

TORMENT™

TIDES OF NUMENERA™



FROM THE DEPTHS: INDIGO

Ray Vallese

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A Torment: Tides of Numenera Novella

by Ray Vallese

For the Common Good

Chapter 1

I don't blame Tuck for what happened. Not anymore. Back then, though, the only thing stopping me from killing him was the fact that I could only do it once. I wanted him to suffer a hundred times, a thousand times, for every innocent life he took. So I waited. And you know? After spending so much time with him, I came to realize that the awful thing he did, all the ruin he caused, he did for what he thought was the good of the Ninth World. It's not his fault his perspective is so limited. That's just the way he's made.

I don't mean "made" like an automaton. He's as human as they come. Right number of limbs, just one head—the usual. Lately I've begun to pick up on details, like the way his dirt-brown hair hangs down to brush his shoulders, or how his eyes are the same blue as the ocean. How he's scarred and slim and the color of sand. But none of that matters. Just what's inside.

What Tuck did wasn't his idea, and he wasn't even sure he wanted to do it, but he felt he had no choice. And whether he's a monster or a hero depends on where you stood when he opened the gate. Eltria would burn him to cinders if she could. Baji might say everything turned out for the best. But that's my point—whose best? Who decides what's best? Maybe we should sift through Tuck's head, find the path that led us here, and you can judge for yourself.

Where to start, though? The grisly attack on New Iqa? The leeches? That trouble with the mutants? It all blends together for him. I'll try to break the patchwork back into its parts.

Let's start with what happened at the stream. In his own words.

I felt the rumblings under my boots and knew that it was almost time.

Mojander didn't seem to notice yet. The cropper trailed behind the patchwork automaton as it rolled between the rows of volk, misting the stalks with sparkly orange nutrient clouds. The machine's treads bogged down in the mud every other row, so he kept pushing it free. From time to time he banged on it with his pearly synth hand. The kids watched from the edge of the field, near the silver stream that ran parallel to the rows, cheering each time he knocked the sprayer back into action. The old man played it up for his audience.

If Mojander weren't so fat he could walk the rows and spray the volk himself. Eltria's field contraptions broke down as much as they didn't, or rolled over the crops, or yanked healthy plants out of the ground, or gave them too much fertilizer, or not enough. Seems like they made more work than they saved. But everyone still said the Aeon Priest was the smartest person in town.

I shouldn't be too hard on her. Eltria's been pulled in all directions since she took charge of New Iqa, and we wouldn't have survived the attack if not for her. She's just . . . not easy to work for. But we needed a new consul after Lozwen died, and Eltria's who the people picked, for better or for worse.

Mojander used a red rag to wipe the sweat from his jowls and his weedy mess of white hair. Then he froze mid-dab and cocked his head. He dropped to his hands and knees and belly and pressed his ear to the soil, eyes narrowed in concentration. I guess he finally heard the rumblings. I'd kept quiet so as not to ruin his big moment.

Grunting to his feet, the cropper whistled through his teeth and waved his arms so hard that the ends of his long white mustache bounced. "Children, children! Clear the way! Clear the way!" The kids had seen this hundreds of times. It happened once, maybe twice a week. They still loved it.

"Here . . . it . . . comes!"

The kids whooped and ran up and down the rows, dodging the orange clouds sprayed by the slow-trundling automaton. Cilo slapped my hand as he passed me, a good smack for a kid as thin as a volk stalk. Behind him ran his barking thuman. The big hound's wide smile crinkled the leathery skin of its human face. The boy had named it Fatch, after his uncle, for the yellow-toothed grin it shared with the man.

Deep below the ground, the clanking started. The dull metal clunks always ticked by at the same rate, never faster or slower, like the steadily turning gears of a giant machine. The story goes that not long after the exiles came to the valley and settled New Iqa, they heard the clanks rising up from the field. They'd dug almost deep enough to bury a rilit tree standing up, but they'd found only soil—no idea where the clanks came from. When they saw the effect on the surface, though, they knew they'd found the perfect spot to plant their crops.

Sure enough, right on cue, the wide stream at the edge of the fields bent toward us. The silvery water washed up over its banks and curved into the fields, soaking into the soil as the flow crept through the rows like an enormous spreading puddle.

The first time I ever saw it, I thought an invisible dam had suddenly closed off the streambed. But I'd walked along the bottom of the muddy bed plenty of times, walked right up to the wall of lustrous water and stuck my hand in it—nothing blocked it off or held it back. More like the stream was pulled sideways at a sharp angle, drawn into the fields by whatever clanked underground.

Some of the kids ran back to the bank and plunged their hands into the water as it bent toward the volk, pulling out boloka shells and crystal pebbles. Cilo and a few boys went down into the empty streambed a dozen yards ahead of the bend and dug in the wet bottom with sticks. Fatch followed, pawing clumsily down the slope.

The volk started to sing, the same mournful tune they'd been putting out all week. A good soaking might perk them up. When they started their song last month we knew they were almost ready for the harvest. The high pitch meant it'd be a good crop this year, but in the week since the attack their melody had drooped—when they sang at all. Mojander hadn't been able to figure out why they'd gone sour. The creatures that had almost destroyed the town hadn't gone near the fields.

Mojander ran his hands through his hair and closed his eyes as if listening to the volksong, but the rhythmic clanks were what had his attention. He had to stay alert for any changes in tone.

I joined the boys and Fatch in the streambed and went to work, digging with my hand spade for chunks of metal, synth, stronglass—any old parts that Eltria could use in her workshop. But my heart wasn't in it. Scooping out the muck felt too much like digging graves. I'd had enough of that lately.

Suddenly I felt a tiny burst of pain behind my right ear.

Hello, friend Tuck. Are you in your mind?

Hi, Baji. I'm just digging for junk while we water the volk. What's the word in Demestoa?

Oh, it looks always the usual here. You know these valley settlements. I just had some thinking about your troubles and wished to ask.

A clump of azure steel shards cut my hand as I pulled them out of the mud.

We're getting by. Eltria's been all right. Some of the people have doubled up until we can build new cottages to replace the ones that burned. We've been cutting lumber outside town. Not so far away that we need to worry about getting lost in the forest.

Ah, it is good! Wash away the hurts with progress. Tell me of this watervolk.

No, I said we're watering the volk. The stream's bending into the fields again. We're hoping the crops will get their song back before the harvest.

There is much magic in the world. The work of your annoyance, the priest, again?

"No, whatever relic is doing this, it was here before us."

"What was here, Mister Tuck?"

The young girl's voice snapped me out of my head. Jirda looked up at me, cupping a pile of black boloka shells. The hem of her yellow dress and her bare feet were covered with mud.

"I said, what was here, Mister Tuck?"

It took me a second to realize that I'd answered Baji out loud.

"The clanker, Jirda. The machine underground that pulls the water into the field." I squatted down so we were face to face. "I was just talking to myself, I guess."

She lowered her voice to an excited whisper. "My mom does *that all the time*. Me and my dad tease her. Look at the shells I found!"

"Very nice." I showed her the metal shards and other bits I'd collected in the sack clipped to my belt. "I'm digging, too. These are for Eltria."

Friend Tuck?

Sorry, Baji. Can't talk right now. I'll catch up with you later.

Until the later times, then.

As he left I felt the usual prick of pain in my head, much weaker than the one that signaled his arrival.

Jirda rattled the shells in her hands. "Does the stream bring these from the monster city? More Joyless?"

"It's called M'ra Jolios. But no, this is just an ordinary stream. The water in the city is—well, it's held in place. It's shaped like a big dome. Like a big bubble, but just the top half." I sketched it in the mud with the pointed tip of my spade.

"Why doesn't it spill out?"

I drew several thick lines extending up from the base of the dome, enclosing it. "The obelisks hold it in. They're like . . . giant fingers sticking up out of the ground. They hold the water in the dome shape. Along with the twisty plants and coral buildings. And the mutants who live there." I added a few swimming shapes in the mud.

"How?"

I had no idea. Eltria claimed to know, but if you ask me, part of being an Aeon Priest is knowing when to act like you know something. She'd never been any closer to M'ra Jolios than the rest of us.

I put on my best mysterious smile. "The wisdom of the ancients, Jirda."

The thuman trotted over and poked his bulbous nose into the shells in her hands. She pulled them away. "No, Fatch, these are mine! You go away!"

We climbed the slick slope to the top of the bank while Fatch ran back to the boys in the bed, still looking for treasure.

"Can the monsters swim here? My dad said they killed two of his dossi and he knows it because of the kelp in their guts. And Sora's mom said the monster curse is what made him get sick and die."

I knew what people said about M'ra Jolios. I said some things myself now and then. It was handy to have monsters to blame when we needed them, but Lozwen had always said we had to take responsibility for ourselves.

"No, the monsters—the people in M'ra Jolios stay in their city. They like it there. Your dad and Sora's mom just got the wrong idea. That happens sometimes."

She looked down into her shells as if they might reveal the future. "Is Eltria always right now that she's the consul? Lozwen said New Iqa was safe and now she's dead."

Yes. I'd buried her myself. As much of her as we could find. But I had to hold it together for Jirda. No tears in her green eyes—just questions. Some of the same ones I'd asked myself over the last week. Baji had helped me struggle toward answers, but I didn't think they were the right ones for a girl who'd just seen her village burn and her neighbors die.

"Tuck! *Tuck!*" Mojander bellowed.

A reprieve—thank the gods. Then I saw the panic on the cropper's face as he splashed through the flooded field, knocking the volk aside, running toward me in as direct a line as he could make.

"Everyone up here, now!"

I'd never seen him move so fast. Then I realized: the clanking had stopped. It was one of those sounds you got used to, like volksong or the peazels cawing at night, a noise that faded into the air. Now the silence beneath my feet was all I could hear.

Whatever turned and clunked deep in the earth always held its pull for at least an hour, but the angle of the sun told me this was way ahead of schedule. Something was very wrong.

The wall of water held back in the streambed broke free and gushed forward.

Jirda and the other kids on the bank screamed.

One of the boys in the bed—I think it was Nase, who'd lost his dad in the attack—had already started climbing up the slope before the stream gave way. I lunged, grabbed his arm, and yanked him to the top, sending him sprawling to the ground with a yelp.

Cilo still knelt in the muddy bed, intent on the hole he'd been digging, when he saw what was coming. The boy scrambled for the slope. He wasn't going to make it.

I leaped into the rapidly filling bed as the stream roared back into the channel. The cold torrent slapped me hard; water shot up into my nostrils as my feet hit bottom. I crouched and leaped upward, propelling myself to the surface, spitting out water as the silver current pushed me along like a stick.

Shouts from somewhere behind me, cries from just ahead. Cilo splashed and kicked frantically in the water a few lengths in front of me. Fatch's jaws were clamped on his shirt collar as the thuman fought against the stream, trying to pull the boy to the bank. It must have jumped in, too.

The boy's flailing and the thuman's struggle slowed the pair of them just enough for me to grab Cilo's ankle. I couldn't pull him back toward me, against the current, so I pulled myself to him until I could grab under his arms and keep his head out of the water.

Cilo's collar tore loose from his shirt. The thuman whined and paddled helplessly, swept out ahead of us, its brown head and front paws sticking up out of the silver flow.

"Fatch!" Cilo spluttered.

A slight bend in the stream told me that it was about to leave New Iqa and wind back into the forest. The current slowed a bit here, and I kicked like mad to reach the closer bank, one arm slicing through the water, the other locked around the struggling boy.

After what seemed like minutes I managed to grab a thick rilit root sticking out of the bank. I wound my arm around it with a death grip but couldn't pull us any closer.

"Climb over me!" I shouted over the rush of the stream and Cilo's cries.

He grabbed my arm and slowly pulled himself up over my body, gripping the back of my shirt, yanking my hair to steady himself. His weight pushed my head under before I could take a breath or close my eyes and my world went silver as I swallowed too much water. Cold, sour, it filled my throat, blossomed in my chest, choked out the light and the life, made the world dim . . . and suddenly I was back in the tank where they found me, sealed away in darkness underground.

Waiting. Quiet and still.

Nothing to hear, nothing to see.

Floating alone in my own cold ocean.

And then, just like before, I felt strong hands grabbing me, pulling me into the air.

Later, as the sun set, I climbed the rungs bolted to the side of Eltria's workshop, sat on the peaked roof, and talked to Baji as I looked out over the village. People were still cleaning up debris where cottages had burned ten days ago.

The loss of the animal is not to celebrate. But the boy's family has great joy with your choice. Truth is truth. Friend Tuck, you are a hero.

I wish I could have saved Fatch, too. It's like the gods are punishing us. First the attack. Then the volk. Now the clanker gives out? It's never done that before. After Grayden pulled me out of the water, she and Mojander followed the stream on foot for hours. They hoped Fatch had reached the shore at some point, but they didn't find him, not even after walking until they ended up back where they started.

Your stream is circling?

No, it's got a few bends, but mostly it's as straight as a stick. We learned a long time ago that if you follow it out of New Iqa and into the forest, eventually you enter the village again. Happens in both directions. It's like the stream—I don't know, folds in on itself.

If the water does this as you say, was the animal not washed back to you?

No. Things swept away in the silver stream . . . don't come back. We learned that, too.

Lozwen had drawn the stream on the map in her cottage, tried to make it look like the way it worked. She was no artist, but you could understand its impossible loop. Her map showed New Iqa, the nine other human villages, and M'ra Jolios swaddled in the thick woods

of the valley, surrounded by a ring of mountains. The mutant city sat dead center with the ten settlements scattered around the rest of the valley like stars in the night sky.

Well, the map showed their relative positions. They didn't move, exactly, but like the stream, traveling from one to the next was harder than you'd think. The valley turned you all around whenever you ventured too far from home without a ghost belt to mark your trail.

Thinking about all this almost brought Lozwen back. Older than any of us and wrinkled with experience, but with a fire that made her seem young. When I first came to live here, I asked her why. Not just why she brought me to New Iqa, but why they pulled me from the tank at all. I didn't matter, I said. They could have just left me in the cavern. She laughed and said that I must matter a great deal if someone went to the trouble of sealing me in a tank of fluid and hiding me underground. Everyone matters, she said. Every life. She knew it was a risk to bring a stranger into the village, but how could she do any less? "Helping every one helps everyone," she liked to say.

Baji, did I ever tell you about Lozwen's map? She stuck pins in it to mark the other villages. Green pins for the maybe-friendly ones. Black for the nasty ones and the mysterious ones, like yours. Only two of the pins were green.

Mmm. This sounds unfavorable. Perhaps the charm of her was hidden.

No, she was the best! When she started, all the pins were black. She said she wouldn't quit till she turned them all green, that bringing the villages together would be good for the whole valley. I bet Demestoa would've been an easy one. Maybe we'll make it out to your town someday.

Perhaps this is truth. I will be looking much forward to it.

Me too.

But if you carry to us your annoyance, the priest, I will see that you are carrying her away again.

I laughed, but it deflated into a sigh. I wanted to visit Baji, see his village. Lozwen would have found a way. But now . . . the valley would never let us travel that far. Eventually Eltria might cobble together a device, maybe find a way to tinker with the ghost belts so they last long enough for the trip, but getting there and knowing what to do once you get there are different things. After what Eltria said at the burial about other villages—maybe even M'ra Jolios—possibly being behind the attack on us, I didn't know what to think.

You know, Lozwen used to talk about bringing the mutant city into an alliance. She had a big green pin she was saving for that spot on her map. She told me that she hoped she lived long enough to use it. I know she could have done it.

It is M'ra Jolios that you are referring? The strangement of water?

Yes. I'm looking at it right now.

The sinking sun's red light tinted everything. From where I sat it lined up perfectly behind the tiny curve of M'ra Jolios on the horizon. New Iqa was the only village in the valley close enough to see it without a spyglass. Grayden said the obelisks rising up around it looked like a giant steel spider dead and buried on its back, eight stiff limbs sticking up through the ground, locked around a glittering prize. The smith had a gift for making anything sound creepy. But right now the water city looked like its own little world rising in the middle of the valley, glowing blood red in the sunset.

The last radiance faded from the sky. In the windows of the cottages below, sol jars started to shine, giving off the warm light they'd soaked up during the day.

Squeals and chirps from below caught my attention. I scooted to the edge of the roof and leaned over. A flurry of green laaks padded out from the open doorway of the shop. The pack of lizards scattered, scampering every which way and disappearing into the gloom of the empty field that lay between the workshop and the rest of the village.

Gods about. I tensed for what would come next, and sure enough, Eltria's psychic whistle blasted its shrill note in my head. Felt like someone had hollowed out my skull and filled it with ice. Not like the small sting I felt when Baji came knocking.

Baji? You still there?

The blast had knocked him out of my head. So much for our conversation.

I climbed down from the roof to grab a sack and go on a lizard hunt. At least this time Eltria noticed that the laaks were loose before people started screaming.

Chapter 2

Let's stop for a moment. Maybe the stream wasn't the best place on the path to start. I'm still getting the hang of this.

When Tuck almost drowned saving the child, he thought of the tank. That's his first memory, so logic would say to start there. About a year and a half ago, explorers venturing out from New Iqa found him in an ancient metal cask of oily fluid. The story is that they pulled him out of the tank as soon as they stumbled across the underground vault, but he'd been submerged for a long time. Bringing him back at all was a miracle, so who knows how his mind might have been affected?

The chiurgeon gave Tuck a comprehension graft with their language, ran all sorts of tests on his brain and body, and asked a lot of questions: Who are you? What is this place? How did you survive in that tank? Tuck sat, soggy and quaking, and spun stories until the chiurgeon gave up, but he had no real answers.

Lozwen had the crew bring him back to New Iqa anyway—she probably would've taken in a ravenous chirog if it had looked lonely—and gave him a job in Eltria's workshop. About a year later, Baji appeared in his head like an infectious idea. Tuck thought it was an aftereffect of having been in the tank (which didn't seem likely, so I often wonder if he suspected the truth, but let's not get into that right now). The important part is he kept his new friend to himself. As the new face in a tight-knit community, he liked always having someone to talk to.

Now I think I've gone too far back. Stringing all these pieces together is harder than it looks. But it can't hurt to know where Tuck came from. The more I learned about him, the better I could understand the path he took that brought us to where we are today.

So let's back up a bit from the stream and look at when Eltria took over as consul of New Iqa. I can tell that this happened before the stream incident because in this memory, so much of the village still lay in ruins. They'd barely had time to deal with the dead, much less start putting the town back together.

They shouldn't have bothered. But at the time, who knew?

I buried the last of the dead while Eltria addressed the survivors. Leaning on her new walking stick, her bulk packed into her hooded amber robe, she spoke to everyone who'd gathered in the graveyard. The people came to mourn. They got a speech instead.

"We have suffered a terrible tragedy. Just days ago it seemed like the end of New Iqa. Our merciless attackers gave no warning, no quarter. They brought only death."

She'd hated speaking in public since her last shop assistant mutilated her face, but she was the one who'd tried to domesticate a margr. That was before I came to live here. She had planted a tiny device in the goat-headed creature's brain, something to let her keep the thing under control. Didn't work out. The margr had gored her first chance it got. Sprayflesh healed most of the scars, but she still felt them. The ones you could see, anyway.

I'd heard her practice the speech that morning in the workshop while I set a new piece of stronglass in the shattered window. She'd started in her private study off the main work area but moved upstairs to her loft to finish. If she had asked me, I would have told her to come ready to talk to people, not at them.

"Our beloved consul Lozwen fought bravely, but she, like so many others, lost her life. We will always remember and honor her, and them. But we must also move forward. I did not seek the burden of leadership. In fact"—she shifted her weight to her good leg and poked her walking stick toward the crowd—"when you offered me the consul's necklace, I refused. I told you that I am a scholar, not a leader. But your persistence proved greater than mine, so I stand before you today."

I shoveled the last clumps of soil into the graves and patted them flat. To hear Eltria's protests, you'd think the town had begged her for months, but it had been only three days since Lozwen died. Since all of us nearly died.

Most faces in the crowd blended together, though a few caught my eye. Palene, a gold mourning cloth covering his short black curls, stood with some kids who'd moved up closer, leaving their parents in the back. Behind them was Grayden, a head taller than everyone else, her bald scalp still red from the forge accident last year that had burned off her hair. The smith kept the scorch marks as a reminder to be more careful.

