

**VENGEANCE IN THE PALING LIGHT**

Austin C Brown

In honor of Melville, Lewis, McCarthy

When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown. The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

(Gen 6:1-5)



If God meant to interfere with the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now?

Judge Holden

The gods know nothing, they understand nothing.  
They walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

Asaph

Then Zimbir fell and the kingship was taken to Shuruppag. In Shuruppag, Ubara-Tutu became king..  
Then the flood swept over.

The Sumerian King List



VENGEANCE  
IN THE  
PALING LIGHT

# I



His birth, his childhood – Cursed ground – Stolen – A  
fireside grin – A false prophet speaks – Sold into slavery –  
On the condition of the human heart – To Peyron – A  
hidden stone – An antelope is butchered – A stabbing –  
Melee.

The infant is naked and thin, a creature born of blood and made for the shedding of blood. The father holds him in the light of the fire studying the child's face. He invokes obscure blessings from foreign gods, tattoos markings on the tiny heel. Outside lie dark barren lands where black twisted trees hiss in the cruel winds. The mother writhes on the crude linens, clawing at the ground until the second child comes forth, lifeless and crimson in the pale light.

In former years the child's parents were once keepers of sheep but have since become tillers of the ground, laboring along the desolate landscape and against the darkening horizon, bent and plowing, the days each harder than before. Birds steal away their seed, digging with their beaks, their prying claws, and whatever green manages to rise is soon consumed by the cutting locusts.

At the age of eight, the child's father leaves to hunt in the north, never to return. His mother draws up into silence. The child becomes it and in him broods another disorder where crumbling hearts lie in shadowed reefs. His eyes hollow, deep as the world's groaning soul.

He works the ground with a crude pick, claws up rocks from the low hills. Dust and wind under a wasting sky, the remote line of the horizon lost in a sulfur haze. The months grinding away in toil, in sweat, in thorns.

One day he rises in the field to see the distant shapes of men on horses advancing along the wind-torn landscape. Far to the north. He stands watching and then runs for home kicking up sand with his small feet along the old footpath. As they ride through their dry and



withered crop, the mother stands in front of her offspring clutching a small pruning hook, defiant, ragged, the men leering silently.

The child becomes the feral blood beat of terror while the manstealers strip them of their clothes and bind them nude in wooden cages and steal them away to a caravan of vagrants who prance their chattel in lines and grunt with pleasure while they make their bids. Two wineskins for the child. His mother and sister satisfy a debt between dark-skinned traders that laugh like hyenas. The night is filled with debaucherous mirth and drinking. A trapper with a missing ear grins at the child from the darkening edges of the flickering campfire. Woodsmoke drifts into the chambered blackness beyond.

Near early dawn, men with beards filled with colored beads depart with the child on camels burdened with goods. They press out into vast stretches of sun-bitten earth where bundles of cactus tear up through the hard crust with thorns as long as fingers. At noon they stop and the men eat dried meat, pluck burs from their camels. Then they mount up again and ascend a lonely tableland saddled over a remote plain trembling with heat. They descend and trail across, specks on the spine of a sand-strewn wasteland. The child thirsts but does not speak.

This for days until they edge near a precipice overlooking a city that rises out of the waste like some terrible termite construction of mud and stone. He is acquired by a lean and sinewy man who barter in skins and implements of war and who oversees a pit where men fight against other men and beasts. The child's face is branded with a glowing iron, the charred lines drawn as if by a careless hand with a charcoal spike. The trader lurches drunkenly by candlelight in the bedchamber, thinks himself a prophet. Embers pulse in the cooling hearth. The child rakes it to life, turns to listen as sparks curl to blackness.

The promise of a seed foretold, the man mutters. Enmity in the viper's eye. Biting the heel, crushing his head. It shall not be so. It shall not be so, I tell you.

The years pass with the child scooting blackened bowls of meat scraps into covered holes and cages filled with slaves from strange lands. He watches men fight like apes and maul for bitter life before raving crowds. He sees them win wiry women and intoxicating drink and death. He learns to amputate infected limbs. To mend and char

the severed stumps with fire. He learns to wield a three-pronged shaft and a net laced with thorns. At the age of fourteen, he impales a wounded slave from Shinar in the pit. He sees the bulging whiteness of the man's eyes. The slow uncoupling of life from flesh. Standing there he is become devoid of all his past, save the fading visage of his mother who still beckons in the night like a distant phantom calling out for vengeance to a heart allured to it.

There comes news of war in the east. News of calamitous men spreading like an infection and consuming life for reasons recondite and preposterous as if vindicating some ancient right or transcendent dogma where the will of man is esteemed wholly autonomous, untouched and unfettered by all domains of power. The men of the desert city stand aloft the stoneworks and squint toward the naked horizon watching for weeks. Nothing comes save the trundling bands of merchants with their spices and chattel and ale in the brewing dawn.

Six months later, the boy watches men gamble in the broken light of his master's gaming quarters. Filthy drifters with long hair and exotic hides of ill-begotten gain. He gains an eye for trickery, for sleight of hand, and he notifies his master of those now destined to see their throats cut. He's sent to kill one in the night. Scaling a high wall under a jaundice moon, he slides through a window into a dark room and slides a thin knife into the man's head. He watches the body jerk to life and tremor with senseless hands. He leaves no trace and says nothing, yet still the boy's master is slain outside the city gate two nights later.

He is taken and caged amongst the chattel. They huddle like animals. Like souls longing for the shadow. His tongue swells. He eats little. He sees a man flayed on a roped stanchion, pulled apart by horned oxen. The days pass, without memory, without remorse, the infernal sun rolling in its long circus. Finally he is led to the noon market wherein he is sold to hard men from the mountainous regions of Peyron forty miles to the east where slaves labor among huge stones and in deep caves, picking and hauling sheered rock with hands as callused as the hearts of all who lived in those days. For the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and every imagination of the thoughts of their hearts was but only evil continually.

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They came for the boy in the predawn dark shuffling through the blackness with torches throwing frayed light on the ground. He was balled up in a small cage in the sand. One of the men rattled at the wooden lid, leaning with the torch dripping bits of fire. The figure squinted down at him. Firelight and shadow and soulless eyes.

In a dry and dusty concourse near the main gate, they dragged the cage through the sand and loaded him onto a wagon bed stocked with others of no favorable heritage. Huge horses brayed and stomped in agitation and a thin dust choked the street. The boy peered through a slit. Rugged men stood clustered in grim discussion and there were slaves roped together on the ground with a wild-eyed goat. Someone shouted and the slaves and the goat padded out the open gate in silence. Then the wagon creaked into motion, trundling slowly into the moon-stained desert along the windblown route for east.

They rode for hours through troughs of low desert grass and across spits of sandstone into an intolerable heat. By evening he was set by the crumbling wall of some lonely outpost and left to watch the wagon and slaves drift southward in a pale of retreating dust. Two other cages fashioned from the ribs of oxen were lying half-cocked near him. A thin arm slid out a hole and the boy could hear the muffled voice ask about water.

The boy squinted through the crack.

You got water or no?

There's no water, the boy said.

The arm slid back in the cage.

Where we at? the boy asked.

A thin figure wrapped in a tattered cloth came out and eyed them as if making an inventory and then ventured back toward the grouping of mud-cracked huts. He returned with a bowl of muddy water and poured it slowly through a small hole in the top of the boy's cage. The boy pressed his mouth against the raffia and sucked at the water. The figure made similar forays among the other cages and the sky grew dark and the smell of charred meat drifted in the desert air. A child with wild black hair sat watching them from atop the wall.

Come daylight the wind was running across the sand and another

child was sitting perched atop the wall with his feet dangling. The figure with the thin arm called for the child to bring water and the child stared without expression.

What's wrong with you? the man said.

An hour later they were brought remnants of meat and other bowls of water. After that they were dragged each in turn to a wide gate that bore above it the splintered remains of a stone archway. The figure in the tattered cloth drug the wooden gate open and lashed it to the wall with a strip of leather and stood staring out across the desert. Wind pulled at his ratty hair. Out in the distance, the boy could just make out the forms of men on horses escorting a line of slaves. Two scraggly chickens flitted around the courtyard pecking at the dirt. None spoke while they waited.

Two of the Peyronians trotted in first. They were broad-shouldered men with scarred chests and thick jaws. From atop their mounts they lazily watched the figure by the gate unseat the lid to the boy's cage. When the boy crawled out he stood blinking in the newly risen sun. One of the Peyronians swung off his horse with a length of rope in his hand and he knotted it around the boy's neck and wrists and tugged on the leash, pulling him toward the string of slaves lumbering in through the open gate. There were ten of them tethered together, all ages, all sizes, mute images of suffering bound into one and coated in the dust of the land. Another figure was fished out of a cage and numbered among the company behind the boy, then the Peyronian mounted up and jerked his horse toward the main gate and the group shuffled into motion.

There were wild terrains all to the east and a narrow foot trail that bore in it the echoes of former migrations long entrained and now flushed under the newly rising sun and rose made sky. They walked for hours in that desolation and the wind blew hot and dry and the Peyronians rode in pairs at the front and rear of the group without interest to the order of things as if they were begotten of the heat and stone and made to endure it. The boy padded in step staring off at the distant line of paper mountains swimming in the heat.

Come evening they picked their way up a long talus slope and stood on the broken edge of a wide ravine. A herd of white antelope

were moving silently in the open bottomland. One raised its head twitching its ear in the copper light and then lowered again. The men on horses convened, eyeing the animals. One lifted lightly on his saddle and leaned, surveying the rocky descent. He pointed, tracing his finger along the rocks and two of the others trotted off with their great bows slung behind them. The lead Peyronian was disfigured about his jaw with black tattoos etched about his naked skull. He sat watching and then swung his horse and motioned with his chin for the slaves to march on.

They set camp atop a lone rise that was pinched up out of the desert and littered with bits of shale and sandstone. The slaves had been made to sit in the ground and they were strung about tending their bleeding limbs in silence. The boy's wrists were much rawed and he regarded them indifferently turning them this way and that and he looked out along the western rim of the world where the sun hung red and huge and little black birds were flying up out of it into the thin clouds shelving the diminishing sky.

When each of the slaves had by some unspoken rule parceled out their own spots in the sand with the ropes cabled between them to tender some ease of movement, the boy shifted to look at the figure bound up behind him. When he turned a man with an enormous head and an enormous beard looked up and held his gaze. Bits of debris were lodged in the man's black hair and his eyes were tinged yellow and the soul of him was in them. The boy looked away and then back to find the slave still staring at him, or perhaps into him. As they sat just so the man sniffed and repositioned himself watching the Peyronians work a fire into flame. Then the man lowered his bound hands and cautiously turned over his tattered waist strap revealing a small serrated stone set flush against his skin. Thin and sharp. The boy stared at it and then at him and then at the Peyronians standing near the awakening fire. The man returned the filthy linen to its place and they sat not moving while embers coiled into the night sky.

Sometime later in the dark, the Peyronian hunters returned with an antelope draped across the back of a horse. The creature's limp head jostled as they tramped up the loose rock into the light of the camp. The two squatting by the fire rose and counseled with the

returning men and they lifted the creature from the horse and tossed the lifeless body to the ground. In the crackling firelight they commenced to hacking the antelope with knives, ripping back the tough hide in frayed sheets and cutting away handfuls of wet meat which they wordlessly tossed to the slaves and they passed along a common skin of water which moved among them without incident. After this the Peyronians hoisted the rib racks over the fire and conversed while the drippings hissed in the flames.

Setting out early? said one.

Early enough to make two days.

The first made a noise and prodded the fire with the blade of his knife, glancing back at the hunched chattel with their bloodstained mouths and hands.

In the night when they had bedded down in the sand and lay strewn about in postures of sleep, a single Peyronian sat leaning against a boulder by the dying fire keeping watch. From among the coals, a thin column of smoke was breaking apart in the wind.

The slave with the knapped stone had waited on his side in the still of the darkness before reaching slowly to his waist to withdraw the shard. He held it close to his chest then went to cutting. Sweat glistened like jewels on the man's ebony forehead. The boy watched him. When the slave's wrists soundlessly uncoupled, their gazes fixed momentarily in profound knowing. He then sawed off the rope about his neck.

The slave did not move for a long time. Then he arched and rolled slowly, his white eyes straining slantwise to see the Peyronian. He held the pointed stone tight between his thumb and forefinger and weighed the cost of the distance. In that frame he lay as still as death. Nothing but wind and the sound of men sleeping. The boy watched. The Peyronian was sitting etched in the red stain of smoldering light, motionless, both knees pulled up with his head cradled in his arms. The others lay slumbering in a nearby rim, dark cocoons in the veil of night, the horses darker silhouettes beyond.

The boy looked at the slave but the slave did not look back. He was shifting to a low crouch and rising slowly, moving forward like some horrible creature lurking in the night. The boy looked at the

sloping darkness behind him and then at the slave moving forward. Low and stepping, his feet making no sound.

One of the horses was watching.

The slave crept to the edge of the campfire and then moved with sudden speed. The Peyronian jerked awake and reached for something behind him but the slave was on him plunging the stone into the side of his neck as if an insane artisan hammering metal. He held the Peyronian's head against the rock while he stabbed. The Peyronian struggled to cry out but was gurgling on his own blood. Air sprayed from the side of his throat. The slave covered his gaping mouth and seized the knife and drove it into the man's side. The Peyronian's legs trenched in the dirt. Then he fell still and slumped oddly to one side as the slave let the body fold over. The slave peered over his shoulder, eyes calamitous beyond reckoning. One of the sleeping Peyronians had begun to stir and the slave pulled the knife out of the body and straddled the man and drove it into his chest. A choking scream erupted in the darkness. All jolted awake. Several of the other slaves were sitting erect looking about in confusion. The helpless Peyronian tried to fend with his hands while the slave hacked him. They were wet with blood.

Both Peyronians were up gripping their hand knives as the slave rose in the darkness to face them. He was panting loudly and watching the Peyronians move around him in opposite arcs. The disfigured man said nothing and the long ropy hair of the other swung like a tail as he crept. They looked like wolves about their prey.

Cut yer eyes out, said the man with the twisted hair.

The slave was managing the uneven ground and shifting to face his adversaries, both arms stretched wide as if to feel the distance of his foes. The disfigured man kept sliding rear of him, edging nearer, and the slave would steal quick glances, shifting his attention. As he was doing this the other Peyronian darted forward and sliced open the slave's forearm and when the slave swung wildly in return the disfigured man lunged and cut the side of his head.

Blood was running down the slave's ear into his beard and he was breathing loudly and shuffling in the sand with his knife held out. The Peyronians circled again, sliding silently, weaving their weapons in a kind of dance, feinting, and when the slave spun to meet them in this back and forth, the disfigured man slipped under a swipe and thrust

his blade through the slats of the slave's ribs.

The slave let out a low moan. He stumbled back, half bent, holding his knife up. He was about to say something. Then he stepped and his legs would not work right.

Some of the watching slaves stood frozen as if in a dream while others hurled themselves at the Peyronians. One had clasped onto a leg and had taken to biting the thigh with his teeth while another flung himself against the disfigured man, looping his tethered arms around the slaver's neck only to be stabbed in the eye. Others pressed into the fray and the boy entered with much hate and the convulsion of men in their savagery prefigured some horrible denizen of hell writhing with its many limbs and shrieks. The boy's clawing made no common difference and he was struck in the head and felled where he lay in a senseless darkness. Feet trampled all about him and they trampled all through the diminished fire kicking up sparks and the Peyronians hacked in vain as the slaves dragged them down, twisting the rope bindings every which way and the dark mass of men jerked and shivered with death and moans until the souls of most were shorn from flesh in night.



## II



A nameless slave cries forth – Escape – Hoof tracks in the desert – In wait with a knife – In search of Gilboa – A wasting heat – A horse dead by morning light – Pile of human remains – Desperate thirst – Fortuitous storm – Eastward.

When he woke he was encased in darkness with the newly slain woven about him in every intimacy. Someone had vomited and the smell of it was close and he could hear the muffled gasping of the perishing. He might of thought himself cast into the abode of eternal torment but the day of his death was not yet and he clawed at the flesh until he finally broke forth like some unreckonable graveyard parasite hatching from a corpse.

Blood was running into his left eye and dripping from his chin. Standing there he was wild looking and breathing heavily and when he began yanking at the rope bindings, pulling fist to fist with his back set into it, a pair of lifeless arms drew up stiff and oddly bent as if in want of something.

Two other slaves were still alive. One of them was half lying on his back with the ropes cinched about his chest and digging into him. The other was sitting a few feet away sawing at the rope fastened around his neck with a knife he had claimed. He was born a slave and never knew a time other and you could see it in his eyes.

The boy had ceased with his pulling and he stood watching the slave with the knife sever the restraint and then scabble over to the horses and search the pouches. The slave in the ropes kept crying out to be cut free, but the man seemed not to hear as he searched, lifting flaps and feeling into pouches. He was hurt in some way and kept favoring his ribs.

Cut me free, the slave cried out again, trying to rise. He was thrashing and kicking about. The boy could see a deep slash on the side of the slave's thigh. It opened like a mouth when he moved.

The freed man paid no attention to the shrill petitions and he tethered the horses and mounted one and descended the slope without so much a glance back at them. The entangled slave called out long after the horses had slipped into the darkness. The boy stood for a moment in the night with the man newly silent beside him. And then as if aroused from a long and listless contemplation he went to searching among the dead.

You cut me free, right?

The boy said nothing.

If I find a knife, I cut you free.

The boy hauled at the corpses and managed to lift one into a sitting position and flop it over. Underneath lay the disfigured Peyronian in cold death, both eyes bulging, a rope lashed about his neck. He was still clutching a slender blade in his hand and the boy pried it free and went to sawing with the slave watching on. When he was free he ran to where to the Peyronians had slept and searched the woolen bed rolls finding nothing. The man kept crying out after him.

I'm not cutting you free.

We are friends. You see? Friends. He opened a hand as if to show him something.

Your leg's no good.

My leg's good. Cut me free.

The boy ran to the edge of the rocks where the hill sloped off to the flatlands below. He stood peering. The horses galloping across the lower expanse appeared dreamlike in the moonlight, little more than ghostly figments trailing amongst the darkened needle grass and sand.

Don't leave me like this.

The boy regarded him indifferently and then picked his way down the slope following the dappled tracks westward while the bitter cries of the abandoned slave carried along the wind.

In that moonlit scrubland the night bore the dark shapes of ocotillo looming in their myriad alien forms. Like things growing on an ocean floor. He kept on the tracks, sighting them among the brush and

scattered rocks and when they cut around a barren scarp the boy scrambled atop it and stood peering. The first signs of morning were coloring the mountains to the north. A charcoal edging of the world to come. Neither horse nor rider in sight.

He labored after the hoof prints for hours, half walking, half running out into a sweeping waste where an outcropping of rocks stood far beyond. He loped across the empty flat and picked his way atop the boulders, surveying the land with shielded eyes. A shimmering furnace of sand and endless scrub, the sun pulsing in the boundless sky. He stood looking northward at a distant ridge. He wiped at the salt in his eyes. Along the remote line of the world he could see the dark and minuscule forms of the horses quaking in the heat. The boy lowered against the stone. He kept glancing over his shoulder as if to sight some other figure hunting his steps, then he quickened from the rock in pursuit.

It took him an hour to overtake the slave and when he did he squatted in a patchwork of withered scrub, watching through the wiry brush with fevered thirst. There was a low ridge close by and it ran along the earth with cloven rocks ranging its sandy base. He could see the slave towing the horses up the slope with the leather straps wrapped about his wrist. The man was hunched with pain and kept clutching at his ribs with his free hand as the horses clattered up the stone.

The boy studied the ridge and then scurried among the rocks in a wide orientation to the summit and crouched in wait with his knife. Up there the sandless rock was flat and grooved from the wind and there were faint ridgelines rising forlorn in the distance.

The slave struggled over the crest, pulling at the strap with his naked back wearing the sun in sweat. When each of the horses had clambered up after him in a flurry of lunges and stood tossing their heads in agitated communion, the slave slumped to the ground, rasping with his forehead pressed against the stone. Kneeling there he seemed to be in homage to the beasts. Then he slid to his side and slowly eased to his back, where he lay not moving. The boy watched him.

One of the horses drifted away uncoiling the strap from the slave's wrist. As it did so the slave tried to sit up but sank back to the ground moaning as if some strange moirologist overcome with lament.

The boy neither moved nor took his eyes from him, and when he felt sure the man wasn't feigning, he edged forth by degrees until he was standing near him.

The slave's eyes cracked.

The boy stood gripping his knife.

The slave lay motionless and filthy and his lips moved to form words but a thick rattling issued up from his chest. The boy stepped back and stood watching. He regarded the horses and then the man again. He could see the deep discoloration along the slave's broken ribs.

Where's your knife? the boy asked.

The slave didn't answer.

Where's your knife?

The slave pointed at one of the horses and coughed, fingering his side. The boy glanced at the horse and told the slave he would kill him if he moved. Then he backed away without taking his eyes from him. When he reached the spotted horse he found the knife dangling in a sheath amongst the pouches. The boy watched the man and the man did not move and the boy took the gourd of water and loosed the strap and tilted it. His throat jerked as he drank. He stood panting holding the water and drank again and replaced the plug and drew near the man.

Where you head'n?

The slave squinted.

The boy crouched. I can help you. Where you head'n?

Gilboa.

That a city?

I can't breathe.

Is that a city?

Yes.

With water?

The man grimaced, Yes.

Where?

The man didn't move.

I can help you. What direction?

The slave lifted a hand and pointed.

East?

The man nodded and the boy stood and looked, walking to the

edge overlooking the empty waste. He walked back and crouched.

No city.

The man squinted with one eye. Beyond the ridges.

You sure?

The man nodded.

If you are wrong we die.

The man pointed again and the boy peered and stood. Then he gathered the horses and checked the knots that bound them together and he took account of the supplies until he was satisfied and then mounted a horse of dark bay and set off eastward with the slave still lying on the nameless ground watching the horses clatter along the chapped stone.

The boy ventured out onto the unremitting waste, jostling atop the horse, glancing back at the silent ridge. It grew small as did he and the sun slowly fell from its meridian until it sat blood red and swollen above a distant plateau. Miles out he stopped and turned, squinting at the forgone horizon. Wind tumbled across the sand throwing bits of chaff between the legs of the horses. He pulled his mount back around and nudged it forward into the trembling heat.

Several hours later the eastern ridge loomed before him in the evening sun. He stopped the horses and sat studying it. Seeing a pinch in its spine perhaps a mile to the south he kicked forward his horse and led them through a narrow cleft ribbed with old varnish. Shadows ran along the lower stones and a slit burrowing into the ridge's side harbored a seep of muddy water. The horses edged against the stained rock and craned to drink. The boy had tried to dip one of the empty gourds into the slick but when it proved too shallow he dropped to his hands and knees and sucked at the silted water and spit it into the gourd. When he was finished he sat sprawled on the rocks breathless and wet watching the horses.

After all had been drunk, the boy mounted up and they wove their way through the cleft down a bank littered with chipped boulders. He emerged onto a vast sweep of sand that held no sight of a city. Only a distant gray upheaval bulging from the earth like a swollen knuckle. The boy trotted into the stark emptiness and sat peering in all directions before setting off again.

He sheltered in a shallow cave at the base of the mound and made a lonesome fire that glowed solitary in the darkness. He sat studying a necklace laced with bronze shapes and smooth jade stones that he found in one of the pouches. As he turned it in the light of the fire his shadow flickered against the rippled wall.

In the morning he found one of the horses lying dead on its side, stiff with its dark eyes glassed. He tugged the straps free from it and fixed the pouches to the other horses and set off for east where the country began to pitch into dry wadis flanked by mountainous crags. The horses struggled and slapped their way through the loose grit and the sun burned pure white, lighting the cauterized rocks with a stinging brightness, and there were small cacti among the stones and bur sage and the very ground beneath them was a stove to cook the flesh from a man. The bones of things were scattered among the desert in jigsaws and were themselves bleached omens of no right fortune and as the boy rode past the remains of something large with its gray hide clinging in mottled clumps to the whited bones, he looked down at the skull lying partially buried in the sand and pitched back as if to behold its torturer before fleeing the world.

Nothing stirred, nothing moved.

The horses began to falter.

He urged them up a bluff and rested in the shade of a lone spire where he stood surveying the land. A view forsaken of all hope. Endless lines of serrated rock to set teeth to gnashing. He held the heads of the horses and wet their mouths with water from his hand and then descended into the stone labyrinth, following a dry and rock strewn gully all through the day.

The evening was slow to coming and when it did he was found picking his way up the rill lines of a sandy ridge in the lowering sun. When he reached the summit he halted the horses and sat staring out across a low gorge at a group of stone dwellings cut into the face of a cliff. Adobe looking things crafted with crude holes. He sat watching for a long time. The deepening shadows of the surrounding mountains slanted across the perched settlement and ran up the cliffs. There was uncomfortable stillness to the place.

