding this situation. There were a number of the Faithful who had managed to settle in areas where they were largely left alone, though there were just as many who had settled in areas where they were being abused. Since most of these were not so far out of and away from the valley, we agreed to spread our porous sheen outside the valley and see how much ground we could cover collectively. This turned out to be an incredible experiment.

We met one morning as we normally would, via our shared psychic impressions. I guided the women into a deep state of awareness of one another, and then requested they lend me their focus. It took naught a moment but I was soon filled with a rush of emptiness—I recognize that this sensation may be difficult to imagine but this is the best way I can describe it—and the hunger rose in me to heights I had never thought possible. I was ravenous. The churning of anger and frustration that arose from the darkness was overwhelming; it took every ounce of my practiced focus to maintain my composure and direct it. The hunger flooded out of the pass and out into the streets of our neighboring lands. I directed this hunger-made porous sheen to find the Faithful and coat the dwellings and businesses of the people around them. In an instant, all emotion was drained completely from these people. The internal hurricane that was this



ravenous hunger almost immediately subsided. I withdrew the hungry sheen and broke the focus of my High Priestesses. The hunger immediately balanced itself between us. We wallowed in the peak of emotions that flooded us as the darkness spread itself out among us. In the next moment, all feeling subsided and we were once again left with the gnawing hunger.

This level of hunger, however, was welcome in comparison to the typhoon I experienced only moments before. It was too much! I absolutely would not be able to manage this every time, nor very often. While still in council with the women, we discussed the experience at length. We came to the decision that this situation called for a new generation of High Priestesses. Though our actions on this day had bought us some time—the people from whom we had just fed and completely drained would take several months to recover fully—more monsters would need to be made, and soon, should the backlash against the Faithful prove to be exceedingly violent. This was an unplanned occurrence. As the valley was well contained, all parts of it lay within easy reach of myself on the plateau, and the women ruled their quarters with relative ease. Expansion was not something we ever had to consider.

The clergy that served on the plateau, in the Shrine of the Dark, however, had a plethora of ideas on how to approach selecting new High Priestesses. As it turned out, they had been waiting for the opportunity to share these ideas. I found this rather humorous, though upon further consideration I should have expected it: the clergy had collectively been lobbying for the evangelism and expansion of the faith to outside of the valley for many years. Eager to serve as they were, I gave them credit for their patience; they never once acted out of turn to push an agenda of expansion.

Of course, the punishment for grave error was death by being fed to the wolves, so any who rose through the ranks to serve in the Shrine knew their place and kept it well.

I listened to their ideas. While most of their ideas were ludicrous and generally self-serving—in one approach, they insisted the entire clergy be turned—and more still were terrible and half-baked, a handful of ideas were actually worth pursuing. One thing that was necessary to take into account was that promotion in the ranks of the clergy was a vicious affair. Many clerics were often mutilated or murdered on their path of ascension; only the fiercest, most cunning individuals became priests. (More often than not, women would claim the titles, which made me revise my initial evaluation that women would be more compassionate as hosts of the darkness, so many centuries ago). Care would need to be taken in determining the best approach to choose a new generation of hosts that would serve as heads of their own temples and regions. This was compounded by the knowledge that we did not have the luxury of placing into quarantine each new host we created until they learned how to control and abide alongside the hunger and would not be a threat to the delicate ecosystem we held in precarious balance. We also needed to act swiftly now, and develop a long term system of investiture later. This all made me realize I had grown too complacent.

After several meetings with Shrine clergy and the High Priestesses, we agreed to pursue a plan that left most of the selection process in the hands of each High Priestess. Each one would choose a successor. Each quarter had its own peculiar set of practices that it maintained over the years, leading to a diverse congregation across the valley, both in demographics and in practice. By leaving the criteria for selection in the hands of each temple, each High Priestess could choose any clergy member that would best fit the overall temperament of the quarter. This would ensure continuity and leave the people largely unaffected by the change in leadership. Furthermore, as part of this preliminary run, six of the current High Priestesses would relocate to troubled settlements outside the valley, while the other six would work alongside myself to ensure the new breed developed the habits necessary to keep from losing control over themselves and the hunger. On such a short timeline, this was a gamble, but it was the best approach we had at the moment to move forward. The High Priestesses set down their criteria and process, made the clergy acutely aware of any consequences, and proceeded to select their successors. The successors' training began long before they were turned.

## 15

The training protocol was intense. Though each district was different in their approach to choosing and developing a successor to the High Priestess, they all shared common elements.

Namely, starvation.

We were the bane of all life on earth, but also its protector. We were stewards over the land and the people we ruled. To allow the darkness to run rampant would be to drain the world of all its color. When there was no emotion left on this plane of existence, there would be nothing to feel, no place to glean it from, no experience worthy of having ever again. As destitute and forlorn as this immortal life could be, the pleasurable sensations experienced during the height of our festivals and celebrations made it worthwhile to grapple with the darkness, to hold it at bay, to manage its hunger. We knew there would come a day when this world was wiped of all joy and sorrow; we worked tirelessly to delay it. It would not do to invite a maniacal power-motivated fiend into the fold; nay we needed to be cunning in our approach to select the next generation of High Clerics.

The clergy made complaints of the process from bottom to top, with the highest levels shouting the loudest, claiming they deserved the honor over everyone else. That is, until they witnessed and participated in the training regimen established by the High Priestesses. It didn't take long to weed out the power hungry from the truly subservient. As the trials were developed and executed, more and more applicants dropped out, until—in some districts—only one remained. This wasn't the intended goal of the trials—to whittle down the mob until one remained—but it was a convenient turn of events, with regard to our current situation. The process would need to be amended to better prepare applicants for future iterations, but for now, this would work. Thankfully, the High Priestesses in those districts that ended up with one were content with who they were left with. Other districts saw two applicants complete the trials; one district's

trials resulted in all applicants dropping out. Or dying. This was fine—as we intended to have six applicants succeed the High Priestesses in their districts, the districts with zero or two potential successors could work out their particular challenges. We decided not to send successors across districts, provided that each successor was determined according to trials attuned to the idiosyncratic nature of their respective districts.

We had our six successors. It was time to move forward and make hosts of them. Despite the initial outrage from the clergy on the process of succession, they were all very eager to partake in the elevation of the successors to High Clerics. This was a historical occasion for the Temple! It would not do to have these individuals turned in the dead of night in the depths of the crypt. Nay, a ceremony must be created and a celebration held to honor and observe such a monumental event. New rites should be enacted. The Faithful should all take part. The clergy was beside themselves with ideas and planning. The Shrine of the Dark became a flurry of activity as they prepared a new festival to honor the successors and celebrate their ascension.

I was approached by a gaggle of priests at the close of my meditation one morning, eager as they were to share their plans and obtain my approval. We withdrew from the courtyard and congregated in one of the many meeting rooms that broke off from the main hall. The priests proceeded to lay out their plan: the festival would be a week long affair and involve every district of the valley. The main ceremonies would take place at the Shrine and the district temples would oversee the more localized events in much the same way as during the full moon festivals. They included plans to draw in more travelers and tourists than normal, with strategies on how they would make room for everyone. When presenting the figures of the full scale event, they produced a financial plan that thoroughly defined all expenses, and included potential profits. They left no stone unturned; their gods would be honored by the spectacle of the festival and the return on investment in such a grandiose production. They planned to perform the main ceremony during the next lunar eclipse, on the dark night of a full moon. I loved the idea. There were a number of minor adjustments I requested, but I was generally impressed. I called a meeting the very same afternoon with the High Priestesses to convey the information, knowing full well that the drawn up plans were already being copied and sent to each temple. With little dissent, the plan overall was accepted. I signaled to the priests to set a date. Preparations were soon underway.

In the meantime, those who had settled out of the valley were not faring well. In those locales where we had debilitated their neighbors, our people took to pillaging and looting. This carried repercussions in the form of reduced industry: those city-states that contended with the Faithful withdrew commerce and imposed sanctions on any dealings with the settlers. Fear increased greatly and calls for armed defenses were raised. War would not bode well for our people, nor for our precarious management of the hunger. Should our current system be put into jeopardy, the consequences would be catastrophic for everyone involved. Moreover, in defeating one army, we would be set against others; the cycle of war would be never ending. We would be driven to consume all in defense of our livelihood, thus bringing our livelihood to an end. A solution would need to be found.

I gathered the clergy at the Shrine. Representatives arrived from the district temples. I impressed upon them the import of peaceful negotiation and laid out a plan I hoped would appease the leaders of the city- and nation-states without. I counted on the attention to detail and greed of those present to address problems with the plan and devise means by which they may be advantageously corrected. They did not disappoint. As preparations for the upcoming festival continued underway, a delegation was sent to each of those locales affected by conflict between our people and their neighbors. The delegation would serve to ease tensions by offering to invest in the local markets a rather generous sum. Additionally, our people would refrain from looting and rioting, and would respect the locals laws when in public spaces. In return, our people could live their lives as they did in the valley within the bounds of their settlements, and we would be given permission to raise temples in the outskirts of their towns where our people could congregate without fear of disruption. So long as the Temple was allowed to perform all rites without civic or military involvement, the local government would receive a portion of what the Temple brought in from their region. There were a number of alternative options with which the delegations could offer as negotiation; these, it turned out, were unnecessary. The local officials negotiated on the amounts offered, not the terms provided. They were as eager as we were to come to peaceful agreement, but did not want to feel they were being taken advantage of. Treaties were struck all around. Those principalities that experienced no issue with those of our own who migrated also requested such agreements. Of course, we were far more generous with those who caused us no trouble. However with the grand festival currently in production, the building and development of our outside temples would have to wait. This served us well as our successors would still need time to properly acclimate to their new stations upon ascending.

It seemed as though we had everything well in hand. Nevertheless, I remained vigilant and instructed the High Priestesses and the clergy to remain vigilant as well. Representatives of the Temple were sent to our settlements outside the valley to ensure that our people upheld the terms of our agreements and to deflect any negative attention that arose as retribution for earlier trespasses. There was much to manage. I found myself deeply involved in the politics of the well being of the Temple.

Perhaps I should have been deeply involved all along.

The night of the eclipse was fast approaching and most of the preparations were complete. Diligent, the clergy was. As laissez-faire as we operated, they were intent on serving their gods well. Proficient, competent, eager. Cutthroat and ambitious, yes. But hard workers nonetheless. I watched the preparations take shape and prepared to greet the successors when they arrived. They were to arrive with the offering for the ceremony, a fortnight before the eclipse, which was unique, as the offering was usually delivered the night of the full moon. The successors would have time to bond with the offering before they consumed it. I was curious to gauge their reaction. Or maybe it was some twisted desire rising up from the darkness within to see how this would affect the way they performed. I yet failed to differentiate between what was truly

mine and what was being packaged to appear as mine. What did it matter? It seemed I rarely carried any concern for this any longer.

## 16

The festival began a week before the full moon and eclipse. District leadership had gone above and beyond to dress up their quarters in preparation for the event. And what a sight it was to behold. As part of the week-long celebration, the High Priestesses and I would make a seven-day tour across the valley, stopping to grant each district our blessing before returning to the Shrine of the Dark in time for the eclipse, when the successors would be turned, and in turn consume the offering. Delegations from neighboring nations were present to observe and, in some cases, participate in the celebration. Despite tenuous relations between the people of the valley and some of our neighbors, they all still wanted to partake in the festivities.

Events like these bring people together, and often times for the purpose of profit. There wasn't a guest at the Shrine that didn't have money signs in their eyes or lustiness pouring out of their heart. Greed ruled the day, greed expressed through hedonism.

Our walk along the boulevards through the districts was not without peril. Or, rather, the concern of impending peril. The clergy had agents spread throughout the valley, and without, to attempt to discover and undermine any conspiratorial pursuits that might exist. For as vicious and hostile as the valley could be, often these efforts were directed at the Temple. The people gave tithes and taxes with one hand and conspired with the other. Such was life in the valley, but it worked for us. The numerous conspiracies uncovered simply provided more fodder for the festivals. Each temple had in its crypt a dungeon where conspirators were cast and kept alive until chosen to participate in the Great Sacrifice as offering. All too often, high ranking Temple officials were discovered participating in some conspiracy or other, which raised a scandal that would sweep across the valley. For some nations, a scandal of these proportions would be detrimental. For the people of the valley, it was just another Tuesday.

The more humorous aspect about this was that the most devout follower perceived the offering as the highest form of service to their gods and community. The Temple was constantly flooded with requests by persons wishing to commit themselves as a part of the full moon offering. As we had plenty of criminals in waiting to be sacrificed, these requests were declined. This resulted in the very devout creating sham conspiracies for the purpose of being caught and committed. Some of the Temple officials who were caught in conspiracy did so out of what they perceived to be true devotion. We had people conspiring against us because they wanted us destroyed, and we had people conspiring against us because they wanted themselves destroyed in service to us. It was ... amusing.

Our attendants were beside themselves when they learned of the parade, while the more sinister members of the clergy approved with some ambivalence: if they are truly gods, they thought, no conspiracy to destroy them would succeed. Perhaps ambivalence was giving their temperament

too much credit; they were, in fact, eager to watch. Would the gods survive the parade? What they failed to realize was their own precarious position should we die. Without us to strike fear into the hearts of their neighbors and to temper the power dynamics across the valley, even the most hardy individual would be swept away by the incumbent violence if they were not destroyed by the armies that would arrive to pillage the land. What did any of this matter to them when they had become so complacent with the current order of things? Their complacency would need to be addressed, but not during these festivities. Nay, we would wind our way along the parade route and deal with any threats directly that slipped through the clergy's fingers. The young man and I had lived through a number of harrowing experiences that *should* have seen us dead. And all this when we were just learning of our strength, when we were young and weak in our new existence, when we had a tenuous grasp of our burgeoning powers. Centuries later, our powers had grown significantly, and I knew my own powers far exceeded those of the others. Realistically, there was little real threat that existed, and none that would harm us on this little walk. I assured our attendants there was nothing to be concerned about, that their regard should be for their own safety; we would be fine.