I'd tuned out Eltria's speech, but she must have said something good because Mojander started applauding. A few others joined in. The cropper was already throwing his weight behind the priest. That made sense when you remembered that she made him a synth hand

to replace the one he lost. It made less sense when you remembered that it was one of her cobbled devices that blew his hand off in the first place.

"I will strive to justify your faith in me," Eltria said. "I can never replace Lozwen—none of us could—but I will do my best to carry on her legacy. Together, we will rebuild to make New Iqa better, stronger—the jewel of the valley."

"Praise the heart!" called an old woman. A few people echoed her. Others clapped.

"What about the water city?" a man's voice called from the crowd. "Those monsters sent that death to us!"

Everyone started babbling at once, like they'd been waiting for release. Snippets of "Oh, come now," and "He's right," and "Do you think?" and more.

"Please, people," boomed Eltria, waving her stick for quiet. "I have heard the same rumors. Some blame the water-breathers in M'ra Jolios. Some blame the other humans who share our valley—those in Warale, Quarenchan, or the other villages. The truth is we don't know whether the attack was misfortune or a weapon aimed at us. We will find out, though, and then we will do what must be done."

Her threat sounded vague, ominous. Fewer people clapped.

The crowd made some quiet chit-chat for a while and then dispersed. I shouldered the shovel and tried to disperse, too, but Eltria hobbled up to me before I could escape.

"Tuck, I need to go prep the field automatons. Mojander said he needs to start spraying soon. When you get back to the workshop, finish stripping the canister in the clamps. You know the one. It's drained now, of course, but I might be able to salvage some parts."

Right, all the bodies were in the ground now, so back to work. I didn't feel like doing much of anything. At first I'd thought that being consul would give her less time to find things for me to do. Now, I realized that she'd probably call on me even more, especially while she was recovering from her injuries.

On my way home I replayed her line about how our village would be a jewel, as if it had been a rusty shin before. Lozwen had led her people here years ago when the conquering Tabaht drove them from their homeland. Their only options were the fiery Fields of Ossiphagan or the forested valley. Since then, Lozwen had spent every day building a community here, a place where we all did our part, where we could feel safe despite half the things in the valley wanting to kill us. I'd only been here for a year and a half, but it felt like

home. The consul had even made progress in talking to some of the other villages—at least enough that they'd stopped cursing us as intruders.

But we were still the newcomers. Unwanted. What if the dark rumors were true? What if someone had sent that—that whatever-it-was to destroy us?

For the first time, I felt sorry for Eltria. I wouldn't want to lead at a time like this. Who else was there, though? Besides, Aeon Priests were wise and clever and strong (or so the gossip went—Eltria was the only one we knew). Still, her speech left out my role in the attack. Everyone knew what had happened, but . . . Lozwen always said there was nothing like a crisis to show what you're made of.

The workshop sat at the edge of town. Better to have some distance between homes and things that might explode—or worse. Apparently if you gather a lot of devices in one place, there's no telling what might happen. Eltria said she'd taken precautions against that and didn't want me worrying everyone over nothing.

The workshop's distance also meant that it had escaped the flames. Some of the sections of town I cut through weren't so lucky. Plenty of cottages had burned clean to the ground. They were newer buildings, so the lumber hadn't had time to harden to stone. The older parts of the village had fared better—against the fires, anyway. Not against the creatures.

I needed to talk. I concentrated until the small burst of pain throbbed behind my right ear. *Baji, you there?*

He answered by the time I reached the workshop.

Hello, friend Tuck. What are you this day?

Hold on a minute.

As I slid back the outer door, the shop's networked glowglobes kicked on, lighting the large work area. Tables and benches sat buried under piles of half-dissected devices, blueprints, notes, and parts for things not yet built. Models of structures I didn't understand dangled on ropes from the high ceiling. Tools hung on pegs set in the walls. The door to Eltria's private study off the main work room was closed, as always, and probably whisperlocked.

I set the shovel in a corner and before I reached the door to my room, the laaks came. The dark green lizards scampered down the walls and across the floor, surrounding me, hissing, sniffing at my boots and trouser cuffs. One sat up on its hind legs, tall enough to lick mud off my knee.

"It's me, it's me. Go poison someone else."

The laaks made great guards, if you didn't mind having toxic lizards around all the time. When they got like this I left my door closed to keep them out of my room. They were trained, but Eltria never found a way to control them completely, not even with implants. And they smelled terrible when she dissected them for her experiments. She couldn't resist cutting into things to see what made them tick.

I put out a few bowls of ground yol scraps for the pests, then pulled up a stool to the table where a pair of clamps held the black canister at an angle. The touchpad at the top was dead. Drained, Eltria had said. I knew she was right. I closed my eyes and relived the feel of my fingers pressing the screen's tiles. The heat of the licking flames. The whine of the drill spinning down. The mess it made of me. It would have been so easy for events to have gone the other way, for me to be dumped in a grave instead of digging them.

Sorry, Baji, I had to deal with the laaks. Today was . . . We buried the rest of the bodies. Lozwen, too. But I'm tired of crying. I just feel mad.

I reach out with my unhappy feelings to you.

Everyone voted to put Eltria in charge, like I thought.

Indeed you knew well the eddies of your people.

I don't know, maybe it's for the best. It's hard to think about anything. Four days ago my biggest problem was mopping spills in the workshop. Now half the village is gone.

I am grieved for you, Tuck. For your Lozwen, most. From your many times talking of her, I am knowing your deep respect. I too have tumbled with woe and joy. Most lives are watered with both. Do not be letting the weight of one drag the rise of the other.

I fired up the hard light scalpel and began stripping the touchpad from the top of the cylinder. Eltria might be able to cobble it into some other device. *Does your village believe in an afterlife? What do you think happens to people when they die?*

Here in Demestoa, so far across the valley from you, we are believing in such a place, the endless source of all life, the end of all souls. Through us it comes to this world, and through it we come to this world.

I couldn't help smiling. *Baji, you know that makes no sense, right?*

Friend Tuck, you asked for belief, not sense. But in this they are being one in the same.

It sounded like he smiled back, as much as a voice in my head could smile.

Chapter 3

"Hold on," you might be saying. "How do you know all this? When do you come into the story?"

I confess. I hadn't met Tuck by this point, so all I can relay is what I picked up from him afterward. This brings up another question: how much can we trust the flotsam in his head? What might all that unknown time in the tank have done to his mind? What about what the priest did, or what the detonation might have done, or even his front-row seat at the end of his world?

Well, it's all we have to work with. But memories don't lie—not on purpose. And I know he's not hiding anything in a corner of his mind. If he was that sharp, he'd have locked away the part I'm about to show you. See, I've finally found the perfect place to start. Before the stream, before the burial, came the attack on New Iqa. It colors everything in his head.

In this memory the cottages are still standing, the streets not yet filled with the dead. That's how I know I've hit on the first stones of the path that brought us here. The thing that started it all.

It began with a discovery, or maybe a message.

Alger brought the creature back to town slung over his shoulder like a sack of wet flour. By the time I heard the commotion and went to see, he'd laid it out in the square.

Palene knelt nearby, tracing golden finger-patterns in the air as he wove a charm over its corpse. A few other people stood farther back, leaving him room to work. His talents drew on the invisible nano-spirits in the air around us—or so he said. I didn't pretend to understand.

Alger beamed like a hunter who'd bagged a prize, but I knew he hadn't killed the creature. He'd just turned sixteen and had ventured into the woods on his own for the first time, putting his new explorer's coat to good use. He hadn't even gone far enough to get lost.

The creature smelled like wet fur despite being hairless. It was almost as big as a thuman and looked a bit like a pale fish with three long arms spaced unevenly around its torso. Two of its arms ended in triple-clawed hands, one empty and the other gripping a short, stubby tool. On its third hand the creature wore a many-fingered orange glove. There were no

features on its head—just a slit that could have been a closed eye or mouth. Its bleached scales looked dry and nubby.

Alger's sister came up behind us. Astis, a few years older than her brother, had always been the real explorer of her family. She was part of the group that found me in the tank. Her round face and beaded braids were the first things my eyes saw after I was revived.

She nudged one of the creature's arms with the pointed tip of her boot. "Where in Abaddon's Abyss did you find Ugly here? Is it dead?"

"Of course it's dead!" her brother scoffed. "I had to chase off some limmils that were eating it." A small chunk had been torn away from a spot on the thing's side. Clear goo glistened around the wound.

Palene stood and wiped his hands on his jacket, leaving white streaks on the brown cloth. "I can't identify it. It looks aquatic, but it's desiccated."

"It's from M'ra Jolios," said Astis. "It dried out coming all the way here."

"Maybe," Palene said. "We don't know that."

Alger laughed. "Sure we do! You think those monsters don't spy on us?"

"Just keep an eye on it, and don't touch anything. I'll get Lozwen." Palene walked off, shooing the others who had gathered.

I took a few steps back from the body. "Alger, why did you bring it here? It might have some kind of disease."

"Eltria will want to see it. I bet she knows what it is. And if she's still paying shins for relics, then I've made a profit my first time out!" He reached down for the orange glove.

Astis, quicker, slid the glove off the creature's arm, revealing another three-clawed hand beneath. The glove's fabric kept its shape as she held it up. "Oldest gets first pick."

"Wait, Palene said don't touch anything." Even as I said the words, I knew they wouldn't help. Lozwen was the only one the siblings listened to.

I reached for the glove, but Astis turned away and slid it over her right hand. It had eight pointy fingers but otherwise fit her well. She flexed her fingers experimentally and then jumped as if startled.

"Huh. I felt some kind of—" She wiggled the fingers, spread them wide, bent them, clenched them into a ball. When she did that, a huge orange fist of energy crackled into life around the glove. Not a human fist, but scaly, with eight lizardlike fingers. Astis flexed her fingers in the glove, and the energy fingers did the same.

"Oh, this is fantastic! It's warm. Tingly." She swept the giant hand back and forth in the air around her. I leaped back to avoid being hit.

This wasn't good. "Hey, I don't think—"

"This one's mine!" Alger said as he pried the tool from the creature's second hand. It looked like a tiny tripod. A black marble floated in the space between the three prongs, rotating, held in place by gods knew what.

"Give me that! These aren't toys!" I'd worked in Eltria's shop long enough to know what relics like these could do. She called them the numenera, and she knew how to study them, how to use them.

"I just want to look at it," Alger said, moving it out of my reach. "I won't activate it. I don't even know how."

Movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention. No, not movement—shifting colors. The creature's pasty white scales had begun to shimmer. Iridescent patterns rippled across its body.

Astis moved her giant orange hand to the side and stepped closer. "That's beautiful."

The wide slit on the thing's head puckered open. A thick brown appendage shot out like a lightning bolt and wrapped around Alger's left wrist. It was rough, gnarled, like a tree root uncoiling from the darkness.

"Hey!" Alger scowled, tugging as the root constricted around his skin, drawing blood. "Get it off me!"

I grabbed the root close to where it sprouted from the slit and tried to hold it still, but it twisted out of my grip, stronger than it looked. The hard coating felt like bark and scratched my palms raw. Beneath me, the fish-thing didn't so much as twitch.

"You brehm-brain," Astis sneered at her brother, bringing the energy hand around. I stumbled backward as she tried to grab the root, the shimmering creature, something, but the orange fingers passed right through them both, scraping uselessly against the ground. It's like the hand didn't perceive them. The fingers were solid enough for me, though, knocking me to the side as they swung around.

Jirda and a few other kids who'd been watching before came back. "What's happening? Is Alger okay?"

"Go get Eltria! Tell her to hurry!" Then I remembered the tools that hung near the forge. "Get Grayden, too!"

More blood dripped from Alger's wrist. He dropped the tough act and started crying, wailing, kicking at the root, smashing it with his other hand, with the tripod. He jabbed the relic's prongs into the bark again and again, and after a few hits the black marble spinning between them popped loose and fell.

By the time it hit the ground, it had turned into something else.

The change took only a second, but that second stretched into a nightmare. The marble grew, gaining mass and size, lengthening into an oblong body, pushing out segmented legs, translucent wings, and a triangular head, morphing into an insect the size of the fish creature on the ground. But it was like no bug I'd ever seen—an alien blend of cobalt flesh and gray metal, all pulsing organs and clicking gears, stitched together with ropy veins and clear tubes that pumped blue fluid. Three bulbous yellow eyes dangled from a vertical stalk on its head. Serrated mandibles flexed mechanically, like a pair of workshop clamps. The thing smelled like the back end of a dossi and chittered with the sound of glass rods scraping together.

The creature's eyes lifted to look at Astis, and then it shot toward her, slamming into her chest and grappling her torso with all six of its legs, its face even with hers, antennae twitching, jaws clicking.

She screamed and bashed it with the orange fist, hitting herself too, but the creature clung to her body, the tips of its legs sunk into her flesh. With her other hand, she tried to rip it loose. Two flaps on the creature's thorax clanked open like doors, and from inside its body a clear tube shot out, plunging into the girl's chest. The conduit pumped and hissed and red blood flowed from her into the insect, mixing with the blue liquid circulating through its own tubes. Its body began to glow purple.

The whole thing was over before I could move. Gurgling and clicking, the insect detached from her and rose into the air on whirring metal wings.

Astis dropped to her knees, then to the ground. The orange energy fist fizzled and popped.

Alger made an awful sound and ran to his sister's side. The root jerked him back, and with a face wet with fury he screamed and gave it a violent yank. I half expected it to slice his wrist clean off, but the root unwound from his arm and fell slack to the ground.

"Astis!" He huddled over her body. No blood spilled from the black hole in her chest, as if the insect had taken it all.

The bug buzzed over my head and soared above the square, glowing brighter and chittering loudly. People ran toward us, but I couldn't take my eyes off the thing. It rose higher, hovered for a few heartbeats, and then exploded in a violet burst of flaming metal and guts.

Thank the gods.

Among the fiery shower of burning gears and organs and tubes was a handful of small black marbles.

Before they hit the ground, each of them swelled into another winged monstrosity, erupting to life in the air.

The new bugs barely paused in flight. They swooped in low arcs and turned back up, flesh squelching and metal grinding, and then darted after villagers in the square. Flaming debris set rooftops afire. People yelled and ran in all directions. The creatures buzzed and dove among them while homes began to burn.

A tumbling flame singed my arm, shocking me out of my reverie. How long had I stood in that bedlam, doing nothing?

"Alger, come on!" I grabbed the scruff of his coat and pulled him up. His face glinted with tears. He muttered something I couldn't hear over the commotion, then pushed past me and ran.

None of this seemed real. Maybe Eltria could still save Astis. I bent down to pick up the girl's limp body when a large shape buzzed past my face, its body gears clicking like hail on a roof. The droning sound circled just above my head.

I left Astis and ran. Gods help me, I ran for my life.

Lozwen. I had to find Lozwen. She'd know what to do.

I'd barely run a dozen steps when something big smacked into my back and knocked me to the ground, hard. I rolled over as one of the insects landed on my chest. It was heavy, maybe as heavy as me, and it pinned me down as six legs clung to my torso. Three fat yellow eyes writhed like snakes from the central stalk on its head. Gears clacked, hydraulic pumps sloshed blood through its veins. Sharp mandibles pressed into the sides of my neck, drawing blood.

Suddenly a dark shape swung in from the side and smashed the thing, ripping it from my body, sending it sprawling to the ground. The bug landed on its back, legs wriggling madly, flailing to right itself.

Grayden ran past me, winding up with her giant forge hammer. The smith brought its steel head down on the wild insect, again, again, again, smashing it to pieces as it clanked and squealed.

She kicked the lifeless form, scattering the fragments, and extended a gloved hand to help me up. "You hurt, son?"

"I don't know." My fingers touched the sides of my neck and came back slick and red. "I think Astis is dead."

Behind Grayden, the pieces of the smashed insect sparked and flashed. They began to move, flying back together, rebuilding themselves, springs and spindles locking into an exoskeleton, tubes and veins snaking through the gears, pistons pumping, blue fluid flowing.

"It's still alive!" I shouted.

No. What squatted there was a different creature—a central misshapen lump ringed by multijointed legs that tapered to gleaming blades. The main body huffed up and down as it clicked to life. A curved tool protruding underneath its belly whirred like a drill. The parts had arranged themselves into something new.

The spidery thing scuttled toward Grayden and reared up. Front leg-blades sliced bloody lines across her thighs. The belly drill extended in stages toward her knees.

The smith kicked and tried to bring the maul's head down on the creature, but it scurried around her, dodging each blow.

"Get Eltria!" she shouted between swings.

"I'll find her!" I wanted to find Lozwen, wanted the consul to take charge, lead us out of this, but Eltria and her relics were the next best thing.

I ran toward the workshop, leaving Grayden to fight the multilegged thing. She'd smash it again. She'd be fine. That's what I told myself.

The edge of town lay just ahead, the workshop beyond. Suddenly a winged insect flew straight up from the cottages in front of me, droning loudly, glowing brightly, and burst into a fiery purple mess. As the burning debris fell, three new bugs popped into existence and soared back down into the streets.

The flaming rain spread fire across the rooftops. Feyel ran out of a burning cottage, bleeding from jagged gashes that lined his face and arms, and collapsed in the dirt in front of me, reaching out as he crumpled and stilled.

I couldn't move. The world receded, like I was watching a distant scene through remote glass. All across the village, insects clacked through the air or skittered over the ground. People ran, fighting to barricade themselves indoors, but the fire jumped from roof to roof. Bucket brigades tried to halt the advance, but they couldn't keep up. Every few moments another bug exploded in the sky, raining down more flames, more creatures.

Several villagers fought back with crank crossbows, razor rings, rocks, clubs—whatever they could find. Mojander swung a large sword—an old blade that I'd seen on the wall above his hearth, a keepsake from his younger days—in wide arcs, landing solid blows on anything that buzzed too close. He smashed a crawler to bits, but within a few seconds the splayed parts pulled themselves together and took flight again in new form.

I closed my eyes and strained until pain burst behind my ear. *Baji! Baji, are you there?*

"Tuck!"

Not Baji—Eltria. She ran to me, moving as fast as her weight and her long robe allowed. Soot and purple blood stained the amber cloth. In her left hand she held a round device that looked like two metal segments wired together around a ball. "Are you all right?"

My relief at seeing her released a flood of babble. "What is all this? What's happening? There was one and now they're everywhere! Where's Lozwen? What do we do?"

The priest clamped a thick hand on my shoulder. "Calm down. Lozwen is—look out!" She shoved me aside and raised the device, turning its knob. A beam of spiraling pink light streaked over my head and blasted an insect a few feet above. Its gears, rods, tubes—all its synthetic parts—turned to steam with a sizzling *fwish*, leaving only the flesh and organs. They splatted to the ground.

Even then the parts quivered toward one another, inching closer together. I screamed in terror and anger, stomping the pieces until my boots were stained with purple jelly.

"Tuck." Eltria grabbed my arm as I panted, half choking, half sobbing. "We need to get to the shop. There are too many of them. I need the new canister on my tall bench—the one I've been taking apart. Lozwen is . . . we can't wait for her. I need your help now."

Yes. The consul would want me to step up, to help Eltria help others.

We made our way through the panic and chaos toward the workshop, staying away from burning cottages. Along the way we managed to steam and stomp three bugs. I avoided looking at the dead we passed. I didn't want to know who they were, not yet, but still I saw nightmares everywhere. Things like the one that killed Astis and almost got me, like the one

that Grayden had fought, crawlers with buzzsaw mouthparts, wrigglers with bodies of snaking cable, flyers with hind wings like razor blades, and more. Bursting insects and black smoke filled the sky.

Finally we saw the workshop. The grassy field between it and us seemed free of bugs and fire.

Eltria handed me the device. "On my mark, we run for the door. Use the emitter to cover us while I get the canister. I've studied it enough that I think—"

Her words exploded in a grunt as a flying thing with a fat abdomen slammed into her from behind. The bug's many legs gripped her shoulders and arms and scooped her off the ground. Eltria shrieked and kicked as she was hoisted higher, higher, a mouse snatched up by an owl.

I fumbled with the emitter and turned the knob. The device grew cold in my hands as a pink beam spiraled out toward the bug, but it had flown out of range. It arced over the field and circled back toward the village, dipping and rising as it struggled to keep Eltria's flailing form aloft.

"No!" I started to give chase, locking my eyes on their receding shape, but I lost track of them almost immediately among the clouds of black smoke and the other figures slicing through the sky.