I think we must, the boy said to the horses as he picked his way

down the loose scree to a narrow trail winding its way up to it.

The half dozen or so structures emerged from the stone at varied heights and there were small footpaths climbing to each with a wide shelf serving as a central courtyard. The path broadened onto the summit and the boy with the three horses rode in at a slow walk. He stopped and waited. Pale sandstone, carved and smooth. Nothing moved. He rode forward slowly passing one of the dwellings, the clomp of hooves reporting in the silence, the wobbled holes lightless and dead.

He walked the horses into the courtyard and halted them near an old blackened fire pit and sat looking and then called out. His voice ran along the rocks and was met with stillness. He called out again and nudged his horse to the cliff's edge. There below the thin winding trail.

The boy dismounted and led the horses to the mouth of one of the entrances. He set the horses and unsheathed his knife. The room was very dark and the boy could not discern its features nor depth and light from the entrance cut across the stone floor into blackest darkness. Above him the migratory sun painted the rimrock in rafts of torchlight and he gathered up tufts of withered shrub from among a nearby cleft and set flint to it and walked holding the small flame into the room. The light of the fire danced pushing back the darkness. Gnarled bits of wood lay scattered on the stone floor and a warped opening tunneled further into the mountain. The boy tossed the failing stub and fetched up a fresh batch and pressed into the deeper chamber with the newly kindled flame, stooping low until it widened into a concave where human remains were lying in a scab of tattered linens. The bodies were stacked like tree limbs, bent and twisted in all manner of articulation. Sunken faces with black eyeless sockets, the leathery skin stretched taut around raw and gaping mouths, the bony fingers palsied and clutching at the darkness and at one another with the ratty hair black and twisted. The air smelled of old dust and old earth and the boy swept his torch toward the far wall and left.

All that evening he lurked through the chambered dwellings like a silent mortician called to visitation. Or like some benighted mole clambering about the ossuary mountain in search of something. But nothing was to be found save the decayed remnants of a terrible pestilence or barbarous plot.

The boy returned to the horses in the courtyard under a wax

moon. He had grown weak with hunger and he rummaged for a strip of dried meat and he stood chewing, gazing at the dark cliffs rising black as ink.

He rode out in the morning under a sky the color of steel and he rode through the ragged canyons until one of the horses collapsed in a panting heap and he cut its bladder for water but there was none. He trudged past a lone inselberg and across cracked pans of stone and he passed between naked plateaus onto the same. A lone bird trailed across the sky and was lost in the declining sun and appeared again to nothing. To a horizon of heat and sand blurring in a haze of dust. The horses slowed and he switched between them, leading them by the strap like some traileed circus hand across the blistered rock.

Night fell and the boy sat in the darkness on a low ridge in silence. The last of the water had long been drunk and the horses seemed mad in their thirst. Sand blew across the bald stone and the murk of night shrouded all and the boy rose from his thoughts and squatted and shat in the sand. He stared out across the blackness into infinity where the stars hung and he considered their origin and the tailored mysteries thereunto. So very small the notions of man, yet crowned with some dim vestige of glory. A trembling nobility lost to spiritual torpor.

He woke in the dark to a distant rumbling and propped on an elbow, turning to look behind him. Far to the north the sky silently flashed. He rose and stood staring. The distant horizon strobed again igniting great bulkheads that quivered over the grim architecture of the land and the boy could see sheets of rain falling in the pulsing light like the frayed skirt of a wraith sweeping slantwise.

Cracked lips and hollow eyes, watching in amazement.

The horses stamped in agitation and the boy mounted and set off toward the storm. Within the hour the first signs of morning broke in a coral haze as the storm swept west leaving pools of water in its wake. They first came upon divots of water cupped in the stone and he and the horses sucked at them like desperate lovers. They trotted from cup to cup until the land grew more jagged and they came upon a ravine flanked by cliffs that held a narrow flow of water fed from a thousand cracks. They picked their way down to the stream and the



boy lowered himself to it and drank and the horses stood ankle deep doing the same. He laid in the cold water and it ran over him and the filth fogged from his body.

Drink till you can't no more, the boy said to the horses. Drink for all you're worth.

When all had been drunk and they had drunk yet more and each gourd was made freshly full dripping with water, the boy and the two horses slowly trekked along the pebbled ground with the sun angling overhead with much steam rising in rare spectacle from the quenched stones.

### III



Wanderings – An old hermit – Idols – An offering – A  
prophetic homily – Signal fire – Flight – Another horse lost  
– In hiding – A new risen sun – Setting forth into the  
unknown.

On the boy traveled into the stark landscape. The telltale scrub running for miles. Ripples of heat stretching like melted glass with canyon bluffs rising sawed and rent and far beyond broken hills the color of clotted blood quivering as if to test credulity. A sharp wind hissed through the wiry scrub kicking up bits of sand and lizards tacked with pale thorns watched with grinning mouths. The boy rode with his head down, eyes averted.

This for hours, hours through all the burning day and into the black night and beyond the night to another merciless sun until nearing a range of raw mountains the boy saw rising wondrous from its lower regions a thin trail of smoke from a crude shelter.

He shifted on the back of his horse and studied the smoke for a long time. Then he pulled at the strap and angled off for the foothills leading up to it.

There was no hiding on the slope and the boy rode along a packed foot trail with the knife tucked in the waist cloth of his lower back. An old hermit was sitting hunched on a stone before a low fire with a skewered rodent stretched on a stick. His hair was as wild as the desert, he had rags for clothes. Filthy as some aboriginal mummy. The old man craned to see the boy maneuvering up the slope to his spot. Old tarps lashed with ropes flapped in the wind.

My eyes are dimmed with a dust that fogs the world, he said. Come closer.

The boy didn't move. Then he nudged his horse closer, keeping a distance.

The old man's pale eyes were filled with an opaque cream and his teeth were chipped stones screwed all wrong and stained. He stared gaping slightly, a ponderable expression.

I'm looking for a nearest city. Might you know it?

The old hermit seemed to find the question hard to understand and he sat scratching at his neck.

Men don't oft venture these parts.

The boy waited and the old man seemed to be fixed in thought.

Do you any water to spare?

There's a well here, the old man said, nodding. He gestured toward a hut up the path that congealed out of the rock like a mud wasp nest. There's a slab over a hole inside. You can fish up the pail. Give sup to the horses alike. There's plenty.

A strong wind sent the fire to thrashing and sand twisted off the mountain. The boy turned his face and the old man sat hunched as before but with his eyes closed.

It'll throw the light footed, if yer not awares.

The boy squinted and when the wind had abated the old man slowly rose from his seat and beckoned the boy to follow. The boy glanced behind him and dismounted and led the two horses single file under the tarps along the path to the hut.

It was dark inside and littered with hides and a shard of light cut through a hole in the roof lighting the foot stirred dust. There were rodent skulls and bones carved to look like animals and there were various iron totems and stone bowls and sightless gods with round heads and jutting penises disarrayed on rough planks fastened to the mud wall. The hermit shuffled through the gloom and bent under a cleft burrowing into the chest of the mountain where a flat stone was covering a tomb of water.

Damn if it isn't heavy, the old man said looking down at the granite cap. There's the pail. Fish it down deep.

There was just room enough for the two of them and the boy slid aside the granite slab and spooled the bucket down by its rope nearly twenty feet to water and brought it grating up the rock. He tilted the leaking container and drank. The water was cold and stank of sulfur. He drank more and then watered his horses by turns and the evening sun dipped behind the mountains and the old man invited the boy to some meat and they sat picking at the charred animal by the fire.

Are ye protected of the djinns that do wander these parts?

I don't know about no djinns.

The old man's eyes fixed on the boy. They're spirits. Cruel as death. And if ye isn't protected they'll snatch your soul like a child's toy.

I just need to find a city.

There's no city. Only dirt and djinns.

Where's the nearest you know of?

The old man stared at the fire. I've seen wandering pilgrims like ye before. Searching for life when the life out there is none to be had.

This is the out there and it don't much care already.

The old man fell silent and then said, Let me get something.

The boy watched him rise and shuffle off to his hut and come shuffling back along the path in the failing light and sit with a bowl of water flecked with brown powder. The hermit produced a small pouch from among his folds and shook its dusty contents into the water and stirred it with his finger. The water shone red in the firelight.

Here, the old man said extending the bowl. Drink it all.

The boy shook his head.

It's a ward of protection. You need it.

I ain't drinking no red water.

The bowl hovered in offering and the old man withdrew it and drank the bitter liquid and sat staring at the fire. The wind whistled high in the clefts and the old man shifted the fire with a stick as the boy looked on.

Ye understand the stars, don't ye?

I don't think so.

They tell you things. Portents and omens. But ye have to have a right clear mind. You understand?

They don't say noth'n to me.

It's cause you ain't listening aright. It takes a deft ear.

I find it hard enough to understand people.

Ah, no truer words. No truer words, indeed. But the stars, they whisper.

What do they tell you?

That there's days of trouble coming. Terrible days.

I think I knew that.

Aye, and so ye did. That mark of Cain on your face said it enough

for me. You've known sorrows, but I fear there's fresh sorrows enough to come.

It ain't no difference to me. Just looking for a city to lay up in.

The old man made a sound and wiped at his mouth. Then he spoke thus, There's spirits in the city of man, understand? All lurking in the basin of men's hearts. Gods within gods that animate the clay to ends at once there own but hardly theirs at all. Like a hunter with a horse. Steering it, guiding it. A man can try sweepin'm out but its like trying to sweep the bones out of a body. They crawl in and no man can quit them, seeing the world's too arid a place for such. They crave the flesh of men, whole crops of them will dwell together. And when all these host gather like congregants in one place and the men lay with the daughters of men and spawn yet more for the taking, these yield the bent ones, those fallen offspring of Seth who did not remember their heritage and carved a portent of doom that none can alter. As sure as the stars hang like ornaments. Do ye understand?

The boy gave no indication at the strange homily but did only stare at the glowing embers, and the old hermit shook his head mournfully.

I've tried to tell ye.

I guess I'm not one for such.

Must be so.

And the old hermit cast a sideways glance. His eyes pale and bleary.

They sat before the dying fire watching a flame dance on the glowing coals. It twisted in the wind and was sucked away to nothing and lighted again atop the coals, a silent hypnotist cradling a ruby pendant. Off in the resolute black of the firmament the white speck stars hung rightful in their place with the unseated casting off to touch the horizon.

The boy began to nod and he stood to shake away the sleep.

There's room enough in the hut. Cause you can't be sleeping out here. There's scorpions that will set you rigid as stone.

The boy secured the horses and took his place among the hides in the gloom of the hut and the old man pulled shut the cobbled plank door and settled among his own. The light of the moon formed a circlet on the floor and the grim idols watched lidless from their perch

and the sound of breathing soon came in rhythmic strokes.

The boy woke in the night in the darkness of the room. The wind was all astir outside and whistling through the cracks of the door and the light of the moon shone faintly through the smoke hold in the roof. He shifted onto his side and lay still for some time and then sat up looking at where the old man had nighed but was now gone. He started to his feet. He peered about the room. Stood listening. None other was there. He grabbed the knife he had hid among the pelts and slowly eased open the plank door and pushed out into the cool night air, treading softly and listening. Wind lashed across the face of the rocks throwing spits of sand. He shielded his eyes and crept along the path round the hut. Ahead in the gloom he could see the horses standing where he had leashed them. Awake and tossing their heads. He turned gripping his knife and looked down the black slope and out into the subsumed beyond and back at the smoldering campfire. Another gust of wind stirred and his eye was drawn to the sight of a bonfire on an overhang up the coiling mountain trail, a hundred feet above. The stacked wood was all ablaze and burning brightly and he could see the flickering outline of the old man against the sky. Smoke billowed into the stars and the boy felt a great unease. He stood watching.

Other dark figures suddenly joined the old man. Like ghosts forming from the blackness. Men with axes and bone knives and cudgels fixed with bent spikes who had emerged from their holes and tramped along the mountain trails like wolves drawn to the signal flame. Perverts in heat for new flesh.

The boy bolted for the horses and began picking feverishly at the knot. He kept glancing warily up the trail. Swirling wind and darkness in that unreckonable night. He unlooped the tether and mounted and tore off down the path and onto the slope into the thick sage. There was only the sound of the hooves ripping through the deep brush and the wind in his ears and the boy cast frightened looks behind him at the fire that was a lone torch in the night sky. He kept beating the horse with his fist and driving his heel into its ribs. At the bottom of the foothills the earth suddenly cut away and the horse pitched headlong, screaming, throwing the boy like a rag doll against the ground. In the

brush the horse was all legs and flopping about, dashing the gourds in a spray of water. The boy clambered half crazed to his feet while the creature continued to thrash about on its side with the pouches spidered among the branches. It had nearly righted but stumbled half bent as if to pray and the boy tried to steady it but the great beast tottered and collapsed on its side with a rush of air. Its head was jerking about. The boy pulled at the strap and pleaded with the horse to rise but it lay breathing where it had fallen. And so he drew his knife and cut the tether and swung atop the other horse and he kicked it forward into a run through the declining brush and out across the nameless playa.

They rode long into the night, galloping hard until the horse weakened to a trot, throwing its head and snorting with the boy on its wet back coaxing it forward with fearful petitions.

They hid in the cavity of a wide ravine. Deep in its gut. The flame hung as but a spark on the distant mountain and the boy's thoughts were troubled as he crouched by his trembling horse, clutching the knife against his chest, watching all through the night tucked away in the dark recess.

Signs of morning finally broke along the eastern horizon. A red bloom radiating in the blackness, igniting clouds like heated metal.

The wind fell to a whisper.

Nothing came for him, nothing could be seen along the stark desert plain.

At full light he shook the two remaining gourds and parceled out what items remained on the sand and he reasoned with his horse about them all. He picked his way up the ravine and strode out onto the level ground and stood small in the enormity of that place, scanning the horizon. Standing there the indefinable calculations of human choice churned suspect and mysterious as if to mark the common frailty of men in their plight, while yet behind it all the unseen currents of determination moved providentially and were themselves curiously marked with designs by a hand larger than men can conceive, yet still their own.

He spat.

Eyed the sun.

Then he turned again to consider the distant mountains from whence he came and walked back to the lone horse and led it out from its place and drifted off again.



## IV



Viper's bite – Fitful night – Cages of the damned – A fateful  
alliance – City of Ebarr – Revenge at a brothel – A stable –  
The boy eats – Climbs another wall in moonlight.

Now come days of wandering, days of agony in the seething heat  
land. Where skeleton trees rise twisted in the blasting sun and  
fevered escarpments materialize in the distance like anxious dreams.  
He rides slumped across a great pan and among towering buttes,  
drawing on wordlessly, the horse lurching forward like some  
dehydrated beast mannequin cracking apart.

Pale antelope with long twisted horns herd in the evening light and  
are lost in the red horizon. He trails them for hope of water and finds  
a mud slick in the recess of a gully. He digs with his hands, soaks up  
water with his reeking loin cloth and rings it into his mouth.

The night sky is a mass of stars all alight and the boy sleeps fitfully  
with the horse panting and wolves gibber among the distant rocks like  
selfsame wanderers crying out. They set out in the morning and ride  
among sage and windswept acacia and the horse is struck by a viper  
that sends it screaming. He studies the swollen leg. Presses the bloated  
hide with his thumb. The horse stamps in pain and the boy walks  
alongside it and the horse labors awkwardly until it slides to the  
ground in a heap on the side of a hill, its breath rapid and shallow.  
The swollen leg is bleeding, rotting around the bite. He stands over  
the dying horse, curses aloud. An hour later the animal seizes with stiff  
jerking legs and rolling eyes and the boy unceremoniously shoulders  
the nearly empty gourds and drapes the amulet round his neck and  
sets off toward the declining sun, a solitary migrant unknown in all the  
world with his shadow stretching thin and alien along the stark waste.

He shelters among the rocks. Lies curled in the cooler night air.  
He wakes to a dream that he cannot recall save for a single image that  
stands fixed in his mind. A black raven with black jeweled eyes tossing

about on the ground with splayed wings, claws claspng at the air. Claspng at nothing.

At first light he set off under a vaulted sky with potted blue mountains rising far to the east and he labored all through the day and into the afternoon, his tracks trailing for miles like stitching on a pale garment. He stopped on a low rise and uncapped the gourd and drank what little remained and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and slowly corked the gourd while studying the distance. The foreground swelled in elevation and he lurched on and was much diminished for want of food and he stood weary atop a bluff looking down into a great bowl of desert rimmed with scalloped rock walls. The sun was a blurred egg yoke in the evening haze. Far down in the desert lowland he could see cages fastened to poles. A pack of animals appeared to be huddled about them, jostling with movements too remote to discern.

The boy descended the steep slope and pressed out across the desert bowl and came to see cages full of corpses hanging from gibbets with wild dogs scampering all about and rising up on their hind legs to tug at the frayed stumps dangling through the rungs. One turned with its dark stained mouth to regard the boy. The boy stood watching in the heat. One by one the dogs seemed to take note and chatter uncertainly and stir in the caked dirt. The boy shouted and the dogs stiffened and sniffed at the air and the boy shouted again and the half dozen dogs trotted off in turn, swinging their blood scab heads round as they faded off into the sweltering sand.

Seven iron wombs with rotting corpses barred within. Posted at intervals. A slight pendulum motion in the wind. There were cords of tattered flesh dangling beneath them and blackened hoops of blood and the dark prints of the dogs stamped about in mad variety.

The boy slowly neared walking the parameter of the scene. Some of the damned wore soiled clothes, others were naked with half devoured legs and hands chewed to the wrist.

The boy scanned the distant rocks and then approached the nearest cage and used the tip of his knife to search the tunic of a body bloated like a larva. Its misshapen head rested against the bars with flies clambering over its face, its matted hair. The boy coughed and reared away turning and returned to search among the cages and saw staring at him through the rough iron bars a man sitting atop a body

folded beneath him like some horrible mattress. The boy froze and neither spoke. The man wore no shirt and his dark skin was patched with paling blotches and he seemed oddly comfortable in his chamber, leaning forward to grip the bars with the cage tipping slightly, the rough hewn gibbet rising askance.

Damned if dogs aren't cursed things, he said.

The boy drew back as if to distance himself from a demon and the man asked if he would let him out but the boy did not answer. The man was a pollution of filth and stared with a wild intensity. He gestured toward the gourds, Just a swallow.

The boy stood with his knife. There's none to spare.

He extended his long arm out, Only a swallow.

There's none to spare.

I'm asking you.

The boy didn't answer and the man stared and then squinted at the dipping sun and fixed again on the boy. Flakes of dried blood fell from his face.

The way those gourds are flopping about, he said, arm dangling, you aren't goin' far.

I don't think I'd be worrying about me.

The man shifted and flies hissed viciously. You're not going to find water. Not without me.

I've found it before.

Not here you ain't.

The boy stood watching.

You're lost aren't you? Run'n from someone too. Or just lost?

I'm not running.

But yer lost. I know it.

You don't know.

The man smiled.

The sun burned in the west throwing a harsh light across the land. The boy stood aglow.

Why you in there?

For nothing much.

Must've been to someone.

The man smiled again.

What did you do?

The man edged a nail along the back of his head until he dislodged

a bit of matter and he held it aloft for inspection between his thumb and forefinger and flicked it unseen on the ground.

Peckered the wrong woman. Might of disputed with someone over it.

You kill the man?

Not yet.

It happen in a city around here?

The man pressed his face against the bars, I'll take you to it. Just let me out.

Or maybe I'll find it myself.

The man's voice changed and he stared with his bloodshot eyes, Listen to me. We're both caged animals right now, and your leash is but a speck longer. That's all. Now there's a city not far, and I'll take you there and finish up my business. There's plenty of water and food to be had. As sure as our thirst is strong.

I've heard promises before.

This isn't about no promises. It's about living.

The boy gazed out over the landscape, turned to look behind him. Brushed a fly from his ear.

That mark on your face. Where'd you get it?

The boy fixed on him but didn't answer.

I know that mark. The man repositioned his weight and the cage jostled in the air. Even if you find the city, there's men who will gather you up like stubble and burn you in the fires. Slaves aren't nobody, especially nobody in Ebarr. You understand?

Is that the name of the city?

The man nodded.

It's close?

Yes.

How long to get there?

Few hours.

I don't have no water.

I know. Now let me out.

Who put you in there?

Nobody to concern you.

That cage says I should.

It says you shouldn't get filthy drunk and argue with a dog's ass of a man.

The boy didn't speak.

I've got a camel penned up in that city. There'd be one to snatch for you to. Supplies as well, but we need to get about it.

The boy stood studying the man. Behind him the scarlet drapery of the sun was running across the sand and up the crowned rocks to a blood cloud sky spreading like a holocaust. He knew all would change and he knew he had no other way and he turned to fetch a stone and went to hitting the iron spike bent through the coupling while the man watched with interest and the flies whirled like dervishes robed in black. When the bottom caging swung free the corpse pitched with its rotting skin puckered through the grating and the man lowered himself and ducked clear the cage and eyed it rudely as if its existence proved an offense and he stretched testing his shoulder and then straightened to a surprising height.

Alright, come on, he said, lumbering off to the north.

The boy followed behind him like an obedient goat and they trekked across the painted desert with the man glancing back with his blotched face and matted hair.

The sun fell from its lofty course, melting into the horizon, and the night began to fold in on them, snuffing out the ember glow in the west. The desert air cooled and a flock of larks darted across the face of the moon and the land heaved into a rolling waste of scrub and crippled junipers and they crested a hill and stood staring with their dark and haunted faces. The city lay silent in the distance. Dots of torchlight flickered among the adobe buildings like candles on an altar and there was a great stone wall bordered about with a ziggurat rising black and portentous with shacks strewn outside the city.

The man pointed, We climb the wall there on the far side.

I see it.

The man started down the hill and the boy followed and they took up a trail that wove through the purlieu of raddled huts. Old sesame lamps were hung about glowing dimly and there were the lame and destitute sitting off in the darkness and watching and an infant was crying somewhere. After a time they came to a small well in a clearing trodden with use. They fetched up water. An old man with a stick watched them drink. Water dripped from their chins. Dogs could be heard fighting in the distance.

They stood panting and then set off up a narrow footpath. There

were little mud houses everywhere and they could see the the face of the wall shaped out of the night and when they drew near the foot of it they crouched in the dark behind a stone hedge. The man studied the upper lip, tracing its line with his eyes. Twenty feet of stacked blocks, opposite the moon's touch.

He told the boy to move swiftly and they ran up the slope to a corner seam and scaled it silently to the parapet appearing briefly in the moonlight and back down to the shadows of a stable pungent with the smell of urine. A hog grunted in the darkness and the man shuffled over the packed straw to a gate and peered out. He motioned with his head and they padded along the cobbled street among the plaster buildings that were stacked about in every variety.

The brothel lay ahead in the dark. It was a desiccation of cracked stone with planked windows and a thatched roof. In the entry room there were rough hewn tables and wickerwrapped clay jars and the air was thick with the smell of woodsmoke. Two men were about a game at a corner table. The keeper was standing nearby watching. He looked at them when they entered and stood uneasily.

Where's he at? the blotched man said.

The keeper looked afraid. The other men stopped playing.

Where is he?

Upstairs. With Cyra, I believe.

The man made for the steps and the boy followed.

Aemon, called the keeper.

The man stopped and looked.

You shouldn't be here.

Aemon pointed his finger and tilted his head oddly and then lowered his arm and ascended the steps to a dark hallway lit with a feeble lamp hanging on the far wall. Doors smoked with grime lined the dismal corridor. They walked its length and climbed a set of worn steps to another hallway much the same. The man studied each door in turn and stopped before one latched shut in stone. He stood listening. He looked at the boy and then stepped back and slammed his foot against the door. It splintered open and Aemon marched toward a naked man lying on a bed. A woman was dressing near a basin of water by the wall and she cowered as the blotched figure grabbed the man by the throat and drug him off the bed to the stone floor and went to prying out an eye with his thumb. The naked man

screamed and pulled at Aemon's arms. His legs flailed and he turned in a half circle with Aemon riding him with clenched teeth. The man's eye popped and squirted around the digit and he shrieked horribly.

Grab his legs.

The boy didn't move.

Grab his legs, dammit.

The boy grabbed his legs and Aemon squeezed the man's neck with both hands. The man tore at his wrists, spit bubbled from his mouth. The woman fled the room.

Where did he go? Tell me.

The man stared up with one wild eye.

I'm going to gouge out that other lying eye. Now tell me.

He sputtered and wrenched his neck for air.

Last chance.

Aemon turned to the boy, Cut his eye out.

The man's eye darted and he bucked wildly. Aemon leveraged his weight and thrust his thumb into the man's good eye.

Kalidd-ahri, he cried. Kalidd-ahri.

Aemon drew near the man's face, Not right. That's not right.