What was perceived as a last minute decision was premeditated by quite some time: the Godhead would travel in the center of the procession as was originally planned, but isolated, at some great distance between those who came before and those who followed after. If we were to be attacked, we wanted to be the focus of the violence and reduce collateral casualties. A few of my closest attendants had brought the idea forward, stating that were any unseemly violence to occur, our swift dispatch of the offenders and the preservation of our people would deepen the faith among those who only marginally recognized the extent of our power. The weight of the politics in play in this suggestion was not lost on me. Among those who proffered this idea were either conspirators hoping to catch us vulnerable and defenseless should they succeed in our destruction, or ambitious persons who would seek further promotion upon the success of this plan. Or perhaps a mix of both. Humans were such obvious creatures.

These were the politics at play when the procession began. There were plans within plans within plans, and we were at the center of it.

Twelve districts in six days meant that we would not be spending much time in each. The valley was not particularly large, making the six day trip feasible, though it was not exactly very small either, making the trip a rather ambitious endeavor. No time was allotted for rest, with the necessitation of a very tight schedule if the parade was to cross through all twelve districts and return to the Shrine in time to perform the Rites of the Eclipse. This posed a problem for the human participants of the parade; none would be able to make such a strenuous excursion without rest. To address this glaring issue, the trip was broken up into fourteen segments. The core delegation that would make the entire trip officially was comprised solely of the Godhead; the rest of the procession consisted of groups of clergy and local leaders who would accompany the Godhead through their respective districts, with the first and the final segments comprised of Shrine clergy attending the Godhead from back to the Shrine to the foot of the valley and back again. The transition from one district to the next required attendant groups to seamlessly

exchange one for the next. Clergy from one temple gradually blended into and became the clergy from the next; likewise with political leaders who would make the march. Politicians and local leaders hired mercenaries from their respective districts to provide protection and support and to draw attention should the untoward occur. They walked with the gods and feared for their lives! As they should; where monsters were raised as deities, civilization became monstrous. If the people they deigned to serve fail to kill them, their gods might.

This parade would be an entertaining affair.

Palanquins were made ready to carry the Godhead as the various groups to accompany us down the mountain assembled themselves. The Godhead was dressed in our finest, radiating splendor as we prepared to ride through the valley on the backs of the largest beasts to be found throughout the entire world. Their handlers were many, and were spread throughout the region to accommodate exchanges as we moved from one district to the next, and to anticipate any trouble where an emergency shift change may need to take place. The groups attending the first segment carefully gathered and organized themselves, The darkness within roiled and swelled as I gently skimmed a little off the top of the pride and excitement and joy spreading out around the Shrine's courtyard. I experienced traces of these emotions, and was struck dumb with fascination at the magnificence and grandeur of the production, knowing this was only the beginning. This was truly a feat of excellence.

The Shrine clergy, eager to begin the festivities, sent off the procession earlier than planned. Not by much, but this early start had unintended consequences to be felt as we crossed the districts. My preternatural senses were tingling with anticipation. I would drink my fill of elation over and over throughout the journey, but this is not what sparked my anticipation. I sensed chaos on the horizon. I was hungry for it. From deep within the void came the feelings of terror and hope, of fear and ecstasy, all interwoven into a melange of sweet emotion. It was a preview of the feast to come, the expectation of a promise fulfilled. But there was also foreboding in it. As the emotions came whirling upward, I was reminded of my dream in the dark, where the illumination was too low to cast a shadow, where the deepening darkness hid horrors unknown, terrors untold. There was a taste of joy, yes, but there was also darkness. There was always the darkness, ever-present, ever-usurping any and all emotion, overshadowing all experience. I sighed, resigning myself to the withdrawal of emotion, to the complacency of emptiness. Over the coming week, I would ride such a rollercoaster of emotion, over and over again, and then be left void and destitute, awaiting the following month's full moon festival.

I once knew frustration. I knew nothing of the sort any longer, unless it was fed to me by the darkness.

I turned my attention to the clerics huddled together nearest my palanquin. Early or not, anticipation or no, I signaled to the group that we may begin when all was ready. The clerics did not hesitate: the command to begin was delivered to the head of the procession, and we were on our way.

The procession slowly wound its way down the mountain. Messengers were sent ahead to ensure the district at the bottom of the pass would be prepared to make the transition as we crossed their threshold. This was the quiet before the storm. My wolves owned the mountain sides; anyone attempting to set themselves up along the pass either quickly moved on or were devoured. Merchants and travelers safely wound their way through the pass for more than a century; this procession would be no different. However, taming the woods and keeping them clear of troublesome riffraff was a simple matter when compared to managing a densely packed city-state. The extent of the Temple's efforts at producing an event thoroughly devoid of violence—or rather, violence that was not intentionally planned for the event by the Temple—was yet to be seen. The responsibility fell to the local temples to anticipate and plan for most issues that might arise within their jurisdictions. The haul through the pass would be peaceful, and then it was unknown what lay in wait beyond that, when we transitioned to the next segment of our journey. My preternatural abilities were many and strong, but foresight was not among them.

As there were no crowds packing the sides of the hills, travel through the pass was swift. All in attendance traveled by horse, carriage, or wagon, with the exception of the Godhead. We quickly reached the base of the mountain, watching a scattering of spectators who worked themselves a short way up the pass to catch an early glimpse of the procession. These trickles of people grew steadily into small groups, then larger groups, until we were passing through a great crowd as we approached the first transition point. Night was fast approaching as one group withdrew to be replaced by another, block by block, until the whole of the procession had been replaced with the new guard. The animals that carried our palanquins would carry us well toward the morning, so we continued moving forward with no pause in our stride, though we were now moving substantially slower. With the transition completed with little to no trouble, the procession steadily moved further into the first district.

The people were packed as closely as possible, filling the sides of the boulevard, spilling out from between and pouring over the buildings that crowded the main thoroughfare. The many and rich emotions swirled around in a thick paste, overwhelming my senses. The full moon festivals were nothing compared to this! I sipped from the morass, welcoming the plethora of sensations that threatened to consume me. How incredibly delicious the experience! How infectious each sensation! I tasted the incredulity, the marvelous, the contagion. I also tasted hints of fear, terror, nausea, claustrophobia. The sampling I tasted seemed to alter nothing; the paste was as thick as ever around me. I drank a little more deeply, savoring the flavor of the melange of emotions swimming around me. Oh such intense pleasure! For the first time in centuries, I felt what I had not felt since I was a young man first entering the monastery: sexual desire. Though my capacity for intercourse was non-existent, I still felt the lustful stirring in my heart. The people were ravenous and unfettered; their bedroom fantasies were laid bare to me



there in the streets, in the air. I drank of it a little more liberally, and still it flowed freely. The emptiness within swallowed whole the tastes I had taken, and so I drank more.

I eventually recognized a slight change in the air, a nuanced shift in the energy and knew I lay on the cusp of drinking too much. I checked in with the others in our wordless ways, and they too sensed it. We suppressed the urge to continue drinking, that the well be refilled and we may drink again, and soon. As the hunger rose, my mind was made clear. Were there any opportunity for attack, it was during the ecstasy of feeding. So wrapped up was I in filling myself with the surrounding emotions that I failed to remain vigilant in our surroundings. The others recognized it as well. We sharpened our attention, returning to the crowds our watchful senses.

Yet nothing happened. We drank at regular intervals, often finding ourselves sated for longer periods than we were accustomed to. The people were limitless; not once on our way through did we see a break in the crowd, nor did we notice it thinning at any point. The decorations were intricate and extravagant. They spared no expense in dressing the thoroughfare with the most flamboyant designs. We were as awash in a sea of blues, reds, and purples, as we were inundated with emotion to drink from. The splendor and beauty of the boulevard matched our own. I was impressed by the devotion, by the effort, by the gargantuan level of energy this required to execute. Deep in my heart stirred the remnants of appreciation. Feelings rose and fell within in a steady rhythm managed carefully so as not to displace the thick wall of emotion we moved through. We passed through the first district with no incident. We watched the colors gradually change to be overtaken by those of the next district. The crowds never wavered. Upon arriving at the next transition point, our animals were exchanged, our palanquins were refreshed, and we moved into the next district.

Such was the way of our sojourn through each district. Colorful decorations, densely packed and unwavering crowds, and the sweet elixir of ecstasy to consume as the parade continued. We moved through four districts with no trouble at all; I felt our honor guard around us begin slowly to release that fine edge of paranoia, though they wavered not in their level of alertness. I watched in fascination as groups poured ahead of our procession to demonstrate some novel motif or contraption. Our people were quite creative and inventive; there were numerous exhibitions given that were truly impressive. In a time long ago, before I had met my fate against that most malevolent foe, none of these things could even be dreamed or imagined! Now here before me were the marvels of a new world come to fruition.

We were approaching the midpoint of our journey when I noticed what I can only describe as a crackling sensation simmering over the draught of emotion from which we drank. There was a tangible feeling to it, as if it was physically passing through whatever organ we used to feed with. Something was approaching. Something ... wrong. I received impressions from the others, signaling they too noticed the change. It appeared our trip would not be without some measure of excitement after all. Once again, feelings of anticipation arose. I sat up a little straighter, moving before recognizing this shift could provide a signal to anyone paying attention that I was alerted to something. The general mood of the crowd slowly shifted from elation to

confusion. In the next few moments, our section of the parade was routed away from the main thoroughfare. Either one of our party discovered or recognized upcoming danger, or else we were in the midst of it. Whatever the case, we exhibited a sense of confusion, while collectively preparing for what might appear ahead.

Our animals—and those of us riding them, along with our honor guard marching beside—were led through a series of side streets just wide enough to allow one beast to pass. We moved in single file, snaking our way along these streets that were eerily quiet when compared to the raucous crowds we were enjoying before. I noticed there were barricades placed everywhere, funneling foot track to the boulevard and keeping it there. The thought emerged that members of the crowd were forced to participate, though I dismissed the thought when I considered how much joy and ecstasy we drank from as we moved along the parade route. However, doubt crept in as I gazed on my present surroundings: the grandeur of the parade was viciously juxtaposed to the abominable conditions of the quarters through which we now traversed. There was an ugliness to it, a loathsome reality. Garbage spilled out from between buildings and out of narrow alleyways. Debris littered the sides of the streets. Everything smelled of refuse and unwashed bodies. As I focused more intently on these details, I began to notice more and more people. They huddled in doorways and peered out from behind gates and fences. They were ragged, destitute, demoralized. I tasted fear in the air. Suspicion. Hopelessness. I tasted these things, but felt nothing. This was the true collateral for the wealth that poured in, the hedonism, the darkness. The Shrine, the boulevards, the festivals were all façades. I ruled over a kingdom of filth. And I felt nothing.

I did, however, sense a dramatic shift in the energy around us. There was eagerness in the air; anticipation. I followed the taste of these to discover several small groups of people huddled within a few buildings ahead. The others made it known through our silent means of communication that they recognized this as well. Poor fools though they were, I admired the audacity they exhibited in thinking they could capture our little party and overwhelm us. I considered flattening their demeanor and thus removing the fire from their endeavor, but decided against it after a brief discussion with the others. While the draught of emotion was intoxicating along the main thoroughfare, whatever lay ahead may prove to be interesting. Anticipation rose from within. We moved forward without addressing the threat we approached.

All at once, everything shifted. Time seemed to slow as a series of events took place all around us. There was a shout. There was a loud cracking sound. The buildings on one side collapsed in a roar, causing the animals to panic. They all reared up on their hind legs, jostling the palanquins and sending most of us over the sides or the back, myself included. Our honor guard was pinned down on one side, while the rest were kept from reaching us due to the panic of the animals. There was another shout, and we were set upon by a small crowd, pushing their way inward with staves, torches, and blades of all kinds. I communicated to the honor guard to collect themselves before offering assistance. Hunger was the primary impression I received in return. I slowly arose, and as I regained my feet, a sword was driven point first through my

sternum, barely scraping past my spine. I made eye contact with a gnarled man, an exultant expression splashed across his face to match the ecstasy he exuded at having delivered the crushing blow. I smiled. He hesitated. I grabbed the hilt over his hands and removed the sword in one swift motion, rising to my full height. His courage floundered in that moment. I sucked him dry of all emotion, watching him crumple to his knees. He kneeled there, still, mouth open, eyes empty, naught more than the husk of a man. He would live with this moment burned into his memory for the rest of his miserable life. Others slowed their approach when they realized how ineffectual their attempt had become. The High Priestesses, though torn and bleeding, had reacted much the same as myself. With our immediate attackers subdued, I released the honor guard.

The howling and growling was like music as the forms that constituted the honor guard shifted, their human forms resolving into massive, snarling, wolves. The groups of attackers that were rushing forward to join the assault now attempted to turn and flee. Their passage, however, was blocked by those they thought were crushed under the debris of initial blasts—vaguely humanoid wolves rose from the wreckage to catch and kill those retreating. I watched as the wolves spread out among the buildings, catching, holding, and pursuing the scents of each attacker who dared participate in this ridiculous uprising. I carefully dusted myself off and sent a messenger to retrieve a clean set of clothing for everyone in our party and carefully arranged our return to the main boulevard and the next transition point. I then sent impressions to the wolves to retrieve no less than six of our assailants. Their conspiracy would be crushed and their families made to pay for the housing of those displaced due to this inconvenience. It was all over in a matter of minutes, though it seemed so much more time had passed. It was almost tragic, how quickly this little detour and its momentary excitement lasted. Or rather, it would be tragic were I able to feel and express such emotion on my own. As it was, the void consumed every emotion we tasted. The wolves routed the remaining assailants, each new kill increasing the rapidity of my healing wounds and bringing a swell of elation which was quickly sucked down into the vast void within. My wounds soon closed, the skin smoothing over. The wolves completed their work and returned, having regained their human shape, six assailants in tow. Clergy from the local temple were arriving, bringing fresh clothing for our party and shackles for our prisoners. Three assailants would be taken to the Shrine for questioning. The others we would drag through the remaining six districts and then brought to the Shrine for questioning. If they survived.