I stopped running and looked back across the field at the workshop.

The canister. This was up to me now.

I could do this. I had to do this.

The field seemed clear, but that's what we'd thought a minute ago. The workshop looked still. I took a few steps toward it, made a last check around, and ran all-out for the door. I crashed into the wall, slid the door open, threw myself inside, and pulled the door shut behind me.

The glowglobes didn't kick on, but the windows let in plenty of daylight. Tools, pieces of metal and synth, papers, and other things I didn't have time for filled the tables.

The black cylinder sat tilted in a clamp on the tall bench. Something an explorer had brought back from a forest expedition. Eltria had just started tinkering with it the other day, taking it apart piece by piece, trying to figure out what it did. What had she learned? How could this help us?

No time to wonder. The Aeon Priest knew what she was doing.

I pushed my way to the bench and loosened the clamp. The can was half the length of my forearm and nearly as thick, with a small touchpad at one end and flexible tubes sticking out the other.

Outside, something exploded in the distance. Shouts followed. Then screams.

Inside, the workshop was still, silent. I was tempted to hide in here forever, find a place to hole up, block out the world. Just me and the hush of darkness.

Then it occurred to me: where were the laaks? Why hadn't they swarmed when I came in?

I looked around the shop. Multiple pairs of red dots glowed in the shadows of the corners. The lizards were hiding from me.

Or from something else.

Several things happened at once.

I noticed that the window on the far wall was broken, only a few triangular shards left around the frame.

Somewhere above me, glass grated on metal.

Something brushed the top of my head.

I stumbled back, swatting blindly, and saw a shell-backed insect as big as a stool clinging to the ceiling far above. The tip of its long, slender proboscis danced around my head.

Scrabbling backward, I tripped over a low bench and fell hard on the stone floor, knocking a bunch of junk to the ground. The laaks hissed.

The bug dislodged and glided down toward me with a shrieking drone, shells unfurling into crystal wings. Its jointed legs ratcheted out to expose the pulsing veins and tubes of its thorax. The steel proboscis snaked toward me, cutting my cheeks.

I reached frantically for the emitter but it was gone. I must have dropped it during my dash to the shop.



The giant bug lunged at me as I kicked its face, pushing myself backward along the floor, grabbing at whatever had spilled around me. My fingers closed around an injector just as the thing was on me, stinking like sludge drained from the stream. Its proboscis coiled around my neck, pulling tighter with each loop, drawing fresh blood, cutting off all air. My face flushed hot.

I brought the injector up and drove it deep into a blob of flesh that throbbed between the hard synth of its exoskeleton. Warm blue ooze splattered my hand and arm. With a wet pop the bug vanished, proboscis and all.

Instantly I gasped for breath and huffed until I coughed.

The laaks hissed again from the corners, but there was no sign of the insect—or the injector. Wherever the creature went, the device had gone too.

I wiped the blue slime from my arm on the floor and went back to the black cylinder. On the touchpad, a tiny bulb behind synth or glass sat above four square tiles set in a grid. Each tile bore a different symbol.

Eltria would know what to do with this. I felt a little bloom of hope.

Then I stepped outside. Half the cottages I could see were blazing furiously. Dozens of insects buzzed over the rooftops or chased people through the streets. Black clouds blanketed the town.

For the first time, I wondered whether New Iqa would survive.

Against every instinct I had, I ran toward the chaos. I hadn't seen Lozwen since all this started. Baji hadn't answered, and I didn't know if Eltria had . . . no, she was alive, and I'd bring her the device, and she would fix everything.

"Eltria!" I called for her over and over as I dashed through smoke and debris, bumping around people running in other directions, staying as far as I could from the crawlers and flyers. I barely heard my calls over the thrumming chorus of the insects, the shouts, the crackle of flames.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a multilegged shape clamber around the wall of a cottage and leap toward me—a thing like the one that went after Grayden, but bigger. It knocked me flat on my back and loomed over me.

Its blade-tipped feet sliced zigzags across my legs and stomach. I cried out and jerked but couldn't wriggle out from under it, penned in on all sides by its legs.

The canister was all I had. I pointed what seemed like the front of the device at the creature's belly and pressed the four tiles wildly. I could only hope that it sprayed acid or fired a beam or popped a shield instead of playing a tune.

The bulb above the touchpad lit up bright green. Otherwise, nothing.

The insect's belly doors clanked open. A forked drill corkscrewed down toward my stomach, whirring with a metallic squeal.

I mashed the tiles again, one after another, all together, however I could think to try. "Do something, damn it!"

The bulb flashed from green to yellow.

The can vibrated in my hands as the drill pierced my flesh and I screamed.

Then thunder filled my ears and the world broke to pieces.

Chapter 4

Much better. The chronology, I mean—I've got it now. Starting with the attack works, since that happened first. Then the burial, and then the rescue at the stream. Tuck lives in a straight line, like a path of stones laid end to end, so I'll try to keep things that way from now on. It's just that his head is full of glimmers going back to his first memory in the tank, like voices in his head that won't go away, and it's hard to make sense of everything.

By the way, he's fine. The energies at the center of the pulse made him black out, so he didn't see the bugs collapse or watch his friends destroy their remains. They filled him in later, so there's no direct memory for me to share. The important thing is, he saved the day. True, he had no idea what the relic would do, no knowledge of how to work it. He just got lucky. But the payoff is what matters.

Anyway, now we're caught up. We can start moving forward on the path again. Based on what happens in this next part, it's about ten days after the thuman washed away in the stream.

Tuck is in a familiar place.

I floated deep in the blue-black sea, naked, numb with cold, nothing to breathe. My toes brushed ground and pushed up, but my head smacked into metal. My heart thumped faster, harder, knocking in my chest, reverberating in my skull. I flailed like a beast in its death throes, fists, elbows, knees, and feet hammering as the metal walls of the tank closed around me. I beat on them in liquid slow motion and screamed through the water, my cries echoing dully.

Loud voices dragged me back to the world as I woke in my bed, soaked with sweat. Starlight streamed in through the window. White dots speckled the black sky.

My first tank dream in weeks. They'd been pretty intense during my first year in New Iqa, like the tank was trying to pull me back. It got so bad that Eltria offered to cut the nightmares out of my head. At first I didn't want her tinkering in there, but eventually she talked me into it. I don't think it hurt—actually, I don't remember anything about it. Normal side effect of the procedure, she said. But it didn't work. The dreams still came.

The terror drained away as I lay staring out the window at the constellations. The voices became clearer. On the other side of the door two people in the workshop exchanged hushed shouts. Eltria and a lower male voice—Palene.

“They’re all like this,” said Palene. “The whole crop’s ruined. And you sit here and—”

“It’s not as easy as you seem to think,” Eltria said.

“Without the grain, it’ll be a thin winter. Too thin.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

One of them shook a box of small metal things. A walking stick tapped along the stone floor.

“Eltria, I’ve heard it suggested that when that piece of the numenera detonated, the pulse did more than kill whatever powered those horrors. It killed the volk as well. More precisely, it killed the fields. The plants wilted. New ones have not grown since.”

I’d heard that, too. Eltria denied it every time. The pulse had saved the village, she said. And it did. But could it have done both?

A murmured exchange from the workshop drifted beyond me as I threw on a shirt and pants. Then I pressed my ear against the door gently, trying not to rattle it.

“Then you’re a bigger fool than I thought,” said Eltria. “He activated the canister prematurely. I told him to bring it to me. If I had made the necessary adjustments—”

“Don’t start with that again. Tuck did the only thing he could. But I’m glad you admit your device was responsible for destroying the fields.”

She blamed me for the crops? This was the first time I’d heard that. When everyone voted her in as consul, they said her smarts had saved the village. She didn’t go looking for credit, but she didn’t turn it away, either.

“I admit no such thing. Even if your accusation were true, would you rather those creatures had killed us all? You play hylu—think of it like that game. You give up one marker to save three others, yes? Sometimes sacrifices are necessary for the common good. Lozwen understood that. I think the reason you all forced the necklace on me is that you know it too. Leaders have to take risks. Make hard decisions.”

Dragging Lozwen into this was too much. I wouldn’t let her use that name like a shield.

I slid open my bedroom door and walked into the bright workshop, squinting in the glare of the glowglobes. Not exactly the striking entrance I’d intended.

"Hello, Tuck," said Palene. In one hand he held a long, withered stalk of volk. "Sorry for the noise."

"All I heard was something about . . . sacrifices."

Palene half smirked, then coughed and looked pointedly at Eltria.

At the other end of the room the Aeon Priest leaned heavily on her walking stick while scooping something out of a glass tank—a hunk of a golden substance that wobbled like thick gel.

"Palene is unhappy about the fields. I explained that I've been working twenty-eight hours a day on the problem. You can vouch for that, Tuck—I've barely left the shop in days. But none of the restoratives I've formulated so far has the right cohesion." She shook the goop at us. It melted in her hands, leaking out between her fingers first in thin streams and then in thicker globs. The stuff ran down to the floor, a yellow splotch spreading across the stone, near the dried blue stains from the bug that had tried to kill me.

"This one had promise, at least," she said, wiping her hands on a rag. "I'm getting closer."

"Tuck," Palene began, too casually, as he fingered the stalk, stripping off crumbling strands. "What's your opinion on . . . the secondary consequences of a person's actions? What matters more, the intent or the result?"

So he knew I'd overheard. What burned me most was that Eltria was right. Even if I had known that the pulse would kill the fields, I'd still have used the canister. What was I supposed to do, hope that the gods would intervene, that something would happen along and save us? Was I supposed to just die?

"I think it depends on what the intent is and what the result is," I said. "Like with Cilo and his thuman. You've heard Mojander. Poor guy curses himself for missing the signs that the clanker had stopped early, but it just broke down and Fatch was swept away. Is that his fault?"

"Well, Cilo thinks so," Palene said. "But I don't. Sounds like you don't, either. Maybe it depends on your point of view."

"Speaking of which," Eltria said, shifting her weight and pointing her stick at a work in progress on a table, "I've got some ideas about making sure that never happens again." The tip of the stick tapped a large knot of rods bent to enclose a sphere of multicolored pellets.

Changing the topic. Guilt? Or indifference?

Let's get back to the part where you're blaming me, I wanted to say. The words were lined up to come out when a sharp pounding on the shop door cut them off. Something outside thumped the wood again and again.

Eltria hobbled over and peeped through the bolt-hole. "Ros is back. At last."

She slid the door open but barred the doorway with her stick—a signal the shirtless runner couldn't miss. Ros stood on his tiptoes to peek over Eltria's shoulder into the room, both eyeballs as big as juisine melons thanks to the ghost belt around his waist.

Anyone who headed deep into the forest wore a ghost belt: a metal band with tiny tendrils that phased into your abdomen. When you moved, you left gray afterimages behind, one every ten paces or so. Five belts had been hanging on pegs in the vault where they found my tank. Whatever their original purpose, they worked great for not getting lost in the shifting landscape of the valley. Only the person who wore a belt could see the ghost trail it left. The downside is the belt made your eyeballs swell up like overripe fruit. Itched like ants were crawling all over them, but they shrank back to normal after you removed the belt.

"How did things go in Warale?" Eltria asked.

"Fine, fine, just fine," Ros chattered. He fished a small crystal out of the hairnet that wrapped his head. "Here's the yoke. Takes a minute to dissolve, they said, not much more than a minute. Just put it right in and bam, there you go. A minute or so, they said."

Eltria held up the crystal, barely bigger than a fingernail, and turned it in the light. A tiny dark shadow flitted within.

"Any others? What about the others?" Ros's bloated white eyeballs flicked between us as he scratched his chin. "Hey Tuck. Hey Palene. Who's back? When'd they get here? How'd they do? Anything? Hear anything?"

"No, nothing helpful," Palene said.

Ros and three other runners had gone out a week ago to the nearest villages in the valley. We'd lost a ghost belt a few months back, so we had only four left. Risky to send them all out at once. Two runners had returned with disappointing messages, but at least they'd come back. One still hadn't.

I'd suggested sending a runner to Demestoa, thinking that we might get help from Baji's people. It would mean revealing my friendship with him at last. But Eltria had made that unnecessary. Demestoa was too far away, she said. Too big a risk. The ghosts would fade long before the runner could follow them back.

"Thank you, Ros. Good work." The priest started to slide the shop door closed. "Why don't you—"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm gonna go have me a lie down. Take off the belt and have me a lie down. Head feels like it's gonna pop. That would be bad. Hah." He waved as he disappeared behind the closing door. "That wouldn't be good. Bye Tuck. Bye Palene. Little lie down."

Eltria latched the door and limped to the middle of the room. She held the crystal between her pudgy thumb and index finger so that it caught the light. "Here we go again."

She held it out to Palene.

For once I was glad that the priest didn't consider me all that worthy.

"Me? Again?" Palene's protest faded into a sigh. He took the crystal, popped it in his mouth, and pinched his thin lips shut.

After a few seconds he shifted uncomfortably, then folded his arms and tapped his foot against the stone floor.

"Working?" I asked.

He nodded sharply. Thick blue fluid leaked out of his eyes and dripped slowly down his cheeks. He wiped it away, leaving streaks on his pale skin, and took a series of deep breaths through his nose, each more slowly than the last. He held the final breath for a moment, then parted his lips and exhaled a puff of blue mist. His eyes had stopped dripping.

They closed for a moment. When they opened again, someone else was in there.

Eltria put both hands on her walking stick and rose to her full height, which wasn't much. "Welcome to the village of New Iqa. Amity upon you. I am Eltria. Who am I addressing?"

"I am M'sem," Palene answered, in his own voice. The words came slowly. "The leaders of Warale have considered your request. I have been sent to give you this answer: no."

Eltria shot me a glance. Neither of the other replies we'd received had started out so . . . definitively.

The priest walked toward Palene, but not too close. "Honored M'sem, we don't expect your people to share your food without recompense. We can trade. Look around. I have no small skill with the numenera—what you probably call the relics of the ancients. Let us negotiate an arrangement to help both our villages. The creatures that attacked us might come for you next. Or perhaps the mutants of M'ra Jolios will go on the march. An alliance—"

"Oh, yes, the creatures," Palene interrupted, sounding bored. "I understand that your little camp here was nuisanced by a chelka swarm. What a shocking turn of events. You really

should be more careful about what turns up on your doorstep. It is an awful thing to feel unsafe in your own homes. No one would fault you for going back where you came from.”

I’d never heard the term *chelka swarm* before. The look on Eltria’s face said that she hadn’t, either.

The priest hammered onward. “As I was saying, an alliance between the humans will strengthen the valley and help us all. We may be scattered, but we can work together. What I’m proposing—”

“Is nothing of interest, I am quite sure.” Palene’s words came faster now. He moved around a table and picked up a rusted metal cube from a raised stand. The cube had been cut nearly in half, exposing dozens of filaments that he flicked back and forth, chuckling as they sparked.

“We can make a deal,” I said. “There must be something Warale wants.”

His light brown eyes smiled at me over the blue smears on his cheeks. “Why, yes: your absence. The fact that we all are human does not entitle you to squat in our lands. The valley was ours before you arrived. It will be ours after you are dead. And then we will sweep up your bones and take what we please.”

My jaw tightened. M’sem had come spoiling for a fight. I thought back to my first meeting with Palene, the day after I arrived in New Iqa. Whatever had enabled me to breathe the fluid in the tank made me wheeze in the air. That day, Palene’s graceful fingers had danced, weaving a charm to soothe me until I got used to breathing, but just sitting and talking had helped more than anything else. He laughed easily.

It was hard to hear threats issued with his voice.

“We are not as weak as you seem to think,” Eltria said.

“Oh, have I offended you?” Palene put on an exaggerated frown. “What a poor guest I make. But it is so tiresome to negotiate with children.” He walked to the window, tapped on the stronglass with a corner of the cube, and peered out toward the village. “We know of this place. It lies closest to M’ra Jolios. Can you see the dome from here? I wager you can. More likely, then, that the mutants will slake their thirst on you, and rid the valley of pests. We must do what is best for us all. You understand, I’m sure.”

Eltria smiled, the same smile she gave whenever someone told her that the field automatons had broken down. If it wasn’t Palene’s body that would take the lumps, she might have laid into M’sem with her walking stick.

"I would say what is best for all is a matter of perspective."

I'd seen Lozwen deal with tough negotiations before. Something about her words, her manner, usually brought people around. Eltria deserved credit for trying to be tactful, but it wasn't working.

I stepped in close to Palene and looked up into his eyes, puffing myself up as much as I could. "We offer friendship, and you threaten us? This is a grave insult. I demand an apology."

Palene laughed. "Or what? You'll thrash this body?"

I clenched my fists at my sides. We both knew my threat was empty.

"I quite like being tall," he said, comparing our heights. "If only my family could see me now. Were it possible, I would stay longer. But the yoke has melted, so my time is about up. We spared your ridiculous runner so that I could deliver our response in person. You seem incapable of taking the hints we give, so I will speak plainly: there will be no further discussion. The next runner you send to Warale will be put to better use. And you, tinkerer"—he threw the cube to Eltria—"do not demean your prowess. You *do* have small skill with the numenera."

Palene smiled coldly, but the expression faded as his eyes rolled back and his body crumpled like a marionette. I lunged to catch his head before it struck the floor, and laid him out. He'd come back to us in about an hour, gods willing.

Eltria threw the cube against the ground and smashed it with her stick. "Insolence! Treating us like—like— Go back where we came from? We have just as much right . . ."

She went on and on in that vein.

We'd tried our best. Three runners, three rejections, and now threats. Could Lozwen have found a way? Maybe, maybe not. It didn't matter. Eltria wasn't Lozwen, and neither was I.

That just meant I had to do things my way.

Later that night I contacted Baji and asked if Demestoa could help us. We'd find a way to get there, somehow.

I will speak your request to the Giash, he said. Our what you would call consuls. What can be done will be done.

After the meeting with M'sem, we wrapped our hands in metalweave mesh and hung thin strands of steel spider webs in a perimeter around the town, looping them around tree trunks. An early warning system in case Warale or other villages got any ideas—the warning being their screams as the nearly invisible filaments sliced them to bits. We left one path open and made sure everyone knew where it was. Grayden and Vellick went into a spider-thick grove nearby to collect more webs so we could surround the village twice, even the volk fields. The stalks were all but dead, but Eltria refused to give up on them.

Our food stores wouldn't last long. The crops had failed right before the harvest would have replenished them. We could live off the last of our livestock for a while, though once the yol were gone there'd be no more milk. We'd have to hunt for game. The creatures in the forest nearby were too small or inedible, so we'd have to belt up and go out deeper—hope we found things before they found us.

About a week after we hung the webs, I was lying sleeplessly in bed one night, staring out the window, when I felt Baji knocking in my head. His first message since the visit from M'sem.

Friend Tuck, are you in your mind?

Baji! Pretty much in my mind all the time.

Ah, that is commendable.

Any news?

I brought my people the need for helping your people. I told of the swarm, and your priest who cannot defeat mystery, and the opposite of help that came from the humans. I spoke of the good soul of you, that your people are more than our teachings say. That the valley is better with you than without you. I am cheered to say the ban against you has been struck for one time.

It took a minute to parse out his words. *You mean you're going to help us?*

It is so. We too know the puzzlements of growth, and I offer a tide to lift you up. A remedy to rinse the rot from your ground. Plant this magic and be blessed with life again. Come here, and I am presenting it to you.

Magic. He meant relics. This changed everything.

I flashed back to Lozwen's map. Demestoa sat clear on the other side of the valley. Even if we could travel there normally, the journey would take at least a week. With the forest turning us every which way, we'd have to plan for a longer trip. Could Eltria juice up the

ghost belts somehow—make the afterimages last longer? Then again, she'd never figured out how they worked in the first place.

She also wouldn't like that I set this up without her, but that wouldn't matter after everyone heard the news.

Baji, this is great! Thank you. Now we just need to get to Demestoa. I don't know how long it will take us to cross the valley.

Yes . . . friend Tuck, something more is to be said first. Your people—they are disallowed to us. Some think you dangers. Monsters. I know the different sense, but the Giash swirled with anger when I revealed our talking. So simple it is to share with you, cloaked in the valley as we are. But truth is truth. I am not of Demestoa. It is known to us as a human village, much far from your own. A place you never go. A safe mask for the wearing. But now the mask must fall, for helping is stronger than taboo.