The man surged insanely and the boy straddled his legs. Aemon leaned into his grip. Veins bulged on the man's temple.

Not the right answer.

The man gasped and reached for Aemon. Aemon casually averted his face and squeezed until the groping hands fell to the floor.

Give me the knife.

The boy hesitated.

Just give me the knife.

The boy reached behind him and handed him the sheathed knife and Aemon drew it and jammed it into the side of the man's throat. Dark arterial blood jet across the floor in heaving gouts. Aemon stood breathing staring down at the naked man. He seemed lost in thought, then he wasn't, and he moved to the door to listen. Muted voices fluttered below.

Come on.

Aemon made for the clay lamp at the end of the hallway and he unloosed the leather thong fastening it to the wall and then entered an empty room. After he had kicked open the small shuttered window he stood aloft the stained bedding with the flame of the lamp licking at

the flax stalks above him. The fire slowly crawled and the reeds curled in the heat and the boy's filthy face flickered in the growing light. Aemon launched the lamp into the hallway and he wedged himself out the window like an articulating cellar spider with the boy following easily. Old cracks potted the outer wall and they climbed down easily, dropping to the ground and darting off through the cramped footpaths between the buildings like a pair of reeking mud cats. Behind them the roof had kindled into a tremendous fire and clouds of white smoke billowed into the still night sky.

They wove through the crude adobes in a dead run, sprinting up alleyways and down narrow corridors held in shadow and night. There were darkened figures atop the azoteas with their cookery and frayed tarps strung between the buildings and debris of all kinds and trash piles, old buckets. They ran up a curve of stone steps two at a time and came to a small courtyard where there were a few ratty chickens and a goat standing on a retaining wall. Turning up a stamped clay path inlaid with foot stones they happened upon an archway opening onto a road pitted with wheel ruts. Onto this they emerged walking with artless subtlety. Aemon glanced over his shoulder sucking air through his nostrils. Then he grinned at the boy.

There was no light save the moon which stood visible and bright above the mud hovels. At a fork in the road they angled off to a clearing and crossed a yard to a long sullen stable where an old man was sitting on a makeshift bench under a lantern hanging from a timber beam. He rose when they neared and Aemon spoke his name and the old man wordlessly opened the rough wooden door and lifted the lantern from its place and held it aloft as they entered. In the sulfur light they looked like indigents unearthed from a disaster. The stable smelled of manure and straw and the dromedaries swung their alien heads to watch the approaching arrivals in the thin glow. The old man hung the lantern on a peg and receded into the darkness. Camels croaked uneasily.

Aemon's camel was packed with bundles of wool bedding and pouches strapped with twine and leather straps. He untied the pouches and rifled through the contents.

We can't take any camels out, Aemon said. Not at night.

I know.

We lift what we can and make for the mountains to the north.



I ain't wandering no desert again.

You won't be wandering.

This is gone all to hell.

Aemon turned and looked at the boy, grinning strangely. His eyes were uneven sockets set in his filthy head. He said, We ain't wandering.

The boy stood silent. The blotched man blinked and became animate again and pulled out roasted grains wrapped in a cloth and handed it to the boy.

Eat.

Aemon took out another and unwrapped it and began to chew and the boy did likewise. He then unbounded the blanket rolls and cinched them tight with the twine and cut a length of leather to make a sling suitable for the boy. The boy stood awkwardly shouldering the bundles with the gourds dangling by his side. Aemon slung several pouches about him and uncorked a waterskin and drank and then handed it to the boy who took a long draft. The boy handed it back and Aemon looped it over his head, adding it to the cluster of hide pouches.

The old man neither looked nor spoke when they came lumbering out. They set off along a narrow street for the wall keeping far from the watchmen who were standing atop it with their spears silhouetted against the star flung sky. An old wagon cart was upturned and tilted on its side along the northern perimeter and as they squatted beside it in the darkness Aemon slid his hand across the stone while gazing upward. He chose his spot and shifted the pouches and the two picked their way up to the lip of the parapet, sliding over the edge to the opposite facing and down again with the watchmen undisturbed and black against the stone. They struggled for footing and bumbled their way down like a pair of clambering spalacids and then beetled off through the squalid hatchery of mud huts for the desert.

## V



A dark mountain – A bright flame – Talk of the Nephilim –  
The eunuch – Sacked village – Samael touches his scar –  
Two remaining villagers – A spear throwing contest – A  
map – An interrogation.

They cast out into the night with the city dissolving into obscurity behind them. In that barren country of sand and scrub the world fell mute and the corrugated hills rolled indistinct and black with the stone mountains rising blacker yet to the north. No wind stirred and tufts of wild haired abal dotted the ground and the two tramped along at a quickened pace. The boy studied the horizon and the approaching mountain and he thought of running off, but did not. He bore in his heart some ineffable rogue attraction to the man's vulgar confidence. Or perhaps it was an unnatural kinsman bond drawn from affinities unspoken yet palpable to an orphan heart in want. How to know such things, the tailorings of the soul? But on they walked and neither spoke for the better part of an hour.

Somewhere along the lower foothills of the mountain the blotched man turned and said, You remember what he said at the brothel?

I remember.

What he say?

Kalidd-ahri.

You know it?

No.

You sure?

I'm sure.

Didn't hear it while you were roving about?

I said no.

You come across any other places?

No.

The man glanced at the boy with his dark eyes. Nothing. Nothing at all out there.

A bunch of dead in a cave. An old hermit somewhere.

Where'd you get freed at?

Heading to Peyron. A day out. We overtook them at night.

The man smiled a cruel smile, You cut'm down good?

We just did it.

Enjoy it? Seeing them beg like dogs. He worked his mouth in the dark. I know you liked it.

The boy drank from a gourd and let it fall. Aemon walked slightly hunched at a hard clip, the pouches swinging on his back. The black mountain stood shaped against the sky and it was still very night and they walked side by side.

The boy spoke, A slave mentioned a city. Gilboa. Didn't see it though.

How far from Peyron?

I don't know. Far.

Days?

Maybe so. By foot.

You never saw it?

No.

Sure?

Yes.

We have to move faster, the man said. Have to set a signal fire before daybreak. Gotta be before daybreak.

Signal for what?

The man glanced strangely and didn't answer. Then he said, Sons of Anuk.

Who's that?

Men of war. Men like lions.

Never heard of them.

Well they're comin'.

So there's war coming?

Always.

Aemon readjusted the pouches, Move faster.

The man began to run, stamping up the loose foothills, and the boy followed with the woolen bundles swinging awkwardly. They picked their way up a great talus slope and the loose rocks skated

underfoot and rattled into the darkness and the mountain hove upward with sheered facings piercing the stars. They wove through the spired gaps and shuffled around to the northerly side of the mountain where they clambered atop a shelf overlooking a desert floor drowned in night. The sky was still very dark with the stars tossed like salt grains on a black cloth and the two stood catching their breath while staring out over the void.

Aemon swung the pouches to the ground and told the boy to start gathering brush and the boy dropped his bundles and began fetching patches of old scrub along the steep slopes. When he returned Aemon had piled the pouches and two of the blankets in a heap and the boy dropped a few pluckings from his hands.

More, said the man. Get more. Pillage the whole damn mountain.

They set to searching where they could among the naked rocks, hauling armfuls of razor brush to the pile. The man kept crushing it down and calling for the boy to gather more and soon the kindling was heaped into an enormous sand spur that stood fully eye level. When enough had been gathered, the man dropped to his knees holding the flint with the boy watching and sparks arced with each strike, shooting into a nest of fabric. A single shard of light took root and the man cupped it and blew and smoke began to trickle out from between his thumbs. He continued to coax it and the smoke thickened until a fire sprang to life and he set it among the blankets under the brush.

It's going to burn fast. Get ready.

There was another blanket lying on the ground and the boy took it up and the man told him to wait. Fire ran through the twisted brush and soon the whole mound was crackling with heat. Embers twisted into the night sky and the shelf shone brilliantly. They were bathed in orange. Aemon turned to face the desert. He stood peering like some bird of prey looking downcountry.

The boy was the first to see it. Far beyond to the east. A speck of light. Where the sky and land fell to cellar black.

Hold the blanket, the man said, turning to face the fire.

They held it aloft on opposite ends creating a blind before the fire. The man counted aloud and told the boy to lower it to the ground on the count of four. They crouched and the man craned to see the distant fire. It blinked from sight and then reappeared.

Up. Lift it up.

The boy rose and held it high with his arms outstretched. The fire was ablaze and the boy turned his face from the heat of it. After what seemed a long time the man told him to drop it again and they crouched and watched the distant spark flicker three times and then diffuse into nothingness.

Aemon stood staring out into the darkness casually rolling the blanket. The fire had burned bright and fast and soon lay reduced in a crackling heap with the charred pouches smoking in white ash. The man crouched and laid a series of small stones in parallel lines on the ground to mark where the fire appeared in the distance. He stood and turned and said they would break at first light. Then he reclined against the stone and extended his great body to full length and eyed the boy.

I ain't tired, the boy said.

The man rolled and the boy sat on the shelf looking out at the stars while the smoking remains of the fire smoldered and snapped and the ash drifted off the edge like flakes of snow.

When they woke in the morning the sky was the color of urine gathered in a glass with the sun hovering just above the jagged horizon. The fire lay black and lifeless and there were birds in flight cutting across the mesa. Aemon sat inspecting the contents of the remaining pouch. He dished out roasted grains and strips of dried rabbit meat on the ground and parceled a portion for the boy and sat chewing. The boy took it and walked to the edge of the shelf and ate. The man's hair was caked up with grime and the boy's hollowed eyes soundlessly panned the open world.

When they had finished they drank in turns and the boy saddled the gourds and the man slung the lone pouch across his back and fixed the waterskin the same and they set off down the mountain along a groove to a wide pediment veining out across the floor of the desert. The world lay flat before them and the firmament held its sulfur tint all through the day as the two trod in the dull heat. Strange treelike plants with stiff thorns and ashen skin lined the slopes with their leafless arms and the two rested in the shade of an immense boulder half sunk in the sand as if dropped from a great height and left by giants. They sat drinking saying nothing and the man examined the

curved Peyronian blade turning it in his hand without expression. He chiseled at a bit of dried blood with his thumb and said it was not impressive workmanship and slid it back into the lion hide sheath and rose and picked his way to the top of the boulder and stood staring off into the distance. The boy watched him dig at his ear with a finger. Then he dropped down and they set off again, tromping across the expanse like two insects progressing over a wrinkled and tattered hide.

The mountain from which they ventured grew faint as smoke in the shedding light and locks of dry tobosa sprouted from among the stony fissures and swayed in the growing wind. That evening the sun stooped below the horizon and burned with a ruddy fervor and the night came creeping in and the two sat before a low fire eating the last handfuls of grain with the desert pure black all about.

Aemon picked at his teeth and the boy sat staring into the fire. The man dug out a husk and flicked it toward the flame and the boy watched him go to working again.

Them are unknown parts around Gilboa, the man said absently, still picking at his teeth. They'll be pleased to know you've been near it. I wouldn't worry a bit.

The boy glanced but didn't speak.

The man reclined and repositioned his legs. You figure out what we're after?

Someone.

That's right. Someone. Know who?

No.

No, you wouldn't.

The boy kept on the fire.

In that turd hole town of yours ever hear of the Nephilim?

The boy shook his head.

The man regarded the boy with a look of grotesque amusement. Nephilim. Never at all.

I don't care about no Nephilim.

The man smiled. You born a slave? Or someone take you?

The boy didn't respond and the man mused aloud, I bet they took you. Probly just came right in and stole you. Killed your father, raped your mom. You any sisters? They'd like them too. Then they probly just sold you off for a trinket. Maybe for a drink. Maybe for that much.

The boy kept staring at the fire.

You remember what they look like? Was their faces all wrapped up with just two pig eyes staring out? He paused and made a sound. Black lifeless eyes. Leaves an impression.

The man fixed on the boy. The boy looked back.

Don't know, said the boy.

Aemon looked on with half amused insanity, his untrue eyes cauldron depictions of the campfire. He made a slow gesture and rubbed his face and told the boy that the Nephilim were made to be killed and were of foul origin and less than animals and were like human waste sticking to the foot and that Samael was a great prophet sent to devote them to destruction and that pity was a pitiful thing that burned only in the breasts of women. He said that they were the sons of Anuk, the true breed made from the gods, and that the man they were hunting was no such product and a false claim and that his blood would be spilled and drunk as wine and that the cities of the Nephilim would bow unto them and give pleasure as milk and they would take women of their choosing, making great harems befitting their abundant seed that spills like a coursing river. When Aemon had spoken all these things he was breathing differently and he sat with a look of bitter pleasure watching the trembling flame and the boy who was listening quietly nearby.

Silence fell between them and the fire reduced to pulsing embers. The moon shone yellow in the blotted sky and they were two specks in the spectral light.

You said Kalidd-ahri was not the right answer, the boy said.

Aemon smiled and tilted his queer head, It was right. Then the blotched man laughed and the boy seemed to find the humor in it.

In the still dark of morning a blush of scarlet grew along the eastern horizon. They rose and pissed on the sand and gathered what little they had and set off across the mesa with the sun slowly bulging into view across the desolation, hazed and dull, like an enormous cyclops lumbering from its chamber. There were no trees and the land was a wreckage of stones protruding from the earth as if the product of some terrible upheaval or cosmic disarrangement flung from beyond.

The gourds hanging from the boy's neck sloshed with water as he

walked and he stared out at the ragged combes and low escarpments rising mute in the distance. After a time they stopped and drank. In the hard light the blotched man's back was a patchwork of peeling skin. They did not speak, they eyed the terrain. Then they pressed out again trudging with their calloused feet over the scorched sand.

The hours passed in silence, the circumscribed hills saddled with scoria and bits of flintstone, mound to progressing mound, until they saw the rider with the camels approaching in the distance. Black shapes dancing in the heat. The boy asked who it was and Aemon stood squinting and said their ride had come. Then they footed off down the hill.

Within the hour both parties drew nigh along a pebbled flat. The camels were great humped beasts with coarse hair and doubtful eyes and they were rigged with crude saddles and pouches specked with tufts of blackened hair as if hacked from a creature and sown together with the organs still biting on it. The mounted figure was bald and thin to bone and black as charcoal and he wore little but for straps bounded all about him that held slender sheaths for knives with obsidian stones set in the handles.

The eunuch halted his camel. He stared at the boy with his white eyes. Aemon strode wordlessly over to the other camel and began searching among the pouches. The eunuch's head sat large on his thin neck and was misshapen and he kept staring as if inanimate of soul. The boy held his gaze.

He's with me, Aemon said, withdrawing a strip of flatbread and a fistful of dark legumes. Aemon shoved the bread in his mouth and went to chewing and held out a portion for the boy and the boy took it and ate.

The village's been took, the eunuch said. Fell easy.

Aemon chewed and then nodded and shoved more bread into his mouth.

Good, he said. It's Kalidd-ahri. That's where they're head'n.

How far?

Don't know.

Know the direction?

Aemon tossed his head back and refilled his mouth, Nope.

The eunuch sat motionless, strangely erect. His eyes followed the boy's movements.



The air was still and hot and Aemon told the boy to ride with him and he mounted the great beast and Aemon turned it eastward and they set off at a gallop, pressing the camels hard across the windswept land and by late evening they came to see smoking in the distance the dark remains of the sacked village. It lay solitary in the open with the mountains to the south faintly outlined in the dying light.

A wall of dried mud and sharpened timbers encircled the village and sections of it bore the faded emblems of their gaudy deities. These strange depictions were smeared in red and hallucinatory and weathered from the thrash of sandstorms. A sentry posted at the entrance stood scooping meal from a pottery bowl into his mouth. He nodded as they rode single file through the gate. The air reeked of smoke and death and bodies were strewn on the ground, men and women hacked in all fashions and lying in their own dark blood. One lay altogether crushed and faceless in the road. Along the wall hogs were rooting among the slain.

Many of the buildings had been torched and lay cremated in smoldering piles and there rose thin columns of smoke that feathered into the black sky and small flames twisted in the wind throwing quilted light across the winding pathways. The camels stepped between the bodies and the road widened into a courtyard where there hung figures from shafts of gopher wood, bound and charred and dangling over fires. They were posted loosely in rows and their legs were half consumed to stumps with the bones stabbing out in charcoal filaments, the skin of their naked bodies blackened to burnt meat. Their heads were flung back in agony and greased with smoke and they were rotating slowly in the open air. One was still yet alive and jerking and there milled about him all manner of barbarous men with wild eyes and distempered teeth who had great weapons for stabbing and chopping. Some were searching among the dead while others stood smoking reed pipes that glowed like tiny roses in the darkness. The man screaming in the flame drew their empty stares. Among them stood a giant that seemed crafted from a fable book story, a misbegotten figure woven from a flawed womb that was altogether nude with his great member swinging obscenely between his thighs. His hair was unkempt and it draped across his sweating pug face and in his left hand he held the shaft of an enormous spear, the head of which was the size of a horse cutter.

Huge camels ambled about in packs, their legs filthy with the gore of the fallen. They were beastly congregants of another order whose mouths were buckled like madmen in an asylum and their humped backs bore great bundles with the trappings drawn tight about their gorged bellies. From these there hung human parts in the manner of finery: bent fingers thread together in loops and blackened ears and whole heads affright and dried like enormous seeds. The shadows of this foul rabble ran to darkness absolute and the darkness seemed to pull at it with tendrils from another realm and the fires made these dance and quiver as if made animate by vaporous fiends jerking at the physical world.

But among it all and foremost in the firelight stood Samael the prophet, a sharply muscular figure inscribed with pockmarks and scars and other fiery brandings now dark and puckered in what would seem stigmata branded from the abyss. His hands were large and two locks of hair fell from his shaved skull, knotted at intervals with gold strands. His eyes were unsound in shape and they seemed to see through things or beyond things or were perhaps windows to imaginations degenerate and fateful. But for all this his face was curiously untouched and very nearly beautiful. He was standing before the charred bodies as if appraising sculptures.

They rode unto him and turned the camels to face him.

My cat has returned, he said. Of what have you learned, Aemon?

They've slipped to another city. One so named Kalidd-ahri. Don't know its whereabouts.

Samael absorbed the words without witness to feelings and commenced to shift slightly to see the boy riding rear the camel.

You've a guest, Aemon?

You could say it. He was a help.

I am sure he was.

Might know a thing about these parts. Been wandering about.

That so? Hear that, eunuch? Perhaps you'll have a new friend.

Samael offered a delicate smile to the boy and he spoke in a tone near that of pleasantries. The eunuch is a maker of maps. He likes to draw things.

The boy glanced toward the eunuch. The eunuch sat expressionless.

Samael inquired into the boy's origin and the boy told him that he

did not know and that he was taken many years ago and Samael seemed pleased at the admission and drew near and asked the boy about the mark on his face.

A note of property? he said.

Not no more.

The prophet studied the boy's face. Tis the markings of Lamech, Samael said. You agree, Aemon?

Seems it.

Samael reached to touch the scar and the boy drew back and Samael smiled and waited and reached again and traced his finger along the pursed line.

I have not seen such handiwork in some time.

The boy did not move.

Samael lowered his hand and searched the boy with his eyes and as he did so he told the eunuch that it was time to gather the men to eat. From among a small pouch the eunuch produced a bird's skull fitted with a looped cord made of braided human hair and he cupped it in his hands and blew into a rear hole. A terrible note rang out. Like that of a mother having found her deceased child. He repeated the call and men came lumbering out of the darkness and by ones and twos they tromped into a communal hall outfitted with roughshod tables and a large firepit where there hung among an assembly of shaved poles various pigs glistening on spits. A pile of dead chickens and a skinned dog were heaped beside the fire on the dirt floor and some among the group clasped their own plundered foods with tightfisted greed. The giant ducked through the entrance and seemed spectacular in the room and he trod about for an open space and there was much revelry and stink of men and Samael told them to enjoy their spoils after a brief word. They commenced to eating and the report of their chewing was singular and they coughed and grunted like hogs and the food was a brown paste in their open mouths. Smoke from the fire bled out through a hole in the roof and the low flame seemed volcanic amid the dark ring of hunched figures.

Two men of the village were sitting in the corner bound with ropes, beaten and looking on with swollen faces. One's eye was pinched shut in a dark fistula of bloated flesh. When the rounds of food had diminished and drinking became acute, a man of incredible physique rose to address the motley congregation. One so named Ngannou,

second only to the prophet. He informed his men that their prey was presently scurrying off to a city called Kalidd-ahri and he inquired into their knowledge of the place and none knew. At this he appealed to their better sensibilities by pointing to the two men bound in the corner, asking whether they might know.

Heads swung. A deep quiet filled the room.

Ngannou stood with an appraising look. He told the bound men that the first to help would be afforded a great prize, the other not so.

The one's good eye darted uncertainly, but neither spoke.

Ngannou bore a look of disappointment. Then with a paternal air he asked to borrow the hatchet of someone sitting nearby. Holding it casually by the handle he approached them and knelt demonstrating the item as if it were something unusual to behold.

Kalidd-ahri, he said.

He waited.

The man with the swollen eye was sweating profusely.

Don't, said the other.

Ngannou looked suddenly bored and asked the sweating figure if he preferred his left or right foot.

Fool, said the other. You'll be damned.

The man with the swollen eye was shaking violently, his wrists wringing in the restraints.

Ngannou stood.

It's northwest, the man with the swollen eye said. Northwest beyond the high mountains.

The northwest?

The man nodded.

Do you know how far?

I don't know. It's far.

Very good, Ngannou said. So said your friends in the fire.

The man stared.

Lower your head, Ngannou said.

The man's face twitched.

It's ok. Lower your head.

The man glanced about fearfully. Ngannou gave him a look and the man slowly lowered his head. He was breathing loudly. With a single finger Ngannou guided his head a touch lower and then struck him with a great blow causing the man's body to pitch forward with his

face pressed against the ground in a vomit of gore.

At the sight of this the other villager was beset with rage and he heaved against the restraints and fell sidelong cursing with spit caught in his beard. Ngannou casually drew near to close and stared into the man's eyes as if searching for something. Then he stood and turned and motioned for those nearest to create more space. When they had shuffled aside, Ngannou handed off the hatchet and withdrew a slender blade and he gripped the man by the throat and pressed him to the ground. Air seethed through the villager's nostrils while Ngannou cut the restraints. Then he stepped back and sheathed the knife and spread his arms wide and told the man that he was no man and that his people were weak and fit to be killed like dumb animals.

The villager rose. In that strange light he looked insane. Something was in his mind reaching beyond the bounds of men's knowing. Then a moment later his wet teeth shone and he lunged for the great Anukite and they become one, gripping and heaving with sudden jerks. Ngannou was a full foot taller and he mocked the man and the man cried out with effort but it was of no account. When the villager drove forward with his stout legs, Ngannou shifted his weight and flung the man to ground and mounted unto him and began striking the man's face.

The man surged, rolling to his side, and as he did so Ngannou latched onto an arm and extended it out. The man strained but the warrior found his angle and wrenched it behind the man's back. The man screamed and his shoulder popped and the bones bulged through the skin, dragging about like a creature under a sheet.

The Anukite folded the arm further and then let it go where it hung frozen in an unnatural state.

The man lay squirming in agony, cursing through clenched teeth.  
Ngannou rose.

The man struggled to rise. His arm was dangling oddly. Ngannou pushed the man with his foot.

Ngannou turned.

He said, Very weak.

Then he motioned towards some of the men standing in the back.

Let us see thy aim, Duntree.

A spiteful looking man with a pinched face eagerly rose and snatched up a spear leaning against the wall. Ngannou stepped aside

and the spear shot through the air striking the man in the hip. It hung limply from him. The man seemed not to feel and with his good arm he reached and jerked the spear out and awkwardly threw it at Ngannou.

Ngannou swatted it away easily.

Laughter rose.

Another took aim in the back and the spear missed woefully, clanging off the rear wall, creating more laughter. Someone else found the man's shoulder and another hit his knee. Ngannou held up a hand and called after the giant, Let us see thy arm, Mushdamma.

The giant rose slowly in the back, his head brushing the cross beam. He lifted his tremendous spear and hurtled it across the room and staked the man to the ground. The man gripped the thick shaft with a look of wonder. It was protruding from his abdomen. He gasped for air. Blood spilled from his mouth and then he died. Sounds of groaning and delight erupted and Ngannou congratulated the foul giant.

Aemon sat reclined in a lurid posture eating scraps of pork and the boy quietly watched as the group came alive with drink. Someone struck up a kind of rhythmic chant composed largely of grunts and a handful of bearded men near the fire tossed their heads while postured in a low crouch, stepping nimbly with their arms limp by their sides. They moved in tailored unison and shook their chests while others slapped their meaty thighs, lifting splayed hands before their wild faces.

A haze of smoke choked the room and the small lanterns shone dimly and some of the men returned to their mangled food, picking at the bones. Mushdamma plucked his spear from out of the villager and ventured into the night and some followed in noise and revelry. Others smoked with stuperous looks while a handful gambled off their new found treasures with copper dice.