Spectators soon began arriving from the main thoroughfare, having picked their way across the barriers and through the wreckage. They approached with timidity, unsure what trouble yet lay at hand; clearly, their curiosity bested their fear. The six assailants were, by then, bound and hooded, three of which were surrounded by a small contingent of honor guards, ready to take them up to the Shrine. The spectators watched as the rest of us organized ourselves in a loose parade pattern, with the remaining honor guard surrounding us. A gloating sensation arose from within. I smiled, the grin easing its way to my eyes, as I surveyed those who had arrived from the boulevard. Fear and awe flooded the area, and I sipped gently from it. I assumed a

number of these voyeurs were involved in the events of these back streets. We would find out soon enough. When all appeared ready, we carefully moved past the rubble and slowly made our way back to the parade route with our three assailants in tow.

## 18

We proceeded along the main thoroughfare, returning to the bluster of the crowds as we passed into the next district. As we moved, six of the priestesses were silently working on the three captives, their thoughts being read as subtle impressions, and their emotions being manipulated to drive their thinking into the realm of conspiracy. This is how we were able to uncover a number of co-conspirators; names and locations were gradually extracted and passed on to our agents spread out through the crowds. The agents would capture a select few at a time and throw them out into the path of the parade. Security would then deal with them, brutally.

Most were torn apart by one or two of the honor guard wolves. The human-appearing wolves would transform right in the street, devouring the offerings thrown to us by our agents. They fed ravenously, emptying the conspirators of any emotion. Once fully drained, the wolves would tear the bodies apart. Sometimes it was quick work, but more often than not, the wolves would play with the conspirators, chasing them back and forth, like a game of sorts, in the lane at the head of the parade.

It was quite a show. In one stint, two wolves tore at a body between them, in a rough game of tug-o-war. One wolf managed to tear the body away from the other, flinging it into the air. A third wolf leapt over the two, catching the body in its maw and running off with it. During these games, the poor fools who fought to survive believed they had a chance to escape, but none were fast or clever enough. They were all destroyed with impunity. Children dragged forward with their insurgent parents were completely sucked dry and left to recover on their own. On a few occasions, babies were held up as offerings to the High Priestesses, who would drain them of all emotion and then drop them to the boulevard.

This was, of course, all for show. We had no intention of completely crushing all resistance. Nay, we sought to foster an air of uncertainty. We made the appearance of pursuing the conspirators, working to catch who we could during the remainder of the parade, but not working beyond that. We nurtured the violent emotions that rose in the crowd, manipulating them to bring their fear and admiration to a fevered pitch.

Joy and ecstasy were the most delicious emotions. But fear; deep, unregulated fear was pungent. Spicy.

Powerful.

We manipulated the crowd's emotions as so much cultured bacteria, cultivating the growth of fear, from which we drank our fill. As the fear was sucked away, a strong wave of admiration arose. This we manipulated as well, working the crowds into a frenzy, then drinking our fill.

This, of course, left the people feeling forlorn. Coupled with the vicious display of conspirator punishment, fear began to arise once again. Thus we moved through the remainder of the parade in regular fashion: hone the fear, drink the fear, hone the admiration, drink the admiration; all while the High Priestesses fed our agents with more names, who in turn worked to feed our pets--the honor guard--with ever more bodies.

We completed our circuit through all districts as planned, and in as timely a manner, despite our brief detour. Upon arriving at the foot of the pass that would take us to the plateau, we made a grand display of hanging the three captives we had dragged through the streets with us. Unbothered to suck them dry before they expired, we allowed them to feel and express their full range of emotions as we propped them up and slid the nooses around their necks. They died with the full experience of their feelings. Theirs were the most gruesome deaths yet.

With the bodies still writhing on their lines, we began our trek up to the plateau. This final leg of the journey was populated by the lower clerics and temple servants, followed by the acolytes, the faithful, and the more adventurous of our constituents, which made for a large and lively traveling party.

Upon arriving at the plateau, the giant traveling party spread out. The Godhead dismounted from the great beasts and arranged themselves just before the altar. Temple servants scurried everywhere to accommodate everyone. Parishioners and constituents were guided to the general seating area cut into the rising slopes on either side of the altar. The candidates for High Cleric were brought out and lined up before the altar, in full cleric garb, facing the audience. The sacrifices were then brought out hooded, lined up and made to kneel before the candidates.

We had much to drink during the parade, and while the ascent to the plateau was spent wallowing in the richness of the emotions we had consumed, it was all immediately drained with the drawing out of the sacrifices. As if on cue, the void within leached every last vestige of joy, anger, fear, admiration, and all other emotions, leaving little more than the hunger.

The all-consuming hunger.

The drop was such that, in a split second, my mood shifted from contentedness to brooding, simmering, bitterness; it was what remained aside from the hunger. The void within was aware of what was about to transpire; it seemed ready to receive all it could from the candidates, and the vessels placed before them.

With everything in place, the ceremony began in earnest. With the hunger welling to barely manageable levels, I was keenly focused on the sacrifice; most of what came before was a blur. I cared not a lick for it. I allowed it because it was important to the clerics, it was important to the faithful, it was important to the candidates. This was their special moment, and I was not yet so far beyond my humanity to allow them this. Still, the hunger drove impatience; my composure was such that while I was as stone on my throne, seated far above the populace, I

was writhing internally, craving the end of ceremony. Ceremony be damned! All that mattered was consumption.

Societies decried the cultural phenomenon of consume, consume, consume, and yet this was all that mattered. Man consumed man, either in spirit, effort, or deed. Everything was for sale. Everything and everyone. Here, spread out before me, was the price paid for our people's unmitigated success: the consumption of man by man.

Well, I suppose it could be argued that those of us who comprised the Godhead were no longer human. Still, the price for the livelihoods of those who flew headlong into hedonism was the soul of their fellow man. Twelve souls, in this case.

As the ceremony approached the sacrifice, the energy on the plateau was in crescendo, reaching a fevered pitch as the hoods were pulled from the heads of the fodder kneeling before the candidates. The cleric leading the ceremony raised their arms and the crowd immediately fell silent. The air was pregnant with expectation; everyone, including myself, moved to perch on the edge of their seats. The cleric's voice carried well over the crowd as they offered a prayer in supplication to their gods. When the prayer was finished, the High Priestesses stepped forward, and the crowd was witness to their turning of the candidates.

There was no art, no beauty to the deed. The candidates had been tested and prepared for this moment, and now that it was here, there was no amount of training that could have prepared them for this. The women bore down upon the candidates, driven blindly by the hunger, and the crowd was taken aback by the absolute brutality of the display. The stillness over the crowd was broken only with the occasional whimper, weeping, or wale.

The void rolled over within, and I felt a medley of emotions course through me as it did so.

The experience of the candidates was broadcast clearly into the hearts and minds of the Godhead. We were as one experiencing the turning together. One by one, the candidates were released as they came to consciousness in their new existence. As the last one was released from the turning embrace, the medley of emotions dissipated. Again, as if on queue, the void swallowed whole what remained of feeling, and the hunger grew to unfathomable intensity. Without any pomp, the candidates fell upon their prey. The silence was broken; the people had taken to their feet, bloodlust drawn across every one of their faces, their voices rising in cheers, jeers, and screams.

Euphoria arose within, as anger, sadness, fear, and terror freely flowed from the hearts of those being sacrificed into the veins of those newly minted into the Godhead, and thus to the rest of us.

It was over in a matter of moments. The final sacrifice fell to the ground. A small contingent of clerics rushed forward to clear the bodies from the before the altar and place them atop it. The celebration pyre was quickly prepared. Once again, the cleric leading the ceremony stepped

forward, a burning torch in hand. The High Clerics--High Priestesses and newcomers to the Godhead--stepped aside, flanking the altar. Raising the torch high, the lead cleric once again offered a prayer in supplication, leading the crowd in the popular verse. As it wound to the end, their voice was heard clearly, intoning the final verse, which was a call and response:

"They are the damned," they cried, "and we are their children," came the enthusiastic response.

And then the torch was tossed onto the altar. The altar erupted with a response of its own, with a fire the likes of which had not ever been seen over the valley. The heat flowed over the crowd in one intensive burst, pushing the people back into their seats. The initial blast quickly dissipated, however, and the bonfire settled into a steady rhythm, rolling with the light breeze that flowed onto the plateau from higher up in the pass.

It was done. The ceremony was complete; the Godhead was nearly doubled; the hunger was momentarily satiated. I settled back into my throne as the people left their seats, working their way down to the space before the altar to offer their congratulations, offerings, tears, laughter, and anything else with which they thought to bless the newcomers to the Godhead. The great hall was opened to the crowd, with vast quantities of food and drink made available to all in attendance. A party erupted that would last for more than a week, though I was not present for most of it. At the close of the ceremony, I gave my blessing to the Godhead by impression, to the clerics in charge of the event with a wave, and withdrew to my quarters in the crypt.

## 19

We proceeded along the main thoroughfare, returning to the bluster of the crowds as we passed into the next district. As we moved, six of the priestesses were silently working on the three captives, their thoughts being read as subtle impressions, and their emotions being manipulated to drive their thinking into the realm of conspiracy. This is how we were able to uncover a number of co-conspirators; names and locations were gradually extracted and passed on to our agents spread out through the crowds. The agents would capture a select few at a time and throw them out into the path of the parade. Security would then deal with them, brutally.

Most were torn apart by one or two of the honor guard wolves. The human-appearing wolves would transform right in the street, devouring the offerings thrown to us by our agents. They fed ravenously, emptying the conspirators of any emotion. Once fully drained, the wolves would tear the bodies apart. Sometimes it was quick work, but more often than not, the wolves would play with the conspirators, chasing them back and forth, like a game of sorts, in the lane at the head of the parade.

It was quite a show. In one stint, two wolves tore at a body between them, in a rough game of tug-o-war. One wolf managed to tear the body away from the other, flinging it into the air. A third wolf leapt over the two, catching the body in its maw and running off with it. During these games, the poor fools who fought to survive believed they had a chance to escape, but none

were fast or clever enough. They were all destroyed with impunity. Children dragged forward with their insurgent parents were completely sucked dry and left to recover on their own. On a few occasions, babies were held up as offerings to the High Priestesses, who would drain them of all emotion and then drop them to the boulevard.

This was, of course, all for show. We had no intention of completely crushing all resistance. Nay, we sought to foster an air of uncertainty. We made the appearance of pursuing the conspirators, working to catch who we could during the remainder of the parade, but not working beyond that. We nurtured the violent emotions that rose in the crowd, manipulating them to bring their fear and admiration to a fevered pitch.

Joy and ecstasy were the most delicious emotions. But fear; deep, unregulated fear was pungent. Spicy.

Powerful.

We manipulated the crowd's emotions as so much cultured bacteria, cultivating the growth of fear, from which we drank our fill. As the fear was sucked away, a strong wave of admiration arose. This we manipulated as well, working the crowds into a frenzy, then drinking our fill. This, of course, left the people feeling forlorn. Coupled with the vicious display of conspirator punishment, fear began to arise once again. Thus we moved through the remainder of the parade in regular fashion: hone the fear, drink the fear, hone the admiration, drink the admiration; all while the High Priestesses fed our agents with more names, who in turn worked to feed our pets--the honor guard--with ever more bodies.

We completed our circuit through all districts as planned, and in as timely a manner, despite our brief detour. Upon arriving at the foot of the pass that would take us to the plateau, we made a grand display of hanging the three captives we had dragged through the streets with us. Unbothered to suck them dry before they expired, we allowed them to feel and express their full range of emotions as we propped them up and slid the nooses around their necks. They died with the full experience of their feelings. Theirs were the most gruesome deaths yet.

With the bodies still writhing on their lines, we began our trek up to the plateau. This final leg of the journey was populated by the lower clerics and temple servants, followed by the acolytes, the faithful, and the more adventurous of our constituents, which made for a large and lively traveling party.

Upon arriving at the plateau, the giant traveling party spread out. The Godhead dismounted from the great beasts and arranged themselves just before the altar. Temple servants scurried everywhere to accommodate everyone. Parishioners and constituents were guided to the general seating area cut into the rising slopes on either side of the altar. The candidates for High Cleric were brought out and lined up before the altar, in full cleric garb, facing the audience. The sacrifices were then brought out hooded, lined up and made to kneel before the candidates.



We had much to drink during the parade, and while the ascent to the plateau was spent wallowing in the richness of the emotions we had consumed, it was all immediately drained with the drawing out of the sacrifices. As if on cue, the void within leached every last vestige of joy, anger, fear, admiration, and all other emotions, leaving little more than the hunger.

The all-consuming hunger.

The drop was such that, in a split second, my mood shifted from contentedness to brooding, simmering, bitterness; it was what remained aside from the hunger. The void within was aware of what was about to transpire; it seemed ready to receive all it could from the candidates, and the vessels placed before them.

With everything in place, the ceremony began in earnest. With the hunger welling to barely manageable levels, I was keenly focused on the sacrifice; most of what came before was a blur. I cared not a lick for it. I allowed it because it was important to the clerics, it was important to the faithful, it was important to the candidates. This was their special moment, and I was not yet so far beyond my humanity to allow them this. Still, the hunger drove impatience; my composure was such that while I was as stone on my throne, seated far above the populace, I was writhing internally, craving the end of ceremony. Ceremony be damned! All that mattered was consumption.

Societies decried the cultural phenomenon of consume, consume, consume, and yet this was all that mattered. Man consumed man, either in spirit, effort, or deed. Everything was for sale. Everything and everyone. Here, spread out before me, was the price paid for our people's unmitigated success: the consumption of man by man.

Well, I suppose it could be argued that those of us who comprised the Godhead were no longer human. Still, the price for the livelihoods of those who flew headlong into hedonism was the soul of their fellow man. Twelve souls, in this case.

As the ceremony approached the sacrifice, the energy on the plateau was in crescendo, reaching a fevered pitch as the hoods were pulled from the heads of the fodder kneeling before the candidates. The cleric leading the ceremony raised their arms and the crowd immediately fell silent. The air was pregnant with expectation; everyone, including myself, moved to perch on the edge of their seats. The cleric's voice carried well over the crowd as they offered a prayer in supplication to their gods. When the prayer was finished, the High Priestesses stepped forward, and the crowd was witness to their turning of the candidates.