What? All this time—everything about Demestoa was a lie?

I am regretted so. It was needful for safety. And for our ease of friendship.

I couldn't believe it. Months of talking to Baji, and suddenly this. I would have said he must be in Warale or Stroyundi or one of the other hostile villages, but I noticed that the word *human* kept coming up.

Sometimes you ask a question even though the answer is creeping across your skin, but you ask anyway so you can find out that you're wrong and everything's fine.

Baji, where do you live?

Truth is truth, Tuck. My home is M'ra Jolios.

I went for a walk under the stars. The cold always helped me gather my thoughts.

Baji was a mutant of the mutant city, and he had lied about it the whole time.

What else had he lied about? I went back over the conversations that I could remember since he'd first reached into my head. He'd never offered many details about his daily life. Just chit-chat—ordinary things that would be easy to fake, especially if he thought I'd never travel to Demestoa. I did most of the talking. Mainly he listened. And he tried to help, or acted like he wanted to help.

Was that part of his plan?

I'd never understood what opened the channel between us in the first place. Our brains met about a year after I came to New Iqa. I thought that floating in the tank had awakened something in me, or maybe it came from my life before the tank—whatever that might have been. But if that were true, why hadn't the chiurgeon's tests detected it? Why did it wait so long to manifest? Something must have happened to spark it. Was it Baji? What if latching onto me was another part of his plan?

Hold on. What plan?

I tried to imagine the nefarious plots that would hinge on fooling me. I couldn't come up with many. His big scheme was to make friends with a human in New Iqa so he could sink his claws into this—this isolated, useless little village? Trick me into giving up the secrets of our Aeon Priest who could barely keep her field automatons running, who couldn't feed her people, who might have killed their food in the first place?

Did the mutants of M'ra Jolios even have claws? All I knew were stories of water monsters told by frightened people.

I didn't know what to do. I wanted to talk to Lozwen more than ever. She'd probably have called this a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Whenever talks with a village fell through, she'd smile and tell me to cheer up, maybe we could bring the mutants around.

Could I do that? Could I bring the mutants around?

Whatever happened next, Eltria had to be in my corner. I might have been able to rally a few people for a trip to Demestoa, but no one would follow me to M'ra Jolios without her say-so. I wasn't sure *I'd* follow me.

I had to tell her straight out.

When I returned to the workshop the laaks jumped all over me, pawing and padding. Eltria had forgotten to put their bowls out. They hissed and skittered off as I shooed them away.

I started up the creaky stairs to Eltria's loft until a metallic whir from her private study off to my right stopped me. She'd been working in there a lot during the past week. Usually that meant the pressure was getting to her. If she was still no closer to fixing the fields, maybe she'd listen to another idea.

The study door was whisperlocked, but I picked up a lot around the shop by keeping my ears open. I leaned down to the latch and spoke the right word. It slid back.

I opened the door to the smaller room and the stink of oil and rot hit me first. Two narrow tables ran side by side. On one, a winged creature from the chelka swarm lay on its back, six crooked legs bent in the air, thorax pinned open. Metal parts and organs had been pulled out of the cavity, some still dangling by synth tubes and slack veins, leaking grease and blood.

On the other table lay a gray human arm, severed at the shoulder. Wires and blood vessels stuck out of the stump and ran to an iron box with a row of control knobs. Fitted over the fingers—maybe screwed to them—were five bigger steel fingers lined with tiny blades that whirred as they sawed the air around them.

A yellow light blinded me and then turned to the side. Eltria stood between the tables, wearing black coveralls with a bright lamp band strapped to her forehead.

"I heard you coming. I thought it was time for you to see this."

She turned a dial on the iron box and the blades stopped dead. "With the right wiring, I think a person can control any tool we give him."

I felt like I'd just been dropped into ice water. She'd told me that we'd burned all the insects after the pulse shorted them out. And the arm—that sooty, ashen skin, the unnatural bend to the elbow, the cross-section of bone and collapsed muscle at the shoulder stump with its wires and vessels . . . I steadied myself on the doorframe.

Eltria switched off the headlamp. "You know what the other villages said. We'll get no help from them. In fact, Warale wants us dead. You were there."

Vomit tickled the back of my throat. "Whose arm is that?"

"Tuck, we need to be ready to fight. We have to think about the future. Lozwen wouldn't have wanted us to fall apart."

I stepped backward into the workshop, bumping into a table. "Hiding one of the things that killed her? Cutting up the dead? Experimenting with—you think that's what she'd want? The future is that we need to *fix what we did!*"

"I've tried. I'm still trying. Whatever happened to the fields is beyond me. I'm not giving up. But other villages probably have more food than they need. If we can show them—"

"I asked where you got that arm."

"Tuck! Look at the big picture! What does one life matter against all of ours? Everyone put me in charge of saving them, and I'm damn sure going to do it however I can!"

"Lozwen always said that *every* life matters! She wouldn't support this."

Her face looked weary. "I'm just doing what's necessary."

Necessary? No, necessary was giving people a chance, helping them up. Turning the black pins green. Doing what was best for *everyone*. Not this.

A few months after I first came to New Iqa, four broken hounds loped into town during the harvest festival. We were all dancing and drinking and before anyone knew it, the hounds went after kids who were out picking cingets to carve. Lozwen drew them off and kept them at bay with nothing but a staff until people got weapons and put them down. Afterward, she said she couldn't afford to be afraid when people were at risk.

I came to the shop hoping Eltria would help me figure out what to do. She had.

"I've been contacted by a . . . a person in M'ra Jolios." I spat the words at her. "They have something that will restore our fields. We just need to go get it."

She gaped at me like I'd just shot flames from my eyes. "Contacted *how*?"

I explained how Baji had appeared in my head months ago, how we'd talked back and forth ever since, how a spot behind my right ear flared with pain when the channel opened, how he'd always given me good advice.

Glowering, she prodded and poked at the area behind my ear. "And you don't remember anything that might have happened to enable this communication?"

"No." I was afraid that she'd think it was some kind of hostile action, that the mutants had invaded my head to spy on us, but she let it go without an argument. She was full of surprises.

"Some mysteries are beyond us. I'm more concerned with the offer you received. You're going to sit right here and tell me everything. Every word you've exchanged with this Baji."

So I did—mostly. She didn't need to know everything.

I also stressed that I trusted Baji fully. That wasn't exactly true anymore, but I had to convince both of us that this was the best option. Honestly, I had no idea what would be waiting for us in the water city, but the mutants had nothing to gain from luring us to our doom.

Not as far as I knew. But as Eltria had said that night with M'sem, leaders have to take risks.

Chapter 5

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if Tuck hadn't returned to the workshop that night and caught Eltria in her study, or if they'd hosted an envoy from a friendlier village than Warale, or if the priest hadn't tried to—hold on, that hasn't happened yet. Must stick to the path.

Would things have turned out any better or worse in the end? And if every life matters, does that include mine? I wouldn't be here if not for Tuck. He put the needs of others ahead of his own. He saw the whole sky, not just one star.

That's not to say it was easy. His memory of the village meeting where they sold the people on the plan to go to the mutants is heavy with noise: shouts, arguments, curses. The dead were invoked. Words were thrown like rocks. Actual rocks were thrown, come to think of it. I'm glad I wasn't there, and you don't need to watch the whole thing. Good enough to say that eventually the votes swung toward hope over despair. The people saw the sky, too.

And Tuck dreamed. He dreamed about struggling in the tank, drowning in the stream, rising forever in the water of the mutant city, of the ocean, kicking toward a surface that was always just out of reach. He dreamed of a dome swarming with three-armed fish creatures whose mouths opened like black holes that sucked everything in. He dreamed of his dead friends and neighbors floating out of their graves, their skeletons suspended in still waters.

Just bad dreams, he told himself, visions that didn't mean anything. But his head is also full of visions that do mean something, because they really happened. Funny that they can look the same but feel so different.

The journey to M'ra Jolios took a day and a half.

We weren't fast enough to head into the woods alone like the runners did. Eltria recruited Grayden and Palene to join us. The smith brought her maul and a metalweave vest, and she tied a scarf over the top of her burned scalp. From time to time she muttered prayers or curses and clasped a tiny synth talisman around her neck. Palene carried our tent in a backpack. Eltria packed a few devices in a satchel and walked with her stick even though her leg had healed. I think she'd grown used to the affectation.

I volunteered to wear the ghost belt since the trip was my idea. Besides, we didn't want anything to hobble Grayden or Palene in case we needed their protection, and Eltria said she couldn't stand the idea of making ghosts.

The belt's ethereal tendrils shivered into my belly, and my eyeballs swelled, warping my vision for a moment until I got used to the effect. The itching, the tears, being unable to blink—that was the worst part. Every few minutes I checked my trail of afterimages, a line of ghostly gray statues that showed me always ten seconds in the past. They'd start to fade in about four days, so we had to make sure we were close to home by then. Only my bloated eyes could see the ghosts, so predators couldn't use them to track us—at least, no predators we knew about. The deep woods were still a mystery. Getting lost when the valley shifted wasn't the only danger.

We kept as straight a path as we could. Once an hour Eltria wound up her biomechanical bird and sent it above the canopy to check directions. With her synced lens she could peer through the bird's crystal eyes to keep us on course. Even so, we kept crossing lines of my ghosts, so we knew the valley was doing its best to confound us. Walking through my own gray apparitions felt like stepping through smoky mirrors. Like I was touching my past.

Near the end of the first day we entered a patch of thick trees that seemed to quiver until we realized that brown scutimorphs coiled around the trunks. Giant, pulpy wrigglers, each bigger than Grayden, with hundreds of legs and pincers like scythes. The sight rooted me to the ground. I was afraid to move, to be seen. My mind filled with fire, screams, and death. It took several pokes from Eltria's walking stick to startle me back. Palene twisted his fingers to weave a charm that muted our sound as we detoured around the area.

Even after the effect wore off, we traveled mostly in silence. We got lucky and had to pass through the grove only once. As night fell we made camp under a dense canopy that blocked out the starry sky. Eltria handed out chunks of dried bread and treated us to her ideas about the city we hoped we were heading toward.

"It's a big fishbowl. The mutants must venture out on occasion. Are there underground waterways? They had to migrate there from somewhere; the city had to come first. So who filled the bowl? Why did the ancients create the obelisks? So many wonderful questions."

Grayden grunted, twisting her talisman. "Oh, they *venture out* all right. Don't you remember what Alger found lurking just outside town? Or when Orrath's dossi got mangled—all the kelp in the carcasses?"

"Did you see the kelp yourself?" Palene asked. "All I saw were the dossi. Anything could have torn them up."

"I believe Orrath," the smith said. "But it doesn't matter. The monsters don't belong here. Anything they got, we don't need."

Palene laughed, sounding a bit too much like when he'd hosted M'sem. "We need the volk to grow again. If they can help, I'll take it. I just hope your friend is right about us being able to breathe inside."

Baji had told me he'd take care of it, whatever that meant, but that wouldn't exactly sound reassuring to the others.

"You know, Tuck, all you've told us is that you send messages back and forth mentally," Palene said. "How does it work? How did it start?"

I started to finger the spot behind my ear reflexively, then caught myself and invented an itch to scratch. Eltria had warned me not to talk about it. Best to leave it vague, she said—no sense inviting trouble. I didn't know what kind of trouble she meant. Maybe she wanted to come across as the leader who knew everything. She could bluster all she liked if we got results.

"It's just something I can do," I said, shrugging. "Like your sorcery with the nano-spirits in the air."

"But I know how my abilities work," he countered. "I still don't know how you do it. Some piece of the numenera you're keeping from us?"

I forced a casual smile. "It's a mystery."

"Of the ancients," Eltria broke in. "Who knows what happened before we found him in that tank? Just thank the gods for our good fortune. Now let's get some sleep."

I couldn't close my swollen eyes, so I sat up all night on watch, just me and my ghosts. Taking off the belt to sleep carried too much risk. If we got lost this far out, we might wander for years.

Baji, are you there? We're close now. Maybe half a day's walk left.

The bushes rustled as something passed nearby. I was about to wake the others when a small, multilegged creature stepped into our clearing. I could barely see its green body against the foliage. A thin pair of translucent wings fluttered on its back.

Not an insect—just a limmil. Harmless enough. Two or three more stumbled out after the first. Frankly, I was glad for the company. But when I tossed a piece of bread over, they fled back into the bushes.

Still nothing from Baji. I'd hoped to go over the instructions with him one more time, but even mutants had to sleep. Or so I assumed.

Hours passed as I listened to the calls of things in the valley and tried not to rub my bloated eyes.

The next morning Palene and Grayden broke camp while I put out the fire and scooped up a handful of ashes. With one hand, I smeared the markings on my forehead, holding up a tiny mirror to be sure I got the symbols right.

Eltria wound up her bird. The small yellow mech flew up through the trees, and she lifted the lens to her eye.

"Oh, my. We've—moved."

Without waiting for the bird to return, she hurried into the forest ahead. We grabbed the rest of our gear and followed.

The valley had shifted us during the night. Within a minute the trees gave way to an enormous round clearing that hadn't been nearby the night before, and there it was, perhaps five hundred paces away, filling my whole field of vision from end to end, looming like another world rising out of the earth: M'ra Jolios, the water city.

The top of the curved dome scraped the blue sky. Inside grew dozens of organic structures, more like immense plants than buildings, bulbous at the bottom and tapering as they rose higher in the water. Some twined together. Others sprouted huge leaves or fungal pods along their sides or top. Weedier plants and grasses clustered around the larger structures, filling the base of the dome.

I tried to shield my stinging eyes from the bright sunlight gleaming off the dome, but my hands were too small. After a moment I perceived shapes moving through the water, kicking and whipping around the structures. Some bodies drifted slowly while others moved like snakes, undulating with great speed. Smaller creatures—specks, at this distance—swam everywhere in small groups and large schools.

The only things more impressive than the dome were the eight soaring obelisks that ringed the city, gripping it, holding the water in its impossible shape. They appeared to be stone and were covered on all sides in carved symbols. The tops of the obelisks tapered to points that stopped about three-quarters of the way up the sides of the dome. The highest curve of the city loomed in the center of the ring.

At first it had looked like a world unto itself, but now M'ra Jolios struck me as a bubble trying to rise out of the ground and float off into the sky, held down by towering clamps. The giant fingers I'd mentioned to Jirda didn't seem so silly any more.

"Astonishing." Eltria finger-traced the curves of the obelisks. "How do they work? There's no force field—none visible, in any case."

I scanned the outer surface of the dome, looking for a shell, a sheen, a glimmer of *something* encasing the water. Nothing.

"Shhhh . . ." Palene held up a hand. "Listen."

"I don't hear anything," Grayden said.

"Exactly."

Suddenly I became aware of birds—real ones—cawing as they flew overhead. Wind rustling the leaves of the trees that surrounded the clearing. But nothing from the city. The dome, the obelisks made no noise. No sloshing water. No hum of power. Just complete silence.

No smell of dampness, either. No odor of any kind. The city might as well have been a hologram.

My mouth suddenly went as dry as cloth. The sight, the enormity of what stood before us, filled me with awe—and with dread that we'd made a mistake. I wanted to turn back and run through the gray ghosts that trailed off into the forest, follow them home before they faded.

Instead I asked Lozwen for strength and concentrated until I felt the familiar stabbing pain behind my ear.

Baji. We're here.

To my relief, he answered almost immediately. *Friend Tuck, here, at last! It is good. All is in preparations?*

Yes.

Now you are to be crossing the bridge. Move to it.

I beckoned the others to follow and walked around the edge of the clearing until I spotted something on the far side of the dome. A few hundred paces from the edge of the city, an arched lattice of stone spanned a crack in the ground. The bridge was twice as long as I was tall and so narrow that we'd have to cross single file. But why cross it at all? The crevice it passed over was so small that it would be easier to just walk around the whole thing.

But that's not what Baji had said to do.

I cleared my throat and tried to project confidence as I headed for the bridge. "Follow me."

"Stop!" shouted Grayden.

The smith crept toward the dome, staying well away from the bridge. "Do they think we're idiots? That's clearly a trap."

"But this is—"

"Hey! You wanted me to keep you safe. Let me do it." Hefting the hammer, she walked directly toward the city. I considered ways to stop her, but before I'd thought of even one, she moved beyond the bridge and disappeared—not all at once, but in vertical slices, from front to back, as if from one step to the next she had been shuffled into somewhere else.

"Grayden!" Palene ran toward where she had vanished, stopping short of whatever line she had crossed. His fingers drew a pattern in the air, but the charm produced no effect that I could see.

Eltria prodded the air above the spot with the end of her walking stick. Nothing.

Baji! Grayden disappeared!

Was she not crossing the bridge?

Yes. I mean no. I mean she didn't use the bridge.

Ah. This is why my direction. She is now lost. You others, cross the bridge.

Lost? You mean—is she—

I mean lost. In the other place. Cross the bridge. She is returning to you after.

Thank the gods. I had feared the worst.

"We have to follow her in," Palene said.

"No!" I shouted. "She's gone . . . another way. We have to cross the bridge. We'll find Grayden on the other side."

Palene looked to Eltria, who nodded. She really did trust my lead here.

I wished I felt the same.

They joined me at the end of the bridge, and I took a careful step onto the stone lattice. Nothing happened. I took another step. Still nothing. A few more steps and I was across.

M'ra Jolios still loomed in front of me, but suddenly sweat broke out on my skin from the moist air. The earthy musk of wet vegetation all but drowned me. A low rumble in my chest echoed the deep hum of the massive obelisks rising high above. I had entered another place, a secret place.

Five humanoid creatures stood between me and the city. Three were tall and slender with speckled blue skin, large black eyes, and spiny ridges that ran from their heads down their backs. The fourth had a tapered head like a shovel, with one bulbous central eye and weedy growths all over its white body. The last, much shorter than the rest, was armored in interlocking plates of auburn shell with some kind of reflective finish.

Each creature wore a suit of water like a second skin. The clear membranes moved as they did, encasing their bodies in a thin layer of fluid.

The three blue mutants advanced on me. In their left hands each brandished what looked like a smooth stick of purple coral. On their right wrist each wore a wide bracelet of green metal.

This was it. I took a deep breath and stood my ground, pointing to the symbols on my forehead, hoping the humidity hadn't smeared the lines. Now I'd see how well I'd followed Baji's directions.

"Tuck, stop!" said Palene, coming up behind me.

"Wait," Eltria cautioned him.

The mutants encircled me. The tallest one leaned in close, tried to touch my bulging eyes, and studied the ash marks on my forehead. It looked at its companions. Their lipless mouths moved but made no sounds. Then I realized that their mouths opened and closed too evenly to be forming words. They were breathing. Large slits lining their necks rippled, spitting out tiny bubbles within the waterskins.

The trio gathered and conferred in silence.

Soon the tallest one stepped back and pointed with webbed fingers toward the other two mutants—the shovel-headed one and the shell-plated one—at the edge of the dome.

The symbols had done their job. "Looks like we're clear."

"What about Grayden?" Palene asked.

Baji, my friend didn't come back after we crossed the bridge.

Apology, Tuck. I am meaning she returns after your audience with the Giash. Meanways, she is lost. When unlost, if she then crosses the bridge rightly, the guards will keep her for you.

Gods about! Why hadn't the smith just listened? I didn't like entering the city without her, or leaving her behind.

Nothing to be done about it now.

"Don't worry," I said. "She'll show up soon. She'll wait out here until we're done inside."

Palene grabbed my arm. "Tuck, are you sure about this?"

"We know what we're doing," Eltria hissed under her breath. "Grayden can take care of herself until we come back out."

Shovel-head and Shell-plate met us as we approached the dome. Even this close to the city I saw no skin, no force field holding the water in its shape. It looked like I could reach out and stick my hand right in.

Shovel-head shambled around us, tapping my ghost belt, Eltria's satchel and walking stick, Palene's backpack. Baji had warned me about this.

"We can't take our things inside," I said. "They'll be here when we come out."

I tensed for Eltria to insist on keeping her satchel, but she fiddled with it for a bit, checking all the pockets, and handed it over.

As I unlatched the ghost belt and felt its tendrils withdraw from my body, I looked back at the gray ghost trail. The afterimages stopped halfway across the bridge. I hoped they still continued on the other side, beyond whatever hidden boundary we'd crossed. I hoped removing the belt wouldn't cause the ghosts to fade prematurely, stranding us here. So much of the trip was built on hope.