None were so untouched by the festivities as the eunuch who suddenly appeared before the boy brandishing a vellum scroll in his left hand. He sat without a word and unrolled the map and produced a slender utensil of bamboo sharpened to a point. By this he set a small conical vial of heated leather and uncorked the stopper and dipped the tip of the pen inside. A bead of dark dye from a rare flower pooled in the narrow canal of the instrument. He held it in one

hand. On the map there were indigo etchings of an unseen kind. Depictions of mountains and huts for cities and streams fingering like veins from a midrib. Orbiting these in a constellation of scratches were the esoteric markings of the eunuch's mathematical language known only to he.

The eunuch tapped his finger on the map, Ebarr. He slid his finger to an unmarked expanse above the spot and made a circular motion. Unknown.

He looked intently at the boy.

Aemon was sitting up and watching with some curiosity, still working on a leg of blackened meat.

The eunuch slid his finger to a blank spot in the lower west corner.

Aemon says you were come for a city, a Gilboa.

I never found it.

But you were close.

Don't know.

You do not know or you do not want to say?

The boy looked at the eunuch. His face said nothing.

Never seen it.

The eunuch lowered his eyes to the map.

How you learn of Gilboa?

A slave. Said it was beyond but there was no nothing beyond.

Beyond what?

A ridge.

You go to the ridge and see nothing?

Right.

Nothing from there?

Nothing.

The eunuch inquired further into the boy's knowledge of Peyron and the slave city of his upbringing and the many landmarks now so phantom in his mind and the eunuch pressed him for accuracies that he could not provide. The eunuch sat staring. Aemon pondered the stiff gaze of the eunuch with a bemused gape creating alongside the boy two incomprehensible poles of expression that rendered him altogether uncertain, as if he were witnessing at that moment a slip in time or culture where the accident of it all could not be reckoned with any clear indication of understanding. The boy waited. Then the eunuch's pen became animate and he scratched out a series of notes

in the lower corner and rose and left the boy. Aemon reclined to his former posture and told the boy that the eunuch was a strange craft.

Some were still chanting and dancing in their oddity and the boy sat trying to conjure the image of the map in its various details and especially the westward trail forged by the war party that cut across deserts and mountains and other villages they had sacked.



## VI



The boy selects a hatchet – Sandstorm – Samael pontificates upon predation – A lunar eclipse – Slavers on the road – A dog takes an arrow – Telmin – An execution – Torgan – Two of the Nephilim flee – Devoted to destruction.

When the night had drawn long, each man slowly drifted off, bedding down like indelicate squatters suddenly fortunated with excess, urinating in the ransacked huts and lying about with their legs dangling off the ends of straw mats. The boy slept on a blanket in the corner of a mudbrick hovel with Aemon stretched out along the opposite wall. A rustling wind tumbled through the empty streets and the sky held no light.

The rising sun made visible again the slain scattered about the village. They seemed sleeping things themselves save for the small birds pecking at the tattered remnants with their curved beaks. Several of the corpses hanging from ropes had collapsed into the ashes and lay black as charred cinder logs. Along the wall the hogs were congregated in the dirt, bloated and filthy and much contented, and the Anukites arose much the same and gathered their supplies in a wordless mob, strapping and lashing supplies to their camels. The giant had wrapped a woolen blanket about his waist and he was walking alongside his own enormous mount, leading it by the strap like some contemplative ogre king departing a royal bath house. Few were conversing and those who did matched the hush of the still morning air.

The scouts were the first to set out, two wiry men with great bows slung across their backs, the shafts of their arrows feathering against the slate blue sky. They convened with the prophet and kicked out to the north riding at a gallop drawing up spates of dust behind them. Aemon told the boy to secure his own mount from among the spoils

and he selected a densely furred camel and outfitted it with smoked meat and millet and fresh skins of water. From among the slain he found a hatchet fitted with a stock of oil rubbed sotol wrapped in leather. The bronze head was thick and corroded with dappled etchings of coiled serpents. He parceled it among his goods with the handle extended out.

Among the rest of the company each man housed their weapons in roughshod scabbards sown together with the sinew of boars: curved blades as long as arms and huge iron mallets and long shafted khopeshes stout as beams. There were twenty men and extra camels heaped with provisions and they trailed out the gate, pressing westward into the desert.

The boy rode near Aemon.

All through the morning the sun wheeled along its bitter arc, red blistered and pulsing, and a searing wind swept along the pebbled ground kicking up bales of swirling dust, drawing the distant ridges in a thin haze. They rode for hours and nooned by a gorge that was stained and black and deep. An ill-conceived colostomy to the land. Here they ate and drank and grunted among themselves and then forged out to hills choked with shale and twisted trees looted by the sun. The eunuch studied the horizon with the map unscrolled before him scratching notes as might a shop merchant at a desk. More than once he rode alongside the boy to inquire whether the land was a remembered place, but the boy could not say as it all seemed a lost dream.

In a few hours time, the world leveled into a pan of course sand tracked with pinions of stone, molting cacti, a solitary tree perched aloft a ridge. A deep stillness seemed to issue up from the rocks and the men by some natural instinct kept their silence, observing everything with watchful shifting eyes. In this quiet estate they rode henceforth, miles on end, and the drooping sun blurred into the horizon with the shadows of rocks stretching like brushstrokes to the canvas edge.

They camped in the open desert with the camels sitting quietly in the dark. An acacia was hacked up for firewood and they sat round a fire eating their meals with their hands. Embers roamed the night sky

and the branches popped with life as Ngannou stood among them recounting tales of former heroism. Somewhere in the distance they saw the signal flame of the scouts, brief and flickering. Then it blinked away to former night and all was before as it stood.

With morning a bitter wind fell upon them and they set out with their faces wrapped in cloth the color of the desert. Sand lashed at them as it lashed at all and each man was alone with his fugitive thoughts. They holed up in the lee of a low ridge and shook the sand from their waterskins and drank and the sand was but grit in their teeth. The boy sat silent among them, watching uneasily, the dry troughs of desert grass bending in the wind. None spoke. They rode on.

By late afternoon a great lever was pulled in the north and the wind fell away to a whisper and they rode with unwrapped faces, studying the harsh landscape with bloodshot eyes. Their way took them through a ravine walled up with sharp rocks and they climbed atop a rise overlooking the wide desert. Ngannou set his mount and stared out over the waste. A hard land littered with stones. Samael spurred up beside him. They studied the sight. Ngannou looked over his shoulder at his men and then kicked off down the slope into the vast heat waste. They trailed single file for miles into the dark of evening and made camp at the base of a ridge. A small fire was kindled and soon the scouts emerged out of the darkness like foreign things themselves. They dropped from their mounts and drew near. One was holding a pair of dead rabbits by the feet. Samael greeted them.

There's a trail three miles to the north, one of the scouts said. Well trodden. Cuts towards high mountains that'r bald and faceless.

I'd say a trail is what we want, said Samael. Did you see anything?

No one.

Perhaps the day will bring just such, Samael said.

The scout tossed the rabbits to one among the group and he jerked the meat from it and hung the strips over the fire on sticks and in that low firelight the men were seated all about, some crouching, some sitting, and there was little conversation until a dispute arose over the nature of wolves. It was generally contended that they possessed a sagacity unparalleled among beasts and that it was this singular attribute that made them creation's surest predator. Some felt that this was not so and various substitutes were offered as superior candidates.

Lines of evidence and counter evidence was marshaled to great effect and the dispute sharpened to nearly a pitch until Dungle ventured off and shat upwind the group, thereby incurring a string of invectives that sent him bumbling off bow legged to the amusement of those most appraised of the view. After this silence fell among them again and they sat staring at the red coals that were living things in their fiery chambers and the night sky bent round the globe and was much alive itself and Samael leaned forward into the doubtful light and spoke.

There is one yet to be named among us. One that exceeds them all.

Heads lifted. They waited.

Life is predation. And the world is the greatest predator of all.

Many quietly nodded save for an ugly man from the rugged mountains of Agonn who looked on uncertainly.

You do not agree, Kobid? Let us hear thy thoughts. Ah, come now, Kobid. Speak freely.

Kobid shifted, trying to form his words. It's just that the world is no creature.

Well said, Kobid. It is surely no creature like a wolf, but will it not devour all the same?

But where's its mouth?

Samael straightened and made a wide gesture, It is all mouth and teeth and stomach. Look around and see. Are not the mountains its fangs? Is not the sand its saliva?

That's sure dry saliva.

And so it is. It needs not be wet because it soaks up the blood of its victims. That's its saliva. But I will grant you this, Kobid. There is no more intimate form of violence than what is portrayed among the animals. They attack with their faces. Their very faces. Not so the world. It employs a different tact, and to the degree that it so does, to that same degree it is not nearly so pure. For what is more pure than to kill with one's face? What could possibly be more intimate than that? Man uses things forged from the earth to strike his enemy. But if his passions are stoked will he not reduce to but using his hands? And why so? Is it not because he knows this is more personal, even sensual? Yes. It certainly is. Thus to use one's mouth is the purest extension of the soul. Here the animals are our teachers, and we would do well to learn from them.

Kobid sat staring, the lines of his rough hewn face scrunched in a state of bewilderment. Those nearest watched him in the firelight, their own doubts now fully pacified and expressed through quiet fixations on the glowing coals.

In the morning they rode out in the cool dark to the north. The scouts pressed ahead and the pack followed their tracks through the stark wilderness. After a time they came upon the road and it was no wider than a game trail and lightly packed with use and it stretched to distant hills and disappeared behind rolling slopes, stretching again to the world's end where there rose a tremendous mountain range, spired and hulking. The sky was pure blue and bright and they rode in a long line up the road with Aemon saddling alongside the boy. The backs of the men were broad and some had shaved heads and some had tufts of braided hair swinging behind them with the loping of the camels. Samael rode far afront on his mount with his own braided locks falling across his scarred back. In the sharp light his skin looked like crumpled paper.

The boy asked Aemon how the prophet came to be called the prophet and Aemon looked at the boy and fixed on the line of riders trotting ahead, his head bobbing slightly. Then he smiled strangely.

Ever seen a child dedicated on the altar plates?

The boy shook his head.

The firstborn in our land is dedicated to the gods, Aemon began. Some are tattooed with a mark, some blessed by shamans. A few are sanctified by the priest himself. These pass on untouched. But the others are not so. On the sixth day after their birth a bull is slain and its strong blood is sprinkled on the child. A slash of red is applied to the wrists and feet and genitals. Then the mother lays them nude on the temple floor and the clan leap over them in dance, their faces and feet sanctified with blood. There is music and dancing and the beating of drums and much smoke of incense. Blood is splattered everywhere. If the child cries out the priest pails water over it and wraps it in the ceremonial cloth and he ascends the temple steps to the altar where the fires are stoked to a ravaging heat and the child is laid on the metal plate in sacrifice. There they scald on that table in dedication.

The boy looked and listened. They bobbed along the path.

It is a test for the parents. A sign of devotion.

A response seemed required and the boy said he understood.

Aemon glanced over his shoulder.

He continued, In the days of Samael's father there was war in the land, and on the night before he would leave to fight and die in his bravery, he spent his seed into the wife of his youth. Her womb was fertile and she became pregnant and harbored within her the babe that would forfeit her life. She perished in her agony, but the child clawed its way out from between her. Here he remained all through the night until he was found by a servant girl atop his dead mother. The young girl marveled at the child's strength and brought him to the temple whereunto none were found to dance for him. All his clan was at war, yet the child cried not. None knew how to proceed and so the priest chose to dedicate the child forthwith for want of precedence. He wrapped the child in the ceremonial garb and handed him to the watching officiate and they ascended the steps of the temple and burned bright the fires, heating the plate to a glowing red. It was the noon hour and the sun was white hot in the sky and the smoke of the fires rolled all through the air but it did not obscure its brightness. It shone central above them. Like the eye of an infernal god. They held the child aloft and laid him on the burning plate and the flesh of his skin melt.

The officiate was the first to see the eclipse, a dark disc sliding over the face of the certain sun. A portent to be sure. He cried out and they withdrew the child forthwith and his skin stuck to the metal and he was much rawed by it and his wounds were very great but the portent was no lie and the child survived. The babe suckled at the breasts of many women and the priest took him as his own, raising the child in the ways of divination and war, as the priests of our land are no mere priests, but suzerains chosen by the gods to rule as divine stewards.

Aemon paused. He gestured toward Samael with his chin.

This is that child prophet now grown. The prophet, Samael.

So he's a ruler? the boy asked.

As you say.

Above them the mounted sun ruled solitary and arrogant in flaring signature and the boy stared ahead toward the dark mountains stenciled against the bare sky. They rode on in silence, trotting along the dusty path.

Aemon uncorked a skin of water and drank and refashioned the bung and looked intently off to the west. He reared up on the camel and shielded his eyes, staring out across the wasteland. One of the scouts was galloping toward them. Each man took notice, watching intently. Ngannou called a halt and turned his camel and the scout reigned up before him.

There's a slave caravan up the path. Six men, all armed. Moving our direction.

Of what breed of men?

Don't know. Light skinned. Smaller frames.

Ngannou convened with Samael and the boy leaned to see. He could not hear them. Ngannou now seemed light upon his mount as he sat listening to the prophet. He nodded and then turned and gestured to the scout and the scout set off from whence he came and Ngannou advanced the group ahead as before.

The path curved among the gently sloping mounds and they could see along its eastward bend the caravan driving along the dusty track. There were two wagons with caged beds pulled by camels and they were flanked by riders watching with mirrored interest. The land was sparse and the two parties were objects of witness along it, approaching slowly and halting before the other, the men of the caravan leaning atop their mounts with feigned ease. They looked like degenerates convoked from the sand. A short man with long matted hair called out a word of greeting. Ngannou stepped his camel forward and stopped in the space between the two parties. The Anukite surveyed the men in a manner of disinterest as if the very effort was tiresome.

As fate would have it a small rat-faced dog emerged from under one of the wagons, growling with fearsome bluster as if the rightful spokesman to the situation. Ngannou quietly regarded the creature and as he did so one of the men in the caravan made a sharp sound thereby attempting to reign in the animal, but the dog took no interest in submission and darted forward in mock aggression, barking excitedly.

Ngannou waited.

The man kept calling sternly after the dog but the dog would not listen.

This is not amenable to discourse, Ngannou said, gesturing with an

open sweep toward the creature. Can you not control the least of thy beasts?

The man dismounted and continued to make his appeal but the animal only grew more emboldened, darting and snapping while the man stood stupid in the path, an invisible line between he and the Anukite tethering him to his half of the world.

Ngannou shook his head.

As the dog danced closer, Ngannou's camel bellowed in protest.

Ngannou rested a hand on his thigh and leaned to regard the creature. He lifted his gaze to the man standing in the road and then to the others watching uneasily from their mounts. The dog suddenly shrieked in pain and began to crawl along the ground toward the wagon with its rear legs dragging in the sand, an arrow shaft dead through its back. The man in the road spun. The other slavers wrenched about. Behind them the scout lowered his bow and sat watching them atop his mount some distance away. The men of the caravan looked about nervously, hands on their weapons.

The other scout trotted into view.

Justice is commensurate to the needs of the moment, Ngannou said, arresting their attention. In the scales of eternity this creature's life is nothing. We would all do well to view it as such.

We aren't after trouble, the short man announced.

And neither are we, Ngannou said, watching the dog scoot along the ground.

The man in the road backed away slowly.

All is well. Attend to thy dog. That's right. Retrieve the creature. Go on. It and the arrow are yours.

The man stood motionless and then edged forward and bent and snatched the dog by the scruff and tossed it back. Then he moved away and stood awkwardly by his mount.

It's reported that there is a city by the name of Kalidd-ahri to the west, began Ngannou. Beyond those very mountains. Would you say that is generally correct?

The men of the caravan sat watching the Anukite. One glanced over his shoulder at the rear scouts.

More than generally correct, I'd say, said the short man. Two weeks beyond, hard west.

Is that from where you come?



No, Telmin. An outpost to the northwest.

A slave town?

Yes.

Are they well supplied?

Fairly so.

How far?

A day's travel.

Ngannou studied the mountains and then kicked his camel forward. He casually rode up to the wagons and moved alongside them as if perusing a market store. The men of the caravan watched him. The cages were filled with nude women peering out like frightened animals. Sheep skins slung over the cages flapped in the wind. Ngannou leaned and surveyed the contents. He rode to the rear wagon and studied the chattel inside and then rode slowly back. None spoke.

At this town of which you speak did you see a man with a braided beard bedecked with yellow beads?

The short man glanced at his men and scratched his face with a three fingered hand.

We seen'em. They passed through the town the night before. A whole company of them.

How many?

The short man looked inquiringly at his men and then shrugged, Suppose it had to be twenty, maybe thirty.

Which is it?

Thirty. I'd say thirty. We was drinking and they marched through the town during the night, watering their mounts and filling their skins, saying noth'n. Just standing there in the dark. That's where I seen him, the man with the beard. Tall sonsabitches.

Ngannou eyed them. Where did they go?

Don't know. Kept to ourselves. Next morning they was gone.

Ngannou looked back at Samael and then made a noise with his mouth and kicked forward his camel. The group galloped past the slavers and the slavers stood watching them pound off across the open desert to the northwest.

The trail wound its way through the blistered hills and a sharp wind

arose from its northerly lair throwing sand like snow off the sand drifts that stood in imitation of waves. They ate while riding, fist to mouth, jerking atop their mounts, speaking none at all. One of the pack camels lost its footing and toppled down a steep bank where it lay blundering with its heavy burden causing the company to call a halt. Kobid galloped back and dismounted and snatched the camel by its beard and hauled it upright, beating it forward with shouts.

The barren land bore only razor scrub and jots of sandstone and the mountains that were but ghosts along the skyline now loomed before them, rising like kings from the earth with spires for crowns. Immense, hulking, the moon stamped in the sky, half swallowed in the firmament as if a vessel sinking into water. Samael reigned his camel and regarded the sight. The wind was blowing and the eunuch set his back against it and scribbled notes in his scroll. Aemon looked about with one eye asquint. The prophet pulled his camel around and the group trotted off down the main road.

They made a fireless camp at the base of a dune. A biting wind blew all through the night and they rose after a few hours and set off in the black of early morning with the camels groaning in protest. The narrow road slid through the dark shoreline of hills until the sun broke in the east. Small gray birds glided across the cobalt sky.

In two hours time they came upon the slave town of Telmin. It was seated in a windswept sink adjacent the mountains, a ring of dry mudblock structures raked by the stabbing winds with clusters of ragged tents sutured to the earth. There was no wall and in the center of the city there appeared to be a large pit set in a clearing. Plumes of black smoke were bending in the wind.

They rode singlefile along the dusty road and among the rows of bedraggled and wind torn tents. Old women with leather faces watched them pass and small children ran naked among the shelters peering like wild things. They rode over the remains of a collapsed wall and past rubble dwellings filled with wind drifts of sand and the remnants of pottery and they came upon men with lampblack faces working enormous clay furnaces that burned with a terrible heat, great smelting tubes vomiting gouts of smoke funneled up from some inner recess of the world's core. There were broken mule wagons and piles of ore chiseled from the mountain and half naked slaves wheeling wooden carts loaded with chunks of raw stone. In the shade of a rope

drawn canopy a cluster of grim-eyed taskmasters and a cat silently watched the Anukites ride slowly by.

At the town square a crowd was standing in witness of an execution. Two men were bound in the center of a shallow pit, their arms and legs extended and pulled taut with rope. They were hovering slightly off the ground, both face up. One of them was thrashing with loud cries and the other seemed strangely docile in that fateful posture. The executioner stood in their midst holding a long slender blade. He wore only a mantle of sheep felt and was bald and his biceps were striped with a red dye.

Samael rode up to the edge of the pit. Ngannou saddled next to him, nudging people aside with his camel. They moved without protest. Here eighty stood in witness, a hundred. All encircled. Mostly men.

The sins of the two criminals were announced by a figure who looked like an unearthed mole and he spoke aloud the edict with mild pomp, invoking the names of their gods to enact justice. When he was finished he rejoined the ring of onlookers and the executioner approached the man who had been thrashing. The criminal stared up with his wild black eyes and the executioner clasped him by the throat and unceremoniously slid the knife between the man's ribs with deft proficiency, once on the left, then the right. The man shrieked and flailed against the restraints and then fell to a whimper where he hung limp, coughing and gagging uncontrollably. The executioner shifted to the second victim and the man tightened and jerked with each stab, moaning loudly as if to vocalize life's bitter finality.

Blood trailed from the wounds and dripped from the small of their backs into the sand.

The executioner stood appraising his work and then pinched the blade of his knife with his thumb and forefinger and swiped the blood from it. He flicked his hand and strode out of the pit. There the men hung in the sweltering heat until they died and were slackened unto the ground where they lay in strange fixtures of sleep.

In that mining outpost none ruled absolute, tacit or otherwise, but heed was effectively paid to a hulking figure by the name of Torgan, one of the principle slave traders and a former man of war who regularly frequented a cantina not far from the pit. Ngannou inquired into the whereabouts of this mock ruler and was directed with pointed

finger toward a squat building up the road. Ngannou kicked forward his camel and the group rode through the crowd with austere and barbarous stares.

They passed along the gutted road and tramped up a slight incline to the four-squared cantina and pooled outside it. In the open yard there was a small communal well under a stretched canopy. Camels tied along a hitching rail. To the north the tallest mountain peaks stood resolute in the open sky and in the bright glare of the sun the stone buildings shone incandescent. Ngannou dismounted and raked aside the dried goatskin flap hanging over the door and ducked through, entering a dimly lit room shrouded in smoke. There was a lone lantern hanging from a crossbeam and men were sitting in the darkness.

The outside light set Ngannou in blackest relief and the frame of him seemed inhuman in the low ceilinged room.

The inebriates all looked up. None spoke, nor moved.

The Anukite spoke in a low voice, Where's Torgan?

No one moved. Then a man near the rear clay wall rose from his chair. Two others were seated with him. The dark figure was shaped like a brick and he had no neck and a drooping eye. Two black leather baldricks crossed his bare chest and his brow was pronounced and brutish and there were copper beads in his twisted beard.

Who's asking? Torgan said.

Ngannou exhaled and suddenly looked as if he had been summoned to endure a longstanding irritant. I could enunciate the sounds oft attributed to the form standing before you, but that would fail to convey the absolute truth of what is at stake for you at this moment. For there is but one question that needs be answered, and that is whether or not you or any other of these foul excretions has any knowledge of the war party that passed through this shitpan two nights previous.

Wha'd you say? Torgan said, straightening.

There was a stirring in the room. Eyes shifting in the darkness.

Ngannou shook his head. He said, The lion lies so comfortably with his pride of females until the rival comes from afar. Seeing him in the distance he rises and thinks himself sovereign, yet he has grown fat and weak for the day of reckoning. In this he is unable to perceive the thin thread of existence lowering over the flame. It is right there. The

fire is licking at it, and it is so fragile. So thin, so terribly thin. Yet it is in the lion's blood to go forth. For what else can he do? He must proceed with the dance, fateful that it is.

Torgan looked around and laughed derisively. Others smiled back with crooked grins. Torgan reached behind him and gripped the handle of his ax and casually held it beside him. He pointed at the Anukite, You don't know your place here.

Ngannou stared and then turned and gestured for the man to follow before ducking through the entrance outside. Torgan trod after him and when he emerged from the door he froze surveying the group of Anukites bandied about in the courtyard. An arrow from one of the scouts struck him in the groin. He buckled and made a move for the entrance but Ngannou fetched him by the ankle and drug him across the dirt. Torgan kicked and rolled, swinging his ax. Ngannou stepped within its arc and caught the ax along the shaft and wrenched it free and swiped off the man's hand above the wrist. The man howled and cradled his stump against his chest. He looked up with bright eyes. The severed hand lay like a strange artifact in the sand. Ngannou tossed the ax and stood over the man, blocking the sun.

Where'd they go?

Torgan laughed strangely. Blood was running between his fingers.

Ngannou stared down at him.

A figure from inside the cantina emerged through the door clutching a knife and was shot in the face with an arrow. His legs crumpled and he fell back gripping the stiff shaft with both hands. Torgan tilted toward the cantina and shouted a name. It bore the native accent of the Nephilim.

Ngannou seized the man by the throat and glanced back at Samael. Torgan's breath reeked of sour ale. He was smiling. Men could be heard tramping loudly inside the cantina and there were shouts and some began fleeing rear the building. Samael motioned with his hand and the scouts and two others bolted in pursuit. Ngannou unsheathed a blade and drove it through the man's underjaw into the stem of his brain. When he rose he met the gaze of a woman watching from the doorway of a nearby building. She turned and quietly withdrew into the mud house.

Down the declining road a handful of onlookers were standing nervously in witness of the incident.