There was no art, no beauty to the deed. The candidates had been tested and prepared for this moment, and now that it was here, there was no amount of training that could have prepared them for this. The women bore down upon the candidates, driven blindly by the hunger, and the crowd was taken aback by the absolute brutality of the display. The stillness over the crowd was broken only with the occasional whimper, weeping, or wale.

The void rolled over within, and I felt a medley of emotions course through me as it did so.

The experience of the candidates was broadcast clearly into the hearts and minds of the Godhead. We were as one experiencing the turning together. One by one, the candidates were released as they came to consciousness in their new existence. As the last one was released from the turning embrace, the medley of emotions dissipated. Again, as if on queue, the void swallowed whole what remained of feeling, and the hunger grew to unfathomable intensity. Without any pomp, the candidates fell upon their prey. The silence was broken; the people had taken to their feet, bloodlust drawn across every one of their faces, their voices rising in cheers, jeers, and screams.

Euphoria arose within, as anger, sadness, fear, and terror freely flowed from the hearts of those being sacrificed into the veins of those newly minted into the Godhead, and thus to the rest of us.

It was over in a matter of moments. The final sacrifice fell to the ground. A small contingent of clerics rushed forward to clear the bodies from the before the altar and place them atop it. The celebration pyre was quickly prepared. Once again, the cleric leading the ceremony stepped forward, a burning torch in hand. The High Clerics--High Priestesses and newcomers to the Godhead--stepped aside, flanking the altar. Raising the torch high, the lead cleric once again offered a prayer in supplication, leading the crowd in the popular verse. As it wound to the end, their voice was heard clearly, intoning the final verse, which was a call and response:

"They are the damned," they cried, "and we are their children," came the enthusiastic response.

And then the torch was tossed onto the altar. The altar erupted with a response of its own, with a fire the likes of which had not ever been seen over the valley. The heat flowed over the crowd in one intensive burst, pushing the people back into their seats. The initial blast quickly dissipated, however, and the bonfire settled into a steady rhythm, rolling with the light breeze that flowed onto the plateau from higher up in the pass.

It was done. The ceremony was complete; the Godhead was nearly doubled; the hunger was momentarily satiated. I settled back into my throne as the people left their seats, working their way down to the space before the altar to offer their congratulations, offerings, tears, laughter, and anything else with which they thought to bless the newcomers to the Godhead. The great hall was opened to the crowd, with vast quantities of food and drink made available to all in attendance. A party erupted that would last for more than a week, though I was not present for most of it. At the close of the ceremony, I gave my blessing to the Godhead by impression, to the clerics in charge of the event with a wave, and withdrew to my quarters in the crypt.

## 20

We proceeded along the main thoroughfare, returning to the bluster of the crowds as we passed into the next district. As we moved, six of the priestesses were silently working on the three

captives, their thoughts being read as subtle impressions, and their emotions being manipulated to drive their thinking into the realm of conspiracy. This is how we were able to uncover a number of co-conspirators; names and locations were gradually extracted and passed on to our agents spread out through the crowds. The agents would capture a select few at a time and throw them out into the path of the parade. Security would then deal with them, brutally.

Most were torn apart by one or two of the honor guard wolves. The human-appearing wolves would transform right in the street, devouring the offerings thrown to us by our agents. They fed ravenously, emptying the conspirators of any emotion. Once fully drained, the wolves would tear the bodies apart. Sometimes it was quick work, but more often than not, the wolves would play with the conspirators, chasing them back and forth, like a game of sorts, in the lane at the head of the parade.

It was quite a show. In one stint, two wolves tore at a body between them, in a rough game of tug-o-war. One wolf managed to tear the body away from the other, flinging it into the air. A third wolf leapt over the two, catching the body in its maw and running off with it. During these games, the poor fools who fought to survive believed they had a chance to escape, but none were fast or clever enough. They were all destroyed with impunity. Children dragged forward with their insurgent parents were completely sucked dry and left to recover on their own. On a few occasions, babies were held up as offerings to the High Priestesses, who would drain them of all emotion and then drop them to the boulevard.

This was, of course, all for show. We had no intention of completely crushing all resistance. Nay, we sought to foster an air of uncertainty. We made the appearance of pursuing the conspirators, working to catch who we could during the remainder of the parade, but not working beyond that. We nurtured the violent emotions that rose in the crowd, manipulating them to bring their fear and admiration to a fevered pitch.

Joy and ecstasy were the most delicious emotions. But fear; deep, unregulated fear was pungent. Spicy.

Powerful.

We manipulated the crowd's emotions as so much cultured bacteria, cultivating the growth of fear, from which we drank our fill. As the fear was sucked away, a strong wave of admiration arose. This we manipulated as well, working the crowds into a frenzy, then drinking our fill. This, of course, left the people feeling forlorn. Coupled with the vicious display of conspirator punishment, fear began to arise once again. Thus we moved through the remainder of the parade in regular fashion: hone the fear, drink the fear, hone the admiration, drink the admiration; all while the High Priestesses fed our agents with more names, who in turn worked to feed our pets--the honor guard--with ever more bodies.

We completed our circuit through all districts as planned, and in as timely a manner, despite our brief detour. Upon arriving at the foot of the pass that would take us to the plateau, we

made a grand display of hanging the three captives we had dragged through the streets with us. Unbothered to suck them dry before they expired, we allowed them to feel and express their full range of emotions as we propped them up and slid the nooses around their necks. They died with the full experience of their feelings. Theirs were the most gruesome deaths yet.

With the bodies still writhing on their lines, we began our trek up to the plateau. This final leg of the journey was populated by the lower clerics and temple servants, followed by the acolytes, the faithful, and the more adventurous of our constituents, which made for a large and lively traveling party.

Upon arriving at the plateau, the giant traveling party spread out. The Godhead dismounted from the great beasts and arranged themselves just before the altar. Temple servants scurried everywhere to accommodate everyone. Parishioners and constituents were guided to the general seating area cut into the rising slopes on either side of the altar. The candidates for High Cleric were brought out and lined up before the altar, in full cleric garb, facing the audience. The sacrifices were then brought out hooded, lined up and made to kneel before the candidates.

We had much to drink during the parade, and while the ascent to the plateau was spent wallowing in the richness of the emotions we had consumed, it was all immediately drained with the drawing out of the sacrifices. As if on cue, the void within leached every last vestige of joy, anger, fear, admiration, and all other emotions, leaving little more than the hunger.

The all-consuming hunger.

The drop was such that, in a split second, my mood shifted from contentedness to brooding, simmering, bitterness; it was what remained aside from the hunger. The void within was aware of what was about to transpire; it seemed ready to receive all it could from the candidates, and the vessels placed before them.

With everything in place, the ceremony began in earnest. With the hunger welling to barely manageable levels, I was keenly focused on the sacrifice; most of what came before was a blur. I cared not a lick for it. I allowed it because it was important to the clerics, it was important to the faithful, it was important to the candidates. This was their special moment, and I was not yet so far beyond my humanity to allow them this. Still, the hunger drove impatience; my composure was such that while I was as stone on my throne, seated far above the populace, I was writhing internally, craving the end of ceremony. Ceremony be damned! All that mattered was consumption.

Societies decried the cultural phenomenon of consume, consume, consume, and yet this was all that mattered. Man consumed man, either in spirit, effort, or deed. Everything was for sale. Everything and everyone. Here, spread out before me, was the price paid for our people's unmitigated success: the consumption of man by man.

Well, I suppose it could be argued that those of us who comprised the Godhead were no longer human. Still, the price for the livelihoods of those who flew headlong into hedonism was the soul of their fellow man. Twelve souls, in this case.

As the ceremony approached the sacrifice, the energy on the plateau was in crescendo, reaching a fevered pitch as the hoods were pulled from the heads of the fodder kneeling before the candidates. The cleric leading the ceremony raised their arms and the crowd immediately fell silent. The air was pregnant with expectation; everyone, including myself, moved to perch on the edge of their seats. The cleric's voice carried well over the crowd as they offered a prayer in supplication to their gods. When the prayer was finished, the High Priestesses stepped forward, and the crowd was witness to their turning of the candidates.

There was no art, no beauty to the deed. The candidates had been tested and prepared for this moment, and now that it was here, there was no amount of training that could have prepared them for this. The women bore down upon the candidates, driven blindly by the hunger, and the crowd was taken aback by the absolute brutality of the display. The stillness over the crowd was broken only with the occasional whimper, weeping, or wale.

The void rolled over within, and I felt a medley of emotions course through me as it did so.

The experience of the candidates was broadcast clearly into the hearts and minds of the Godhead. We were as one experiencing the turning together. One by one, the candidates were released as they came to consciousness in their new existence. As the last one was released from the turning embrace, the medley of emotions dissipated. Again, as if on queue, the void swallowed whole what remained of feeling, and the hunger grew to unfathomable intensity. Without any pomp, the candidates fell upon their prey. The silence was broken; the people had taken to their feet, bloodlust drawn across every one of their faces, their voices rising in cheers, jeers, and screams.

Euphoria arose within, as anger, sadness, fear, and terror freely flowed from the hearts of those being sacrificed into the veins of those newly minted into the Godhead, and thus to the rest of us.

It was over in a matter of moments. The final sacrifice fell to the ground. A small contingent of clerics rushed forward to clear the bodies from the before the altar and place them atop it. The celebration pyre was quickly prepared. Once again, the cleric leading the ceremony stepped forward, a burning torch in hand. The High Clerics--High Priestesses and newcomers to the Godhead--stepped aside, flanking the altar. Raising the torch high, the lead cleric once again offered a prayer in supplication, leading the crowd in the popular verse. As it wound to the end, their voice was heard clearly, intoning the final verse, which was a call and response:

"They are the damned," they cried, "and we are their children," came the enthusiastic response.

And then the torch was tossed onto the altar. The altar erupted with a response of its own, with a fire the likes of which had not ever been seen over the valley. The heat flowed over the crowd in one intensive burst, pushing the people back into their seats. The initial blast quickly dissipated, however, and the bonfire settled into a steady rhythm, rolling with the light breeze that flowed onto the plateau from higher up in the pass.

It was done. The ceremony was complete; the Godhead was nearly doubled; the hunger was momentarily satiated. I settled back into my throne as the people left their seats, working their way down to the space before the altar to offer their congratulations, offerings, tears, laughter, and anything else with which they thought to bless the newcomers to the Godhead. The great hall was opened to the crowd, with vast quantities of food and drink made available to all in attendance. A party erupted that would last for more than a week, though I was not present for most of it. At the close of the ceremony, I gave my blessing to the Godhead by impression, to the clerics in charge of the event with a wave, and withdrew to my quarters in the crypt.

## 21

Our surrounding settlements were gaining in popularity far quicker than we could have imagined, despite the admonitions of the Church and surrounding communities. What began as curiosity quickly evolved into a flood. The curious and skeptical became ardent believers, casting aside sensitive sensibilities for the potential of unmitigated pleasure. As the settlements swelled, so did the need to expand. This caused some discrepancies in our dealings with the countries around us. Though our ambassadors worked tirelessly to arrive at non-violent solutions, it was becoming apparent that these efforts would eventually fail. Our people were bleeding across boundaries. Where they bled, those spaces were often annexed into our settlements. Most of those who saw promise in our way of life preferred assimilation to opposition. As more land and people were eroded from surrounding communities, the more angry and bitter their rulers became.

Under normal human circumstances, this would result in straightforward conflict. Countries would turn their armies against us and we'd be forced to defend our positions, even as we fought to gain more. However, these were far from normal human circumstances. Those around us knew not how to address this issue, as already it was becoming apparent that any violent reaction was immediately quelled and their people disenfranchised as they became human husks, devoid of emotion. We heard many appeals to limit the growth of our people, to contain and constrain them, to which our response was always to counsel those rulers that we would impose no restriction that would limit our own power.

The more our people expanded, the greater the mythos that surrounded us, in turn leading to such succulent emotion to consume on the eve of the full moon rituals. This was a small price to pay for the effort we extended in keeping the hunger at bay. But of course, those without the void could never understand the deep sacrifice we made in carrying it. Instead, we began to make overtures to assimilate entire nations, offering their leadership positions of power within

the markets of their own lands in exchange for our temples to be erected in their capitals. The more intelligent ones recognized they had little choice and were quick to enter into negotiations. The more power hungry, however, ground their heels and threatened military action despite their evident failures in past attempts.

I often felt the humorless nature of the High Clerics when weighing the words of their ambassadors in many of these cases. The subliminal chatter was bundled within high anticipation, a clear marker of the manipulation of the void to turn our autonomy--and thus these negotiations--over to the hunger. We tread with care in these cases, well aware of the impact if we allowed our logic to be overtaken. As such, we often yielded to some of the more poignant rebuttals by working to redirect our people to the more open communities.

In truth, in the short term it mattered not, for in the long term those nations would be swept up anyway. The pressure to relinquish command would become too great for most when they found themselves surrounded by temples, when all their neighbors had made unholy agreements with the monsters in the mountains. When this came to pass, we were far less accommodating with regard to the transfer of power. It was often the case that their own people would give up their former governors as offerings when it came time to choose between assimilation or submission. And once an entire region came under our influence, a grand temple would be raised in the center of it, and a High Cleric would step into it to ensure the full moon rites were observed appropriately.

There was no standard of ethics imposed upon our people or those we assimilated. As gods, our behavior was the height of emulation. Our people recognized we killed only when necessary. Thus murder, homicide, suicide was largely kept at bay by their own resolve. We held honest dealings with those who managed the temple wealth. The fear of repercussion ran deep in those with whom we dealt, and thus their books were clean. That fear filtered out among their business associates. Only the lowest and furthest removed from our influence acted without heady concern, though they were still influenced by the dominating social currents. The revelation of dour streets in prior times was no longer relevant; our people, though they lacked true understanding of why we limited our power, followed our example.