My eyeballs burned as they deflated back into their sockets, and for a moment I went blind. I wanted so much to scratch them, to dig them out of my skull. Instead I closed my eyelids for the first time since we'd left New Iqa, enjoying the darkness, listening to—feeling—the thrum of the obelisks, the motion of the city.

When I opened my eyes again, I could see. Behind me, my ghosts were invisible. That sounded better than thinking they were gone.

Shovel-head and two of the blue mutants escorted us to the edge of the dome between the nearest pair of obelisks. The slender creatures tapped buttons on their metal bracelets.

Their membrane suits broke apart seconds before they stepped into the vertical plane of water, as casually as if walking through a doorway, and then they were inside the city. They motioned for us to follow.

Palene grabbed my elbow again. "Tuck, how are we going to breathe?"

"They're supposed to give us something." I waved to get Shovel-head's attention and made a display of taking a deep breath and exhaling. Then another.

The pale creature leaned in close, looking me up and down with its globular eye as its weeds rippled inside its waterskin. I exaggerated more deep breaths and soon it started mimicking me. That must have got my point across because it motioned to the third blue mutant, who rotated one of the armored creature's plates on some kind of hinge, exposing a cavity, and pulled out four small bags made of dark gray fabric.

The blue mutant came toward me, holding out a bag. I reached out to take the offering, but it slapped my hand away and drove the bag hard against the center of my throat. The bag shrieked as a sharp point pressed against my skin and broke through. I gagged and cried out as a thin tube slid into my throat.

The mutant let go and the bag hung there, pinned, inflating and deflating with a whistling sound as I breathed. The pain lessened with each breath until all I felt was a sharp ache, a heaviness, in my throat, like a bite of food stuck halfway down.

"Lovely," groused Eltria.

The guard pinned her and Palene next. Those bags squealed, too, twitching before they started puffing out and in. These things were alive.

Shovel-head and the blue mutant shooed us toward the dome.

"Keeping the shape of the city," Eltria murmured, reaching toward the vertical plane of water. "What I wouldn't give to study the obelisks, those symbols—secrets of the prior worlds."

"If we do this right, maybe you'll get that chance." I closed my eyes and stepped forward into the wall.

There was resistance as I pushed through, like walking into a sheet of skin, and then it gave way and I was inside, immersed in cold water. My mind tried to tell me I was back in the tank, alone, trapped. Instinctively I held my breath, and the bag against my throat shuddered violently, jerking the tube in my throat.

Baji this is crazy where's the air what if the bag breaks how can this even work

Be settled. His voice was calm, slow. *You are having air without end in your tultur. They are bred for such.*

I opened my eyes and exhaled slowly, and the bag, the thing that Baji called a tultur, calmed and deflated. Carefully, I inhaled the smallest possible amount of water, ready to choke, but I didn't. I took a larger breath, then a full one, then several as the tultur puffed out and collapsed over and over, trilling with satisfaction.

A blue world sparkled with sunlight all around me. From inside the curve of the dome disappeared, making the water seem endless. I'd heard stories about the ocean, how it filled the world, everything that wasn't land, and imagined this was what it was like to stand on the ocean floor. My boots squished in a spongy mass of weeds. Here, the drone of the obelisks softened to a dull hum.

Tuck, understand your honor. The glory of M'ra Jolios is rare known for humans.

My breaths fell into a slow rhythm. I moved my arms and legs and kicked a bit, lifting off the weeds. My hair and shirt puffed out around me. The two blue guards floated nearby, watching with smooth black eyes, their mouths gulping water, bubbles rippling out from their gills.

Eltria and Palene pulled themselves through the water on either side of me, the priest's big robe billowing like a tent. Tultur pumping against their throats, they took in the looming city, Palene with an open-mouthed smile of wonder and Eltria with a hard stare—fascination, maybe, or shock. Her lips moved, but her muffled words didn't carry.

One guard tucked its arms to its sides and kicked toward a plump organic structure nearby, dwarfed by its neighboring plant towers. The shorter black structure reminded me of a boloka shell, only hundreds of times larger than the ones that washed up in the stream at home.

The second guard pointed, so we followed the first, stepping, bouncing, and then finally swimming. Despite using our arms and legs, we couldn't keep up. Eltria's girth made her even slower.

Where are they taking us, Baji?

The Giash forbids your entry to come far. Only to a place of encountering, near the skin of the city. We there await.

Eventually the first guard must have thought we were sufficiently close behind, and it swam into an open mouth in the side of the base of the black structure. We followed. The

tight, dark tube curled down, then up, then down again before emptying into a shadowy chamber.

Kelp and grasses covered the ground, growing in haphazard clumps around the room. A cluster of coral spikes rose from the center of the floor and curved outward like tusks. One of them radiated dim purple light. A figure standing behind the spikes touched each one in turn, causing them to glow, brightening the area in stages.

The creature lighting the coral spikes was humanoid, like our escorts, but shorter, with golden-yellow skin laced with grooves. A tall fin on its head curved backward like a claw, and its hands were more like flippers, each with one side digit that reminded me of thumbs. A medallion of concentric circles hung around its neck.

Behind the golden creature, a larger pulpy mass rose from a thick patch of dark green kelp. I thought it was jet-black vegetation until it turned toward me. At least a dozen thin tentacles, each ending in a humanoid hand, sprouted from what I took to be its head. Below the tentacles a mouth shaped like a funnel pulsed rhythmically, as if filtering water. Its lower body—if it had one—remained hidden in the kelp.

As the golden creature lit more spikes and the chamber brightened, I became aware of darker shapes gliding about, swirling around us like shadows. Every time I looked directly at one, it grew less distinct. I saw them best out of the corners of my vision.

The guard who'd led us to the room pushed us away from the mouth of the tube, closer to the cluster of spikes, and took up a position by the opening. The second guard stayed in the tunnel.

I saw only one other exit: a tiny, crude door made of driftwood, set into the far wall, looking very out of place in this organic chamber. Grayden's warning of a trap echoed in my head. Now she was gone and we were underwater, surrounded, at the bottom of a city of mutants, breathing through throat-bags we didn't understand.

It all seemed too much. I looked to Palene and Eltria and found them staring back at me expectantly. Eltria said something I had no way to hear.

Baji? Are you here?

The golden mutant by the coral spread his arms and bowed. *Friend Tuck. At last we stand together.*

So this was Baji. I studied his lined skin; the tiny black circles of his eyes; his sharp, hooked head fin. He stood about as tall as my shoulders. Smaller fins lined his arms and legs.

His mouth opened and closed; bubbles streamed out his gills. Not quite what I pictured when I thought he lived in Demestoa.

Baji, I'm not sure—

He raised a flipper. *Hold to your moment. I am enabling this place for tongues in favor of the honored guests.*

Baji touched one of the circles on his medallion and the fleshy walls of the chamber flashed with a burst of white light that subsided slowly.

"Greeting to Tuck and Tuck's friends," he said out loud. His voice carried perfectly through the water. His words sounded wet and slurred, a little slow.

"I am Baji. Welcome yourselves to M'ra Jolios, the eye of Ny'kul, a drop of the endless ocean. I have the study of your speech. I am the channel of our visitors"—he gestured toward us—"and the Giash"—he gestured toward the shadowy shapes drifting all around us—"and the Mois, the crest of the Giash"—he spread his arms toward the tentacle-headed thing that loomed behind him.

He turned back to us. "Your honor is great, and the ills of your home sorrow us. Please, unravel for us why you are coming to M'ra Jolios."

"Tuck, tell them—oh!" Eltria began, stopping in surprise at the sound of her voice. She turned to Baji and spoke very loudly and slowly. "We come . . . far away. Our land . . . very sick. You help us. We grow strong!"

Baji gulped water and returned her stare.

Tuck, is this one a child in the mind?

Uh, no, that's Eltria—the Aeon Priest I've told you about.

Ah! Your annoyance, yes. Hold to your moment.

Baji faced the Mois and a silent conversation seemed to take place. After a moment, the tentacles writhed, hands gesturing through a quick succession of signs.

Baji bowed to us again and pointed to me. "The Mois hears this one. Please to unravel your coming."

Eltria smiled her tight smile. "Tuck is my assistant. I am the consul of New Iqa—"

Behind Baji the mass of tentacles flailed violently through the water, exuding a black cloud. The new dark patch began to swim around the chamber with the other shadows.

"Please to not!" Baji said. "The Mois hears this one, or you are ended."

Ended? Baji—

"Please, I am ordained to be making you clear." He bent a flipper toward the large creature behind him. "You see the Mois, but a piece of her only. A face. Around us also is the Mois. We are sheltering in her."

A black tentacle grew out of the wall and snaked toward Eltria, curling around her body, brushing her robe. On the wall, near the spot where the appendage had sprouted, a mustard-yellow eye opened, large and round. Its black pupil slid from side to side.

"What's this all about?" the priest asked.

Palene moved back toward the mouth of the tunnel that led out. The flesh of the wall grew over the opening like a skinpatch closing off a wound. Another eye blinked open over the spot where the tunnel entrance had been. The blue guard in the chamber pushed Palene back toward us.

Baji! What's going on?

Friend Tuck, do not be fearing. The Giash takes your audience in the Mois. No other way is possible. But I know your words will please, and the Mois will open herself.

I don't know what to say!

Say the true in your heart, and it is not to fail.

What—what if they don't like what I say?

Death, perhaps, and punishments for me. But your words are sure to please.

Inky shadows twisted all around us. Another tentacle grew up from the ground and curled around Palene's feet. I motioned for him and Eltria to stay where they were.

Death, perhaps. Only perhaps. I could do this. I thought of all the times I'd watched Lozwen talk someone into or out of something. Maybe her spirit would guide me.

As . . . as wise Eltria said, we come from—

In your mouth, Tuck. They are not hearing otherwise. You are the voice, and I am your channel.

Out loud. Right. Easy to lose track.

And my words would be translated. I began to realize how much we depended on Baji.

"As wise Eltria said," I began, "we come from New Iqa. A village far across the valley. Many people live there. Adults and young. We grow plants called volk to eat. But we were attacked by a chelka swarm. Insects of flesh and metal. And in fighting them off, the ground that fed our plants became sick. Now the volk won't grow. We tried to fix our ground, but we failed."

A dark yellow eye winked open in the soft ground near my feet. Its black pupil dilated and stared up at me. If I hadn't been underwater, I'd have broken out in a cold sweat.

"Many things grow here in M'ra Jolios. In the eye of Ny'kul. We plead for your help. If you can heal our ground, we can feed our people. That will help New Iqa. That will help M'ra Jolios because . . . because if we are well, if we are your friends, we can help when you need it. You're alone here, in the middle of this valley of human villages. This land of strangements and dangers. Perhaps helping us is a start, and together we can bring all of our peoples together."

Baji waited, then bowed when I said no more. "You are thanked."

He turned between the Giash and the Mois, translating for them. Or so I hoped. I had no idea what he was saying.

The shadows slowed their crawl around the chamber. The Mois swirled its tentacles gently, opening and closing its many hands, possibly in a pattern—it was hard to tell. Several more eyes popped open in the walls and ceiling, all focused on Baji.

"Tuck," Eltria said. "What's happening?"

I held up my hand toward her without turning my gaze from the Mois.

A moment later the creature lifted three tentacles in front of its body. The hands contorted into a series of signs. Baji watched the dancing fingers intently.

"The Mois is asking the rights of the—the rights of you to the valley. M'ra Jolios is the eye of Ny'kul, the endless source of all life, the end of all souls. The human herds come and go like waves. Why are you to be? Let there come the sharing of creation."

Palene stepped up next to me, bowed to the Mois, and raised his hands. "May I speak? It seems that since you can't survive in the valley outside this city, perhaps we can come to some—"

The blue guard by the wall tapped its wide metal bracelet. The tultur pinned to Palene's throat burst with a pop, leaving a cloud of gray flesh and white goo in the water.

He gasped and sucked in mouthfuls of water. Choking, sputtering, he scrabbled at the end of the tube still sticking out of his neck, dancing grotesquely off the ground.

Baji! Help him!

I cannot! I do not have—only the guards—

Heart pounding in my ears, I yanked at the tultur at my throat, trying to pull it out to give to him, but it felt like a part of my body, like I was trying to pull off my hand.

Large black tentacles sprouted from the ground below Palene and wrapped around his legs, rooting him in place as his torso flailed.

"Let him go!" Eltria shouted. She pressed her palms together and pulled them a few inches apart again, and suddenly webs of red lightning arced between them. A bolt shot out from the webs and struck a tentacle. Fuchsia clouds bloomed in the water.

The shadows in the chamber undulated wildly, writhing in every direction around us.

No, no, no—this couldn't be happening. No time to worry about how Eltria did that. I swam to Palene and tried to wrench him loose from the rubbery tentacles. They held his legs like iron. I pulled on my tular as hard as I could with both hands.

A new tentacle grew out of the wall and reached for Eltria's hands. She twisted away and held up the crackling red lattice. Another bolt blasted out at the tentacle. It missed, striking the wall, and in the space of a heartbeat the tentacle coiled around both of her hands, encasing them in thick bands of black flesh.

Palene's eyes fluttered half closed as he began to slip away.

This is it, I thought. I brought us all here to die.

The blue guard glided toward us, clutching something—another tular! The mutant ignored me and rammed the bag against the tube in Palene's throat. Within a few seconds it started expanding and contracting, and he came to, panting heavily.

Eltria stopped struggling against the tentacle that had by now wrapped both of her arms to the elbows. "Thank the gods."

The shadows slowed, resuming a less frantic path through the water.

"All right," Palene said, hoarsely. "I'm all right."

Long seconds passed. All I heard was the sound of my breathing as my tular puffed out and in, out and in.

Then Baji spoke. "Visitors. The Mois hears this one"—he gestured a flipper toward me—"and *only* this one. The next friend of Tuck to offend will be ended."

Tuck. I am much sorry. All must be following the laws of audience. Punishments are not mine to give. I did plead for the Mois to command the saving of your friend.

We were so vulnerable under the water. What had I walked us into?

"There is more," Baji said. "The friends of Tuck require keeping."

As he spoke, the ground grew upward around Palene and Eltria like walls of flesh, surrounding them, climbing higher and higher. The tentacle sealing the priest's arms

withdrew just as the flesh grew over the tops of their heads, encasing them in cocoons. Stretched so thin, the skin became slightly translucent. Eltria pushed up against her wrapping, her face a protruding mask of anger.

At least we were still alive. One thing at a time.

"The Giash waits for this one to fulfill the sharing."

I forced my eyes away from the cocoons. "What do you mean?"

"Tell the legend of your people growing here. Share your right to be."

Baji, what do I say? What do they want to hear?

He looked back at the Mois. After a moment, one tentacle rose in the water, its fingers splayed wide.

Ah, she is with agreement. Allow me to show.

"I am the first honor," he said. "My life is being given to the study of our years. There is much to our people, the Ghibra Ny'kul—the children of Ny'kul. I will tell with words of your discernment."

Baji ran a flipper across half the coral spikes. Their light faded, darkening the room. The shadows nearly vanished in the gloom, but the yellow eyes on the walls and floor stood out like moons.

"Long ago, when the tides quarreled and the light shone, the gods of endless water are looking upon the world and saying, where on this world is water? Where on this world are we? So in their hand they grew a droplet and seeded it on this world as a sign. But wretched Shulshul laughed and ripened leeches to unmake the droplet, and then unmake the world. The gods swirled to anger, engulfing the leeches in their cascade. Then in their mouth they grew a second droplet, and one god melted to the world to hold it against Shulshul."

The chamber's eyes tracked Baji as he made a slow circle around the coral. "The droplet is the eye of Ny'kul, the endless source of all life, the end of all souls. Through the Ghibra it comes to this world, and through it the Ghibra come to this world. M'ra Jolios is all the water that flows, and all the water that flows is M'ra Jolios."

He relit the darkened spikes and the shadows became distinct again. Behind him the Mois lifted several tentacles above her head and twirled circles in the water.

Baji gestured toward me. "You are now the honor."

Inside the cocoons, Palene's silhouette barely moved while the thicker shape of Eltria fidgeted. Could they hear us? It felt wrong to give the history of New Iqa, which I knew only

from stories, while they sat captive. They were the natives, not me. But things didn't always come down to right or wrong. I had to make the best of it.

I thought of the last time Lozwen told the story to the kids at the harvest festival. She always played down her own role. This was my chance to give her a better tribute.

"It's true that our home is not as old as M'ra Jolios. We haven't been here as long as you. Our village lies to the south, across the changing forest. Many years ago its people lived . . . elsewhere, far from the valley. Their home was called Iqa, and they lived in peace. Until another people—the Tabaht—came riding their terrible dragoliths and took the land. The people of Iqa fought. Many died. Finally they were driven out."

Baji looked toward the Mois, whose tentacles drooped around its black shape. I had the impression that my message was being passed on sentence by sentence.

"They fled until they were sure the Tabaht no longer chased them, and then they fled farther, through many dangers, losing more people. Eventually they found the valley. They learned its ways and made a home—New Iqa. The first years were bad. Other villages, long established in the valley, wished them harm. But Lozwen, who led them from the Tabaht, made the village grow.

"She brought me into their home when they found me in the valley. She taught us all to think beyond our forms, to see all of New Iqa as our body, to see that each of us was just one part. 'Helping every one helps everyone,' she said. She . . . died in the attack that poisoned our ground. But she lived for the common good of New Iqa, and of the other villages, and even of M'ra Jolios. Today we come to you to carry on her legacy. To help each other."

Baji nodded several times between the swirling Giash and the pulpy Mois. I had no idea how closely he translated my words to them.

Finally, Baji bowed his head. The shadows continued to glide back and forth, bathed in the purple glow of the coral. No reaction. The tentacles swished about the Mois in a tangle.

"Visitors!" Baji turned to us. A dozen yellow eyes of various sizes winked open in the walls, ceiling, and floor, all looking at me. "The sharing has pleased the Giash, and the Mois takes the words of Tuck. The Ghibra Ny'kul are to be helping the people of New Iqa. As M'ra Jolios is all water and all water is M'ra Jolios, so too are we one in this world."

My body would have collapsed in relief if the water hadn't been holding it up. All the trouble—it had been worth it. I pictured the volk singing in the fields as Mojander danced

down the rows. The kids running and laughing again. The storehouse full of grain. If only Lozwen could have seen this moment, but there was no better way to honor her memory.

Inside the cocoons, nothing from Eltria or Palene. They couldn't hear us. For all they knew, we'd just been condemned to death.

I bowed deeply toward the Mois. "Thank you." Baji offered no translation that I could see. I doubt it was needed.

You are congratulated, friend Tuck. Did I not say your words would please?

What now?

Now we gift the sla'zul.

Baji swam toward the tiny driftwood door, but he didn't approach it. Instead a small hole puckered open in the floor near the door and stretched itself wide. Within a minute it looked big enough to swim through.

"What about Eltria and Palene?"

"The friends of Tuck are for keeping until the sla'zul is gifted."

Baji dove head-first into the hole. I signaled to Eltria and Palene that everything was okay, but they probably saw out of their cocoons about as well as I saw in.

I followed down into the darkness of the hole. Unlike the tunnel that led us into the Mois, this passage made one turn and opened onto a fleshy space about half the size of the audience chamber. The only light was what spilled in through the passage.

I tried to speak, but the water muffled my voice.

The audience is for talking in your mouth, Baji said. Here it is heads only.

As my eyes adjusted to the darker room I noticed half a dozen small, veiny sacs hanging from the ceiling. Baji plucked one like a piece of fruit and pulled it downward until the connective skin stretched and snapped. *The sla'zul is found within.*

He worked his flippers gently around the sac, kneading its skin, splitting it.

Baji, I don't know why—

Tuck, hold to your moment. I am full of regrets to you. For your friends who failed our laws. For the punishments of the Giash. And for before—my deceivings. When first my mind saw yours and reached out, the story of Demestoa was an easy thing to lie. Your people had no means of making such far travel to see that the settlement did not hold me. But I was never knowing that friendship would come. By then I was trapped in the eddy of the lie, and I could not kick free. But truth should have flowed instead.

Time for truth all around. *Yes, that did upset me. I felt tricked. But I understand why you did it.*

You were forbidden to us, so the lie was needed. But truth is truth: I also had fear of my acceptance to you, so I made a human face. And my thoughts began to dream of an artery between our peoples.