In the squalid court rear the cantina, men scattered in flight, scurrying down narrow corridors and dusty slips winding through the structure ridden tets. The scouts put an arrow into the leg of one and dropped another near a pile of wicker baskets and an Anukite dismounted and smashed in the man's face with an iron maul. The scouts held their bows and spun their mounts looking for a favorable direction. A sharp wind toppled a basket throwing its lid in a sidelong roll until it butted against a low wall. There were none to pursue. The smaller of the two scouts swung from his camel and bounded up a cone shaped tower quilled with poles of acacia, scaling the grouted wall like a hairless lemur fitted for war.

Samael trotted around the building with the rest of his men. The slain Telminian lay sprawled on the ground, his head an explosion of matter. They watched the scout crest the pinnacle and crouch atop the moorish dome, a peering gargoyle set in blue. The scout fixed on an object in the distance. Two riders were beating their mounts toward the mountains kicking up trails of dust along the foothills. He pointed and called down and then turned and studied the main road and the growing mob forming in the street. A solitary figure on a horse was rallying a throng of slavers and other miscreants with solemn cries.

The scout descended and spoke of what he saw.

Orders were issued for the scouts to pursue the escaping fugitives and Samael turned to face his own bloodthirsty rabble. Let us see what quibble these fools have.

The two groups met along the road between the cantina and the pit. The mob had swelled to nearly forty and they crowded about with their crude weapons, men of all shapes and sizes, inimicous, filthy, thirsty for violence. All were on foot save for the lone degenerate perched atop a ragged horse. He had a ring of carved bone fixed in his nose and various gold hoops lashed through an ear and strips of boiled leather tied about his arm. He set his horse and adjusted the grip on his lance.

The Anukites were grouped twenty yards distant and in that jackal confrontation both parties stood askant in their differing aspects, a fateful menagerie of dire postures and severe looks forged only at the cost of lethality itself. The boy was situated in the rear alongside Aemon.

Samael was the first to speak. He stepped forward his camel and

said that there was the stench of the Nephilim in that place and that they were going to make them a horror to the peoples and that those wandering by their tents would wag their heads and click their tongues at the calamity befallen them, saying, Oh, what manner of curse has come upon this place? What foul misguidance of deed didst thou partake? Even the children will cry out for answers, yea, the very beasts will shrink back knowing it with dread.

When he had finished speaking, Ngannou pulled from his scabbard a huge iron cleaver shaped in the fashion of a scimitar, the ivory handle of which was white and ornately carved and fitted at the end with a leopard's tooth. The scrape of other weapons sliding from their sheaths tolled in the street and the mob of men altered in their appearance as the brittle line between discourse and war had been unalterably breached. Each side advanced toward the other sorting amongst the prospects those figures most choice in their eyes and when the two entities in their collective wholes touched, the sun made bright their raised weapons and rancorous teeth. The cry of metal rang out and men with heated breath shuffled in the stamped sand, the flesh so close and wet and packed in a dancing horde of violence where blood courses through the ropes of men's veins and sprays in a wild mist, mixing with the light, the shouts. In all this Ngannou reaped like a crazed farmer swinging a sickle through white ripe wheat, shattering swords and teeth and cutting whole arms off, and Samael was a vapor wielding twin serrated blades, blocking and driving the points through the soft shells of men's flesh. Camels were stabbed, their legs cut out. One of the great beasts pitched to the ground bearing in its breast the sunken prongs of a forked trident, pinning the rider's leg in a hill of fur. Several of the crazed mob descended on the Anukite dashing him in a delirium of hate. The sight of this aroused something new in Ngannou and he became a berserker god in the heart of the throng, smashing men as if they were hapless children. Along the flank the giant hurled his great spear and the object streaked over the fomenting mass and lodged into the neck of the taskmaster's horse and the creature reeled and staggered and flopped to the ground, tossing the rider into the matrix of savagery wherein he clambered to his feet and was struck in the head with a tremendous blow, projecting the entirety of his dark dome into the sky in a spray of syrup and puzzled gore. Half his ear remained and half his face. Some

inner pin was pulled at the midsection and the man crumbled into an unnatural posture of sitting and fell back with the contents of his head spilling like a chalice full of wine.

In that wild pandemonium a thick dust choked the street and it grew and drifted in a diaphanous curtain of bleeding light, and it was as a fevered dream.

It was no real contest and soon many of the mob lay dead or dying in a welter of gore and those remaining fled mindlessly and were trampled underfoot and the Anukites dismounted and slew them with their axes, hacking the jerking bodies like maniacs, chopping torsos, heads, genitals. Samael was wet with the lifeblood of his victims and he straightened on his mount and flung back the twin ropes of his hair and urged his men on, calling for purification complete and total.

In response to his word, the violence spread to the onlookers without discrimination. Doors were kicked in and the struggling inhabitants were dragged out howling and flung to the earth and lanced without mercy, the younglings rolling helplessly from their mother's arms and stomped to death in the dirt. A string of dogs tied to a pole near the pit were barking in a mad frenzy and tearing at one another and Aemon moved among them beating each to death with a club. People everywhere were running, falling in confusion and staggering from blows to the head, wailing insensibly, crawling like injured sea lions through the spreading gore. Swords fell as swiftly as guillotines and their blades quarried for death, vanquishing befrighted souls quick as flint spark. Some vainly fought back with mining tools, or with rocks, while yet others fled into the desert without water like small ground hares driven from their burrows in terror.

A small girl sat confused in the street, blood running from an ear. The mired feet of Samael's camel padded next to it and the child gazed up dumbly at the sight of its forthcoming destruction.

The boy stood over the Anukite who had fallen from his mount. He was bleeding terribly from his neck and chest and something heavy had struck him in the face. He was trying to sit up.

Ngannou waved the boy away, Get back.

The boy stepped aside and Ngannou drew near, clutching his bloodstained weapon. The dying Anukite stared up with bludgeoned eyes. He lay panting. Ngannou nodded and the man bowed best he could and Ngannou lopped off his head. Blood projected from the



thick stump and the head fell with a dull thud and dirt stuck to its eye and wetted face. The body lay pitched, draining into the sand. Then the flow slowed to a bubbling froth and then to nothing and the boy was instructed to finish off the wounded Telminians without mercy.

## VII



Aemon investigates a geode – Into the high mountains – A camel is lost – The prophet on man's telos – The boy inhales deeply – The scouts return with news – Through the night – A westward hunt – A consuming habub – Scorpion.

They looted the outpost for what goods interested them and gathered about the pit, mending wounds and recruiting fresh camels. A broad shouldered and thick Anukite named Shulgi had lost several teeth from a small handpick and he was pressing torn rags into the cavernous holes of his gums. His lip was severed and when he grinned the rags showed forth. Aemon had found a geode and stood studying it as the riders drew water from a well for man and beast alike. The stone was the size of a cantaloupe and a portion had been struck away revealing the inner agate that shone with a red brilliance in the sun. He turned it with a look of introspection as if the chambers therein hid a secret compartment. The boy sat in the shade blankly watching him.

The eunuch ascended the tower and searched the horizon from an upper window. He reported no sign of the scouts. Samael stood studying the mountains and then convened briefly with Ngannou and the eunuch over the map, gesturing with a finger pressed against the parchment. Then he beckoned his men to move out forthwith.

Aemon tossed the geode onto the ground and the boy stared at it and then rose to follow.

They mounted up in the thinning dust and pressed out leaving behind them the dead to lie in the sand and as they trod beyond the old fallen wall they looked like the grim apparel of war itself, caked with blood and filth, the stunched viscera still clinging in human bits. In an hour's time they were crusted and burnt looking and as they rode

through the searing winds up the foothills toward the mountain, plates of dried blood dropped from them as if they were insects shedding an old skin, or something altogether visceral emerging from a cocoon.

In two hours more time they were deployed along the base of the cordillera where the tracks of the scouts were lost in the loose talus. They halted. The great slopes vaulted before them, slanting up to towers of raw stone. Ngannou eyed the rock facings. He turned to Samael, We wait for the scouts? Samael squinted at the peaks and then gazed along the winding base to the forward horizon. They'll find us after catching their game.

A lone trail followed a cut in the mountain, sliding along the rocky joints, where it disappeared over a low fan of stone to impossibly high switchbacks. Onto this they embarked in a long string with the camels slapping up the loose rock under the cape of the mountain, grinding their way higher into the throat of the thing. As they rode they seemed to be men imbued with a divine calling, as if the hand of destiny itself was thrusting them forward without caution in that precipitous stone yard of clefts and drops. The boy gripped his saddle. Wind swept along the rocks. A white-tipped falcon floated effortlessly over the open desert.

As they trekked deeper into the mountain the path curved up an enormous protrusion of rock forcing each man to dismount and haul at the straps of their camels with loud shouts, all but beating the reluctant creatures upward. Along this steep pitch one of the beasts lost its footing and slid moaning down the slope and plummeted over the lip where it spun silently in the air like a clay figurine until it struck a lower shelf with a distant crash and cast off again, spinning yet more in a spray of items burst forth from its satchels. It was Kobid's mount. He leaned and looked down into the yawning abyss and swore.

They clawed at the stone and bit into the rock with hoof and heel alike, advancing slowly for hours until they halted on a ledge in the blood red light of evening. Here the men devoured their meals like hyenas and the camels huddled with disdainful looks as if a company of disputants discussing a matter. The red sky diffused into shades of pink and rusted orange and the shadows of the mountains mapped onto the earth in slanted portraits. With the onset of night a small fire was struck and the men lay all about in marked silence. There was little wind and the sky held its many stars. The eunuch sketched in his

scroll and Ngannou stood peering off into the incoordinate darkness as if contemplating by some supernatural medium the location of his foe.

The boy was sitting alone beyond the light of the fire when Samael called after him to draw near. Some of the men regarded the invitation with mute interest, watching the boy rise and approach the fire. Samael beckoned the boy to sit. The prophet was smoking, half reclined. He inhaled deeply and let two jets of smoke run from his nostrils.

When a man eradicates a pestilence of termites, he began, are not the larva likewise destroyed?

The boy nodded.

Why so?

Because they're termites?

Yes, because they're termites. Samael turned his head and blew smoke thoughtfully. He fixed again on the boy. The larva are simple grubs without eyes or mouths yet for chewing. By all relative calculations they are not in their current form adult, but they are tantamount to it. Only time and nourishment is needed and they will be every bit the problem of their progenitors.

Kobid interjected from outside the ring of firelight, What be a progenitors?

Samael looked and smiled. Do you not know?

Sounds like a word woven from afar.

Samael nodded and looked at the boy. Do you know?

Seems a family or something.

Samael looked pleased. Well said. It is the thing from which another thing descends. An ancestor, parent.

So why not just say parent then? Kobid inquired, squatting in the dark and shuffling pebbles from one hand to another.

For the same reason you prefer a decorated weapon over a bland one.

Kobid nodded and fell silent.

The boy looked at Samael.

Weigh the lesson with wisdom. Suppose there is a man who discovers a nest of termites in his home. He kneels over the rotted wood and studies the swarm with a look of disgust. Now suppose he takes up his hatchet and chops into the wood and therein sees a vast

network of chambers with its many nurseries for the young. What manner of fool would use the edge of his hatchet to crush only the adults? If such a man stood and cried aloud 'I have done all that is needed' and then walked off clapping his hands, would not wisdom itself mock him? Certainly. The folly is clear to all. Even a child can see that all ought be destroyed, lest the larva grow and overtake the home anew.

Samael paused and looked up from the fire. He eyes shone black. You did well today cutting down the termites, entire.

The boy held his gaze and then looked into the fire.

Samael called after Ngannou, Tell me, Ngannou, what is your chief pleasure?

The man was still standing by the mountain edge staring out into the blackness. He turned and was but a silhouette of darkness. I can say what would be my chief pleasure. To hold the head of Ubara in my right hand and the head of his firstborn son in my left.

Vengeance it is, Samael said. A most choice selection.

The prophet closed his eyes and sucked on the short pipe and repositioned it and let the smoke spill slowly from his mouth. Then he spoke more loudly as was his custom when fashioning a homily. He said, Man is always about the maintenance of pleasure. He is made of flesh and in his flesh resides a conglomeration of potential pleasures whereby man's purpose is found. These potentialities are those capacities of the body wherein a profitable feeling can be elicited through its proper usage. Consider the tongue. It is a strip of flesh capable of receiving the sensation of taste. Is this not a wonder? Set one berry from the fields of Lagash on thy tongue and what do you experience? Is it not the sensation of delight captured through the sensation of taste? Consider likewise the form of a woman. Does not the eye desire to drink in the sight? Does it not linger?

Suppose we were to draw the shape of a man using the eunuch's charcoal and parchment. We see the figure's legs and arms and torso and head. The man entire. Now make a mark at every point where pleasure can be purchased. There you will see that the stomach is a would-be pleasure. And the hands that do want to touch. And the eyes that do want to drink in the sights. And the neck that is desirous of being rubbed. And the ears that long for the songs of old. This is not all however. Venture into the heart and search further. Are there not

untold pleasures to be had of a different kind? Things like vengeance and merriment and the pleasure of artful imagination and the pleasure of tranquility and the pleasure of conquest? I would have you know, men, that we are spirits wrapped in flesh made to experience things, and these points of experience form our happiness or displeasure. There is no where else to look for such. It all flows through it. It is all a conduit to the physical world that rebounds back to us in the form of feelings. That is our portal.

Samael paused with a searching look. The men were listening.

Is it not therefore plain what conclusion should be drawn? If we are physical beings made to receive pleasure, how can we not pursue that which most activates the pleasure? What else could be more germane given our very construction? I tell you that we are creatures made to indulge fully in that which brings each man his greatest delight. Any other course is folly. For any other course is by the very nature of things a departure from that which brings man joy. It is definitional, constituent. So if your chief would-be pleasure, Ngannou, is to hold the heads of your enemies in your left and right hand, you should strain after it with all the passion available in your great frame. For only through that will you find the sweetest end. And you, boy, hesitate not to destroy every last termite, young or old. Man's heart is made for war. And that pleasure can only be had through the dispensing of enemy flesh. Whether the dashing of an infant or the dashing of a combatant, it is all music to the soul partaking in war. You would do well to heed it as such, lest your pleasure be stricken with the confusion of pity. I would have you not be unhappy.

When Samael had finished his sayings all fell to silence and each man pondered the meaning in his heart. The boy sat staring into the fire.

My dear, Kobid, Samael said, You looked perplexed.

The man's ugly face turned up. You speak beyond what my head can hold, he said.

Ah, Kobid, fear not. You understand the principle well. It comes naturally to you.

Kobid raked a hand through his matted hair and grinned proudly.

What about you, boy? Samael said, examining the end of his pipe. Does it come naturally?

I don't know. I think so.

Samael straightened and called after Damu, the keeper of alchemy. Bring me the toad dust.

Damu rose and moved to the camels and unsatcheled a box of gopher wood and brought it to Samael. Ngannou stood watching. The box was smooth and stained with use and Samael unwound the long loops of twine wrapped around it. He lifted the grooved lid and set it on the ground and withdrew a sheepskin pouch and a hollow pipe-reed stained with smoke. The pipe had a cupped receptacle carved from a foreign wood and it was fashioned in the manner of a small spoon. Samael untied the pouch and retrieved a small instrument and doled out a portion of sand colored flakes and fitted them into the pipe. He then pressed another substance like that of shaved flax into the pipe and he told the boy that it was time for him to be strong and to hear from the spirits.

The arallu will grant insight. Those weak of heart shrink back and hear not, but those whose mind is strong lose all to be reborn with visions. Let it be known that the sons of Anuk receive their visions and that you are no son direct, but you bear on your face a cousin mark. Fate has brought you to this moment, and it is fate that has woven your person to ours. The spirits must be consulted. You shall listen to them and obey them.

Samael retrieved from the fire one rightful coal with the flat of his knife and with it touched the end of the pipe until a thin stream of white smoke began coiling out. Then he lifted it to his lips and stoked several times. When he seemed pleased with the taste of it, he handed it to the boy. The boy looked at it and then took it.

Inhale deeply, slowly. Three times.

The boy held the pipe and glanced at the dark faces beyond the fire. Then he brought the tip to his mouth and inhaled slowly. It bore a pungent flavor. When he exhaled the world began to fog and the boy could hear ringing.

Inhale again, Samael said. Be strong. Be warrior strong.

The boy sipped and the prophet spoke louder and the boy drew more deeply. The world began to totter and quake and the voice of Samael grew distant. He felt himself shrinking to an infinitesimal point and the pipe was growing impossibly heavy in his hand. Then the boy shuddered and all folded into unresolved blackness and he was without substance and rushing toward a pincrack of light and he knew

not where he was, nor what he was, and a maelstrom began revolving in a coiling turbulence and there were fiery spalls of darting light and jets of ice white comae and a tunnel opened to the solitary universe where the boy was one with all amid a geometric turning of flaring suns rolling like heated marbles. Faces with flowing hair segmented before him as in a potters' mosaic and there were anguine shapes throwing bits of ignescent matter and the boy had no legs, or arms, and all was one, and he felt a warmth of peace for the first time in his life. The faces welcomed him and he felt a brotherly kinship he reckoned eternal and he wanted to embrace them but they multiplied to infinity and he was not infinity and then he was, speaking without words to the entities that disintegrated into orbs of light pulsing like hearts beating with energy. They reassured him that all would be well and that no evil would befall him and that pleasure was love and that all was one. Then the faces dilated into translucent beams and receded from sight cracking reality like a plate of glass. He felt cold and alone and rushing again and he was one with all and without substance, waves upon waves of color that engulfed him in a conflagration of light.

When the boy woke he was lying naked on his back. Aemon was kneeling over him, looking down with his offset eyes. The fire had reduced to embers and the boy's head swam and a shrill chime rang in his ears. Samael was sitting nearby in the dim light. The others were sleeping on the hard ground. The boy tried to sit up but the world warped and he lay back.

Aemon smiled.

Didst thou meet them in the light? Samael asked.

The boy touched his face with his hand and swallowed and said that he did meet them.

What did they say?

The boy sputtered and felt his sweating body. They welcomed me.

Good. That's very good. They are often welcoming. Now sleep. For we leave at first light.

In the still gray light of early dawn the sun stirred below the jagged



dark of the eastern mountains. The men crouched in silence eating their salted meat and they drank with cocked heads and wiped at their mouths with their hands and when they were finished they yanked at the straps of their camels freshly securing their goods. Ngannou paced about the camp until there was light enough to ride and he mounted up and led the company along the stone trail through a high pass carved into the mountain's shoulder. There was no vegetation and all was stone and rock and they rode singlefile along cliff edges that were sheer and treacherous, falling hundreds of feet beside them. A fierce wind ran among the peaks and they covered their faces with thick shemaghs, advancing like morose bandits scouring the unknown world. With shielded eyes Aemon stared out over the thicket of granite peaks. In that obscure light the mountains looked like petrified mammoths, fossilized giants.

They rode all day and all through the afternoon without stopping, saddling along the stony trail, their tack clanking dully, each man halting and jerking up the steep walls. Near evening they saw to the northeast across a deep gorge a distant trickle of smoke rising from an adjacent ledge. Samael called a stop and he sat studying the smoke with his hands in his lap.

Ngannou turned in his saddle, You figure it to be the scouts?

Samael squinted and looked still longer. Would seem to be their handiwork.

The giant called out and the company followed his finger. They could see the scouts perched atop an overhang. Small as mites on the stone face. Samael unsheathed his sword and found the sun's angle and signaled the scouts with its dull glint. They rode on.

They crossed a gravel slide that pitched into a ravine and they clambered over rubble that was sheared and razerous and they stopped to mend the bloodstained legs of the camels with strips of linen and having done so they descended further into the seams of the mountain. Down there the air was much cooler and shadowed and they rode until dark overtook them. Small lamps were lit by each and they advanced slowly for another hour before halting. Old gnarled trees dotted the stone floor, gripping at the rock with exposed roots, and Mushdamma tore them up and made a blazing fire. The flame sawed in the wind and the embers raked along the ground and coiled into the darkness.

Soon a speck of light shone in the distant blackness, moving down from an upper point, jostling with small movements before disappearing and then reemerging as twin lights over the crest of the ridge. The scouts came riding out of the night with their lamps held aloft, the soft glow marking out their dire faces. They trotted up to the fire and halted their camels, breathless and sharp eyed. The lead scout turned his mount quarterwise and told the prophet that the riders were Nephilim riding hard west and that they caught one at dawn still trying to flee on an injured camel.

Couldn't get the other, the scout said. Lost him near a cut in the mountain.

Do you believe he intends to notify our subjects? Samael inquired.

The scout nodded. Can't be moving fast though. He's off trail, few supplies.

Samael looked at Ngannou. Then he looked at his men and started towards his mount. Men, I believe we are going to be riding this night.

And thus they rode, clambering over the rocks with their lamps held low to the ground. The moon shone pale and the mountains were figments in its pale light and they slid blindly along the rolling bottomlands of the gorge in a welter of pinched stone where the walls rose black and formidable with the dome of the universe light only above. They rode all night, each man lurching in his saddle, glaring down with their red wire eyes at the dim mat of lighted rock before them.

By morning they had traveled eight miles, ten, and the boy was jerking in his saddle with sleep. They lumbered along a terrace of stone staring off at the heraldic light of the newfound sun. They could see desert wastelands through a gap in the mountains to the west. They stopped and studied the view. Ngannou turned his mount and surveyed the vaulted cliffs of the rear mountains as if appraising its worth, then he chucked his camel and rode down the stone bank.

They padded out onto the open floor of the desert. Sand lay all to the west and there were turrets of stone jutting up from the earth as if the root system of the mountain. Samael ordered the men to fan out and they combed the ground for signs of the fugitive. A shout soon

rang out and the group gathered around a lone depression of tracks cutting westward. The smaller of the scouts ran his finger along the edge of a dappled hoof print and peered off towards the trembling horizon.

He's moving fast, he said, looking up at Samael.

The prophet's countenance darkened. He stared off to the west.

The men waited.

Ngannou, he said.

Yes.

I believe we must intercept that fool. What is your opinion of the state of the camels?

They'll hold.

Samael glanced at Ngannou and turned back to the westward string of tracks.

Set your provisions, Samael said. We're riding hard.

All at once they were galloping west into the unremitting desert, driving the camels across a thermal waste where the seated rocks burned like coals and where all trace of shadow was chased away by the vertical sun. The wind had been blowing with a mild bite but there soon arose a blistering gale that seemed summoned from the basement cellar of the sun itself.

Sand coursed over the back of the desert smoothing the tracks of their enemy and they could see out along the western rim a wide cloud of dust. They rode harder, kicking their mounts without mercy, and the camels were snorting and heaving with the ribbed bellows of their immense lungs sucking air, necks extended. Mushdamma's camel slowly trailed from the pack, croaking hoarsely.

The tracks grew so faint and slight in the gusting wind that the scouts had to lean to squint out their form. They bounded across a cracked flatland and followed an arroyo running straight west and the cloud of dust they had seen was now foaming over the tops of the rising hills. When they drew atop them, the floor of the desert dipped into an immense bowl running to the edge of the world. Out along that lower plain of sand and rock they could see the rider galloping toward a sandstorm that could have been stitched from the final vision of man's destruction.

The scouts pulled up their mounts, and all stopped in turn, watching the rolling wall. The wind was rapping at them and the

satchels were vibrating.

By the gods, Dungtree said.

It was miles wide and surging, heaving, as if the vaults of the earth's furnace were opened and storming and rolling like a thing consuming the world. Each man sat staring, watching the rider gallop across the desert flat right into the heart of it.

The giant hove up beside them, staring off, his camel stamping in agitation.

One of the scouts turned, Want us to try cuttin' around it?

Samael's face hardened.

We might flank it, catch him exiting.

Samael gripped his saddle. He sat staring.

Take water men, he said. We ride through it.

At this each man unfastened his waterskin and drank, eyeing the approaching sandstorm. Then they recast their wrappings, tightly covering their heads in fresh shemaghs, and they rode forth at a trot watching the storm engulf trees and mounds of rock with smoking columns hundreds of feet high.

As it drew near they stared up into it and then turned their heads as it swept over them. The wind howled and tore at them and the sand was as needles against their skin. The boy steadied his mount, covering his eyes. The figures of the men and the figures of the camels dissolved into shadow forms as if things tangential to reality and a deep velvet encased them and the world drew down to an ethereal plane like sunlight beating through closed eyelids.

The boy thought he heard Aemon shouting and he turned squinting through the cracks of his fingers and something sharp struck his shoulder and the linen wrapped about his head unraveled and flapped in the wind and he reached and tucked it secure and he could only see the dim outline of a single rider before him, fading darker with the continual bleed of red to black until all was seamless night. His camel stopped and he leaned clutching the beast by the hair of its nape. He kicked the creature in the flanks. It didn't move. He kicked again and the camel rotated and lurched a few steps. Wind tore across the desert and there was much darkness and time unscrewed from its moorings, jumping hours or minutes or not at all as he waited bent in the screaming howl.