I found this interesting, as these people were not acting out of religious fervor but rather emulation of their ever present gods. I often wondered how many acted out of fear, how many acted out compliance to social currents, and how many acted out of a desire to one day become one of us. The thought wasn't out of place; where once we had only twelve High Priestesses, we now had among our ranks some several dozen High Clerics. With each region we assimilated, the demand for a direct representative of our presence was great enough to instantiate a new High Body. The Festival of Ascension, as it now came to be called, had been refined and performed a number of times. And always there were twelve. Each region boasted twelve satellite temples to house a High Cleric each, all equidistant from a grand central temple that was symbolic of the Temple on the Plateau, the **SHRINE OF THE DARK**.

Those central temples were raised in the hopes that I, the First, the One, would grace the region with my presence. In fact, I remained ever present on the plateau. I had no cause to leave. The High Clerics managed local affairs and collectively managed regional affairs. Our preternatural communicative abilities made it plausible to confer with my associates without the need to be in their vicinity. We spoke across kilometers with ease. Were we to take the world, I could speak with one on the other side of it as if they stood next to me. I knew of the undercurrents and intrigues of each region intimately, as if I walked among the very people the High Clerics counseled. I had no cause to leave, and so I did not. Those central temples stood in symbolic gesture, and were no less powerful a presence without my being there.

We made no edicts against the exercise and proliferation of other religions. The Church, along with a number of other religions, worked tirelessly to maintain their foothold in each region we assimilated. Most, however, failed over time, their philosophies and afterlife promises falling empty. The Church, and a number of offshoots, managed to exist well enough, as the culture among our regions provided acceptance of the bitterness and anger in their congregations. Small groups of theirs were often seen carrying signs and shouting from soapboxes on the need for those around them to repent. Few listened, and those who did often fell into the crowd who were penitent during Church services but otherwise did what everyone else did. Ultimately, our theocracy held firm without our need to enforce it. It seemed our **FULL MOON RITUALS** appeased the guilt and bloodlust of all who attended the Church or served us wholly. It seemed like despite pushback from various groups within our communities, everything was running smoothly.

## 22

I stand on the edge of the plateau overlooking the valley on the eve of another full moon. The anticipation of the ritual to come is tangible, like sugar on my lips, sweet aroma in my nostrils. The sun is close to setting, its thin outline peeking over the mountain range across the valley, the sky aflame with the sun's farewell. A nostalgic mood has overtaken me, as I think back on how far we have come in so short of time.

The process of assimilation seemed as if it would be unending. As our borders approached those of other nations, we often entered into similar negotiations as had historically occurred. Though the most staunchly religious countries proved to be difficult, eventually they too were assimilated. Other theocratic authoritarian regimes were often taken down from within, as the more ambitious political figures and merchants found our culture to be more accommodating to their goals and aspirations. People incapable of reading, those who were manipulated by those in power, were often the front ranks of violent reaction, but were quickly pacified when they discovered their brand of faith could not protect them from our powers. They raised crosses and talismans and were easily swayed when drained of the one singular motivating force those who held sway over them used to manipulate them: emotion.



It truly began to feel as if we would eventually take the world over. It didn't matter how logical, how powerful, how resilient, how ardent a region was grounded in their nationalism. Strip away all the pride and righteous anger and all that was left was mankind's desire to survive. Strip away all the pride and pleasure in acting in concert with manufactured nationalism and the individual was left abandoning their beliefs. Whole armies would march against us, crusades wrought against us by the powers of their lands, and all would fall in subservience to our power as we drained them of their resolve. Fields of battle would be strewn with emptied human husks, not a drop of blood drawn among them all.

We rarely ever killed anyone in these confrontations. As soldier, mercenary, and general alike began to revive and recover, they often conceded. Fanatics on the one side would become fanatics on ours after such engagements. We had no shortage of those willing to die in battle as a gesture of their undying fealty. We had little need of those, though there were plenty. It was almost pathetic, witnessing the expression of extreme ideology crushed and claimed; they believed their acts were righteous, when their acts were naught more than the expression of deep emotion. Drained of that emotion, which carried always a bittersweet flavor--righteous indignation and furious passion almost always tasted sour--they fell at our feet and begged to become a part of our culture upon recovery.

Their gods had abandoned them in the midst of their defense of them. What must it mean but that they curried no favor, despite all they had wrought for their religion? And yet here were living gods, gods beholden to their people, who lived and regularly appeared among them. It was difficult to deny the pull of a culture whose deities were more than just figureheads. When gods walked among the living, the living were easily swayed by their gods' whims.

We stood on the precipice of an empire stretching the whole world round. We needed no evangelism, no overtures, no threat of force to expand. The violence we engaged in as a state was done so in defense. The acquisitions we made were largely voluntary. Foreign countries and merchants wishing to do business with us needed only respect our way of life. And on and on the cycle of negotiation and assimilation would run. Our people made sure we were fed out of fear, but otherwise approached their lives with heady zest. And thus over many decades did we come to establish our presence within one continent after another.

Undercurrents of resentment flowed everywhere, but were impotent. Countries whose mainstream belief systems were bastardized in the process of assimilation held adherents who were yet unwilling to release them. Though their faith was not strong enough to make them rise up in the ranks of the crusades that called for the true believer to stand against an encroaching evil, it was yet resilient enough to survive accretion and fester in the assimilated nation. The Church held many such members, unwilling to take arms in battle, but unwilling to accept defeat. The monasteries and missions that dotted the landscape in a few countries continued their tireless work despite the presence that had taken hold in their lands.

I could never fault these people for this. I understood this all too well. Being a man of the cloth myself, and one who had been sworn to non-violence except in the most necessary of situations, I recognized the desire to live and thrive in one's chosen way of life despite the surrounding climate. In the same way we assimilated nations, it was once my charge to assimilate souls for the god I once held dear. I imagined innumerable people across the world held fast the idea that by attrition, they could one day reshape the world in the ways of the gods they worshipped.

A humorless grin slowly stretches across my face as I considered this. I was once in their shoes, and I desperately worked toward this end. Yet here I stood, a monster by anyone's reckoning, wanted naught else but to be left alone, and somehow at the pinnacle of a religion that had swept the world, and generally ruled it without ruling. Were I of philosophical bent, I would have found the irony interesting. I wanted for nothing, and yet I had all at my fingertips. My younger self, along with all those furious believers, wanted all for their god, or gods. The hunger wanted for all as well, but for itself, and yet was perpetually denied sustained satisfaction. Perhaps the monks of south east Asia had it right: desire was indeed the source of suffering.

I could have written volumes on the topic. I was not, however, of philosophical bent. I was not even very intelligent to begin with. All that had transpired was naught more than opportunity at the intersection of experience. Over the many many years of learning to exist with the void, in dealing with humans of varying capacity, I came to intimately understand motivation, and had become the ultimate being in manipulation. Very few recognize how deeply human behavior is tied to emotion. Most humans reject the idea, and as such are incredibly easy to manipulate. I and my people make these humans dance like puppets on strings of emotion, and few are the wiser for it.

Am I a living god? Am I a demon? In my old life, I would have labeled one of my ilk as Satan or Lucifer incarnate: the Deceiver. And yet, who was I deceiving? What I did was strip man bare of all they *felt* they believed, and in that vacancy, man refilled themselves with a more honest bent. Was that manipulation? Perhaps. But what human has ever been honest with themselves about anything? As a man of the cloth, how honest was I with myself?

This soured my mood. The void roiled within, but left me to my emotions, subtle though they were. I wondered, thinking back to my return to the abbey after that fateful voyage, I wondered if I had been dishonest with myself from the beginning, never recognizing or accepting the void taking hold because I thought myself too pious and far above any such occurrence. It made me wonder how early this thing had taken hold, if the entire week I struggled was naught more than for show, if I was chosen for this quest because of my own blindness toward myself.

These were not happy thoughts. They pulled me in different directions. Perhaps I came to manipulate others with such ease because I myself had once been so easily manipulated. Perhaps I was the perfect tool for this void; out of ignorance of my own weakness, I provided the means by which this thing could thrive. I began to grow angry, but it lasted for a moment

before the void sucked it all away and I was left peering across the valley over the growing twilight with nothing more than a series of confusing thoughts jostling around in my mind.

I turned from the edge and walked around the altar. The Shrine clerics were preparing to light the bonfire that would cascade over the valley and across all the lands we now called our own. I pulled the hood of my cloak over my head and silently withdrew to the cairn beneath the temple. The others would feed, as they have done so for the past several decades, and I would be satiated with them. It would be enough, as it always was every month, for now.

## 23

*Darkness on the horizon. And yet, I'm surrounded by darkness, so what does it mean that I can differentiate between the darkness around me and the darkness that comes? It is all the same, and yet it is not. I can feel it.*

*I remember this place. The dim twilight that has no source reveals shadows and shapes and not much else. I am once again walking a road that has no beginning and no end. This time, however, I am surrounded by the crowd that I had left behind the last time I was here. And this time, there is reverence. There is respect. There is a gracious accommodation of space around me within which I can move freely. There is much more that I am aware of that I failed to grasp prior. The hunger, the voracious appetites of those that surround me, is palpable, and in this I am able to comprehend some of what I've become. The void I feel in my physical body is, perhaps, an extension of this place, rather than a being that has come to inhabit my body. The recognition is briefly alarming, but fleeting. In the next few moments a sound of rushing air replaces my introspection with a curiosity of what surrounds me.*

*The beings all huddle close, and I have the curious sensation of being drank from. My energy ebbs and flows, and does so at the slightest provocation of any one of these beings. The void, then, is this place, and the hunger is the mood of it. Satiation comes when enough of these beings around me have been satisfied. But they are never truly and fully satisfied, always returning for more when the urge strikes.*

*The last time I beheld a vision of this sort, I yet clung to who I once was, and thus experienced this through the lens of some part of my lost humanity. This time, however, I stride forward boldly, comfortably. It is dark, and I am at home in it. The shadows surrounding me move as one, ever mindful of my own movements. In some ways, I have been elevated, no longer a fleeting trespasser but one of them. And not just one of them, but their warrior. I stand a little taller at the thought; I have become more than I could have ever imagined. Once upon a time, my modus operandi was pious modesty. Now, among mankind and among these monsters, I am a god.*

*The thought lingers a moment, and then I feel disruption. The shadows feel it as well. Something comes. Something far more potent. There is fear; there is sorrow; then there is silence. The impressions I receive extol me to be silent with them. The impressions then cease. I pause, not breathing, not moving, not thinking. Silence is what I become.*

*The monstrous presence lingers on the edges of my vision, persists but for a moment, and then withdraws. The impressions slowly arise. The low humming resumes, though it conveys fear, horror, wariness, and, surprisingly, hope. I shudder to the depths of what soul remains to me when I understand what is suggested by this hope. These beings lend me their talents, and in turn I provide them with sustenance. Together we grow stronger, I at the crux, my shadows and minions at my heel. It is because I stand and walk and grow and build and feed that the others offer their fealty. The monstrous presence that approached and turned away is one but many others on this plain, and the shadows expect that one day I will stand firm against them.*

The shuddering persists as I awaken. Sweat pours down my face and chest as I slowly sit up from my slumber. The magnitude of what I have wrought on the face of the earth pales in comparison to the voluminous power I felt in that place. I had grown in my powers to extend my presence across every temple we erected, and it was dwarfed by the monstrosity I witnessed in passing. How could such a being as myself ever hope to contend with a being such as that? The conception was dizzying. Though I was momentarily devoid of emotion, my brain continued its attempt to fathom the power I felt, and to make sense of what was being asked of me.

How the fuck could I ever hope to contend with a being such as that?

Centuries have passed since my ordeal introducing the void within. I have grown incredibly powerful since then, though it has been no fast process. Each passing year, I find my powers incrementally extending, evolving. Centuries. I am more powerful now than I have ever been, and yet my powers pale in comparison to whatever that was that encroached on the edges of my vision. Over centuries! How much longer would it take to even come close to such power? What more was to come?

I shake my head, willing myself to empty it of what remains of the vision. I have lived lifetimes, and will yet live many more, and here I am working to remove some distressing thought as if I was a spurned lover desperately awaiting the letter of one whom I knew would never write. I rise slowly, extending my preternatural senses to encompass all of the valley and some of the surrounding temples. I feel the chatter of my associates; though they were not witness to the vision, it is plain they can feel the disruption, the dismay, the almost terror. I push my senses to the very edges of our territories, where I encompass all who carry the void. With a slow inhale, I carefully draw their attention. I understand more than *know* they each consciously or unconsciously turn to face the **SHRINE OF RADIANCE**. With a slow exhale, I work to quiet their fears.

I do not know what stands ahead of us, I impress upon them. Whatever it is, we have much work to do, I extol. The impressions I receive in return are those of acquiescence, of a recognition of remaining focused on the task at hand, though also curiosity around what, perhaps, that task entailed.

I blanche. Indeed, what is the task at hand? We have moved from one **FULL MOON RITUAL** to the next, watching our community grow and expand, assimilate and overcome, all for ...

What?

We have managed to exist and expand with no long term strategy. I have watched intricate conspiracies rise and fall, all compromised due to our ever growing suite of preternatural abilities. What planning we have done has centered around our financial stability, and even this was an outgrowth of concern around running out of space to store valuables provided us as offerings. There has only ever been one plan, one goal: keep the hunger at bay and manage it appropriately. Let humans proliferate to provide a wealth of nourishment. Provide rails wherein humans can exist with the wealth of emotions they are capable of experiencing, a veritable smorgasbord from which we may feast. That has been the whole of our operations.

So what now?

I step out of the cairn and walk the length of the outdoor cathedral, to stand at the precipice of the plateau beyond the altar. We are stronger than we have ever been, and continue to grow stronger. It has taken us centuries to arrive here; it may take centuries more before we can contend with the greater powers existing on other planes. Time is on our side. We have centuries. We will consume them.

I reach down deep into the void and struggle to withdraw confidence. It comes unwillingly, as the void insists on managing all that arises. Though I often lose these struggles, I have grown in my abilities, and this time I am able to fill my being with the emotion. I impress upon my associates the importance of patience. Time is on our side. We have centuries. We will consume them and grow ever stronger, ever more powerful.