It's all right. You've helped us a lot. Not just the sla'zul—you've been a good friend. Eltria and Palene won't blame you for what happened. I'll tell them how you helped us in there.

I did not wish your friends to be ended. I swayed the Giash to keeping them instead. I am believing that the purpose of our droplet is to lift the humans of the valley. My sharing of creation told that the endless source of life comes to this world through the eye of Ny'kul. Understand—this is truth, not story. Can we do smaller than bring it to others in need? The Giash pushes M'ra Jolios to see the best for us. I push it to see the best for all.

Lozwen always hoped we'd become friends with you some day.

Ah, this you are telling me many times, when your thought of me was still human. His black eyes shone as he made a burbling sound. More than once I swam quickly from your head in fearing that the truth would burst from me.

That made me smile. I hope I never said anything mean about mutants.

Your kindness swelled my resolve of our duty to the world, not just to ourselves. Ah, at last!

From the split sac he lifted out a bumpy violet orb nearly as big as my head. The sla'zul. After you are leaving M'ra Jolios, it will hold for a few days only. Be sure it is dug in your fields by then. Bury it three heights deep. Give it no wounds; give it no anger. Let it be as it is, and it will give life.

I took the sla'zul. It felt warm and spongy.

Thank you, Baji.

He put a flipper on my shoulder. I am the honor.

We returned through the tunnel. I swam slowly, kicking, clutching the orb in my hands. It seemed thick and sturdy, but I took no chances after all we'd been through to get it.

Back in the meeting chamber, all the yellow eyes in the walls and floor widened and locked onto my prize, tracking me as I moved through the room.

Baji consulted with the Mois. The skin cocoons around Eltria and Palene withered to husks and broke apart in the water, and the tentacles unwound from Palene's legs. The lightning webs were gone from Eltria's hands.

I drifted over to them. "Are you all right?"

Palene's eyes shifted between me and Eltria, then he nodded. Eltria didn't respond, instead studying the sla'zul in my hands.

With my back to the mutants I whispered, "What was that beam?"

Slowly, making no sudden movements, the Aeon Priest mimed swallowing a pill.

I should have known. She didn't like to walk into situations unprepared.

"Visitors," called Baji, hesitantly. He stood in front of the lazily drifting tentacles of the Mois, their hands floating with contorted fingers. "Before you are sent from M'ra Jolios, the Giash is giving a final invitation. In answer for the . . . the rudeness you have given"—he seemed to wince at his own words—"you will now be owing a redress. The Mois will have the magic in Tuck's head or the magic beneath the fat one's wrapping. Yours to choose."

Baji? What now?

I am much sorry, Tuck. This pulled me by surprise.

We have to give them something?

I regret it so.

What did the Mois think it saw in my head? Damned if I'd let it go digging in there. And it also saw something beneath—

"Eltria?" My gesture asked another question of the priest.

Huffing out a stream of bubbles, she reached inside her robe.

The blue guard snapped to her side. Black tentacles pushed out of the walls. I tensed, not wanting to drop the sla'zul, not wanting to be stuck holding it if something was about to happen.

Slowly, Eltria withdrew a small bundle of soft metal tubes, which joined in the center and bent outward. The thing looked like a colossal snowflake. She held it up on her outstretched palm, making no moves to manipulate it.

"You are given to speak," Baji told her, "but only those words for naming this strangement of magic."

Eltria cleared her throat and uttered two clipped words. "Shock. Nodule."

The snowflake floated up and sailed through the water, settling in a hand at the end of one of the Mois's tentacles. The creature popped the relic into its funnel mouth and sucked on it vigorously for a moment, then spat it out. The snowflake drifted up into the paths of the gliding shadows.

A hole blossomed in the wall behind the guard. The second blue mutant who'd escorted us into the city peered through from the other side.

Baji visibly relaxed and flung his arms wide. "It is good! Tuck and friends of Tuck, the Ghibra Ny'kul send you on your leave. May the agreeable travel be yours." Then he paused and cocked his head, listening. "I am given to say that if ever returning to M'ra Jolios, you will be . . . hmmm. The thought does not carry. Apologies. The Giash is churned. I will turn them from these tides of death. In time a refuge of friendship may grow from this day."

Did you say death? They threatened to kill us?

Only if you are returning. But wash it from your mind. I will counsel them.

So we can leave?

I greatly insist it, before the Giash invent fresh dissatisfactions.

Thank you for your help. Baji, did you—I don't know, twist your translations a little to make me sound better?

His mouth crooked into a half smile. *Only the most little. The pride is yours. Now bend from the waist in favor.*

I bowed once to the Mois, and again in the general direction of the shadows. Palene did the same. Then Eltria stepped forward, hands at her sides, face tightened into a scowl. She glanced slowly at the shadows, at the Mois, at Baji.

She bowed crisply to each of them and I exhaled bubbles of relief.

Chapter 6

If only I could have been there for all the excitement. Poor Grayden missed the fun, too. When the others exited the city, they found her sitting up against an obelisk under the gaze of the guards. She hadn't realized she'd crossed over into somewhere else until she walked and walked without getting any closer to the dome. Then she looked back and thought everyone else had disappeared. As for how she became unlost (as Baji put it), she just said, "Ugliest thing I ever saw. Its head floated loose and showed me the way out." If there was more to the tale, the smith kept it to herself.

Fortunately the gray ghost trail led them almost all the way home before the afterimages started to fade, and by then they were close enough that the valley couldn't turn them around. So Tuck had worried for nothing. No one got maimed, no one died, and they returned with the prize. Happy ending.

From one perspective, maybe. But who decides when things end? As I learned when trying to put Tuck's days in order, things happen in sequence, like stones laid in a path, and it goes on with or without us. The end is wherever we get off the path. The pinch toad Tuck stepped on during the trip home, its story ended at one stone. Tuck's goes on to another. And mine—well, I haven't even come into this yet. Hopefully my stone lies far ahead.

So no, this isn't an ending.

And it certainly isn't happy.

The sun streamed through my window, warming me awake. My head had stopped pounding, but my eyes still stung and I'd swear the left one felt tighter in its socket. The trip back home with the ghost belt had given me a thumping headache and eyestrain that sent me straight to bed. How could the runners go back and forth the way they did?

I got dressed and checked the crate where we'd stored the sla'zul—still bobbing in its tub of water, with no sign that the laaks had disturbed it. We'd returned in the middle of the night, so Eltria had locked it up for safekeeping until we could plant it in the morning light.

She'd already left on some duty or other. Good. I preferred to do this without her. I grabbed a quick breakfast of cinget slices, put out yol scraps for the laaks, and carried the soft, wet sla'zul to the fields.

Mojander was there, oiling the automaton that had sat idle for so long, waiting for volk stalks that were healthy enough to be worth tending. He dropped everything to help me dig. I could have done the job alone, but I don't think he would have missed it for the world.

While we worked at making the hole I recounted the broad strokes of the trip. The ghost trail. The scutimorph grove. Grayden's disappearance. The tultur. The Mois. The questions.

For some reason, Mojander showed the most interest in the breathing bags. "Remarkable," he said, brushing my throat with his synth hand. "No wound at all."

"Not even a scratch. The guards slid them out once we were back in the air. Easy as unbuttoning a jacket."

"Ha! Must have been quite the sight for Grayden. Pity she had to sit outside."

"She'd been lost for a while. Time moved slower where she went. When she finally reached the city, it was too late to go in. Besides, they didn't have a tultur for her."

I hadn't told Mojander that Palene got an extra tultur in the audience chamber, because I'd skipped the part where he'd almost died. Also the cocoons, and the Giash threatening us with death. As far as people knew, the negotiations had gone smoothly. The four of us agreed to leave out the grimmer details. This was a chance to establish good relations with M'ra Jolios, not to stir up fears.

Before long we'd dug a hole three times the size of the sla'zul. Mojander and I got a good grip on the orb, lowered it gently into the ground, and filled the soil back in. For once we were burying something hopeful.

Two weeks later, Baji caught me as I brought crystals to Lozwen's grave. The timing seemed appropriate, since I was beginning to feel like I could talk to her in my head, too.

Hello, friend Tuck. Are you in your mind?

Baji. I haven't talked to you in a while.

How does it do with you?

Things are great. We cleared the withered stalks away, and new ones have grown already—big ones. After a week the volk is already as tall as it'd normally be after a month.

All honor to Ny'kul.

Mojander says he can't wait to slap your hand.

Ah. Does he have anger with me?

No, that means he's happy! It's a sign of friendship.

I see. Please return to him that I too am happy for slapping.

I'll, uh, pass that on.

Baji had come a long way since we first started talking months ago. I could barely understand him back then. He knew the words but couldn't string them together very well. Made an excuse that they spoke a different tongue in Demestoa.

How are your talks with the Giash going? Are they still hostile?

They are thinking old and hard, like the pol'iggib in the deeps of the endless ocean—the Mois hardest of all. Their words churn from your discourtesies.

No return visits for us anytime soon, then.

Not soon, but the time is not beyond us. Minds move. Water flows.

Suddenly a shrill note sliced through my head. I winced and bit my tongue. Gods about, I hated that whistle.

Baji?

Gone. The psychic blast had broken the link.

The temptation to ignore Eltria was strong, but if I didn't respond, she'd blow it again and again.

First things first. I finished arranging the crystals on Lozwen's grave before returning to the workshop. By the time I arrived I'd made myself good and mad.

Eltria sat on a stool at a workbench, wearing a thick pair of bronze rubber goggles that wrapped around her head. The bulbous lenses made her look like a Stratharian war moth.

"Tuck? Is that you?" She looked toward the sound of the sliding door.

"No, it's someone else who's attuned to that damned whistle."

"I'm sorry. I've tried . . . other things, but they didn't work the way I'd hoped. Anyway, I need your opinion." She stretched the goggles off her head and handed them to me. "Put these on."

I did, and a dark underwater scene appeared. A few fronds drifted back and forth. Long-necked red fish glided past, flapping large fins like wings. They circled back into view several times, as if the lenses focused on a small area.

"What is this?"

Her stool scraped the stone floor as she got up. "Do you remember when we left M'ra Jolios? When they took that device from me?"

"The shock nodule you smuggled in. Hard to forget something like that."

"I said it was a nodule, but it was a remote sensor."

I pushed the goggles up to my forehead. "What?"

"I had planned on hiding it in the audience chamber before we left. The way things went, I never got the chance. Imagine my delight when they demanded that I hand it over."

"So this—?" I slid the goggles back down. Three red fish flapped back and forth.

"You're looking at M'ra Jolios. Not the room with the Mois—somewhere else. They must have moved the sensor. And it's not doing me any good."

"Doing you any good?" I ripped the goggles off my head and threw them at her. "I liked it better when I thought it *was* a shock nodule! At least wanting to protect us made sense. But spying?"

"I didn't know what we might face," she said calmly, which infuriated me more. "Obviously I made the right decision, considering how we were treated."

"Look, things got rough, but we broke their rules! We'll know next time. And they'll know how to handle us better."

"I want there to be a next time, too. But we need to learn more about the mutants first. That's why I need your help."

"What do you mean?"

"I was hoping you'd ask Baji to move the sensor back to where the Mois is."

She'd finally lost touch with reality. "Great idea! 'Hey, Baji, we tried to spy on you but it didn't work, so can you help us try again?' How do you think that would go?"

"Tuck, you said he didn't approve of what the Mois did to us. Maybe he'd understand. It can't hurt to ask."

"Yes, it can! It could jeopardize what we're building with them!"

"I want us to have an alliance, too, but we need—"

"*What else*, Eltria? What else haven't you told me? There's always something! Let's see: you kept a monster from the chelka swarm. You experimented on the dead. You took a pill to blast people who wanted to help us. You tried to spy on them. What else?"

She stared at me for a minute, biting her lip. Thinking up her next lie, no doubt. I almost didn't want an answer, and I knew she wouldn't give one anyway.

"You, all of you, made me consul. I didn't want the job, but I'm going to do it. I'll do whatever it takes to keep New Iqa safe. I don't have the luxury of worrying about anyone's feelings, mine included. The larger perspective is more important."

Part of me thought she was right. The angry part didn't care.

"That works both ways," I said. "I'll bet the people of M'ra Jolios have a larger perspective, too. Ask them which one is more valid."

I slid open the door to leave, then turned back. "I was going to tell Baji about your sensor so he could get rid of it. But I've changed my mind. I'm not going to tell him at all, because it's embarrassing. And it might sour things. See, you're not the only one who can look at the big picture."

And with that I walked out.

Three days later I found out what else Eltria hadn't told me.

Grayden and I were in the forest just outside town, collecting more steel spider webbing. Good relations with M'ra Jolios didn't help with the threat from Warale or any other villages that wanted us dead. We stayed in the safe zone, close to the outskirts, so we didn't need a ghost belt.

I spotted webs glinting high up in a rilit tree. A few thumps on the trunk with a log got the spider's attention. As it descended on a strand to the ground, Grayden came up behind it and pounded it to scraps with her hammer. I shimmied up the trunk to cut the webbing loose with my knife.

Sparkles overhead caught my eye. Dozens of shining purple specks floated through the sky above the tree, barely bigger than pinpricks. If they hadn't glowed with a tiny, brilliant light, I'd never have seen them.

Did I say dozens? More like hundreds. The more I looked, the more they filled the sky, blown by the breeze, spreading out across the top of the forest.

"Some kind of strangement up here," I shouted. "I'm going higher."

"Keep your blade out," Grayden called up.

I pulled myself from branch to branch until I'd gone as high as I dared. From there I could see clear to M'ra Jolios.

There weren't hundreds of specks—more like thousands. Tiny points of purple light cascaded across the azure sky, drifting over the trees, reaching the dome city and beyond, spreading across the valley. Many sank into the forest, disappearing into the green.

Shouts from New Iqa drew my gaze in that direction. Sure enough, the particles filled the air above the village, too. In fact, they were thicker there. After a moment I realized they were rising up from one area of town, a spot near the stream.

New Iqa was the source.

"Coming down!" I quickly worked my way to the ground, scraping my hands raw on the rough bark.

"Hey, the webs," Grayden complained.

"Forget that. Look up there."

The canopy nearly blotted out the sky, but a small patch of blue showed—enough for her to see the bright specks. Some of them drifted down toward us.

"What are those things?"

"I don't know."

More shouts from town. We hurried back. Everyone milled in the streets, talking and staring up into the sky. Kids dodged this way and that, laughing as they ducked around the gently sinking particles.

Mojander's exclamations from the volk fields rang out above it all. Arms waving, mustache bouncing, he stomped up and down a row and yelled as Eltria studied the plants. Thin streams of glowing purple specks shot upward from the tall stalks, rising in clouds high into the sky before breaking apart and drifting in all directions. Many caught the air currents and blew off. Others sank back down to earth, settling on everything—roofs, the ground, people. They winked out upon landing, like embers.

Mojander called us over. "Tuck! Grayden! Did you bring that orb from M'ra Jolios or the damnable gates of Abaddon? Look at my volk!"

This close, the stalks all whispered a soft whoosh as they shot the purple particles skyward. "Do you know what this is?"

"Of course not!" he huffed. "A few hours ago they all started doing . . . whatever this is!"

Grayden stuck her big hand directly over the top of a stalk, diverting the stream off to an angle. "Kinda tickles."

Eltria pushed her hand away. "Don't. We don't know anything about this. It might be a harmless light show, but until we know for sure . . ."

I closed my eyes and clenched my teeth until a familiar pain stabbed behind my right ear. *Baji. Are you there?*

"How 'bout sending all these folks inside?" asked Grayden.

"Hmmm . . ." Eltria scanned the crowd gathering at the edge of the fields. "Good idea. Send them home. But let's not alarm anyone or cause a panic until I know what's going on."

"Too late, too late!" sputtered Mojander. "I'm damn well alarmed!"

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll figure this out."

Hello, friend Tuck. What are you this day?

I walked farther down the row to get away from the competing voices.

Something odd is happening. The volk that grew after we planted the sla'zul—it's giving off purple specks. Little glowing things. They're blowing all over.

Ah, this. We are witnesses as well. They pass above our city. So they are born of your fields?

Right in front of me. Do you know what they are?

Not to my eyes. The sla'zul has not done such in my knowledge. But always it is being used in water, not land, so I hold my certainties until there is more study. Our lore is deep, and I will dive for truth. Tell this, was the sla'zul dug in time?

We planted it right away the next morning.

Did it weep with wounds on your travel?

No, it was wrapped up in the backpack. We never even took it out.

Most unregular. It stayed in your eyes for all moments before the burying?

If you mean did I take my eyes off it, no, except when I slept. But it was safe during the night, locked up in—

The workshop.

With Eltria.

Tuck, you are saying? Locked up what?

Hold on.

I crossed back to where the Aeon Priest had pulled a stalk from the ground. She and Mojander studied its tangled roots as purple specks rained down around them.

"Eltria, did you do anything to the sla'zul the night we got back?"

She didn't look up from the roots. "Not now, Tuck. I'm busy."

That was answer enough. Of course she'd done something. Why would I have thought otherwise? If I hadn't been so spent from the trip back, I might have said something that night. Done something. Kept the sla'zul in my room.

"I can't believe this." I wanted to rage, but I just felt dumbfounded.

"What is the boy talking about?" asked Mojander.

"Nothing. He doesn't like not knowing everything that goes on."

"That's not it at all!" I snatched the stalk from her hands and shook it in her face. "I don't like you messing things up, thinking you know what's best for everyone all the time!"

Mojander stepped between us. "Calm yourselves! Eltria, this is plain enough to resolve. Does Tuck speak truly?"

"He . . ." I could see the gears turning in her head. "I tested it, that's all. I had to be sure it wasn't a useless hunk of matter—or worse, toxic. We couldn't take the mutants' word for it."

"Playing with things she doesn't understand. Like always!"

Mojander's mustache bunched up as he scowled. "Kindly continue!"

"All I did was slice into it to see what we'd be putting in our crops. I saw nothing suspicious, so I closed it back up. Whatever is happening here—"

"Is probably your fault," I finished. "Baji told us not to mess with it. Maybe you hurt it. Maybe you tainted it."

"Or perhaps this is how it's supposed to work. Nothing I did could have caused this."

"You don't know that," I snapped.

"Madam Consul," Mojander said, fiercely running his fingers through his mess of hair, "if there is a chance that what Tuck says is true, that you are responsible for this—this—*depravity!*—"

I moved down the row to leave their argument behind.

Baji, you still there? Eltria cut it open before we planted it.

This I am not understanding. Why did she wound the sla'zul?

Because she didn't trust you. She cuts into everything. Tries to control everything. It's my fault for not seeing this coming.

Well . . . do not dry yourself out. The priest's malpractice leaves no stain on you. I will dive into our teachings and surface with what truths I can.

Thanks. And sorry. I trust you.

I am knowing this. Whatever this is occurring, together we will bring all things to the best.

I hoped he was right.

Chapter 7

You can see why I'm conflicted about Eltria. Sometimes she did wonderful things. Other times she bungled them massively. But no matter what, she acted for what she felt was the right reason, even if no one else saw it her way. That's admirable.

Earlier, I wondered whether Tuck was a monster or a hero. The same question could be asked about the Aeon Priest. Her cobbled canister poisoned the volk fields, but it also destroyed the chelka swarm. She endangered the fragile peace with the mutants, but she only wanted to safeguard her people. If she hadn't meddled with the sla'zul, well, I wouldn't be telling you this story. And when it comes right down to it, she's not the one who wiped a piece of the Ninth World off the map. Her crimes are more up close and personal. I wonder if that makes them better or worse.

A few hours later the volk stopped spurting out particles, but by that time the specks had filled the air, floating, drifting, like bits of dust revealed in a beam of sunlight. You could hardly tell it was early evening—the glowing specks lit the night with a purple radiance.

Eltria sent me out to catch some in jars, like a kid collecting glitter ticks, so she'd have plenty of samples to study. I told her off, which made me feel better, but the best thing I could do was help her figure this out.

At least the volk had grown tall and strong. Mojander had given them extra nutrient sprays, just in case, and monitored their watering carefully—minus the kids, of course. Some of the stalks had even started singing, so it looked like we'd be able to harvest them before winter. There was still some debate over whether we should use their grain or not.