Light began to bleed through and all was scarlet like the barren

surface of some forsaken planet. The boy could see the dim forms of men chucking forward anew and his camel swung its head and followed, snorting through the deep bores of its nostrils. They rode with their heads down across the fomenting desert, drawing out through the last of the storm in a bin of dust that clung to beards, hair, chests.

Samael called a halt and the men swat the dust from their hair.

All the world lay in a fog stealing away the tracks.

They were a ghostly troupe with blinking eyes and unmasked faces striped like ill-fabricated zebras. Some stood dousing their eyes with water, others hacking up sand. Dungtree dismounted and stumbled to a crop of stone where he sat pouring water on a fresh mantle pulled from a pouch. He rubbed his eyes with the moist cloth and cursed the vile sand and rested a hand on the rock. A moment later he jerked his hand back, swearing loudly, flicking a small scorpion through the air to the ground. The eunuch dropped from his mount and stabbed the creature with a slender dirk and held it up with the tip thrust through its back. It was twisting and peddling, the tail searching for flesh. Dungtree stood clutching his hand and then extended his meaty paw out, examining it as best he could with his rawed eyes.

Biting son of a bitch, he said.

Ngannou rode to him and called for Damu. The stout figure drew near with his dusted locks and looked at Dungtree's palm. A red dial had formed and the hand was already swollen. The eunuch drew another knife and with it parceled the scorpion against the rock. Both halves squirmed with function. He pressed the flat of his blade against the stinger's bulb and it crunched with a yellow discharge. The eunuch studied the foul liquid on his blade, turning it at angles, a single bead streaking across the facing.

Dungtree said he was fine and sucked at the wound and spat and wrapped his hand with a wet cloth. Damu looked at the broken scorpion and said he knew not its kind and he resaddled his camel and said time would tell its poison. Samael wore a bitter expression as he looked west into the fog of granulated light.

## VIII



Beyond the storm – The boy rides with Dungtree – Abode  
of the unclean – Samael presents bread – Fossilized remains  
– Ngannou’s trial – Across a caldera – Visitants – The men  
eat in preparation for bloodshed – A false fire.

In that purgatorial fog all trace of the rider’s tracks were lost and the sky lay robed in a sheer garment, the watching sun beyond a white cataract, dull and bleary. They kept for west, forging across an unending flat flecked with budding ocotillo and bone dry acacia that materialized like apparitions in the receding pale. The wind had dropped to a murmur and Dungtree sweat in the stale heat, lurching in his saddle with the downward cranking of the sun. He tipped to one side and vomited on the ground and reeled, wiping his mouth clumsily. The company stopped. Damu unwrapped his hand and turned the bloated and discolored flesh.

Damn heart's beat'n funny, Dungtree said.

They looked at him.

Samael sat off, waiting.

Ngannou searched out the boy and told him to ride rear of Dungtree to steady him. The boy dropped from his camel and climbed atop Dungtree's mount. The man's back was cool and wet.

Keep him perched, Ngannou said. Hold him by the hair if you must.

The boy nodded and Dungtree mumbled he was fine. They rode on.

In the afternoon the air brightened righting the world's clarity and they were found on a flat of sun cracked desert that was as bare as a moon. Dungtree had not vomited for an hour and was sipping water. Ngannou kept glancing back at the boy as they followed the sun westward, cantering across the scrubless plane in silence, the dull hoofs of the camels breaking through the uppermost crust of the

desert floor.

Toward evening they saw what appeared to be a cropping of huts pinched together on the horizon. The company stopped and looked. The distant buildings slurred in the heat.

Might be a mirage, said one of the scouts. Want us to go?

Samael lifted a hand to his jaw, squinting off with a vigilant stare. He looked westward at the burning sun and then back north.

We all shall go.

They turned north, advancing along the pan for a few miles and came upon a cluster of mud cracked wattles and huts. A solitary sight in the open desert. They approached slowly. An old tattered fence encircled the slouching wattles. It was leaning every which way from the cruel winds and half consumed by the desert with bone dry lashings of frayed ropes mending the joints. A goat was lying dead in an empty corral. Dried turds scattered in the sand, a crumbling cistern. Nothing stirred.

The scouts trotted forward breaking to the right, bows in hand.

Samael surveyed the distance with a watchful eye and resettled on the huts. He nodded at Ngannou. Ngannou made a sharp whistling sound.

They waited.

A strange figure drew back a rawhide curtain from inside one of the huts. He stood blinking, staring at the men. Then he turned and muttered something and limped into view. The man craned with a look of wonder, his lumpy head altogether hairless and cratered with flaking wounds. A gray syphilis hole potted his face.

A midget plodded behind him, waddling forth with a large mallet-shaped head. Both wore threadbare linens cobbled together from diverse sources, too large and draping.

The man with the missing nose struggled to see aright and he asked the midget who it was that had visited them. The midget nervously raised a hand in greeting and then lowered it. The man asked again and the midget told him to be quiet. They stood an odd pair in the stark light.

What place is this? Ngannou said.

The midget spoke and Ngannou told him to speak louder.

A leper camp.

Ngannou eyed the man and glanced at Samael. How many are

you?

Was six, til yesterday. Now five. Just five souls. The midget pointed to a row of shallow pits. All were empty save one that bore in it a figure wrapped in cloth, tied and partly buried.

From where do you come?

Dudael, said the midget, pointing north. They send the unclean here.

Another figure emerged from a hut. A gaunt woman with small breasts and bone thin legs overrun with gray sores. A huge goiter hung from her neck. She called out in a weak voice for food. Ngannou looked at her and told her to be silent and then asked if they had seen anyone come this way.

The midget shook his head. We stay inside.

The woman hobbled towards the company, stepping gingerly with her bare feet. Ngannou told her to stay where she stood and she looked at the scouts with their drawn bows and dropped to her knees, pleading for meal. Her hair was long and brittle and there were patches of pale scalp showing. She begged.

Samael rummaged in a pack and withdrew a small parcel of bread and held it. I am looking for the Nephilim. Tell me where to find them.

The midget pointed to the west and the woman did likewise naming the city of their pursuit. The other figure stood with his caved face tilted toward the sky as if trying to hear. Samael regarded the midget and repackaged the bread.

There's a foul air here. Let us not linger, said the prophet, pulling his camel away.

They drove west along the scoured flats into a pregnant sun and they were black and warped in the dull flame as if things verbatim to it. Streaks of orange cut across the bleeding sky in translucent stripes like the layers of stratified rock and the unaltered terrain gave rise to benches of stone standing mute in the distance. There were no creatures, no life, save them.

As they were riding among the stone benches in search of tracks they found in the clay rock the skeletal remains of some ancient and enormous beast. Its huge skull profiled out of the rock, the segments



of dark vertebra snaking to ribs submerged in the ground fifteen feet beyond. The men gathered about the object and the eunuch began scribbling in his scroll with a stock of charcoal. Mushdamma set his hand next to the teeth. They equaled its length.

What foul land is this? the giant rumbled, studying the comparison. It harbors monsters.

Samael drew closer examining the skull. Is this not like the one you encountered, Ngannou?

Ngannou studied the creature and said that his was not so statured but did share its form. Samael nodded and then eyed the setting sun and said that rest was needed and that this spot would serve well enough. He added, Some of us have not heard the story of thy trial with leviathan, mighty Ngannou. Let us eat and hear it. We are primed for a tale.

At this the company made a fireless camp beside the petrified remains and gathered from their dusty pouches a dry assortment of foods which they partook in a manner of quiet solemnity. Dungtree ate sparingly but was much improved save for the swelling that still yet afflicted his hand. He unraveled the stained cloth and studied the sting mark and pressed a finger against the blistered sac. With the tip of his knife he punctured it and turned his hand in the remaining light, examining it with a dark and pensive expression.

It would seem you've added another wound to your collection, Samael said. One for telling.

Aye. And a bitter one to be sure, Dungtree said, glancing up before returning to wrapping his hand.

None spoke further and the last of the shadows lengthened until all was shadow with the moon standing alone in the star sprent sky. When the men had finished eating they sat sprawled about in the deep blue of the quiet desert. Samael turned to Ngannou who was crouching in the dirt. He spoke in a light tone, Let us hear thy tale. The one attended with scars from leviathan's grip. Show us.

Ngannou looked up. Then he rose and squared his chest and touched a socketry of old puncture wounds on his left breast and shoulder. He searched the expressions of his men, his eyes dark sockets themselves. He sniffed and after a time he spoke.

In the days of my trial it was cold and gray and the winter had been long and hard. Some had claimed to have seen the beast, stalking in

the night, in the shadows, stealing livestock, taking children. One said it was the size of a bull, eyes as of a serpent, holding light for the darkness. A few had claimed to have seen it flying in the night, but this was rumor chasing shadow.

Now the days of trial have not always been, nor have they always been thus, but I was sent to the dark mountains beyond the salt wastes of Syrian to face a single rival, Godel, son of Bardook. Without weapons, without food. His aim and mine were one: return with the head of the other. This was the will of the counsel for our advancement. To unite the warring tribes. One figure from one clan to rule both.

When the time had come, I was brought to the western mouth of the mountain, he the eastern. It was late evening and a light snow was falling. The sky held no moon and the stone of that mountain was hard as iron, black, unforgiving. The men with me were wrapped in thick furs and they wore thick belts and their breath and the breath of the horses were steaming in the night air. They bid me success and would not return for seven days.

In that granite fortress were cliffs a thousand feet in height, sheer as camel's teeth. I've seen no equal before nor since. Could have been heaven's footstool, or the horns of hell. Judgment knows each, and it was a place of judgment.

I climbed the dark mountain all through that dark night and I found lodged in its side a single splintered tree, gray and dead, four foot in length. I tore it from the rock and chewed at the wood and bit it with mine teeth until there was point enough to drive into a man.

Now it was cold and windy and the dawn was slow to coming. But when it drew forth, it carved out the jagged range in all its terrible beauty, setting the peaks aflame and dipping the lower vaults of snow in shadow.

I kept moving, searching, hunting. I ate beetles, dug for grubs along a canyon floor where there flowed a stream shelled with ice. I fashioned from a granite spike a nail of stone. Wove about the handle long strands of mountain grass. While atop a nearby peak, a foul tempest snarled out of the west, battering the world with howling winds, knocking against the foundations of the mountain and throwing down great handfuls of snow across the rocks. I wedged into a narrow cleft and there clove til morning. It was a long night that night. My feet

clubs, my hands plates of rock.

In the morning the sky had been emptied of its anger and all was white and snow was blowing off the broken peaks. I panned that snow bitten land with a watchful eye and then shouted his name. Nothing moved, nothing replied. Just the wind sliding through the open canyons. I roared again and heard the remote cry of my rival. Thin as a whisper. Echoing from behind a distant spire.

I made haste, running along a thin shelf toward my foe, powdering through the snow, my heart thirsty for violence. That's when I fell upon its tracks. Long taloned prints tracing up toward a dark slit in a rugged horn. Four footed, moving swiftly. I knelt studying them. It was not any beast I knew, not any beast known. I followed the tracks to a deep crevasse where there stood in its cut the dark entrance of a cave, thirty, forty feet down. Squatting there, I waited, watching and listening. I remember thinking what might lay within its stone heart. I remember well the fear that bid me go. So I lowered unto it.

The rocks were black as the blackness within and I stooped and entered, moving into the darkness until the opening behind me was but a white hole, small as a fist. I crept deeper. Blackness surrounded me. Blackness was only before me.

Ngannou paused. The man's sturdy head tilted and his great chin lifted towards the heavens and he focused on one rightful star, the morning star, that burned brightest among all that bright host. He looked at his men again.

I knew it was there before I could see it. Its presence hung in the darkness like something dire and palpable. Like something darker than the absence of light. As if its slinking toward me disturbed reality with ripples of water, touching instinct and soul.

I waited, not moving. I tightened on my knife, listening. The sound of it came from my left. A slight tapping of claws against stone, faint as nothing. I did not move. Then there was nothing. Only silence. Silence to stop a heart.

I set my jaw and swung, roaring, and the stone tip slammed into its scales. The beast had latched onto my shoulder and I could feel its breath seething through its teeth and it bore me aloft, wrenching wildly, squealing like a child. It pinned me against the stone and I could see a single eye contracting, oval, soulless.

Ngannou paused and bent, lifting his weapon from the sand. His

arm tightened and he thrust it with theater, saying, I hove the shaft of my spear up and plunged that chewed tip into the meat of its eye. It screamed and clawed at the shaft. My arm hung wounded, it hung soaked in blood, yet still I bore down on that flailing leviathan with all the hate of a thousand vindicants, thrusting the stone knife into its head, striking teeth and neck and eye until I could taste its sour blood. The creature flailed and raked at the air and darted blindly into the granite wall and tore at it, climbing in fits until it fell rattling and lay hissing, swinging its eyeless head for light. I slid about it crooning words of mockery in a tone of false love. It receded toward the light and in that dim tunnel the form of it took shape. It was reptilian, plated, its eyes gaping holes of half consumed fruit. Blood ran from a hole in its throat.

I fetched up my spear and drew near it. It lay motionless, knowing my presence. Then I thrust my spear into its side until its lifeblood ran free and it lay dead with its face pressed against the wall.

Ngannou exhaled and stood silent. The desert lay blanketed in a sheet of blue and the men were all dark figures watching rightful from the ground. The giant was sitting beyond the outer rim of onlookers. In a deep voice he asked what came of the rival and Ngannou said that he tore from that cold leviathan the frame of its lower jaw and snapped the bone at the curve, fashioning for his awaiting conflict twin instruments of destruction which he used to tear apart the man on a snowy ledge not far from the cave.

His blood filled a canyon so great was his loss.

They set out at early dawn into the barren darkness. Samael rode at the fore of the column in a foul and distempered mood, his stony gaze watching the depleted brim of light shave away the shadowed land to the west. The wind was biting and the camels spit in mirrored disgust and the revenant sun rose to glare anew on the children of men, the white filament of its corona ringing in a bitter toil of heat.

In the afternoon they came upon a wide caldera, burnt and steaming, its long mouth cracked like porcelain in a bistre glaze. They footed up to its lip and peered across the sunken waste. None spoke and they set off across it like injurious stalkers of an unknown nomenclature with the chipped hooves of the camels clapping against

the coagulated rock.

They rode all through the afternoon into the unending evening and into the early night before setting camp in a dark malpais clot. One of the scouts ascended a stone bluff and stood scanning the loured waste for firelight.

The next day found them on a wide plain of scrub and traprock molded with fragments of red and pink feldspar. Huge clouds roamed the sky like floating temples with their vast shadows sliding across the desert floor in silent parade. Wind riffled through the desert grass stirring within each man the memory of something ancient or lost and it did remake in them a perilous thought wherein are found those faltering beliefs of a failed destiny, so brittle they lay in man's conscience.

The land hove into red faced escarpments bearded with scrub and there appeared along the low hills spindly joshuas long scourged by the heat. A blistering wind twisted out of the north and the blowing of it whistled through the split branches like demoniacs howling in the night. Dungtree spat holding his aching hand. The company wrapped their faces, rode head down.

About the noon hour they saw far to the south on a remote ridge the dark forms of men on mounts watching like ghosts. Three in number, blistering heat specks. Ngannou called a halt and the Anukites stared off and the figures turned and slipped from view. Ngannou flicked his chin and the scouts sped off splintering around the ridge in opposing arcs. No riders were found, nor tracks. The scouts circled the perimeter and climbed a spike of sandstone to its needle where they peered off like men atop a mast in a wind. Nothing but fluted rocks covered in sand with broken ridgelines fading in a pale murk of dust. When the scouts returned, Samael gave orders for the men to eat and drink to strengthen for conflict and the men did so as they rode, bobbing gently on the mats of their barking camels, studying the low cliffs with their hands resting on the grip of their weapons. That day they would see no others and they would see no tracks save the marks of wolves trotting to a pair of dormant volcanoes far to the north.

With nightfall the party set a false fire near a stone outcropping

and they laid in wait in the darkness with their weapons. The fire sawed in the wind casting a distorted ring of orange light. The high moon hung white as the eggs of spiders. The fire slowly died and the smoke of it twisted in the wind and the Anukites kept watch in shifts, lying like dark sandworms half submerged in the earth.

## IX



A westward road – The Nephilim receive word – A girl lies gutted – Slaughtered Anukites – Samael speaks – Scouts press north – A goat – A herd – An ambush – A beheading.

They struggled all the next morn through the wasting heat, driving forth into a land more hostile yet. Where the rocks rose like razors and the broken shards were as potsherds along the scorched ground. The sun seemed to feed on them with a more hungry flame and they rode tilting their great waterskins to their mouths, drinking continually, ambling all through the eternal day and into the eve with baleful eyes.

The sun slowly hissed into the boiling horizon and in the last vestiges of light the Anukites came upon a packed trail that curved out of the south and drove west. By paling light they studied the faded tracks of a lumbering company moving west, twenty or thirty in number. There were wheel marks in the sand, one wobbled and snaking like a sidewinder, clumps of animal droppings stomped into the dirt, prints of human feet. The men jerked their camels while studying the ground and the scouts noted a fresh set of camel tracks woven amongst the others moving at a gallop. Ngannou dismounted and crouched over them with a grave expression. He looked to the west and looked at the tracks, both arms resting on his great legs. He stood. Aemon picked up the crusted excrement and crumbled it in his hand, rubbing his fingers together to get a feel for the inner consistency.

Less than a day, he said. Maybe hours.

Ngannou nodded and studied the ground again. Samael was watching silently from his mount and then peered off to the west, his face tintured in a pink oblivion of sky.

They've likely received word by now, Ngannou remarked.

So be it, said the prophet. We have their scent. They are all but under the edge of the sword.

Ngannou nodded.

Samael would not call a halt, nor venture sleep. The scouts trudged ahead on foot, lurking among the jagged rocks with the company advancing slowly up the road, their calculations including every deceit of the enemy. Some of the men wrapped their clanking scabbards in woolen mantels and the mouths of the camels were drawn shut with muzzles of looped rope. They were spurred out in a broad fan across the desert, the eunuch plodding silently in the lead. Thick clouds soon raked up the stars leaving a masked and stubborn moon. The world was plunged into darkness and they rode uncertainly, waiting for the light to spread anew with each gap in the clouds. The scouts picked their way atop a bald ridge overlooking the western front. From here they crouched, searching for a fire they knew would not be found. When they returned Samael called a halt and the company slept fitfully in a belt of cloven stones south of the road.

They set out at first light, a minacious band now more brooding yet, the rippled clouds in the east a lake bed of lava. Aemon rode picking his teeth with a slender thorn and they followed the tracks between mounds of rock crumpled like old parchments and they saddled up a rocky slope onto a sprawling tableland trammed with fissures. The naked rock bore the scuff marks of the trundling company and the sky was an open sky and there was no wind and silence was much felt. In the distance birds hung in the air. Black dots gliding in circulation.

They saw the body posted like a scarecrow on the open rock, propped and lashed to a plank of stained wood wedged into a crack. It hung naked and skinned about the chest and about the thighs with the long peelings of the dark flesh draped and curling in the sun as if yanked from the raw muscle and abandoned for a new project. Its ears were shorn to the stub leaving only strange holes and the scalp had been ripped away and left to hang in a rag of dried flesh, the white skull glaring in the dry heat like the pulp of a heated kernel. The male parts had been pruned from between its legs in a kind of befouled



castration and shoved into its gaping and now stuffed mouth. Tidings of the bloated viscera hung in a leathery gag of dark flesh. Vultures trotted about the body with their own wrinkled faces and they flared their wings as the party drew near, flapping off in a lumbering climb.

The group stood in spectacle of the thing, silent as witness. Samael rode forward circling it, his jaw clenched. Up the path another body lay sprawled on the stone. A nude girl with the entrails spilling from her side like the tentacles of some aquatic denizen. A black stain dried beneath her. More of the muttering vultures were congregated around a fissure beyond. The men rode slowly past the slain girl. She lay gazing up with dull eyes as if unmoved by the endless rounds of the rolling sun. The sky mirrorless in her empty stare. The men chucked their camels forward and they formed into a line, peering down into the slanted light of the fissure. On the rubble floor a wagon lay fractured in a splintered heap, the wooden wheels not right in their framing with the caged walls collapsed in an armature of snapped poles. The murdered were lying strewn about the debris like worthless trinkets, flung down and skewered with sharp implements, their limbs crossed in strange figurations as if marionettes let to fall in a trunk for basement storage.

The Anukites regarded the sight of their stolen kinsmen mute as stone. Aemon spat squinting off to the west and the men sat waiting for some indication. Samael did not speak. Then he pulled his mount back from the stone lip and stared off at the horrible plain to the west and the belt of sawed mountains marking out the north. There he sat. He turned quarterwise and placed one hand on the hump of his camel and addressed his men. Remember this day when the time comes for us to break their arms and hook their jaws. Remember it well.

The men nodded gravely.

Samael shifted, How are the provisions?

Ngannou shook his head. Need to replenish water. Two days left. Three.

What does that map of yours say, eunuch? How far to the city?

The eunuch sat erect near the fissure. I'd say five days. Six.

Samael inhaled. And so it is.

The prophet turned to the scouts and told them to push out to the northwest to see about finding water. Take fresh camels, he said. Ride hard. We meet to the west unless you set a signal.

The scouts nodded and swung off their mounts and untethered their worn saddles and flung them across their shoulders, trading out their camels for those freshest. Kobid shifted the remaining supplies off the two pack camels and the scouts knelt on the rock, strapping the saddles in place and they jerked at the leather straps and swung atop the groaning beasts and galloped up the trail and down the tableland towards the mountains to the northwest. Samael glanced again at the carnage and then kicked off to the west and the men followed in pairs and the dark buzzards dropped from their lofty streams in flaring cloaks of wings, twitching their organ heads in suspicious trotings to fill on the dead Anukites.

The scouts dropped off the tableland to a level waste and pounded across the desert pavement. The sawed mountains rose in a palette of phantom browns in the evening haze. They moved along the parameter searching for an entry point. A faint trail wobbled up the rock and the scouts picked there way to it, scrabbling into the slanted depths. Rimrock vaulted in sheer trappings and they skirted a sharp cliff, angling down to a narrow ravine. There was no vegetation save for the stiff shafts of some reedy plant dotting the gravel floor. The scouts stopped and stood listening, turning their chins. No wind astir. One of the scouts gestured toward a rocky spire seated deeper to the north and they set off in the growing darkness. The tilted light marked anticlines in patchworks of ribbed shadows and the tops of the peaks stood like torch heads and in that faltering reality between night and day they leashed their camels to a dry and splintered mesquite and ascended the upper pitch by foot. The sun was no more and the broken skyline held a raven wash of blue. They shifted round the peak studying the shrinking landscape. Sandwiched between the stone switches to the north they saw a lone spark of light. They crouched and watched the campfire flicker in the darkness. A mile distant, two at most. Twice did a figure block its light.

The smaller scout adjusted his bow as he shifted his footing.

We should go by foot, said the other.

They sat watching a moment longer and then set off.

The camp was set on a slab of stone near the floor of the mountain and the scouts lay watching from a nearby ledge. A man was sitting by

a fire with a goat lashed to a rock the size of a large melon. The creature stood chewing absently. Tattered bundles were strewn on the ground and there were goods of various sorts, foods, bowls. A concubine in a long shawl was preparing stew over the fire and another haggardly woman was nursing a babe in a sling at the edge of the light. The man kept coughing into his fist. A knife lay by the fire. The scouts watched as the three sipped from their bowls in silence.

The scouts crept into the light with their bows drawn and the man looked up, slowly lowering his bowl. He raised his free hand, gesturing cautiously. The women saw the man's face and turned, their eyes dark and fearful.

We don't have noth'n here.

You alone?

The man set down his bowl. There's noth'n here.

You move again you die.

The man held up his hands. We're it. No danger to you.

The smaller scout flanked the concubine and drew near the fire with his bow held taut and kicked away the knife. She pinched shut her eyes, cowering slightly.

We don't have much.

The scout cocked his head listening to the night. He fixed again on the man. We need water.

The man glanced at the other scout. Ain't got much here, just goat milk. There's spare enough though for men in need.

No. Enough to fill skins. Where can we fill skins?

The man said that water was sparse and that their village had been sacked by a war party. He said that war had been spreading through their land and that none were safe. The scout asked if he had seen the Nephilim and the man nodded and said that he had and that they were moving to the east in parties small and great and that it was they who made their village taste the edge of the sword.

The scout kept the arrow trained on the man's chest. How fars your village?

Two days by foot.

When they attack?

Three days ago this night. Been wait'n here for others, but none have come.

There's no other water?

The man coughed trying to remain rigid. He licked his lips and said there were watering holes to the west and that herdsman sometimes drove their steed through but that this had been a dry year. The scouts exchanged looks and the smaller one lowered his bow and drew near the goat with his knife. The man looked concerned. He spoke more loudly, Not the goat. It's all I have. The man gestured at the women. You lay with them. They treat you well. You understand?