## 24

The void, it seems, was generally unhappy with my command to my associates. We all felt the sometimes restless, oftentimes aggressive, roiling that began shortly after I communicated our plan of action. Patience, it appeared, was not the void's strong suit. The beings on the other plane demanded action. There was, of course, no reasoning with them. They knew only hunger, desire, power. They wanted for naught all else. The void began to hold fast all emotion, leaving us without feeling, with only the hunger to push us forward. At first, I aimed to combat it similarly to how I did in the beginning. But the next full moon ritual would prove that this was no viable strategy.

As the offerings were being consumed under the full moon, I felt nothing. Every emotion consumed was swallowed whole by the void, leaving I and my associates nothing to enjoy, nothing to savor. There was a momentary bliss that was immediately withdrawn from our reach. Even my struggles to draw up emotion were met with hard and fast barriers.

The assimilation of a new region meant that a Festival of Ascension was on the horizon. The High Clerics and I were well aware of the void and capable of managing the hunger, as even the newest among us carried years of experience with it. However, the Ascension presented a dilemma, as never before had the void elicited such a strong reaction to anything we had ever done. In no uncertain terms, we were brought to understand that the void was master, and we were naught but its servants. We were driven by the hunger, always had been, and now it was demanding more of us.

I pondered a solution. The void could not be allowed to run rampant, though it pained us to exist with it as intensely as it appeared now. We knew the cost should we decide to feed without restraint. We knew we must provide the void with some succor, to release its death grip on our emotions and those we fed on. We needed to come to a solution before the Ascension, lest the new class of High Clerics be overrun by the hunger and driven to excess. What would it take to appease this monstrous appetite without tipping the scales and upsetting the balance of the ecology we had created? The humans thrived, exercising a wide breadth of emotions from which we drank. As a worst case, I saw fields of humans, shackled and fed for our regular feedings. Sourness came gurgling up at the thought. Joy and celebration were rich emotions that were aromatic and sweet. Should we come to farming humans for feeding, we would never again taste of the goodness and sweetness of the lighter emotions; only fear, terror, and sorrow would be harvested, as this is all the humans would feel in their captivity. These emotions would yet provide sustenance, but there would be joy in their consumption.

Nay, we needed a solution that would continue to allow the humans their autonomy but would provide the void with the succor it desired to release its stranglehold. We generally avoided taking from humans and sought to feed only during the **FULL MOON RITUALS**. Generally. Of course there were exceptions, but these were neither consistent nor were they ever a full meal. Samplings, at best. This gave me an idea.

From my throne on the plateau, I spread my awareness over our territories, encompassing all High Clerics, to hold counsel and discuss my plan. Once upon a time, the void was content with monthly feedings. True, it was always in a state of want, but it never drove us to the edges of desperation as it was doing now. And our influence had grown far and wide, with millions upon millions of lives that lived, worked, and served under our long shadow. There was a wealth of emotion to be consumed, and we need not concentrate it to a small few, as we did on the eve of each full moon. Let us then institute a morning and evening prayer ritual, encouraging supplicants to pause for a few moments to offer gratitude to the Temple. This is how we would present it to our people. During each prayer ritual, we would cast the net of our awareness over our people and drink a nominal amount from each. Most would never notice, but collectively this would provide more sustenance than the void had ever consumed since its inception into this world.

The High Clerics are more than a little agreeable. Such was the monstrous grip the void held over us. In truth, they would have agreed to anything I suggested, if the suggestion meant we

had more to consume. I remind them of the price of excess, and extol them to present this new edict with care. Rising from the throne, I turn to the clergy surrounding me and admonish them to begin preparations for a new ritual to be performed daily, and to prepare our people for it. With utter delight, the clergy scamper away. It will take time for the word to spread far and wide, and so I prepared to wait, hoping the wait would prove to be short.

Thankfully, our clergy and their servants are incredibly efficient. And by the means of myself and the High Clerics to communicate telepathically over large distances, many locales were aware of an addition to the worship of the Godhead by the evening. The tolls sounded at regular intervals across timezones, and the High Clerics of each region gathered their awareness and spread it over their lands to drink. The supplicants were few in that first prayer ritual, and yet there was enough drink from to fill the coffers of our hunger several times over, though we were careful to tease minuscule amounts of emotion from each. This caused the void to pause in its relentless and aggressive roiling. For a moment, the void seemed drunk on the emotion that was consumed, and then ever more so with each wave of feeding that occurred as the hour crossed imaginary boundaries, the evening prayer bells ringing over and over until the hour had run its course across the globe.

As the final bells' ringing faded, the void settled itself. I was filled with feelings of satisfaction, contentment, and was even a little bit drowsy, though I was decided on avoiding sleep until I could determine if this prayer ritual was a long term success. Such was the strength of my powers now, that I could suspend sleep almost indefinitely without being overtaken by madness.

There was, of course, the consideration that I was already mad, and thus beyond the necessity for sleep. Mad or dead, it mattered not. This fresh and regular influx of emotion would sustain me with ease; my powers would become greater, faster. What stands above a god, if a god I was in the most elementary exercising of my powers? Whatever it was, that was what I would be stepping into, and soon.

## 25

The morning and evening prayer rituals turned out to be a great success. Even if only a fraction of the people participated, the amount we consumed from one ritual to the next dwarfed all that we usually consumed during a Festival of Ascension. The **FULL MOON** and Festival of Ascension rituals became naught more than dessert when compared to the sustenance provided during the prayer rituals. Though we yet did not claim the entire world as our own, our presence was grounded over enough of it that the morning prayer bled into the evening prayer--as the morning prayer finished one side of our controlled territories, the evening prayer would begin on the other. Wave upon wave of nourishment would course through our veins, and the void was ever drunk with satisfaction at the volume of it.

I and the High Clerics soon began to feel emotion with some regularity. Though there remained bouts of hunger and the ever-present void within, we began to experience emotions as we once did as humans, or so we thought. Those of us who remembered, at least. I have lived so long with the hunger that earliest days of my struggle with it are beyond my immediate memory, and often beyond my grasp, lest I grapple with it and draw it up from the depths of my mind. As for the memory of my humanity? That was long gone. Only the youngest High Clerics were able to recall what that felt like in any sense, and much of that was convoluted as the void continued to warp our minds in its manipulation.

Even now, I failed to understand where I myself ended and the void began. In truth, I was the void, and the void was me. As my strength grew, it seemed that I was incorporating the void into my very being. I could feel the shadows from my visions coursing through my veins, their thoughts little more than echoes in my mind, but present nonetheless. This I found fascinating; were I of weaker constitution and willpower, these shadows would have all fought for control over my being. As it was, all the struggle in the beginning to keep a lid on the hunger and prevent it from running rampant had honed my will to a fine edge and a heavy veil. I would not be overtaken.

However, I could be influenced and manipulated, as the void proved time and again.

The last vestiges of civilization existing outside of our influence were on the verge of being assimilated, and I felt the clamor of the shadows in their excitement of not just maintaining a foothold on this plane, but very much taking control of it. It was difficult not to get wrapped up in the heavy currents of this emotion, shared as it was among the many, captured from the hearts and souls of those who worshipped us. In these moments I struggled to maintain a sober outlook on our progression, as the constant flow of emotion was overwhelming. I knew that if I felt it, so must the others, though I was unsure if they felt the crowding of the shadows within them as well. We lived a shared experience in many ways, the High Clerics and I, though I was unaware of the extent of what we shared. As part of the training to prepare candidates for the position of High Cleric, exercises to develop mental fortitude were prioritized. When one was fed from and then drank of the life force of another to complete the ritual and accept the gift, their mind was thrown wide open for all High Clerics to see. One of the first things they learned was how to impose a wall to protect their thoughts and release only those which they would use to communicate with the rest of us. I found it interesting that this wall held firm against the shadows as well, at least in my case.

Weeks, and then months passed by and I yet remained awake, unsure and somewhat fearful that I might be pulled into another vision were I to slumber. I clearly remembered the presence I felt at edges of my last vision, and that was bad enough to avoid that plane. But one other thing bothered me. I was sure I would be goaded into acting ever farther with our consumption of human emotion, and I felt unprepared to deal with that, were it to arise. The void felt overly confident and gleeful, pulsing at the center of my being as its tendrils slowly enveloped me. I thought at any moment I could peer into the realm of the visions through my connection with



the void, but avoided doing so at all costs. I knew not what lay in store for me were I to return, and in my current state I was unwilling to find out.

Thus we approached the final Festivals of Ascension. As soon as the remaining regions of the earth submitted to our rule and swore fealty to our temples, our clergy were ready to begin the trials that would raise another generation of High Clerics to serve in the temples that would be built. The anticipation was palpable, both among our peoples and the clergy, including the High Clerics and myself. Throughout this period of waiting, all of us in positions of power were pressed against the more impatient of those among our people. The politicians and business men were always ready to raise an army for the cause, and it was always the High Clerics that counseled patience. Counseled or threatened. We only ever had to wait. All regions fell to us in time, and these last bastions of civilizations, as they called themselves, would be no different.

We were a ship on the brink of cascading over a waterfall: it was inevitable. The mutterings within were becoming louder with each passing day, as we approached the threshold of our complete and total control over all the earth.

## 26

I sat on my throne in the **SHRINE OF RADIANCE**, pondering the many ways the void could sabotage the precarious balance between the hunger and human autonomy. Negotiations were under way with the leaders of "The Last Bastion of Hope," as this small collective of nations had taken to calling themselves. The result of these negotiations--assimilation, and thus the final Festival of Ascension--would usher in a new age of Earth. The energy in the void was tangible, as I often felt as if the shadows residing within were physically pressing themselves against my flesh, as if attempting to break free of this bodily prison. This caused me concern, as there was far too much unknown about the spirits I danced with, their capabilities, and their ultimate goals.

There was so much I failed to understand of the otherworldly plane in which I walked. One foot in this plane, and one foot in that one, ever walking forward. What we wrought on this plane was clearly seen. On that plane, however, I was naught but a tool, a marionette made to dance for the benefit of all who watched. The void pulled the strings, using emotion to drive me first one way, and then another, just as we used emotion to manipulate the human population. Conflict was easy to manage when you could distill and remove anger and fear from the equation. Neighboring communities would begin to rise against each other, only to settle down and come to terms with one another once the regional High Clerics pulled the rug from under their passions. This was the way of it with myself. The void pushed and pulled, simply by managing what emotions were present when it came time to make vital decisions. Over the centuries, I learned not to trust my emotional reactions, though it seldom mattered.

On some level, I understood we maintained this precarious balance of hunger and autonomy by the grace of the void. Perhaps by some intuition, the void understood what we did and why we did it. With the instantiation of twice daily prayer ceremonies from which we received a

generous sustenance, I was often taken aback that the void simply did not demand more, as it was a deep demand that caused the prayer services to be enacted.

These were the musings of a very old man-become-monster. Countless times over the centuries had I considered things such as this, exploring the void in thought, though terrified to step foot into its realm. All this consideration, and I had learned very little. This left me apprehensive. Without knowing the end goal, without understanding how and why the void operated as it did, I felt I was submerged deep in a sea with no indication as to the direction in which the surface lay, and I was running out of air. We were on the cusp of a Festival of Ascension, and I was left feeling furtive in my attempts to figure out how the void might take this out of our control.

To say I was losing sleep over this would be a misnomer. I still hadn't slept for fear of what lay in wait on the otherworldly plane.

We had thoroughly refined the **CANDIDATE SELECTION PROCESS** to address psychological and metaphysical concerns, as well as teleological concerns once a candidate was made to ascend. We had spent countless decades improving the **CANDIDATE TRAINING PROGRAM** to ensure we brought those in who would uphold our commitment to the balance we so carefully maintained. Could this process be subverted in some way without our knowledge? Could we be driven to act without our conscious awareness? These questions troubled me, for I did not know.

The **CANDIDATE TRAINING PROGRAM** was tightly tied to the Festival itself, being the completion of the work of the candidate once selected. It saw the indoctrination, development, and preparation of a human to perform the responsibilities of a High Cleric, as well as to sharpen their willpower to serve as a barrier against the whims of the void. With each Festival of Ascension that was performed, I and my ilk spent innumerable days reviewing the process, looking for holes to patch, edges to smooth, surfaces to reinforce. And every single time, the Festival of Ascension was performed without issue.

Well, the path of the selected candidates was completed without issue. Much like the very first parade, there was always some small problem with regard to conspiracy, sabotage, or outright recklessness.

Here I was again, scrutinizing the entire process, from start to finish. The **CANDIDATE SELECTION PROCESS** had already begun, and those who were chosen would soon begin their training. We were running out of time to alter any part of it should a problem arise in the process.

Running out of time. Now wasn't that ironic.

Both the selection process and training programs were brutal. We sought to commit those souls who stood out from the power-hungry crowd, those who deeply desired to serve for the sake of serving. There were not many. Man may be many things, but altruistic and subservient was not among them. Many humans committed acts of altruism, but for the purpose of recognition and clout. Many humans were subservient only out of necessity. Even those in the clergy, serving in

our temples, were a mixed bag of greed, pride, and covetousness. We found ways to balance these against each other to produce a clergy that unquestioningly performed our bidding. But to draw High Clerics from among them was often in poor taste, and rarely ever did those candidates survive their training.

Few though there were, those who were pure of heart and focused of mind did exist, and we went through great pains to find them. Diamonds in the rough, they were, and we mined for them as dearly as one mines for gold, diamonds, or other precious stones and metals. These diamonds were fulcrum on which this world balanced precariously. To introduce the void to one of unholy intentions was to invite disaster. We had all we needed, more so even, and provided to us willingly. Ascending to High Cleric one of ill will could send this whole world spinning into madness, into chaos.

The Festival of Ascension was a vital part of our operations for innumerable reasons, but namely to ensure that none crossed the boundary into the Godhead that did not belong. I and the others went through great pains that this was well maintained.

Now we teetered on the cusp of complete control of the Earth, and never had the necessities of this process weighed so heavily on my shoulders. We must choose rightly, as we always have done before. There were no second chances when bringing a human into our fold. Despite the refinement of these processes and the successes we saw in them one Festival after another, I yet remained anxious that we could be made blind to some factor that we either did not consider or the void distracted us from.