A particularly big particle tumbled slowly through the air ahead of me. I moved to catch it but stopped before closing the jar lid. The thing looked different than the rest—it didn't glow, and it wasn't purple but white, the purest white I'd ever seen. As I watched, it grew bigger, swelling to the size of a bean.

Eltria had to see this. I trapped it in my jar, already half full of purple specks, and hooked the container in my belt loop.

Suddenly, from down the street and around the way, a woman yelled with pain, followed quickly by a man's shouts. The voices came from an area where many cottages had burned in the chelka swarm attack.

I ran toward the sound as more calls and cries filled the air.

Turning the corner, I saw three things: Grayden on the ground, flat on her back, her face tightened with pain; Palene kneeling at her side, frantically doing something to her arm; and a large, amorphous blob floating in the air nearby at waist height. It was about the size of my head and as pearly white as the big speck I captured.

Other people dashed to and from the scene, shouting:

"She's dead, she's dead!"

"Get Eltria!"

"It's another attack!"

I ran toward Palene and stopped cold at the sight. Grayden's right arm had been severed at the elbow. She squirmed and thrashed in a red smear as Palene wove a charm to stanch the bleeding, his fingers glowing as they moved over the wound.

"Tuck! Don't touch that white thing! Help me move her!" He held her arm gingerly while I dragged her ten or twenty paces down the road by her boots.

A bloody trail led from Grayden back to the smear. It was all I could do not to be sick. "What happened?"

"We were just talking, and that—that white thing appeared out of nowhere, and it got bigger, and she touched it," Palene chattered. "It took her arm. Absorbed it, ate it, I don't know! I had to pull her back out."

The blob hung in the air, surrounded by purple specks. I wouldn't have touched it with my bare hand, but I'm not Grayden.

The white shape slowly expanded in all directions, growing bigger, gaining mass.

No, that's wrong. It didn't gain mass. The shape didn't seem to have any mass at all. Looking at it was like looking at nothing, an empty space in the air. The blob was not so much a thing of clean, pure white as it was an absence—an absence of color, of weight, of being.

Yet even in the few seconds that I studied it, the blob gained a few inches on all sides. It was now at least twice as big as it had been when I'd arrived.

As Palene cauterized Grayden's elbow I grabbed a stick from the ground, moved closer to the blob, and poked it. No resistance. The stick pushed into the space and vanished inside the whiteness. When I pulled it out, only half the stick remained.

Then I remembered the jar. Hurriedly, I tore it from my belt just as the white bean I'd captured swelled big enough to fill the container. The spreading blob engulfed the jar as I hurled it to the ground. No shattering glass. The whole thing simply disappeared within the expanding white shape. The blob kept increasing in size, growing downward into the street as well.

That was too close.

Another white blob blossomed into existence a few handspans away from the first. It looked like a spherical hole opening in the air. Both shapes grew outward toward each other until they touched and merged, forming what looked like a figure eight. That lasted for a few seconds as the blobs continued to grow and melt together, their boundaries disappearing until they had combined into one enormous white nothing.

I ran back to Palene and helped him lift Grayden to her feet. Her wound had been sealed and she hung groggily between us, one arm slung over Palene's shoulder, the stump around mine. "We need to get her inside," I said. "We need to get *everyone* inside."

A strange doubt inside me said I was wrong, that everything would turn out fine. I heard it so clearly that for a moment I thought Baji was talking to me. But there was no voice—just a feeling pushing me toward calm. No need to overreact, it said. This was all perfectly natural.

Then, right in front of us, a bright purple speck soundlessly puffed up and transformed into a tiny white shape no bigger than a pebble.

"Look out!" Palene steered us around it. The small glob spun gently off to the side, doubling in size after a few rotations. "Did you see that? One of the purple things—"

"That's where this is coming from."

"But they're everywhere!"

Yes. And so were the white blobs. That calm feeling I had was wrong. This was not natural, things were not fine. Snowy lumps of all sizes bloated in the air around us. Thankfully most of them bloomed far above the town, but there were enough down here—more than enough. If each one grew until it merged with others and kept growing . . .

Pain flared behind my right ear.

Friend Tuck! Are you in your mind?

Baji! I'm here!

I have pulled wisdom from our lore. It calls the sky lights "cobalt mites." The creatures were known in the time of Ny'kul, in the before worlds.

Creatures? You mean the purple specks are alive?

In a way of speaking.

Baji, they're changing into white things.

Already? In their old coming, the mites ripened over years. This haste is new.

They're everywhere, destroying whatever they touch!

Hold to your moment. Stay far from the leeches—the white things. I will consult.

As we turned the corner to the street where Grayden lived, we were forced to dodge several white blobs that appeared in front of us. Up ahead a large one had eaten through part of a tree trunk, and the upper half of the tree sagged dangerously. The white shape expanded a bit more and the tree crashed down onto a nearby cottage, smashing the roof in.

"Uhhhh . . ." moaned Grayden, fighting as we dragged her. "I can walk. Lemme walk!"

We stepped out from under her arms and steadied the smith. Palene checked her wound and tested her vision. "I dulled the pain. Does it still hurt?"

With her remaining hand, Grayden shoved him, weakly. "Take more'n this to kill me."

"Grayden, if you can walk, you and Palene get inside. Get down in a cellar. Find anyone you can and bring them with you, or tell them what to do."

"Tuck, where are you going?" Palene asked.

"To find Eltria, or something in the workshop that can help."

I had no idea what that might be.

Picking my way through the streets toward the shop, it felt like the swarm attack all over again. How many people would die this time? I shouted to everyone I saw, warning them away from the blobs. Splintered cracks and crashes in the distance told me that trees in the forest were falling, too. The cobalt mites had drifted all over the valley. Were they growing in the other villages? Could they eat through the dome of M'ra Jolios?

As I crossed the field toward the workshop, I met Eltria and her walking stick coming out.

"Tuck! What in Abaddon is going on?"

"Back inside, quick!" I pushed her to the door and dragged her back in. Talking fast, I brought her up to speed on the mites, the blobs, Grayden—everything. She rummaged through devices and components while I concentrated until I nearly popped a blood vessel.

Baji! Are you there?

"You saw these things eat into the ground and a tree," Eltria said. "How do you know people will be safe indoors?"

"We've got to do something, and it's better than being outside."

I tried again. *Baji! Where are you?*

Tuck, I am present. Apologies while I consulted. The mites have turned too quickly. Shulshul's leeches ripen outside our city as well. This is calamitous of the extreme.

What do we do?

A thousand deaths upon me for gifting you the sla'zul. I gave only to help.

You didn't know. Eltria shouldn't have messed with it!

The truth is no help against this.

Can you stop them?

. . . It may be. First it is needed to see your leeches with my eyes. I will go to you.

No! That would take too long, and those things are all over the valley!

There is no walking. Our magic stretches me to you in the flick of a fin.

What? Why didn't you do that before?

Before was not possible. I am to be explaining, but first I come.

I turned to Eltria. "I've got Baji. He wants to come here. Says he has magic to travel to us."

"Magic!" she scoffed. "Perhaps if his kind didn't demean the numenera, we wouldn't be in this mess. Well, fine. Bring him!"

All right, Baji, how does it work?

Is your space deep enough to have me?

We're in the workshop, there's lots of room.

Then look for my coming.

The biggest open area in the workshop was the space near the stairs. We pushed several tables away to clear even more room. Moments later, the air above the stone floor there shimmered like a flag rippling in the wind. The sweet smell of cackberries filled the shop, and a vertical slit in the air opened like a zipper. Through it stepped Baji, wearing a waterskin like the ones used by the guards outside M'ra Jolios. It fit his form perfectly, rising up and

over the tall curved fin on his head. His golden skin looked brighter than it had in the chamber of the Mois, its lines more pronounced. A green bracelet encircled one wrist and a small satchel hung from a strap that ran from his shoulder to his waist.

The slit zipped shut behind him as his solid black eyes settled on me. *Friend Tuck, I am good to see you.* His face showed no happiness.

Baji looked strange, out of place, standing on the floor of the cluttered workshop, encased in a thin skin of water. A few laaks skittered out of the corners, crept close to him, and hissed.

Eltria bowed. "Welcome, Baji. Will any others be joining us?"

"No," he said aloud. The waterskin muffled his voice, which sounded different in the air—more guttural, like something bubbled in his throat. "Just I. To come is greatly forbidden. But the punishments of the Giash are already marked for me. Another breach little matters."

"Wonderful." Eltria pulled a flaxen rope from the pocket of her robe and slapped it against her right wrist. In the blink of an eye it coiled tightly around her forearm, and the free end of the rope reared up, and I saw that it wasn't a rope at all, but some kind of worm with a crystal in its head.

She pointed at Baji with her right index finger. The crystal flashed, and a dark brown cloud formed around him, lifting him off the ground.

"What is this?" His feet pedaled the air and he pushed against the cloud all around him. "What is this?"

"What are you doing?" I lunged for Eltria's arm, but she pointed the worm at me, and I backed up to put a wide worktable between us.

"Tuck, don't interfere. I don't believe for a minute they had no idea this would happen to the volk. Maybe Baji knew; maybe not. But his masters did. They did this on purpose."

Baji threw himself against the cloud, again and again. "You are bigger a fool than my imaginings! We gifted you the sla'zul for friendship!"

Eltria backed up, keeping us both in range. The worm looked back and forth between us, though it had no eyes. "Baji, I don't want to hurt you. New Iqa has been attacked before. I'll do what I must to protect us. You would do the same if your people were endangered."

"They *are*," he growled, deep and low. "The leeches unmake all things in the valley: yours, ours, everywhere."

"Eltria, you talk all the time about protecting everyone, about hard decisions," I shouted. "But you keep making the wrong ones!"

"In your eyes, perhaps," she said. "I look at things differently."

My head started to throb with a dull pain.

"Tuck," Baji croaked. "Tuck, I cannot think to you."

"Not while you're in there," she said. "Let's keep things out in the open. No more secrets. This is my fault. If you two hadn't been able to communicate in the first place, we wouldn't be in this situation."

"It's your fault, all right," I said. "The fields, the mites, everything! Me talking with Baji is the only thing that helped us!"

"Tuck, you weren't supposed to talk to Baji. You were supposed to talk to *me*. I don't know why it—"

"Shut up! I'm sick of excuses. All you care about is what *you* want!"

"You don't understand. I . . ." Eltria shook her head. "It doesn't matter. I'm sorry, but Baji stays here until he convinces his masters to call it off."

"Put me free," Baji said, "and I am returning to M'ra Jolios, where help may come."

"You see?" With her free hand, she waved at the cloud dismissively. "Now that he knows we're onto him, he wants to run. Baji, admit it: you knew what would happen with the sla'zul."

His laughter sounded like wet skin rubbing together. "Did I know you enjoy the sense of an achoon? No, I did not. You doom this place. Perhaps all places. You do the work of Shulshul. I give my hardest congratulations, destroyer."

"Baji," I asked. "Can you really help stop those things?"

His black eyes fixed on me through the dark brown mist. An eternity seemed to pass before he answered. "I am believing it so."

Eltria stepped closer to the cloud, lifting the worm toward her prisoner. "Then do it!"

This was too much. Part of me just wanted to run, to leave New Iqa behind. I felt that seed of doubt again, rising up inside, telling me to go far away, leave the valley, forget this mess. This was too big for me to handle, it said. Maybe letting the leeches bloom was the best thing. How could we fight them, anyway? I should save myself while there was still time.

No. Wherever this doubt came from, I pushed it down. I didn't know how to fight the leeches, but Baji did. That was good enough.

I inched my way down the table that separated me from Eltria. Baji noticed.

"Tell this, destroyer," he croaked, drawing her attention. "How feels your heart at what you have brought to the world? You and the leeches, consuming all you touch."

"Don't turn this around on me," she said.

Did the table hold anything I could use? Nothing looked familiar except for an oversized orange glove—the same one that Astis had taken from the three-armed creature her brother had found. I tried to imagine any way Eltria could have come to possess it that didn't involve her peeling it from the dead girl's arm.

Baji pressed up against the edge of the cloud and locked gazes with Eltria. "The Ghibra Ny'kul were long the first in this valley, and before that the endless water. Very older than you. Our stories flow back to ages. The ripening of the cobalt mites reaches back to Ny'kul and Shulshul. Are you as gods? Are you to be stopping the leeches?"

"Perhaps we could, with the right numenera." The crystal atop the worm's head started to glow. "We'll find a way. We'll cleanse New Iqa, and the valley itself, if we must. This is our home."

Baji laughed again. "And will you be finding each of all? The mites are much clever. Some ripen to leeches at the first chance. Others sink, they hide in things, they wait. If any are missed, your work is nothing."

"Then help us!" she yelled.

Baji's eyes flicked toward me as I pulled the glove off the table and slid it over my right hand. Eltria whirled around and pointed at me. The worm's crystal flashed and I jumped back as the whole table rose off the ground, trapped in another dark brown cloud.

How had Astis done it? I made my gloved hand into a fist, and a giant, scaly hand of orange energy grew around it. Eight lizard fingers flexed as my own.

"Interesting," Eltria muttered. She raised her worm-arm toward me again, then lowered it as she gaped over my shoulder. "Gods about!"

I formed the orange hand in front of me like a shield and risked a glance behind. The edge of a giant white blob—a leech—had pushed through the front of the workshop. It hung half in the wall, half in the door, silently displacing whatever it touched. Half the height of the ceiling, it crept upward and outward, filling the space with white nothing.

Too late. We were too late.

Baji opened his mouth at the size of the thing. Inside his waterskin, his gills blew large streams of bubbles as his face tightened. "So be it."

He pressed something on his bracelet and stepped easily through the brown cloud, his waterskin rippling as his feet hit the floor.

Eltria tore her gaze from the leech long enough to point the worm at Baji. "How did you—don't move!"

In the seconds she took to make her threat, Baji darted like an eel, snatching a small glass shape from a table and smashing it to the ground at her feet. Thick blue smoke exploded around her in a billowing cloud.

Coughing, Eltria stumbled out of the haze. She'd turned completely blue, the deep, bright color of the water of M'ra Jolios. She had also become hazy, like fog. Her clothes, the worm—everything. Through her translucent form I could see the wooden wall behind her.

The priest lunged at Baji to grab his arm and stumbled right through him, awkwardly, as silent as a shadow. Her face turned even more sour and she reached for a jar of dark plum gel from the workbench behind her, but her hand passed right through that, too.

"Baji, what did you do to her?"

Her watched her stumble about. "I saw a piece of magic on the table and gifted her a blessing for what is to come. The most I could do. Perhaps this will keep her. Perhaps not."

Eltria looked down at her phantom body, her arms, her hands passing through everything, even herself. Only the floor still seemed to register her presence. She padded up to me, and though her mouth moved, she made no sounds that I could hear. The worm wrapped around her forearm hung limp.

Reaching into his satchel, Baji pulled out a knot of metal tubes—the snowflake sensor that Eltria had left in M'ra Jolios. He tossed it at her, and it sailed through her shape, clattering to the floor. "I return your trick. But I also am thanking you, for it allowed my magic to stretch here."

The workshop walls groaned as the leech invaded farther, swallowing the front wall and reaching the ceiling. Baji and I moved to the far wall, where the strongglass window looked out over an empty lot.

Eltria, still talking—yelling, really—clutched helplessly at me. The fire in her eyes had turned to fear, and I surprised myself by feeling sorry for her. I had no idea how to reverse the effects. Sometimes things like this lasted for a few minutes. Sometimes they were

permanent. I thought of how she never wanted to wear a ghost belt when we navigated the forest.

"I'm sorry," I mouthed. She was shouting at me. Maybe she'd be safe from the leeches this way. Baji might have saved her life.

Tuck. The time is upon us.

Baji, you could have escaped from that cloud any time you wanted.

I wished first to learn the priest's true heart, but the leech forced action. Now I snap back to my home. Only there can I help.

I swung open the window and leaned out. A handful of mites floated through the air, but the lot looked clear of leeches. For now.

Okay. Do what you can in M'ra Jolios. Contact me when you figure something out. I'll keep everyone here safe as long as I can.

No. He grabbed my wrist. The waterskin around his flipper felt soft and cool, but his grip was like steel.

Apologies for my final lie. I did not come here for the leeches. I came for you.

His other flipper reached inside his satchel for a second, and then I was pulled in a direction I didn't know existed.

Chapter 8

I admit, I worried a bit during that standoff in the workshop. I didn't know who to root for. Baji was sharper than I expected. It's funny—he'd been in Tuck's head, too. But only in the shallows, not the deeps, which is probably why he struggled with the language. He had to pick it up the hard way instead of absorbing it all at once like I did.

When I saw how he handled the priest, I thought: now here's someone I can get to like. I didn't know then the pits of his depravity. I just knew that wherever he took Tuck, I was going, too. We'd walk the rest of this path together.

I lengthened through another place, outside of things, as weightless as a thought. The valley spread out below me like Lozwen's map. New Iqa, the trees of the forest around us, spotted with white holes.

I rose higher, seeing more—other villages, the dense woods, M'ra Jolios, the edges of the valley, all breaking out in white blemishes. The map became smaller still, showing the blobs pushing against the feet of the mountains that ringed the valley. I glimpsed the beginnings of the world beyond. Then the land became too small to see and the map swirled like water down a drain. My body grew heavy.

Suddenly I was underwater, suspended in the cold blue ocean, no solid ground beneath my thrashing feet. I gasped in a mouthful of brine. My chest churned with heat, and dark yellow vomit plumed out of my mouth. I gagged and choked. Was I drowning? Dreaming?

Baji swam into view, pulling a small gray bag of skin from his satchel—a tultur. With both flippers he rammed it into my throat, knocking me back. The tultur shrieked as a spike broke through my skin and slid inside, and then it began inflating and deflating rapidly. I took a small breath, coughed, and panted.

Calm yourself, Baji said, his black eyes fixed on mine. *We are snapped to M'ra Jolios.*

My breaths slowed to normal. My body ached like I'd been trampled by dossi.

We floated in what looked like the middle of the city, surrounded by tall organic structures. The water was startlingly clear and bright, almost like looking through air. High above, through the crest of the dome, I saw the night sky, twinkling with purple mites and full of puffy clouds.

No, not clouds. Leeches.

Three maroon humanoids lined with fins swam by, followed by a leaf-green balloon creature that whipped along with the aid of elongated tendrils. One of the humanoids turned its large white eyes toward me, bubbles pulsing from gills in its cheeks. Its companions slowed and looked back at me, aghast.

Baji, the Giash said they'd kill me if I came back here!

Follow quick, before we are being discovered.

He threw off his satchel, then kicked and shot upward through the water. I swam after him the best I could, thrusting my arms out and sweeping them back while kicking furiously, but he left me behind in seconds, heading toward the top of one of the massive obelisks that surrounded us. The tower narrowed as it climbed toward the crest of the dome. Rising so quickly made my head buzz, my body ache.

A dark cloud swam across my path and I plunged into the middle of it before I could turn aside. A frenzy of small black creatures that looked like brains crashed madly against and around me. Wherever they touched my skin, it burned. I swatted them away, protecting my face.

After they passed I noticed that I'd drawn the attention of two stocky humanoids covered head to toe in reflective shell plates, like the creature we'd seen on our first trip to M'ra Jolios. Only their beaked faces were unarmored. One of them gestured at me, moving through a series of hand signs. The other dove toward the bottom of the city.

Baji, what is it saying?

From above, he turned to wave me on. *Follow quick and it will not be a matter.*

I kicked upward, but the shell-plated mutant grabbed my ankle and yanked me down. Instead of resisting I gave in to the pull and smashed the creature hard in its face with my other heel. It let go of me to clutch its beak as dark fluid leaked out.

I rushed upward without looking back, ignoring the rattling pain in my head and body. After a minute I caught up with Baji at the highest point of the stone obelisk that enclosed the city. The top of the dome rose above us, only a few lengths away. It looked like I could swim up to it and stick my head through into the air on the other side, just as easily as we'd walked inside from the ground.

The giant leeches spreading through the night sky told me I didn't want to do that. What would happen when they grew into the water? Into the obelisks that held M'ra Jolios?

Here, some close place to here. Baji ran his flippers along the smooth underside of the obelisk, searching. Even at its narrowest point, the pillar was as wide as three of me laid end to end. Suspended so high above the rest of the city, looking down reminded me of perching in the tops of giant rilit trees, one misstep from death.

Baji, what are you doing?