The scout regarded the man and said that the women were not choice and that the goat was favorable in their eyes.

The man rose shaking his head. Not the goat. The women they be good for you.

The man's hands lowered slightly and he shifted imploringly.

The arrow slid through the man's chest and the man touched himself, breathing oddly. He gulped at the air and tottered slowly to the ground. The woman with the child did not move, nor the concubine, and the man crouched on all fours in a searching posture, blood bubbling softly from the hole in his back. The scouts stood watching and then stepped over to the goods lying blanketed on the ground. One rifled through the items with his foot. The man wheezed and rolled onto his back and the women sat with their heads bent, eyes fixed on the ground. The smaller scout flipped the goat and cinched up its scabbling legs with the leash and shouldered it with one arm and the women were told not to move from their place until morning.

The scouts hauled the animal back through the dark to their waiting camels. From among a large pouch they withdrew a length of rope and bound up the goat in a tight spindle and fastened it to a rear hump like common baggage. Its head bobbed with the jostling camel and the thing watched the world pass in coterminal frames of deepest blue.

They rode on, weaving their way through the black upheavals, the riven moon pale among the glowing clouds. Insects chattered in the lower gullies and the goat responded with doleful cries. They soon grew heavy with sleep and laid up under a crag where they slept for three hours. When they woke it was still yet night and they saddled their mounts and broke free the mountains onto an open desert plain. They rode west with the lead scout softly fingering the fletching on his arrows, sliding each one out in turn with the careful touch of a creator.

He wet them with his mouth, watched to the north over his shoulder. They rode for miles. With the rising sun came a yet more vegetated land, scrub brush with wilting bristles and wind-blown tamarisk yielding stubborn evergreens, the shadows drawn in newfound forms across the delinquent ground as if the world was harkening at last to the voice of creation's third day.

Soon the mountains to the south sank into foothills dotted with lobes of sandstone and the scouts trod on in the silence, moving at a slower trot.

In the still early light the lead scout straightened on his mount and made a noise with his mouth. The other scout looked. A figure ambled into view to the southwest, a drove of cattle following slowly from a behind a stone slip. Thirty, forty of the rangy beasts.

The scouts stopped.

The lone shepherd stood watching from afar. He held a crooked paloverde branch for a staff and he was old, leaning, leather for skin, a beleaguered wrap of cloth with an exposed bone of a shoulder. He raised a thin long fingered hand. The scouts looked at the sloping foothills. Glanced to the north. They nudged their camels forward.

The cattle were milling in a congregation of yellow dust. Great ribbed beasts with huge horns and flicking tails. Some watching with their black seeping eyes. Others swinging their thick necks for foliage, grinding away with their stub teeth.

The old man was standing at the front of the herd, clutching his staff with both hands, watching with a pair of beady eyes. He hailed the scouts in a raspy voice. The scouts reigned their mounts still some distance away and one called out asking where water might be had. The old man craned his neck, lifting a hand to his ear.

Can't hear ye, he called back.

The scouts moved closer, proposing the same question and the old man squinted in confusion, shaking his head. Damned if mine ears aren't ruined. What say ye?

The scouts waited, then stepped forward their mounts. The old man's yellow teeth appeared behind a cruel grin. He was still smiling when the long arrow shaft struck the side of the lead scout's head. The sound of it was as of a branch snapping and it knocked him clean off his saddle. An instant later a second arrow whistled overhead and two more lodged into his camel's flank and neck. The other scout wheeled

his mount and saw rising from among the filthy herd a howling collection of half-naked men scrabbling over and under the cattle like grotesque tribesmen daubed in blood with misshapen sheets of torn hide canvased about their caked bodies, the knotted ropes wrapped about arms and heads in a barbarous attire like hell crafted bonnets or befouled religious coverings, half mole, half men, hoisting their terrible implements of weaponry in wild attitude and sprinting. Atop a low hill several men with huge bows hatched up out of the ground like new-birthing vipers, the dry sand streaming in a dust tumult, their long hair coils of braided dirt swinging and fogging against the perfect blue sky.

The scout swung his bow off his back with a practiced movement and drew up a grip of arrows. A fresh volley was exchanged and two of the charging Nephilim flailed to the earth in wounded symmetry, the arrow tips wafting from their backs. The return arrows fell black against the sun, trimming the scout's ear and stapling his leg to the haunch of his camel in a one flesh union of beast and man. The fallen scout tottered to his feet, the arrow shaft protruding like a conductor's wand from his ear. His legs did not work right and he trod oddly in place while holding his stout sword. Blood trailed down his jaw and neck. Three vicious looking horses pounded over a hill, the riders savage figures in truest likeness, unshod, painted red, tabering their horses with heathen energy. The scout saw his bleeding kinsman parry an attack and stumble to the ground and receive an arrow in the meat of his thigh. The faltering scout propped to one knee and lifted a blade as a second Nephilite bore down on him with a heavy maul, swinging the great hammer in an overhead arc, smashing the sword in a sharp ring of metal and hewing a cup of flesh from the man's face.

Another drove of arrows rattled through the air and the other scout dipped offside his mount and beat his camel forward while clutching his saddle. The arrows punctured the bellowing creature's side. Behind him the mounted riders charged across the desert in a fury while the Nephilim stood over the fallen Anukite swinging wildly. They hacked at the body in an obscenity of violence, lathering in the gore like mired hogs and howling in delight as if flagellants receiving answer from an irate god.

The riders tore out into the foothills with the scout riding forward on his heels. Behind him the Nephilim were leaning with their faces

close to the wild thrust of their horses' necks. One reared up with a bow and released an arrow and the arrow cut over the scout's head and racketed off a rock.

The scout beat his camel with loud cries and galloped across a low depression to a slope where he hauled at the strap, twisting his camel around. He lifted his bow. The Nephilim flared their mounts. An arrow struck the archer's horse. The scout shot again and again struck the beast. It veered off screaming, swinging its stabbed head. The others pounded up the hill and the scout jerked his mount down the rear bank, trenching in the dirt and kicking off. The ratty manes of the horses blew in the wind like frayed rages as they thundered over the declining hills and through a selvage of low scrub out to an open and barren flat. The arrow shafts in the scout's camel were jerking with each stride and throwing blood and he kicked the failing creature out to a lone cropping of boulders and swung off his mount and bounded atop it where he stood with his blade and one remaining arrow notched in his bow like some fabled warrior statue of long ago.

The Nephilim circled him on their horses at a distance, the long twisted ropes of their hair swinging gently across their naked backs. They trotted watching. The dying camel was sitting on the ground panting while the tussled goat bleated loudly like some forsaken dimwit child.

The scout looked out to the south and west. Dots of acacia, broken hills, scrub brush for miles. He sat. Blood was running down his leg from two puncture holes. He thumbed his calf to better see.

In the distance the trailing Nephilite came into view, shuttling across the sand with his injured horse. He saddled alongside the others and they sat watching the scout. The archer's horse held an arrow in the bridge of its muzzle, the meat of its chest. It snorted and tossed its stabbed head. Two of the Nephilim bore in their hands curved blades in the fashion of a Kalij, dark pounded things with thick yalmans. The other gripped his longbow with a contemptuous stare.

The Nephilim fanned out in a circle.

The scout stood.

They rode around the Anukite to opposite points and steadied their mounts. The archer drew back his bow while the others advanced. The scout shifted round the highest rock, crouching low behind it, watching the approaching Nephilim. The archer let loose a

shot and the arrow splintered off the stone. As this happened, the others jolted forward with their swords in mock attack and the scout stood drawing back his lone arrow. The archer fired again and the scout jerked sideways, narrowly dodging the arrow.

The scout held his arrow and the Nephilim kept their distance.

Going to peel your skin off slowly, one called out with his long, inbred face.

The scout looked at him.

The archer shifted round and the scout limped in turn, watching from behind the curve of the stone. The others stepped their horses in anticipation, pulling their mounts from side to side, looking for an opening and kicking up dust in the dry sunlight.

The Nephilim convened again. They spoke in animated tones. One pointed from where they had come and the archer gestured angrily and the Nephilim eyed the scout.

One spat.

They fanned out again.

With a cluster of bone-tipped arrows clutched in his draw hand, the archer pulled back the string to full weight and advanced at an angle while the others corkscrewed around the rock formation in a slow rotation. The scout shifted cautiously in a low stance and the Nephilim bucked forward with clenched teeth, their half chevron faces smeared and runny in a streaking mascara of blood, clowns malevolent with baboon chins red as rumps.

They pounded toward the scout and the scout fingered off his remaining arrow, sticking the nearest rider in the breast. The charging Nephilite looked down momentarily at the arrow fastened in him and then slumped forward and jostled off his horse to the ground where he lay folded up with his face in the sand. The archer had galloped around the boulder and released his shot and the scout twisted off the rock in effort to dodge it but the arrow raked the shell of his throat trenching through the cartilage and the scout rolled and surged forward swinging his mancutter, severing the horse's leg. The huge steed toppled in a wild dance, screaming with one eye rolling wildly, throwing the archer. The third rider swept by with a hacking swing and the Anukite rolled clear in a fog of dust. When he came up he wrenched an arrow free from the chest of the archer's flailing horse and snapped off a shot. The shaft sunk between the ribs of the passing



Nephilite.

Twelve feet away the dismounted archer stood and took aim.

The scout stepped and took hold of the shaft in the creature's face and let go, jerking sideways the shot. He then reached again as the archer fitted another arrow. He yanked it free and lifted his bow. Both fired in tandem. The arrow butted against the bone of the scout's shoulder and the other bore from his mouth the dark fletching with the mainshaft stemming in a curious azimuth rear his head. The archer dropped his bow and wandered with a look, feeling the object from both ends. His eyes moving oddly.

The scout bent rasping strangely. Blood trickled from his mouth. He held his throat with one hand and looked at the mounted rider leaning against the neck of his horse, spurring the creature around with little command, the arrow buried between his ribs. The Nephilite stared at the scout. A vessel was broken in one eye. He tried to speak and then kicked the horse forward sluggishly, slipping to the ground as might one falling asleep.

Droplets of blood lay speckled beneath the scout in pigments of profoundest truth. He felt his neck, looked at his hand. Red as an evening sky. The archer sat kneeling on the ground in false meditation, arms limp, head bowed with his yellow teeth jawed onto the stick. The scout limped over to the figure where he stood shadowing the man. The bow lay to the side with two arrows crossed in the sand. The Nephilite was breathing rapidly.

You come for us but you come to die, the scout said in a throaty voice.

The man did not look up.

You hear, no? I see you hear. Your eyes tell me.

The scout crouched.

Know I carry your head to the camp of your offspring and feed it to thy children. They taste your sightless eyes. It will be grapes to them.

A tremor racked the man's body and his hands quaked like a dementia patient. Words sputtered within the clogged pipe.

The scout smiled.

Then he rose and sheered off the man's head and snatched it up by the hair and carried the leaking remnant to the snuffing horse. He led it by the strap to the dead camel and tossed the pallid head on the

ground and went to retrieving his supplies. He bound up his wounds with strips of cloth cut from the dead and he hoisted the bleating goat rear the horse, fastening it and the waterskins with difficulty. The other horse was shying in the distance, nosing the rough foliage. He fetched it and led it back. The sun burned in the open sky and the scout looked off to the north, repositioning the stained linen wrapped about his neck. Then he gingerly swung atop the quivering horse and pushed out into the sparse southwest, watching the hills behind him. The severed head jostled with its lightless upturned eyes.

## X



The scout brings news – An outpost – Yarlaganda speaks –  
Night watch – Shulgi drops a courier – A wagon trundles  
into view – A westward investigation – The eunuch has a  
plan – Massacre – Blinded.

Sometime in the early afternoon the scout saddled along the lip of an immense bowl of cratered earth. It was vast and open and the shadows of two clouds were sliding slowly across the ground below. Far beyond, eighty miles beyond, the faint counterline rim rose like some vague wall of the world's end.

The scout sat watching two companies of riders inch across the immense valley, remote and silent, the plumes of dust fading off with the wind. He squinted westward. Far away a stained fortification was set in a rampart of stone, ghostly in the desert miasma. He looked again at the two parties. The Anukites trailed the Nephilim by six, seven miles.

The scout chucked his horse down the loose scree, cutting along the steep face with the rocks tumbling under the slap of hooves and he bound out across the plain until he featured in that enormity a selfsame simulacrum, shimmering and distant.

Mushdamma saw him galloping across the outer frame of the crater, a leaden figure blistering in the heat lines. The giant called out and the company slowed and the scout rode to them in his ragged state, the arrow wounds crusted black with the dark blood running like tears from a weeping eye. The bloodstained linen around his neck was wet and matted and the long braids of the severed head snapped in step with the beast's loping.

Samael called a halt and stepped his camel forward. The scout reigned up. Samael looked at him. He looked at the vacant horse.

The other scout?

The scout shook his head.

Samael's eyes in their deep sockets became flaming novas of vengeance. The other men, haggard though they were, stared on with their own murderous ignitions.

The prophet looked west.

Ngannou drew near.

How many?

The scout's voice was thin, asthmatic. No real definition of sound. He lifted his chin, stretching his neck. He spoke again.

Seen a dozen. Ambushed north of the mountains. No water.

Samael looked at Ngannou.

The night previous the tracks they were following broke off into two groups with a smaller contingent trailing off into the mountains. It was decided to keep for west and leave the scouts to fare for themselves.

Samael straightened.

It would seem our enemy has a puny outpost in this ass hole, Samael said. You'll soon have your revenge, and you'll drink more than water. Can you ride on?

The scout nodded, glowering westward.

They caught up to them in an hour's time. At first they could but see the dust of their enemy foaming against the horizon, then the very men themselves, mere jots riding in a wide formation, ten to the count of the eunuch. Beyond them the elliptic sun was lowering into the west and small birds were crossing the bleeding sky.

The fortified outpost was seated on a scarf of rock, a thumb of a thing, bulky, menacing, the high mud walls cracked with hunks of the weathered facade scabbed off. Along the crude parapet long poles bore the skewered heads of men like gibbets of shriveled meat with the tips running out the top of their skulls or through their raw and blackened mouths. There was a huge wooden gate and it was thick and studded with iron nails and there were trodden paths routing to the north and west. The outpost had been built in long ago times and

was now manned by but five coarse souls.

The enemy filed through the entrance atop their seedy camels, casting looks back at the Anukites bounding across the open plain. The heavy doors slowly ground shut as the inner gears of some clanking mechanism heaved into motion. A roughly hewn timber was hoisted onto the iron hooks to bar the gate while a few dark figures watched from atop the parapet.

Samael and his men halted, steadying their mounts. They squinted with baleful stares. Rags of tattered raiment littered the ground and the bleached remains of a sun scoured cart lay ribbed in the sand. There were half a dozen heads mounted on pikes, leathery things with wasted holes for eyes and missing jaws. The Anukites milled their camels in a loose ring. Samael watched the men atop the the parapet. Aemon tipped slightly to regard one of the desiccated heads and then smacked it over with the flat of his blade. As it lay in the sand a wind drew forth from the north tussling a strip of cloth knotted to the pole and it shuddered and flopped over and quivered in place.

Samael stepped his camel forward and quartered it to better appraise the watching Nephilites.

Yarlaganda, Samael shouted. He waited and shouted the man's name again.

The men on the parapet stood watching, not moving. More figures shuffled onto the upper curtain of the wall. Men of an impressive height, huge shouldered with bones like weaver beams, stout heads with large bored nostrils.

Samael's face tightened. Come to me, he said. Come so that I can give thy flesh to the waiting fowls.

Yarlaganda stepped to the sawed embrasure and rested his massive hands on the uneven stone. He leaned, smiling. Looked at the other Anukites dismissively.

Samael turned his camel and raised a hand in the manner of a trite question. Do you hide like children in a toy fort, cowering with your sticks? Why so afraid, Yarlaganda?

The man stood watching. He shook his head and laughed. Then he said that the Anukite women he took were of poor quality and that the men whined like piglets plucked from their mother's teat and then he said something else that could not be heard over the wind. Samael spurred his camel forward and several of the Nephilim lifted their

bows and Samael drew up his mount and gestured to the ground in invitation. Yarlaganda smiled and turned to dine as his men were exceedingly hungry.

The Anukites circled the outpost riding in a wide arc appraising the sheer walls. Thirty feet of vertical stone, the Nephilim watching like buzzards. Samael sat his mount and studied the horizon. He could see for miles in all directions. The land was all used up with not a tree to be found and to the west was hill country.

That night the Anukites convened to the west in a low depression of earth. Ngannou set watches about the fort and these moved out under the cover of night and the boy crouched in the sand, listening to the men design plans to siege. Someone proposed they fashion a wall of lashed timber to shield their advance but it was determined they could not breach the gate without a formidable battering ram of which the land availed them not. They argued over the use of ladders and ropes and they thought of using fire against the door and they thought of outlasting the men but thought otherwise given their scarce means. Dungtree said he would scale the wall and kill every last one of the menstruating bastards himself. At this they considered sending the eunuch by stealth of night to free the gate. In the end this too was deemed a fool's errand. Ngannou said to wait to see what the morning would bring and he and Samael spoke alone of other matters.

There were clouds that night and the moon was a dull lamp shining through the ghostly veil. The men were lying scattered all about watching still as stones in the holes they had dug. Sometime after midnight Aemon saw a coil of rope drop from the south wall. He watched a dark figure slide down and kneel among the rocks. He roused Shulgi with a touch and they watched the figure skulk through the darkness. They crept with their blades and waited and when the man drew near they sprang from a crop of brush and the man bolted in a dead run with Shulgi bearing down upon him. He clipped the man's leg and the man stumbled sideways and fell and Shulgi pinned him and thrust his knife into him. The man grunted and fought back and Aemon fixed his arms and Shulgi drove the blade into the man's abdomen until the handle and the handle with his hand did enter him. The man cried out and Aemon cupped his mouth, leaning with

weight. The wind was blowing and the sound of the man did not carry far.

This was told Ngannou and he figured the man a courier and he figured this promising and word was spread among the men to watch for others. But none else ventured forth and they slept in turns all along the desert floor.

Morning broke in the east and the sky was all cloud and it looked like a mosaic of broken glass. Dark blue with a single candle glowing through the cracks. Watchmen were posted along the two roads and men were positioned to the east and south far from view and the Anukites gathered at the front gate. Samael called again for Yarlaganda to show his face but he did not and the prophet warned the men atop the parapet of their forthcoming doom. After this Samael spoke no further and withdrew to a spot to the north and he ate. Here their goods were accounted low and they said that water was needed to be had and plans were drawn in the sand with a stick while the eunuch sat watching with his parchment.

The goat had shat on the rope and it had shat all over the horse and the boy untied the filthy creature and bound up its bleating mouth with a length of the soiled rope. The scout watched him with hollow eyes. Then he pulled his knife and took hold of the beast and flipped it on its side and set a knee against it. The animal jerked and he grabbed it by the chin and began to saw its throat. A red sash bloomed and blood sprayed on his hand. The creature's head went limp and the scout stood over the carcass. Then he sat and the boy was told to prepare the meat.

That day the sky held a thin sheet of clouds and the wind was blowing with a mild touch. The boy sat with the scout along the western perimeter watching a whirlwind trace along the radiated ground in a twisting cone as if convoked from the finger of some smoking deity. They did not speak. The outpost lay beyond in the mounting light.

By late morning another speck of dust appeared along the western route and the scout stood and hid the horses behind a pinch of stone and he limped to the edge of the stacked rocks and he and the boy watched a wagon form into view. It trundled along the dusty path, drawing up trails of brown smoke. A lone man was seated on a camel

carting it along. A tarp of cobbled animal skins were stretched on poles forming a kind of rude canopy.

The scout pressed a spot on his wrapped throat and told the boy to get ready to ride. They mounted up and waited until the wagon had passed by and they rode rear of it and when the man looked over his shoulder at the sound of the thumping hooves, the scout arrowed the man in the spine of his back. The half-naked figure jerked and he kicked his camel afresh, wheeling the wagon in a reckless arc, bouncing over the brush and making a racket of dust and the scout galloped alongside the wagon and fired another arrow that fastened in the man's side. The man heaved and slowed his camel and yanked a sword from a tufted scabbard and swung off his mount. He faced the Anukite, hunched and drooling with vomit, the arrows bolted into him. The man looked down at the iron tip barely protruding from his chest. He wobbled with drunken feet. Looked up.

Filthy clapjaws, the man hissed, lurching forward.

The boy peered in the wagon and called out that there were supplies.

The scout touched the bloodstained linen. He pointed west. Where you get this?

The man didn't answer. He grimaced, staggered briefly.

City, village. Which?

They gonna pin back yer skin.

Which?

The man stepped and spit. A pink foam ran down his chin. He stood breathing and turned toward the outpost, shouting weakly with a raised hand. The scout drew his bow and stuck an arrow in the back of the man's head. The quilled figure crumpled like a puppet cut its strings.

In the bed of the wagon there were two blackened casks sealed with fired bitumen and a sack of darkened rice and millet and anise and a store of locusts that smelled of vinegar. A bloodied antelope lay folded in the corner. The scout looked toward the outpost and stared out to the west and then shimmied one of the casks to the edge and removed the plug. He lowered his nose and inhaled the scent of ale with an uncommon look. Another Anukite rode in from the southern watch. They searched the camel and then rolled the slain man over. The lifeless face came up. Sand was stuck to his chest and left cheek.



He was naked save for a fleece persis and leather sandals cinched with cords and the ground lay already stained with blood. The scout knelt cradling in his palm the small medallion hanging from the man's neck. A dull silver shaped bird in flight fitted to a leather strap. He snapped it off. Then he rent open the man's garment with his knife. A small sheepskin bag hung cinched to his dark and wrinkled testicles and the scout cut it away and unloosed the thin cord and emptied the contents onto the sand. Rings of battered gold fell out and the scout sifted them with his finger and shook the bag and swept them back up.

Don't look like no Nephilim, said the Anukite, staring down.

Not so Nephilim, said the scout.

The scout and the boy escorted the wagon back to the prophet and the goods were deemed an unexpected blessing and they dragged the body off the bed of the wagon and those present agreed it harbored no Nephilim blood. The ale was dispersed with notes of caution and the men ate and drank discussing the circumstances surrounding the traveler and the place from whence he ventured. After measured counsel a selection of men were sent to investigate the man's whereabouts: Aemon, the eunuch, Shulgi. These mounted up and drove west following the ruts of the wagon wheels. From atop the parapet the Nephilim watched the disembarking figures.

They rode into the rolling hill country and they rode among the sun blasted hills with sober misgivings as if paranoids embarked in a land of traps. The eunuch rode a quarter mile ahead denoting every rustle, every alteration, watching for all possible subterfuge. Above them the sun was a white hole in a cream sky and the hills about them rose like ricks of bones from the earth, the knuckled mounds turned up in ragged kerfs. They could not see far.

After some time they caught the faint scent of woodsmoke and they grouped together and footed up an esker where they saw the village settled beyond. The thatched hovels were contrived of mud and sticks tied with rafia fibers and were spread across a wide bank of earth with palings of wood stitched in a misshapen parameter. Ratty chickens pecked at the dry dirt and a scrawny woman sat wrapped in a pale and forlorn garb. Naked children with bloated bellies scurried among the beleaguered structures.

They lay watching with their chins resting in the sand counting the men. After an hour they numbered seven of the lank figures, but

reckoned from a count of the buildings fifteen or more. Several paths ran from the village and twice there came men with burdened mules from the west, their large frames and braided hair suggestive of the Nephilim. The wind raked sand across the tops of the hills and the eunuch pulled his dusty shemagh over his nose.

It's an easy take, said Shulgi.

Not the right time, said Aemon.

The water's right there.

It's not the right time, Aemon repeated, glancing.

Shulgi refixed on the village.

They lay watching.

The eunuch's beady eyes shifted in their chambers. He pulled the cloth from his mouth.

They shall profit us with more than water, he said.

Aemon looked.

I know how we enter the stronghold.

The eunuch crept back from the crest of the hill and Aemon and Shulgi slid down and the eunuch told all that was in his mind and Aemon grinned as might one harboring a lurid thought. They peered out over the hill again.

Those wagons there, said the eunuch, lifting a finger. Them we use.

You've a twisted mind, Aemon said, still grinning. Rare metals shine in its dark corners.

The eunuch looked on with his strange face.

The men withdrew from the village and rode back to the stronghold with their news. They arrived sometime in the mid afternoon when the sun was beginning to melt off the clouds and they gathered behind a low cropping of sandstone to the north where a rudimentary camp had been established. The eunuch laid out his idea and those in attendance crouched with pensive brows and the words fell upon them like a benediction. The prophet looked at Ngannou when all had been told.

Our eunuch is full of craft, he said.