The others felt my concerns and shared in it. Whether or not they felt the shadows dancing under their own skins, I knew they recognized a difference in how I carried myself. Perhaps this underscored the importance of the cusp on which we so precariously balanced. One day soon, word would arrive that it was time to erect our temples in the Last Bastion of Hope, and when that day arrived, we would hamstring to the process we had created.

I felt a prickling sensation across my skin. My preternatural senses were on high alert, and I had not realized it. There was an envoy arriving. Any moment now, my contemplation would be disturbed by one of the clergy come to deliver a message.

This was an open air amphitheater. There were no doors to be thrown open, no windows to shout through. I heard the voices and the rushing long before the clergy crossed the threshold of the columns that spread out to either side. In moments, a small cluster of humans in the garish robes of the acolytes lay prostrate before me. I bid them rise, and the head of the group rushed forward to deliver the news that negotiations were completed, that the Last Bastion of Hope had conceded their territory to the temple.

We had run out of time.

Things seemed to move quickly once we gained control of The Last Bastion of Hope. I received regular confirmations from the High Clerics engaged in the **CANDIDATE TRAINING PROGRAM** that this group was performing as well as groups in the past. The clergy were filled with anticipation as preparations for the Festival of Ascension were underway. There was nothing in the stream of information coming in on all fronts that suggested anything was amiss.

This alone was cause enough to make me nervous. The idea that I could be unnecessarily stressing myself out only further dampened my mood. My mind was racing, continuously considering all the many ways in which this process could fail, all the ways in which we might at any moment be wholly taken by the void, all the ways I could be wrong about all of it. I longed for the simplicity of my time traveling with the young man as we attempted to withdraw from human society altogether. Despite our lofty intentions and best efforts, I now held the fate of humanity in the palm of my hand. On a whim, I could destroy all that we wrought.

The void seemed to tug on my nervous feelings, as if suggesting it could erase them, but as it was now almost always in a state of drunk delirium from our daily feedings, it generally disregarded whatever emotions were mine to experience. However, this too caused me some concern. Though I believed the mental barriers I erected against the void and the others of my ilk held fast and remained uncompromised, I worried that some of my contemplations would bleed through.

I may no longer be human, but I am corporeally present on this plane. I exist in it. I am sustained by it. Whatever may befall this world, the consequences will be felt by all beings, I and the High Clerics included. To plunge this world into chaos would destroy any and all hope that we and the humans could ever coexist in a symbiotic relationship that would strengthen me for the work the shadows were preparing me for. The presence at the edges of my last vision haunted me in ways I yet struggled to enumerate. It was making me desperate. All we worked toward could not be undone now.

This line of thinking, of course, did nothing to ease my discomfort.

I listened as reports arrived from all sides, detailing the progress of the Festival planning and the candidates' successes as they moved through their rigorous training regimen. None of it pacified the tension wrapped around my chest. This anxiety was an anaconda, threatening to crush my physically being and drain me of my life force. All the while, the shadows' excitement continued to grow. On more than one occasion, I considered waking the young man, seeking the perception of one who could look in from the outside, as there was no one on this planet who could objectively do so. I dismissed the idea as soon as it arose; the young man slumbered to escape the pernicious effects of the void. I would leave him to rest. I envied him, alone out of us all able to decline participation in the machinations of the void.

I often wondered if in his slumber he walked in the shadow realm. Was he, perhaps, lost in it? From my vantage on the plateau and my ever present vigilance, I had no way of knowing. Were I to sleep, perhaps I could make contact. This posed a dilemma, however. I did not know if each

one of us carrying the void could step into that realm, or if I was alone in that experience, being the first, being the host, being the head.

I turned my attention to the Church. All the major religions had fallen silent since the assimilation of the last free territory on Earth. I knew not if this was a matter of mourning or conspiracy; it mattered not. Were they to wrest control of the world from my wretched hands was not my concern. What was control when compared to the flood of power we experienced at each feeding? Nay, I feared no victory of outright rebellion. I did, however, fear the collapse of the precarious ecosystem we had created. I would happily thrive in the shadows so long as chaos did not reign in the light. I spread my preternatural awareness to listen to the subtle undertones and impressions, the casual vibrations, of the movements and motivations of humans. This often revealed artifacts of dissonance, where conspirators had managed to gather enough attention to their schemes to draw my attention. In this way, we were able to dismantle these intrigues before they became problematic.

As I prodded the major epicenters of the larger religions, I discovered nothing out of the ordinary. This did little to ease my apprehension. I turned my attention to the growing ideological networks and found nothing out of the ordinary there, which also did little to ease my apprehension. Was my paranoia so great that I was inventing a veritable boogeyman with which to torment myself? Or was something truly amiss that lay out of the realm of my abilities to recognize or discover? There was no issue in exercising my abilities. Nay, in fact, I had never been as capable as I was now, always increasing in the strength and prowess of my abilities. In the early days, when we reigned over only the valley, it took effort to extend my awareness over it. Now, I could send my awareness to the farthest corners of the world with naught more than a thought. I could impress my will upon others on the slightest whim. Isolating candidates who required guidance was nothing more than an afterthought. All this I did, and more, to discover what lay in store that may prove to be troublesome for the impending Festival of Ascension. I came up short every time.

The others sensed my anxiety. In a time not long before this one, we shared emotion as one, always at the whim of the void. With the institution of twice daily ritual prayer, the void seemed drowsy and drunk on emotion, leaving us to our own. This had the peculiar result of dismantling how deeply we were tied with one another emotionally. While we were yet very much connected in all ways, we no longer felt as one body. The others moved from one day to the next in usual fashion, managing regional details as was their responsibility, and I managing the overall affairs of the Temple. In this, it seemed I was the only one with heady concern over the possibilities of what might transpire leading up to, or during, the Festival of Ascension. The others lent their energies to understanding where trouble may originate from, though most of their communications with me were to provide comfort and solace. I initially rejected such concerns; we were the Godhead, we did not have the luxury to provide succor to one another in such fashion. But my apprehension only grew, and their support became welcome. Any threat to the Temple, or to any one of us, was a threat to us all. Understanding this made their overtures welcome.

I began to think that perhaps I exhausted all avenues from whence threats may originate. Was there, indeed, no stone yet left unturned? Was there no group or community I had failed to look into? If the apprehension was not torment enough, the overthinking would certainly bring the work to completion. I required a rest from my own thoughts, though no such rest would be had. Were I to slumber, I would find myself in the other realm, and I was not yet ready to make such an excursion. And the distractions by which man escaped their mental anguish held no attraction for me. Nay, I was a prisoner of my own thinking, and being aware of the fact left me feeling forlorn and impotent.

## 28

I was, by all outward appearances, composed on the eve of the final Festival of Ascension. I was, however, far from such. Everything was in place. Everything was in order. All appeared well, and the clergy's anticipation and excitement was palpable. Despite this, I failed to accept things as they appeared, and this drove my paranoia to extremes. We were a week away from a full moon, as was customary for this ceremony.

The entire world was watching. This would be the largest Festival of Ascension ever to be performed, both in attendance and display. Never before had the world seen an event such as this. Coronations, religious rituals, prior Festivals of Ascension, all paled in comparison to what would transpire over the following seven days. This was made possible by way of **THE ASCENDED**'s telepathic abilities, by which we were able to plan and spread information. Some locales were behind the news by two days' travel at most, and so when this Festival was announced, innumerable persons began making plans to attend.

Innumerable. The final count of people expected to be in attendance was staggering. Though I was vaguely aware of how many people existed on this planet, the calculations of how many would attend put the total population in better perspective. I could hardly believe that so many people existed on this planet, that this planet could sustain such a population. It became clear to me why the daily prayer ritual was overly satiating. This population was far greater than we what we needed to sustain ourselves. Even the sampling we partook of was an incredible amount of emotion to imbibe, and now I understood why.

A fraction of the entire population would be in attendance for this final Festival of Ascension, and it was yet a colossal amount of people migrating to the region. The clergy of the region were in high spirits, thrilled to host such an enormous gathering for an event that would prove to be *sui generis*. This served to catapult the extravagance of the event. The finest craftsmen in the region were recruited to create immense and beautiful structures that would play prominent roles in the ceremony. Artisans and artists of all kinds were hired from within the region, and invited from without to add a flourish to the Festival not present in any prior. Through the minds of the local **ASCENDED** I bore witness to development and completion of some of the most splendid works of art I had ever experienced in my entire existence. We made plans to bring a

handful of these structures and pieces to the **SHRINE OF RADIANCE** once the ceremony was complete, and the celebration afterward had come to an end.

I had considered traveling to the region in which the Festival would take place, to bear witness to the splendor of the event directly, but decided against it. From the depths of what soul remained to me I yearned to experience the beauty of the event. However, I recognized if any truly damning thing were to occur, it would center on my presence. I was expected. I was anticipated. **THE ASCENDED** knew I would not be in attendance, and though this information was distributed widely to the clergy, the desire and hope that I be present was strong enough to reach me at the **SHRINE OF RADIANCE** with no effort to sense it on my part. It was mutual--they longed for my presence as I longed to be present. I decided to remain ever vigilant from my throne on the plateau.

Even now, the throngs of people in attendance packed the boulevards on which the inaugural parade would traverse. The Temple had been gracious with grants to local hospitality-oriented businesses to increase the capacity of their establishments to serve ever greater amounts of patrons. We went to great lengths to ensure that even the poorest supplicants and pilgrims would have food and shelter, that there would be no want of sustenance among those in attendance. The planning for this event had begun months before The Last Bastion of Hope had fallen into our hands, and preparation took many months to complete after we acquired the region. The Last Bastion of Hope had become an incredible spectacle in its own right, and now we would draw the world's full attention with a ceremony to surpass all ceremonies.

We had not the means to share the full splendor of the event across the world. This created a great amount of tension among those faithful who were unable to attend for any number of reasons. We considered a number of solutions. We had the ability to impress upon our followers subtle imagery and strong suggestion, but this would in no way capture the grandeur of what would transpire. As a result, many regions decided to hold similar celebrations alongside the Festival of Ascension. This was not uncommon. Past Festivals saw similar events replicated across the globe, as our followers celebrated with the region in which a new cast of candidates would **ASCEND**. Of course, the celebrations accompanying this final Festival would share in the extravagance: regional temples sought out the finest craftsmen and artisans in their locales to create smaller, similar versions of the art and structures being erected at the site of the main Festival. When the last rays of sunlight faded into the twilight here on the plateau on the eve of the Festival, the entire world would light up in celebration.

This would signal sunrise in the region of The Last Bastion of Hope. Across timezones, across regions, across temples the world over, the Festival would begin. A fitting beginning. A fitting continuation.

The sun was slowly setting before me. A sliver of its orb remained visible over the mountain range at the opposing end of the valley. The sky was alight with a fire more fantastic than all the bonfires that had ever been lit on the plateau. Its magnificence was enough of a distraction that

I was entirely consumed by it. My apprehension, my paranoia, remained suspended for those few precious moments, as I lost myself in the beauty of the display. Overhead, the dark of night was beginning to spread its net to obscure the radiance of the sun in its decent. The encroaching darkness brought with it the apprehension and paranoia, and I stood in full attention of what was happening over the Earth. The sun was gone completely from my sight, and its fiery hues spread across the sky were disappearing with it. As the final reds and oranges dissipated into purples and blacks, the Shrine of Radiance exploded in light.

The final Festival of Ascension had begun.

## 29

I was entirely unprepared for what transpired during the Festival. Nothing, absolutely no planning, no consideration, no high level of imagination, could have provided me insight to what occurred. All the apprehension, all the paranoia, all the self-imposed torment was all for naught.

The Festival of Ascension was performed to completion, and the celebrations that took place afterward went on without incident.

There were, of course, minor discrepancies as there are with any sizable event, though no issue was big enough to cause any major disruption of any event taking place the world over. The jubilation was blissful. The celebrations were enthusiastic. The void was naught more than a whisper during the Festival, so drunk was it on the emotions from which we liberally drank. There was excess such that we were unable to keep most of it to ourselves. Thus we shared. The whole world was overtaken with ecstasy, as we spread euphoria over the face of it. Humans everywhere felt our presence and revelations as twelve of their kind **ASCENDED**. We impressed upon our followers visions and imagery of the main Festival to supplement regional celebrations. The world was delirious with the splendor we imparted. What event could ever overcome the rhapsody shared among mankind throughout the Festival and for weeks beyond it? Despite the pain we wrought as the price of our existence, we had created something beautiful. We had created a single shared moment of joy across all of humanity. I sincerely doubted anything we--or anyone else for that matter--could ever come close to creating such collective euphoria.

We were the damned, and humanity was our ward. While we sought to keep the void within at bay, we worked tirelessly to share what light we could with our charge. Never was this made more apparent than during the final Festival of Ascension. With grandiose panache, we presented humanity with a glimpse of what could be. The **FULL MOON RITUALS** would never be the same. They would continue, as it was a regularly unifying ritual across regions. However, having experienced the collective joy and euphoria that was made possible by this final Festival, the **FULL MOON RITUALS** would be transformed into something akin to miniature renditions of the Festival of Ascension, as humans sought to create similar experiences of shared ecstasy.



The outcome was overwhelming. No conspiracy reared its head, no obscured group arrived to dismantle the efforts of those working in concert to create these experiences. The Festival of Ascension was executed with perfection. I was beside myself with relief as the final celebrations began to die down. The Festival was a well-contained bonfire of jubilation, and as the embers smoldered, I was finally able to relax. I had stood in front of my throne through the entire week, watching the complex interplay of the supplicants and clergy on the plateau as they performed all their planned activities in tandem with those of the Festival of Ascension. There were moments in which I was immersed in their ceremony, but they were fleeting. I ever returned to my apprehension, my vigilance. When it was all over, I relinquished my paranoia, doused my anxiety, and allowed myself respite from my self-inflicted torment.