The mites have ripened into leeches. Everywhere they are growing, unmaking. What they touch is gone—only the leech remains. We must act while there is still more valley than leech.

You said you could stop them. How do we do it?

His flippers prodded one small spot on the obelisks' surface. *My words to your priest carried truth. The leeches can be stopped. But the cobalt mites are millions. To abort them all, there is one way only.*

A hidden circle sank in slightly and a larger square section of the stone became transparent, like a window into the obelisk. Inside was a compartment with enough room for one person to stand. A triangular screen protruded from the wall.

The pylons spin a web to hold M'ra Jolios. If one pylon falls, the web falls. The city falls. There is nothing else. The valley must be scrubbed to rid the mites.

You mean—are you going to shut down the obelisks? Nothing will keep the water together. The city will fall apart! You can't do that!

How do I not? Weigh M'ra Jolios against the valley, against the world. When we snapped back to here, did your mind see the leeches?

Yes. All over the valley, even out by the mountains.

Truth is truth. The leeches grow while there is existence to absorb. Creatures, objects, land, air—all are swallowed. You shared the creation of your people coming from elsewhere. Imagine that elsewhere gone. Imagine all elsewheres gone.

But there must be some other way. What about your relics—your magic?

I consulted in all possibilities. The Giash commanded to do nothing. They teach that Nykul will cradle his eye against this threat, keep us safe. They teach wrong. But even if they teach truly, where is the good in standing alone in a sea of white? Better few to perish than many. Better many than all.

Baji felt around the edge of the transparent panel and peeled it back from one corner like a sheet of synth. The water rushed into the compartment, carrying him inside.

So this was his plan. Shut down the obelisks, let M'ra Jolios collapse.

I don't understand. Won't the leeches eat the water like everything else?

Too much. It will burst them like bubbles in a storm. Or so I pray it.

But they've spread too far! The water from the city will flood the clearing, maybe reach the tree line. It won't be enough.

His flippers danced across the screen, which lit up blue and gold. Symbols appeared. They looked like the runes carved into the obelisks.

A deep, dissonant sound began to echo through the water. I felt it rumble through my body as much as I heard it. The harsh noise resounded on, off, on, off, like a warning.

Tuck, you have seen me call M'ra Jolios the eye of Ny'kul—a drop of the endless ocean. I told you this was truth, not story.

What do you mean?

I am meaning we sit over a gate to the endless ocean. All the water of the world flows up through M'ra Jolios, but for the pylons. Their web is a skin that holds it down. When the web falls, the ocean will surge like the fount of Ny'kul, and all will fall. My city. The forest. The settlements. The valley. But also the mites and leeches, for what can stand against gods? Even the mites that hide in things will be cleansed away. Apologies for bringing you here, but your help is needed.

Impossible. Wasn't it? I didn't know anything about the ocean. Just what I'd heard in stories. Maybe I'd been there, in my life before the tank. If there really was a gate linking it to M'ra Jolios . . . it did explain a water city in the middle of a valley that had nothing but streams. On our first journey here, Eltria had said the city was like a bowl. She'd wondered who had filled it.

And Baji was prepared to destroy it. Why would he do that if there wouldn't be enough water? Why would he do that for nothing?

Because he's gone mad, said the voice of doubt inside me. This was wrong, it couldn't work, it wasn't true. The leeches weren't going to hurt anyone. Could I really place my life in the hands of an insane mutant? I had to stop Baji before it was too late. We could find another way. Better still, we could flee the valley. We could—

No. It was true. I felt it, no matter what my doubts urged.

Baji wasn't just destroying M'ra Jolios. He was endangering everyone in it. Everyone in the valley. When the stream broke loose in New Iqa, the rushing water had nearly swept me and Cilo away. Now the ocean was about to break loose right under us.

Baji, can't we evacuate the city? Or at least New Iqa? There must be something we can do.

We are doing it. No time for else.

I imagined the ocean erupting under my feet and realized that I was going to die. If Baji had left me in New Iqa, though, I would have died anyway. He said he couldn't do this without me, so there would have been no flood. The mites would have kept ripening into leeches, and the leeches would have kept eating everything. They wouldn't stop at the edges of the valley. All elsewheres, he had said. Everything would be gone.

Was I ready to die? What did that matter? Lozwen had put other people first her whole life, leading her people to a new land, trying to make peace with the other villages, pulling me from the tank—she gave me new life. Maybe this was why.

The warning continued to reverberate through the water. Down below, from the base of a twisted plant structure, multiple shapes swam toward us.

Baji—they're coming!

Yes. You are needed to hold them while I puzzle the marks of the ancients. He tapped more symbols on the screen.

The swimmers drew closer: four humanoids with speckled green and blue skin, their faces hidden behind devil masks made of shell. The mutants held their arms flat against their sides as their bodies rippled through the water. Each one carried a long, thin coral blade.

The tular pinned to my throat puffed harder and faster as I panted. What could I do? How could I hold them off? I clenched my fists—and a giant, scaly fist of orange energy materialized around my right hand.

I'd forgotten that I was still wearing the glove!

I opened the eight-fingered hand and swung it wildly back and forth. The energy hand sailed through the water easily, churning up a disturbance, driving a wave of pressure toward the oncoming guards. They slowed and bobbed some distance away, looking to each other in silent consultation, then split into two groups. One pair swam above the hand. The other dove below it.

I grabbed the top pair, the hand's lizardlike fingers just long enough to close around both guards together, and slammed them down into the bottom two, who split apart and tumbled backward.

A slicing pain across my palm forced me to let go. One of the guards in my grip had found enough space to rake its coral knife along the orange skin. I felt hot blood, real blood, running from my palm within the glove. That scared me. And enraged me.

I grabbed the closest guard and swung it in mighty arcs back and forth, scattering the other three. The trapped mutant stabbed the orange fingers over and over. Blood ran out the bottom of the glove, down my wrist, turning the water reddish-brown.

I swung the guard around and smashed it into the underside of the obelisk, below the compartment where Baji worked. The body crumpled against the stone, limp in my giant fingers, and I whirled the fist around again for a second pounding into the tower. I let go and the guard sank slowly downward. Its shell face had broken to bits. It wasn't a mask.

Tuck, behind you!

Turning at Baji's warning, already forming a punch, I smashed the giant fist into an oncoming guard at point-blank range, shattering its face. The mutant flew backward into the middle of the dome, crashing into the upper strands of an organic structure.

The other two guards swam far apart from each other and came at me from opposite sides. I tried to swat at both of them, but they dodged and weaved like eels. The water was their domain.

That gave me an idea. I fainted toward one guard and as it ducked, I spun and grabbed the other. As it sliced my fingers, I wound up and hurled it through the top of the dome. It broke through the crest and sailed into the night sky, flailing in a small arc before it fell and vanished from sight.

I opened my bloody palm like a shield to block the attack of the last guard. Stretched out in full, the hand was almost as tall as me. Eight fingers closed over the mutant, pinning its arms to its body, and I threw it out of the dome as well. It flew into an expanding pocket of white and disappeared.

Gods about. I panted and shook. I'd never killed anyone before. Even if the other guards recovered, even if the first one thrown out survived and made it back into the city, the last one had been—eaten. Like Grayden's arm.

I took a deep breath to settle myself. That guard's fate awaited everyone, everywhere, if we didn't see this through. I had to be strong.

Besides, in the face of what we were about to do, one death meant nothing. Not even mine.

Suddenly the orange glove was ripped from me and two strong, slimy hands reached around my neck from behind. Slimy legs wrapped around my torso as thick fingers squeezed my throat. The tular shook and squealed as the attacker choked my life away. I tried to twist around, punch, pull, but all I could do was claw like a child. Two more oozy hands grabbed the sides of my head and started to twist it around.

Then all four hands loosened, releasing me. The legs unwound. I gasped for breath and pushed away as the bag at my throat calmed.

Baji had a four-armed humanoid in a headlock. This one was different from the others—golden skinned, like him, but eyestalks jutted from the sides of its head, and wicked spines lined its arms. The two thrashed for a few seconds until Baji jerked its head sideways with a crack. The creature went limp and drifted downward.

It is woeful, these deaths. They do what they hold is right. But our right is bigger.

I felt tired, weak. My hand ran with blood and my head ached from the resounding drone—on, off, on, off. The waters nearby buzzed with activity. Things that looked human and things that did not glided to and fro in the distance, waving their arms and fins and tentacles, pointing in our direction.

A school of guards swam up from below. Among them was a dark, squiggling mass—the Moir. If it had been the whole structure where we met the Giash before, how could it now be a thing pulsing through the water toward us?

I understood so little of the world. I wished I could have learned more.

We must now hurry. It is prepared. One symbol remains, and the pylon falls.

Baji grabbed my arm and pulled me up to the open wall of the compartment. Inside, the screen showed a row of small symbols on top of a larger glyph that blinked in the center of the display.

He put his flipper on my shoulder. *My saddest apologies for your people.*

I understand. I'm ready. Get inside. I'll hold them off as long as I can.

His tiny black eyes narrowed to points.

Tuck. You mistake me. I did not bring you here to die. I brought you here to live.

With incredible strength, he grabbed my shoulders and threw me into the flooded compartment.

Baji, what are you doing?

He flattened the clear synth panel shut. Nowhere to grab it from my side. I was sealed in. The low warning sound echoed even more loudly inside the small space.

Baji! I don't know how to do this!

The symbol that blinks—the one that inspires a leaf in your mind. Press it three times. Then do nothing. Later, press the one that inspires a hand. Two heights of the pylons should be enough. Press then. Several times, perhaps.

You can't fight all those guards by yourself. The Mois is coming! They'll kill you!

He smiled at me through the panel. *I will die this way or that. What does one life matter, held against the world? Mine I gladly spend. Yours I do not. Nykul swim with you.*

Then he turned and kicked hard toward the pack of mutants closing in on us. The smaller humanoids in the front, scarlet and ocher, carried tiny objects that looked like plants made of blades, or maybe the other way around. The ink-dark leader behind them, the Mois, resembled two giant spiders merged into one shapeless mass, a dozen tentacles snaking from its head. Each tentacle ended in a humanoid hand, and half of them cut the water with small knives.

Five or six guards split around Baji and kicked up toward me.

I ran my hands over the triangular screen. The big blinking symbol did look like a leaf. I pressed it once.

The clear synth panel shimmered with light a few seconds before the guards reached it. They pounded on it, pulled at it, stabbed it with their blades. It held firm, like steel.

As I moved to press the symbol again, my hand paused, like it didn't want to continue. Was this really the right thing to do? The doubt within me rose again, fighting for control. Don't do this, it said. It's not too late. You're safe in here. You don't need to destroy the leeches. Just wait it out.

I shook it off—no turning back now. I touched the leaf again. This time I felt a slight electric jolt from the square.

Behind the mutants at the panel I caught a glimpse of Baji, held fast by several guards, facing a flurry of black tentacles. Above the sucking funnel mouth of the Mois, an angry yellow eye opened.

I pressed the symbol a third time. Another jolt, stronger.

The deep warning thrum stopped. The guards noticed it too. They looked around, confused.

The vibrations of the obelisk faded. I heard the weakening whine of massive machinery losing strength. The stone walls around me turned transparent. Behind, the forest stretched out across the valley, riddled with giant white blobs. Above, purple mites and white leeches filled the night sky. Inside M'ra Jolios, everyone, everything seemed to stop moving.

Friend Tuck. You—

Thunder obliterated the rest of his words. Not just a crack and rumble, but a bone-rattling roar, an explosion of white noise, the eruption of gods.

Far below, in the center of the dome city, the ground fell away, and M'ra Jolios shot up into the sky. The tiny swimming shapes went immediately. Within seconds the mammoth plant structures ripped loose from their roots, now just weeds hurled skyward. A column of blue-white water filled the spot where the city had stood and streaked upward, pummeling the ring of obelisks. I expected them to break apart, expected my tower to crumble in the torrent and fling me to my death, but it didn't topple, didn't even shake.

The water gushing up from the ground rose and fell back down to earth, crashing over the endless geyser that pumped new water in from the ocean. It churned and foamed and rolled out into the valley in all directions, knocking down trees like twigs, flattening the forest beneath the rushing wall, washing away the smaller leeches. The bigger ones ate some of the deluge, but they couldn't withstand the flood and tore to pieces.

I stared in what I hoped was the direction of New Iqa. Grayden. Palene. Mojander. Eltria. Everyone. *I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.*

How many people had been swallowed by the leeches? How many villages would be washed away, drowned, razed by the wave of broken trees? Not just New Iqa, but Demestoa, Warale, Quarenchan, all the rest. All the people in the valley.

I knew a larger world lay beyond the ring of mountains. I'd never been there—not that I could remember—but I'd seen it for a few precious seconds, and I tried to imagine the rest of it.

Better few than many, Baji had said. Better many than all.

Alone in the flooded compartment, I cried, the tears warming the water around my eyes.

The ocean poured in for hours until the thunder settled to a muffled roar. The fountain now shot into the sky only about as high as the obelisks before washing out into the valley.

The water brought weeds and plants and rocks and debris. Eventually other things came through the gate as well. Fish—so many fish. Sometimes a cluster of thousands of tiny arrow shapes, sometimes a single scaled beast bigger than me.

I saw a tentacled creature that looked a bit like the Moai, except two skeletal torsos grew out of the same lower mass. Each head was encased in a spherical helmet studded with tubes.

I saw a long striped serpent with pairs of twitching antennae running the length of its body. It slithered around the base of the obelisks, then opened its jaws and spat out another snake, identical to itself, which glided off while the first crumbled to muddy sludge.

I saw a spindly metallic creature—or maybe it was a vessel—creep along the bottom on jeweled treads, holding fast against the rushing flow. Every few minutes a hose or tendril uncoiled from its top and squirted a slick of pink fluid into the water. These colored patches took on lives of their own and oozed away.

I saw creatures that looked like lumps of copper fire. They writhed in slow arcs, turning the water around them to teal jelly, leaving thick trails in their wake. The patterns seemed to form symbols.

I saw a mouth. That's the only way I can describe it. When it opened, I could see through it to another place. Something there looked back at me, horrified.

Then I saw stranger things.

The obelisks were halfway underwater.

Sometime later I realized that the tulum at my throat still inflated with each breath. I'd forgotten it was there. How long had I been breathing water? Would the bag stop working? It must have been feeding me nutrients as well—I hadn't been hungry or thirsty since the flood started.

Hard to tell exactly how much time had passed. My fingertips had wrinkled like cloth. Stubble scratched my face. The cuts on my hand had scabbed over and I'd slept a few times, floating, enclosed. I dreamed of the tank. Always the tank.

The obelisks were fully submerged now. On the lighted display screen, the leaf symbol held steady.

My nagging voice of doubt returned, telling me to end this. The waters were high enough, it said. Surely the flood had done its job. Find the button with the hand symbol. Push it. End this while there were still lives that could be saved.

No. Baji had said two heights of the obelisks.

A luminescent crimson creature with a long, bony snout swam up to my compartment and circled it. Idly beating its two flippers, swishing its muscular tail from side to side, it stared at me. Strapped to the back of its glowing body was what looked like a foam saddle. Oh, my ride's here, I thought. Guess I'll be leaving now. Then I laughed myself into fits.

Down at the bottom a great churning turbulence marked the area where the water poured in. No more fountain.

Where was the other end of the gate? Baji had said it reached into the ocean, but where? Did anyone on that end notice the water draining out? I was creating a second ocean, here in the valley.

Eltria would have been impressed. Did her ghostly form survive when the flood hit New Iqa? I'd like to think so.

I couldn't be sure, but the water seemed to be about twice as tall as the obelisks. Just to be safe, I waited a few more hours. Or days. It was hard to say.

I thought of M'ra Jolios, washed away in an instant by the furious torrent. I watched its buildings shredded, its people scattered. Most of them had probably been crushed by the flow or battered by debris. But could some of them have survived? They were water dwellers, after all. Were they swept to the edges of the valley? Would they return, seeking their home? Seeking vengeance?

Eventually I decided enough was enough. I studied the display screen, scanning the symbols until I found one that resembled a hand. Not a human hand by any means, but recognizable. My finger hesitated over it.

What if I pressed it and the gate opened wider?

What if I pressed it and my obelisk exploded?

Worst of all, what if I pressed it and nothing happened?

I closed my eyes and tapped the symbol. An electrical jolt ran through me, the same kind I felt before.

Hurriedly I pressed it again—another jolt. Then a low hum, the sound of machinery waking up.

The metal walls and floor of the compartment reverberated as the obelisk shuddered to life. After a few moments it settled into a smooth vibration. The walls became solid again—I could no longer see through them. But I could still see through the clear synth panel.

Down on the ocean floor below, the water stopped churning. Did that mean it was no longer coming in? Were the obelisks holding back the flow? Had the dome been recreated?

I had no idea. It's hard to see a city of water at the bottom of the ocean.

Later I confirmed it: the flood was receding. The water level in the valley had dropped below the crest of the new dome. It poked above the surface like a wart under the clear blue sky. The obelisks were working.

When the new ocean was almost gone, the voice inside me said it was time to leave. I imagined it belonged to Baji, lingering in my head. This time I listened.

With the system running again, the synth panel peeled back easily. I dove through the opening, kicked down toward the ground, and burst through the outer wall of the empty city, into the cool air of the valley. Tiny bumps raced across my shivering flesh, and my saturated clothes clung to me like skin. The low thrum of the obelisks resounded in my chest.

Slicking my dripping hair back, I squinted in the sunlight. The water filled the land as far as I could see, as high as my knees. No trees, no villages, nothing stood from here to the peaks on the horizon. But no leeches, either. No cobalt mites. The sky was bright and clear.

How had the flood receded so quickly? Some of it must have run off the edges of the valley into the mountains. Some must have soaked into the ground. But the rest—the rest I couldn't explain. A gift from the gods. Baji's gods, or mine.

The tular pinned to my throat crooned. I tugged on it, but it didn't come loose, so I let it stay. We'd been through a lot together.

I clenched my teeth until I felt a spurt of pain behind my ear.

Baji. It's me. Are you out there somewhere?

Silhouettes of wide-winged birds flew high overhead, squawking. They wheeled over the domed city and flapped off toward the sun.

Well, I'll be in my mind. Like always.

As my eyes adjusted to the daylight, I began to see pockets of debris in the distance, emerging from the waters. Splintered tree trunks. Broken pieces of structures. Lumpy shapes of beached creatures.

There'd be a lot of cleaning up to do, but eventually the valley would be dry, and we could start again. Empty land stretched all around. A city rose behind me, ready for new life.

Things would be hard for a while—a long while. But we could help each other. Make good decisions. That's what leaders did.

Baji and I had made a choice for everyone.

I hoped it was the right one.

Chapter 9

So that's my story. Well, I didn't come in till nearly the end, not till the crops spawned me and the others, so I guess it was more Tuck's story. How he killed thousands of his own people and millions of mine, all for the sake of some greater good. Once I had safely hidden inside him, I did my best to stop him, to nudge him this way instead of that, to talk him out of going through with it. But there wasn't much I could do. I'm okay with that. We all have to make sacrifices.

And this isn't as bad as it seemed at first. Like I said, I don't blame Tuck anymore. You heard them say they'd stop at nothing to wipe us out. Now they think the job's been done, so no one will be looking for me. And if I survived inside Tuck, maybe more of us rode out the catastrophe. Like Baji said, we know how to hide and wait. We can gather, figure out our next move, even if it takes aeons.

In the meantime, let's get back to the question I asked at the start. Did everything turn out for the best? Hopefully now you can imagine what Tuck would say, what Baji and Eltria would have said.

Me, I think it remains to be seen. Remember the path of stones. It goes on with or without us, and who's to say where it stops? Maybe this isn't an ending. Maybe it's a beginning. So I'll just say that you've got to take care what you do in the name of the big picture. There's always a bigger one, and it might not be yours.

About the Author



Ray Vallese got his start in the game industry when he joined TSR, Inc. in 1994 and had the amazingly good fortune to spend most of his time in the Planescape campaign setting. Since the late 1990s, he's worked as a freelance editor or designer for Monte Cook Games, Wizards of the Coast, Paizo Publishing, Malhavoc Press, Kobold Press, and more. Helping the Numenera roleplaying game look its best and being part of the Torment: Tides of Numenera team are two great honors in his career. Feel free to stop by www.rayvallese.com, if only to tell him that he really needs to update his website.