The Festival came and went, bringing additions to **THE ASCENDED** and leaving humanity with memories of incredible experiences. And now, what? The thought of returning to the mundane struggle of wrestling with the void was sobering. Now we continue doing what we have always done, serve as humanity's Last Bastion of Hope in our regulation of the hunger.

The immensity to which the Last Bastion of Hope had grown in preparation for the Festival was not lost on the clergy. The region remained full of splendor, with much of the artisans' work remaining, excepting those pieces that were brought to the **SHRINE OF RADIANCE**. Such was the grandeur of the region that many were calling for the migration of the **SHRINE OF RADIANCE**. I contemplated the significance of such a move. How symbolic a gesture to place the core of our religion in the region that brought the world into such joyous delirium!

As beautiful a gesture as it could be, I declined. The plateau held too much meaning and purpose; this was, after all, the place where the young man and I had chosen to attempt to withdraw from the world entirely. This was a place of deep ties to our past. I was once a human becoming a monster. In that evolution I sought desperately to save others from what I was becoming. In my former life, I worked alongside my brothers of the cloth to share the Light as we understood and to serve any and all who would seek us for succor and shelter. In my early days wrestling with the hunger, I sought to minimize my expression of its darkest deeds. After all these years, I and my kind had created something that at once staved off the worst of the hunger and shared the best of it with humanity. Damned though we were, we had given humans the experience of a global, collective joy. Such an experience could be their reality.

Nay, the plateau was symbolic of far more than what transpired with the final Festival of Ascension. The plateau was the home of the **SHRINE OF RADIANCE** and would remain so indefinitely.

## 30

The days seemed to extend forever following the final Festival of Ascension. One day bled into the next as my vigilance continued, though I was growing weary of my extended consciousness. Spreading my awareness, telepathic communications, manipulating emotions, all took a toll on

my finite energy. I slowly became conscious of the amount of emotion I required to consume in order to continue my vigil. In the first few weeks, I was able to maintain my sharpened senses with no change in how much I consumed. After a few months, however, I began to grow drowsy. Increasing my emotion intake helped, but was problematic. I was siphoning resources from the collective. **THE ASCENDED** drank, and I dipped into the well of our bounty to withdraw more than my fair share, all to remain conscious, all to avoid entering the other realm. This would not bode well in the long term.

I shared my concerns with **THE ASCENDED**. They knew of my vigil and why I avoided sleep. I knew by way of their impressions they had not entered the other realm themselves. Why I was the only one pulled into that space was unknown to me, though I held my suspicions. Perhaps being the first, I was the only one with whom the void could communicate in such a way, a direct means of transmission. Perhaps I was the only one strong enough to enter the other realm and return, consciousness intact. This was, however, speculation. Perhaps the others had the ability and simply did not exercise it. While possible, this did not seem correct. The times I had entered the other realm were involuntary. There was no conscious effort on my behalf to do so as I fell asleep. As sleep overcame me, I simply appeared there. No, there must be something that draws me in. I know not what.

Too much of my existence was wrapped up in unknowns. My life continued well beyond that of a human, but I knew not if I was truly immortal or I would simply live beyond centuries and pass away in the distant future. I had powers that were growing, though I knew not their limits nor any supernatural laws governing their use beyond what I learned from experience in their use. I was also unaware of all the powers I held at my fingertips. I knew there were latent powers that I had not utilized, unsure of how to use them or what purpose they served. I knew I could remain vigilant for extended periods of time, but was learning that beyond a certain point it came at increasing cost. When I considered the unknowns of the other realm and my access to it, ever more questions arose, and no answers.

The shadows felt ever more present, particularly after the euphoria of the final Festival of Ascension. They imbued this body with ever greater strength and additional powers, but failed to bring to my awareness any of the answers they may hold. How did one communicate with the monsters in one's head and under one's skin?

I periodically sought the talents of those who claimed psychic abilities. The clergy would bring renowned magicians, sorcerers, occultists, all providing what insight they saw beyond this realm in the cards or tea leaves or runes with which they practiced their art. None of it was illuminating. Being of renown, I never faulted these practitioners as false. Provided my countless years of experience in thriving as a preternatural being, who was I to question what was real and what was not? How could I claim to know the secrets of the beyond and accuse those of human ilk that their ways were misguided? I was, perhaps, better positioned to know more, but what evidence did I have that who they communed with was inaccessible? I barely knew enough of my own existence; there were other realms, other beings, other powers, other

skills, and I knew not even a fraction of them. I accepted these practitioners' admonitions, expressed my gratitude in providing their services, and dismissed them.

The longer I lived, the greater my experience, the more I realized I did not know. Everything was questionable, including my very existence. Was this, in fact, a dream? Was the other realm my true reality? Was I already dead, and this was naught more than a vision in the afterlife? The longer I remained conscious, the less coherent I became. My mental faculties were at once ever sharp and also incredibly dull. The costs I incurred in my vigilance were increasing, and not just in how much sustenance I required to maintain my waking state.

With each passing day, I grew more weary. I did not dip into the shared storehouse of emotions more than I already dared. Long past was the time of our struggling with the hunger, and I would not bring about that plight again in my insistence that I continue my vigil. Nay, the night would come when I would slumber, and I would enter into the other realm or I would not. That night was not tonight. It would arrive soon, but it was not tonight.

The sun was setting, and I once again stood at the edge of the plateau watching the burning sky in awe. Whatever I was, it paled in comparison to the magnificence of the setting sun. There was such incredible beauty on this plain, and I was grateful that my existence extended such that I experienced such grandeur each and every evening. There was a time when I shunned the sun, accusing it of representing all that I lost in my evolution as a monster. How foolish I had been! I had only myself to blame for all the sorrow, pain, torment I caused and experienced on the journey that brought me to this very moment. Had I known this was where I would end up, at the head of a collective that brought peace and joy to humanity, I would not have despaired as deeply in my darkest moments. The void was satiated, my powers grew, and humanity thrived as a result. Where I failed as man of the cloth, I succeeded as a monster in the mountains.

I walked to the throne and took my seat, contemplating this all. Warmth and joy, I felt, without fear of their withdrawal. I *felt* freely. I closed my eyes, breathing in the evening air, allowing myself the experience of pleasure of all that we had wrought. And with my exhale, sleep overcame me.

## 31

*I am unaware if it was the extent of my vigil that brought me here, if it was past time for me to come, or if my entry is random, but I once again find myself in the other realm. The ethereal light is brighter, the shadows around me are more clearly defined than before, the way before me is better illuminated. Is this the result of our success on the earthly plane? There is a resounding affirmation from the shadows around me, as if they were fully aware of my observations. I receive impressions of gratitude, of excitement, of satisfaction, as well as concern. I receive impressions that I have been away too long, that there is much I am unaware of, that little time remains to prepare me for what comes.*

*It is revealed to me that it may, in fact, be too late.*

*I walk forward, but my progress is stunted, slow, weak. My vigil has cost me my exuberance here in this realm. The shadows acknowledge the thought; I yet require rest as does every tangible being. I believed myself to be beyond simple human limitations, but as I inhabited a corporeal body on the earthly plane, that body required all that any mortal body required: sustenance; rest. This, however, was not the worst of what was being impressed upon me as I attempted to move forward on this boulevard. The shadows had much to share, and I was as slow of mind in this place, owing much my foolhardy vigilance.*

*Terror grips me as I work out the meanings of the various impressions and visuals being sent to me by the shadows. Each perceives what comes with slight variation to the one next to it, so the general idea of what comes is impressed upon me with subtle differentiation in the details. But it is not the details that matter. It is the message. It is the warning.*

*A darkness greater than I could fathom approaches. A presence to rival even the deepest of my fears. I inquire of the presence. The shadows affirm it is the same as was sensed in my last visit. Desperation claws at me from within, but I stifle the sensation. The commotion among the shadows hold my attention. They are at great pains to collect their thoughts to present a clear impression of what they demand of me to understand.*

*They impressed upon me that they cannot save me. They impress upon me they have given me all they dare to provide, recognizing the fragility of the corporeal body in which I reside on the earthly plane. I have not yet existed long enough nor fed well enough to complete the evolution of my physical being to fully contain all they offer, to become the being able to stand against the darkness that rises. Despite this, they impress upon me I must defend myself. They impress upon me that am I to protect what I have wrought, the work I have done. I am charged to defend it to my death. As if to drive the point home, I receive another wave of visuals and impressions of the cost incurred should I fail.*

*How am I to stand against what I do not understand, I implore. Their concentration is broken for a moment as they devolve into confusion and turmoil. I sense the differences in what they consider pertinent, and their difficulty in coming to agreement on what best to convey. They finally fall silent. They beckon me to do the same. I sense their rising fear. As if in solidarity with the shadows, fear rises within me, my terror growing to levels I have not experienced in centuries. Is it the presence I felt last time that returns? But my thoughts go unanswered. Nothing is spoken. No impressions are sent. And then I feel the immensity of the presence from before. Far larger, far greater, more encompassing than I am capable of grasping. My mind recoils at its approach. My whole being shudders, the shadows around me shuddering with it. There is no time, they impress. Return! they impress with great urgency.*

*I cannot leave without answers. I must leave with at least some shred of a solution. How could I ever hope to withstand the monstrous presence that looms, even from afar? My terror uncoils within, spreading itself out through my torso, my limbs, my mind. I do not run; there is nowhere to run. I cannot hide; there is nowhere to hide. The presence approaches as the terror rises and threatens to consume me, and I feel entirely powerless to act.*

*At the edges of my consciousness, I hear a deep hiss. I grasp at the noise and it pushes away some of the terror. The shadows have managed to collect their focus and work together to reach into me, to push me*

*out with a final message: do not forget; whatever the cost, be not dismayed; all is not lost. There is more, but in the next moment all falls silent and I am yanked from the vision.*

My eyes snap open as I lift my head from its perch on my chest. I'm on my feet in the next moment preparing to spread my awareness in an effort to sense from whence the threat comes, but immediately sit back down, so weak is my body. I sense nothing. I again attempt to spread my awareness from where I land but sense absolutely nothing. No spreading of awareness. No sensual feedback from anything or anyone around me. I hear shouts all around, the rushing of bodies, the clash of steel on steel, the cracking of bones. I hear howling. So much howling. My wolves have arrived, though I remain too disoriented from my abrupt waking to make sense of what is happening, and too physically exhausted to act.

I pause a moment to collect my mental faculties and allow my body to gain some semblance of autonomy. I once again attempt to call upon my preternatural senses and it is then that I recognize I am completely blocked from doing so. Is this a numbing net placed over me? Is this drawn by one of my own? Who would have the presence of mind to revolt against **THE ASCENDED** so thoroughly and not be blocked by the void? But I have no time to consider this thoroughly, as the urgency of the moment has my full attention. I feel completely drained. Without access to my preternatural senses, I am unable to drink, to gain sustenance, to energize myself enough to act.

I look around. Nothing and no one is present in my field of vision, though the Shrine is filled with the sounds of conflict, battle, disruption, death. The shouts of humans intermingle with the snarling of wolves, and I can hear the desperation in the cacophony. I *feel* the desperation within, but am too weak to rise to the occasion.

Too late indeed. Too late and too weak. My extended vigilance has left this body with too little natural energy upon which to operate. I realize, too late, how foolish I was to avoid sleep for fear of the visions it brought. The shadows warned me, but too late had I arrived to receive it in time. Understanding begins to dawn on me as I begin to piece together their many disjointed messages. Defend the work to the death, they had charged me. Protect all I have wrought with every ounce of my being.

The **SHRINE OF RADIANCE**, though brilliantly lit, feels as if it is being drowned in darkness. I cannot let this happen. I focus my attention with what little energy I am able to gather in my desperation. I draw up a mental spike, a power I am aware of but have never used. I attune the spike to whatever is blocking my abilities, but as I attempt to rend the net with this spike, all goes dark.

No light. No sound. Nothing.

## Epilogue

*Commander,*

*My squad arrived at the appointed hour and met with the heathens who brought with them the contraption and talisman they so ardently contended was necessary. Together we traveled the mountain pass and entered the plateau unheeded. As we approached the shrine of the pagans, we were met with opposition. It seemed the idolaters were aware that we were not there on friendly terms. Though outmatched in skill, being untrained in combat, their numbers afforded them some advantage and made our progress slow. We were pulled from our horses and set upon by the fanatics. They fell easily, but their loyalty to their faith gave them great courage and we were at great pains to continue on to the crypt. Such was their efficacy, they gave time for the demon's beasts to join the fray. The wolves came upon us from everywhere, and we were made to defend ourselves on all sides. With little time to spare, our men, along with the heathens, created a barrier betwixt the wolves and the core of our fighting group, from which myself and a few others were able to break away. The heathen with the talisman joined us and we fled further onto the plateau.*

*We cut our way through the few pagans we came upon as we made our way to the crypt. The heathens' intelligence was accurate as to the location and the layout. At what cost did they acquire this information? It matters not. All was told true, and we were in the demon's chambers when we heard the dying screams of our brethren. With little time before we were discovered, we scoured the crypt for the other talisman, the like of the one we carried with us. But neither the talisman, the demon, nor the sleeping demon was present. The heathens failed to provide us with the means of our future victories.*

*We quickly rushed out of the crypt, and were ready to flee when Journeyman Toulouse noticed the demon seated on the throne. Without pause, I turned to rush up the stairs. As I did so, the heathen pressed the talisman he carried into my chest. I grasped hold of it, and he ran away. With no time to lose, I climbed the stairs, rose over the foul monster, and took off its head with one swift stroke of my blade. We turned and fled from the plateau as the wolves and pagans scurried around buildings and over obstacles to block our passage. We had no time to search for the other demon, such was the urgency of our escape.*

*I offer my penitence, my master. I am distraught that we have failed in our assignment, but the demon lies dead on its throne, and that offers me a little solace when I rest my head in the evenings. We have a journey of a fortnight ahead of us. Once at the safehouse I will send along this letter. I have attempted to include all the information you requested, and I hope this suffices. For now, I work to keep up the spirits of our few remaining men.*

*In service to you, and in honor of our Lord,  
Sir William Hensley, Knight Templar*