The huge man was crouching with his great sword stuck in the sand, holding it like a staff at the handle. He took in the words without any indication of emotion. Then he turned in thought staring out to the north. He looked back.

We must make one emendation, Ngannou said. The women need be blinded and bound to the cart lest the driver simply enter by foot. Everything rests on that wagon entering.

All immediately saw the value of this correction and word was spread among the men that they would push out at full dark.

A restless anticipation swelled among the ranks and they sat waiting for the sun to lower and most tended to their weapons with a careful redundancy, sharpening the blades and turning them in observation as if the mere contemplation of the objects would project time forward to their cruel usage. The boy sat in his trench watching a colony of red ants scamper across the ground with bits of matter in their clawed mouths. He pinched up sand and let it fall onto the hole and onto the ants and he watched them sprint in every direction and he rolled the sand onto them to see how they might escape. The scout slept not far away.

Come evening Samael stood before the gate of the stronghold in the paling light uttering no words, no sounds. He but stood with his queer head tilted up and tilted over slightly as if auditing the defenses with a psychotic admiration knowing as men sometimes do the fatal flaw in a thing. Knowing with a smirking audacity the future ruin of those staring back at him.

Night unfurled from the east and the land sank into moonlit darkness. The Anukites made a subtle show of their presence before receding into the distant black of the desert where they mounted up and bounded off to the west with the eunuch guiding them through the caliginous hills. The moon lay in reefs of cloud with the white hot stars peeking. Eyeless men in shadowed form riding. The hooves of their camels padding against the sand, rustling through the dark crops of scrub. Everything bathed in blue.

They reached the western edge of the village and fanned out along a low hill. Several fires were alight in the encampment and these glowed duly shaping out the figures of the damned. The prophet motioned with his hand and eight of his men dismounted and crept over the hill with their weapons, moving swiftly, low to the ground. The others rode in a wide arc encircling the village.

A small dog lying by one of the fires stirred and began barking

uneasily. The man reclining beside it touched the animal with his hand and then rose towards the night, his grim face aglow in the firelight. Two figures emerged from the darkness running with their awful blades reared back. The man lifted his arms as if to shield himself from a bright light and the newly sharpened iron carved the figure from the shelf of his shoulder to the lower cavity of his chest. A tree half split in a summer storm. In that alien form he stood shrieking and the Anukite set his foot against him and dislodged the sword and wheeled to tender the same to another watching in terror.

The Anukites swept through the village in a wave of destruction, slaying the men and corralling the screaming women with barbarous shouts. Some fled like spastics into the nameless dark and sparsely clad Nephilites scrambled out of their hovels and spun in the dirt in perfect confusion and were skewered through and decapitated. Ngannou stood gripping one by the neck with his massive blade arcing out the man's back.

A large bonfire had been kindled in the courtyard and those fleeing were rounded up like harried game, falling and howling as they were dragged by their hair or legs, while others merely clutched their children in mute docility. Ngannou walked among the crying women and children while they were being bound with cords of rope around the bright flame. Samael emerged from the darkness with Mushdamma holding an injured Nephilite by the head and arm. His hand cupped the man's head entire.

Is that all of them? Samael said, surveying the wretched captives.

I believe so, said Ngannou.

Just then a shout arose some distance away and Kobid came dragging a woman into view. She was thrashing and biting and he struck in her in the jaw with a fist and she fell limp and he went to binding her on the ground by the fire and the shadow of the Anukite sawed against the wall of the hut as he looped the rope tight about her. He jerked her up and finished off the knot and let her fall.

I believe that would be all, Ngannou said.

Samael looked and called a count of his men and none were injured. They ransacked the buildings, knocking about like impertinent bulls and they drew up water from a stone well with a crude windlass, restocking their skins and drinking in turns from the slick bucket, belching with satisfaction as if clamorous lords at a feast.

They found stocks of food and ate as they pleased and one came upon an infant sleeping on a folded pelt and he fetched it up by the legs and dashed it on a rock. He flung the rag of flesh into the desert and told Dungle what he had found with a congratulatory air.

The wagons were sitting where the eunuch last saw them. They towed them to the fire and they loaded the bodies of the dead onto the floor of the wagon bed and commenced to hacking off limbs in a foul butchery of gore, leaning and tugging and chopping with stout hand axes in the crackling light.

Samael stood before the watching women. In life, he said, there is often loss and much of it is eternal, and eternity is a length we cannot understand.

None spoke in reply. They sat blinking like birds.

Thou art vassals of the Nephilim, and that will not do. But take heart, thy soul will not be required of thee tonight. Though there is a cost to your utility. A price for a purpose.

The forsaken women listened without understanding as several of the Anukites approached with meat knives and forever doused the light from their frightened eyes, as if experimental surgeons sent from some disordered unit, jabbing and scraping against the inner bone with the bitter wailing drifting long into the night.

## XI



Samael tenders a gift – Reception of the blind – Stowaway  
– In wait of nightfall – Slaughter of the Nephilim – The pole  
– The prophet drinks – Vision of fallen man – Aemon and  
the boy talk – A covenant is cut.

The Anukites rose before dawn to prepare the wagons. The fire lay dead in a dark pool of throbbing embers and Aemon rekindled the flame with thatching torn from a nearby hut. He knelt watching it come to life. The orange glow spread catching the black eyes of the sullen mules freshly fitted with yokes. Beyond them the women with their children. Sitting silently on the ground. A voice called out and they lifted their heads, peering with drawn and amputated faces. The dark prunes of their eyes were crusted black with channels of dried blood painted like tragic clowns in a play and the newly blind children were turning uncertainly, asking for water, the youngest reaching for the air.

The women and children were gathered up and led to the wagons where they clambered in with ropes tied about their necks in a long tethered chain, groping and feeling along the wooden lip. Here they sat perched atop the dismembered and cold remains. A dark syrup seeped between the slats of the wagonbed. Flies hissed. The one remaining male was seated bound on a mule in the front with a thick rope looped around his waist fixing him to the wagon. Only one eye had been taken from him. The Anukites stood watching. A donkey brayed hoarsely.

Samael approached the man on the mule. He had to turn to see the prophet.

You are to lead these wagons to the stronghold in the east and deliver them personally to Yarlaganda. When you arrive two things

must happen. You are to tell him that you have an urgent message from Samael. Say the name. Say it more clearly. Samael waited and then nodded. When you are inside tell him that he will be dead by noon the next day. If he wishes to hasten the time, he can come out at his leisure. Do you understand the message you are to give?

The man nodded.

Say it back to me.

The man said it back in so many words.

The second thing to happen is for this woman here to hold up a basket of food when she nears the gate. You must tell her when that is so. And she must continually cry out that this is a gift from Samael for a pleasant night in his father's land. She must hold it aloft and cry out the words repeatedly and with great fervor as if her very existence depends on it. She is to do this until it is retrieved by Yarlaganda himself. Do you understand? Tell me what I require.

The man hesitated.

Samael told him that it would be unwise to try his patience. I am eager to test out what I have planned for Yarlaganda. You care to know it?

The man's eye averted and then flicked back. He repeated the requirements.

Samael leaned and said, Be forewarned. Some of my men will be watching. If you do not comply, the things that happened this previous night will prove slight in comparison. Do not stop, nor alter from the eastern road. We are driving north to find more of your kind. Perhaps more gifts can be offered. Share that with him if you like.

Samael tapped the flat of his blade on the man's thigh and he walked back along the wagons appraising the women and he swung atop his camel, sliding the serrated blade into its sheath. A basket containing bread was pressed against the elect woman and the lead mules were slapped into motion. They lurched forward and those in the beds jostled uncertainly and the other mules were struck and sent trudging with their stout and brawny heads jerking.

A bead of light was breaking along the lonesome horizon when the wagons trundled into view of the outpost. From atop the parapets a watchman called out and other dark figures filed along the embrasure

squinting off at the strange object. Someone went to rouse Yarlaganda. The huge figure emerged shirtless from his chamber, his long black hair strewn across his back. He lumbered up the wooden planks and along the stone wall. Someone pointed and his great eyes searched the desert floor.

Call the men, he said.

An iron tocsin was struck with a mallet and the Nephilim gathered afoot watching the wagons shamble nearer. A lean scared up man lifted a bow, training an arrow on the lone rider. The man on the mule called out raising his bound hands saying he was no enemy and that he was no enemy. As if inspired by his shouting the woman in the rear wagon raised the basket above her head and began to cry out that she bore a gift from Samael in a tremulous voice. She kept shouting the words and those all about her lifted their grotesque faces toward the stronghold with looks of wonder like disfigured mystics contemplating a mystery. Yarlaganda motioned with his hand and the archer lowered his weapon. They walked the parapet following the wagons. Yarlaganda searched the horizon.

The mules hauled the debased cargo to the front gate where they stood tossing their heads. Some fifteen Nephilim peered down on the carnage in the thin light. The woman was senselessly proclaiming her message and the man on the mule spoke harshly to her and she held her basket aloft in confusion. Many of the children were crying inconsolably.

Anukites did this thing, the man on the mule shouted up. They've taken the village, butchered the men. You see what's left.

Yarlaganda told his men to spread out and watch. Then he gazed down upon the man.

Who has done this?

Samael. Came last night. Some called him a prophet.

Yarlaganda looked north. A red carpet of newfound light was spreading across the eastern face of the land and far to the north figures could be seen riding in a wide sweep without designation. Yarlaganda shouted to the opposite wall and a man reported all was clear. He peered northward, judging the sight with growing irritation.

They blinded the women, shouted up the rider. Cut out the eyes of the younglings. Says he's go'n north to gather more.

Yarlaganda studied the horizon again. Then searched the sparse



land to the east.

Open the gate. Gather them quickly.

The heavy gate swung open and several men stepped out clutching long handled axes and the mules strained against the harnesses and ground the wheels forward and the men walked backwards through the shutting gate with steely looks. Once inside they began sawing at the twisted ropes and the man on the mule relayed all he knew and all Samael said would come to be and he kept touching the wet hole of his missing eye.

The Anukites veered to the west melding with the shadows and there they contracted in the crumbling night, stretching to the blackness that so befitted them, and they drew up on the western road in a presentation of hostility, riding slowly along the blood dappled path toward the outpost, each rider abreast with their stained weapons.

The Nephilim gathered along the parapet. Samael quartered his mount and eyed them. He called out, The bread is a small token of my appreciation. Will you not thank me for such a thoughtful gesture?

Don't listen to the fool, hissed a pig faced veteran at Yarlaganda's side. It's bait, noth'n more.

Yarlaganda stood breathing, his immense nostrils dilating.

Reinforcements are comin. We break his teeth then.

The prophet's voice drifted over the wind again and the Nephilim stood listening with clenched jaws.

Below them in the still dark of the courtyard one of the congealed heaps of butchered corpses shifted and began to bulge revealing the back of a befouled figure hatching into view. The man's head shifted round, slogging through the mired limbs. Then a face slathered with blackened viscera appeared and the white orbs of its eyes searched out the Nephilim above.

The huddled women could not see the eunuch slide from the wagon and slink along the stone wall to a storage quarter and ease shut the planked door behind him.

The day was spent in wait. The Anukites watched from all corners of the smoking landscape while the sun fomented like a quaking heart. By late morning a terrible wind began to blow out of the north and it was as if a great furnace had been stoked to red and flung open,

rattling trees and men and rock. In the blowing dust they looked like charcoal sketches of men rubbed away. Yet for all the misery none seemed so untouched as the prophet who knelt in his hole looking on with an uncommon equanimity as the twin locks of his black hair whipped and frayed from out of the gold bindings. Others sat hunched with their faces covered, the thin slats of their eyes narrow corridors of fabric marking out only a sliver of the fevered land. No one moved on the parapets and the wind beat against it.

In the afternoon the scout limped out of his hole to tend to the horses in the storm. He fought to wrap their eyes with a linen but the long fabric tore off their heads and one ripped through the air to the south, turning and flipping across the sand until it snagged on a branch where it streamed like a ragged wind cone. The boy watched it flap while he remembered the day when his mother was stripped before him. They ate handfuls of baked grain and cured meat, drank water, dark ale. Sand was all in it, sand was stinging their eyes. The boy chewed with his back walled against the north, his frame stooped, chin tucked. One of the horses expelled droppings on the ground not far from him. Lumps the color of coffee beans soon swept over with dust. Time ground slowly by in that turbulent hourglass world, the wide desert the lower bulb, never flipping, mounding up from the endless storehouses of the north.

The boy trenched out a hole and lay in it with the wind running over him. The sky a bitter cloud. He shifted and adjusted his shemagh and suddenly felt a strange shifting sensation beneath him. A deep churning in the earth's bowels. He looked at his hand. It was jostling slightly. He looked about. The scout sat up. Some inner knocking was tolling soundlessly in the depths, quaking the unsettled earth beneath them. The boy straightened with his hands flat against the ground and the shaking fell away to its former stillness with the wind still dashing. The boy looked at the scout and then eased back into his hole, pulling the linen tight across his face.

That evening the sky shone pale yellow in the blowing dust. The eunuch crouched among the wicker stores of baskets watching the slender crossbeam of light under the door fade to black. Wind seethed through the cracks rattling the door against the stone framing.

He waited, peering through the uneven planks. When the night had fully settled and the sky was all swallowed up in black, the eunuch eased out like some debauched lord of the pit bedecked with knives. It was very dark and in the courtyard a lone torch frayed in the swirling wind. The wagons stood as before and the company of blind lay enshadowed near the far wall on the packed ground. The eunuch studied the upper trace and listened for sounds that did not come over the wind.

Darkness ran along the wall and the eunuch became it, creeping to the gate where the massive log rested on the iron rungs. He sheathed his knives and set his shoulder under the drawbar. With his feet planted he slowly lifted the beam free, trembling in the darkness with air sputtering from his nose. He stood balancing it uncertainly and tipped one end to the ground. Then he eased the great timber down and made for the steps.

The guard posted along the eastern wall did not see him moving along the coping with his strange locomotion, sliding with angular footfalls, his hand touching the stone like some alien primate loping soundlessly. He thrust the blade into the man's throat and cupped his mouth and the moist air of life blew hot through his finger cracks and they jerked round with the eunuch pressing close, following him skin to skin to sand strewn stone. The eunuch pressed against the lifeless head and slid the knife free and resumed the posture of the slain watchman. He peered over his shoulder into the blowing night.

Blood pooled out from the body and the eunuch repositioned his legs. He fingered for a heavy knife and hurled it over the lip of the wall signaling an Anukite who had crawled up in the darkness. The man lifted from the sand and rejoined the party lying in wait a half mile distant. The Anukites swarmed along the ground by foot and the eunuch watched them form out of the blackness and gather about the gate. The giant set his shoulders and wedged his thick fingers into the seams and went to prying. The sound of the great doors opening reported dully in mechanical procession as if pikes of wood were sliding through the eyes of immense chains. They pulled and waited with each dull clanking, timing it with the wind, looking about with their dark faces. The eunuch squinted at the other posts through the blowing darkness and then shifted along the parapet to greet them in turn.

The Anukites entered the courtyard and emerged in the torchlight as things moving swiftly, crouching with the steel of their blades slate black. They came first upon the Nephilim sleeping on carpets of straw in an open stall off the courtyard. A handful of Anukites moved among them with their knives and spiked mattocks and smashed in their sleeping faces, bursting the brain matter out their ears. Other Nephilim lay on cots in a small garrison. One rose up at the sound of his bedfellows being hacked. He saw the momentary flash of the swinging blade, then he beheld the world spinning in a satellite darkness before drinking in eternity. Damu lumbered into the courtyard clutching a befrighted head by its black hair, the bloody trophy aghast and dripping. He watched a body drop from atop the parapet to the ground, a scarlet cord grinning across its throat.

Yarlaganda slept on a huge bedstead of iron fitted with stuffed linens and when they entered he bolted up glaring wildly about in the high ceilinged room. Dark wooden beams ran through the upper stonework and a huge sword hung from a peg in an ornate scabbard of birch and quilted hide. He lunged for the instrument and was fell upon and dragged bucking with madness outside where they stretched him face down with great effort and struck his arms at the center joints with two handed mauls, snapping the limbs back with a horrible cracking.

A great bonfire was built atop the wagons and it was fueled with various furnishings and the heads of the slain were tossed in like apples. From among the stones a great beam of wood was ripped free and sharpened to a long and cruel point. This implement was set in the earth with the vertical tip scaling eight feet and ropes were lashed about Yarlaganda's disfigured arms and from a simple pulley of wood they hoisted him and sat him nude on the point. The man's great head flung back in pain and Samael ordered him lowered further and the pole drove like a pencil into a strawberry. Flames roared from the wagon beds and the wood of it glowed as a single coal with black smoke rolling in fetid waves into the consumed sky.

Round they gathered with the blind staring without sight.

Yarlaganda's abdomen bulged and his long fleshy legs kicked, sliding him lower on the point, and he shook his head and growled and fixed his eyes on the prophet who stood smiling in observation. Samael gestured for the golden chalice and the item was produced

and set in his open hand. The prophet held it turning it in the light. Then he drew near Yarlaganda and drove the tip of his sword into the man's side. The man seemed not to feel anymore. Blood ran from the hole and trickled along the curve of his hip into the waiting chalice. Samael held it aloft.

Your foolish pride has brought you to this, the prophet began. Thinking you could take from our people without cost. That you could press into our land without reprisal. 'Strong as a savage bull,' they said. 'None can withstand their arms.' Thy arms are weak. The ribs of thy people are not strong.

Yarlaganda turned aside his gaze. Samael shifted.

Look at me. Thou hast woken a beast. It stirs for more than thy head. You are but a thin branch. The roots shall be dug up. Know that your father will suffer a worse fate.

Yarlaganda cursed Samael and he was lowered further until he bore the look of one gorged with food, ready to vomit. The man's arms jerked and his eyes rolled. Then he shuddered terribly and died fixed to the pole, the enormity of his flesh sunk to halfway.

Samael drank.

Voices rose in a clamor of triumph.

They spent much of the night in mirth debauching among the blind like cats toying with injured frogs. Food stores were dumped and sorted and there were foreign grains and several omers of brown flour and dark breads wrapped in sheets of burlap and thick ceramic jugs corked full of amber wine. Weapon racks housing strange implements were found, long shafted halberds tasseled with red cords and huge forks with iron prongs running along the shaft. Devices of torture like bear claws made for human heads and chains with hooks and other butcheries which the Anukites swung about as if they were feudal lords in a game.

There was a well along the western wall, spring fed from some underground system, and the water was cold and tasted of iron and the giant hauled forth sloshing buckets and poured them over his huge head. Others stood washing nude beside him and they looked like hired peons about an elephant, wiping their faces and jostling with raillery, their feet mired in the filth of the slain.

Some danced by the pagan fire and some howled at the night sky like wolves searching for a moon and then as if gathering in some late or long waning vespers the Anukites pooled about the courtyard in a dark verisimilitude of truth's antithesis, some still eating, some slightly drunk with the drinks still pouring down, waiting for a spoken word. Yarlaganda hung like a strange larva in the firelight and Samael sat opposite his feet, a strange visitant himself, now bleary eyed with the pipe resting on the ground beside him.

Is it not plain that we are all divine? he said, drawing the attention of his men. For what is a god, if not one for whom the order of reality is defined and set according to self-imposed dictates? Servants bow to higher courts and thereby kneel to greater rectitudes of authority. In so doing they obey the limits set by others. The limits, I say. These we label rules. It is morality. Jurisprudence. The defining of concepts. Here the gods sit on their self-proclaimed thrones dictating the so ordered principles by which their creation must bow. Relegating it with edicts, dire threats, austere looks. But what of this tether? Is it not evident that the game is fixed in a mirage? Is it not plain that the value of such things is established by the whims of these so called gods? There is no ultimate boundary to this order. How could there be? Transcendence is arbitrary. It plays to their desires. Their preferences. Their megalomania. The bounds, I say, are but an illusion, fixed only by the fancy of deities groping for power. But listen, and listen carefully. The boundary is no unalterable thing but is merely the product of a fictional decree. It is a form of trickery, false magic, sleight of hand attended with threats. Such limits do not, nor cannot, fall within the domain of a single being, no matter the supposed beneficence. It is a lie. A form of tyranny hammering against the truth.

Is not, therefore, the misstep of the gods evident? We may lay hold of that which exists above them, because we can lay hold of that which is above them. Our claim is right, for our reach is sufficient. Reality is a cloth for our making.

These words fell upon many of the watchful recipients like riddles, yet for all their artless simplicity they were endowed with a real sense of its meaning, knowing by some common instinct the true nature of man's fallen vision, as well the principle by which the archons of old lost their footing. Such articles of dogma being one and the same.

By darkening firelight the women and their young were put down

with little effect, save one dark haired child that Samael entertained on his knee, feeding it bits of cracker like a parrot. As the dying called out for mercy, he seemed to see something profound in the child's eyeless face.

The air reeked and the newly dead were tossed on the pile to smolder among the blue flames and new tongues of fire rose edgewise with the small flarings burning along raiment and hair with the smoke of it swirling up to windblown stars so very far away.

The boy bedded on a lumpy cot in the garrison but was soon driven out by the loud snoring and rank farting. He found Aemon still awake in the storage room leaning by candlelight against the stone wall. The boy stood holding his bedding in the doorway.

Aemon picked at the corner of his eye and gestured at the ground.

The boy laid out the woolen blanket and sat with his back against a wooden drum across from him. Neither the boy nor the man had bathed and their faces were streaked with dirt and sweat. They sat a few feet apart.

You figure we ride out tomorrow? the boy said.

I'd say so.

Where to?

Aemon was reclining with his arms crossed. Wherever Ubara's head is.

The boy looked at the candle. The flame twisted in the unseen currents and then righted and stood calm. As it did so the light's aura twitched and settled again and Aemon too was watching the candle flame.

You kill a lot before this?

Aemon looked up. Hunters hunt. Those who don't get ate. Why you so chatty?

The boy looked at him and then looked at the candle.

Somethin's on yer mind. Say it.

Just thinking.

Aemon fixed on him. Thinking?

I've a thought.

Say it then.

The boy looked tired. He shifted. In a thousand years you think

any will give a damn about us?

A thousand years?

It don't need be a thousand. Just a long time.

Aemon squinted.

Go back some long ages ago and what was there? Same rocks. Same sand, I suppose. But what of the people? Do any of us care about'em?

You wouldn't be here without someone screwin. Must mean something.

The boy turned his head. The candle flame swayed shaking the room.

It's just strange there's been people like us wandering about and now they don't. They're nothin to me. So why think any would care one bit about us?

Aemon looked at the boy. Is that what you want? Someone to care?

I don't know.

Won't much matter either way. Not with you lying in some cold grave.

Maybe.

Aemon cocked his head, worked his mouth. It's late. There's four, five hours of sleep to be had. That's what I care about now. Aemon lifted the candle and blew it out and he and the boy were plunged into darkness complete.

In the morning the pile of burned bodies looked like charred manikins intertwined in stiff postures. Utterly black and featureless. Stinking bitterly. Those atop the parapet sat watching the sun wheel into view, their faces catching the copper light. To the west the long shadow of the stronghold formed along the empty floor of the desert. It was warm and dry as sawdust and no clouds were seated anywhere. The wind had drawn down.

The scout rose early in the still light limping to the well where he sat on the broad coping with fresh bandages shorn from blankets. He drew up water and dipped a rag and wiped the wounds on his calf. Pinched the skin around the scabbed black holes. It felt hot. Holding a length of fabric in his teeth he tore off a segment and wrapped it tight



about his leg and cut off the excess with a knife, letting it fall to the ground. The boy shuffled groggily out of the storage room to the well. He stood watching the scout, his hair grimed up in an unbridled coiffure. The scout cleared his throat and spit red. Then he unwrapped the bandage about his neck and asked the boy to look. The boy leaned. A garish crusted slit seeping a yellowish discharge. The long trench still marred and bleeding. Gnats were already going for it.

Looks angry, the boy said flatly.

The scout flung the soiled linen and refurbished the wound with fresh dressing and made for the parapets. The boy lifted the bucket and drank. There were smoke stains on the inner walls from the many years of fires, a yellowing shadow of soot moving like a shade up the stone blocks and along the newels and dark blistered wood. The men were slow to rising and they emerged from their dens of sleep, plodding sluggishly, half naked, dour. Most of the camels were grinding away at the coarse shrubbery outside with Dungtree watching over them, haggard looking and filthy. Not far from the wall the body of the young child lay face down in the sand with two birds rummaging among the folds of it. Dungtree stared about with his hard eyes. Another bird saddled atop the child's body with its tiny claws and Dungtree sat mindlessly lobbing pebbles at the fluttering creatures.

A fire was struck and meats were prepared and Samael appeared in an irritable and joyless state, pacing about like a tiger in a cage. The men raked the meat from the bones with their sawy teeth and Mushdamma stood naked as before, eyeing the blackened camel leg after each prodigious bite. Silence seemed to become them in the windless pale of morning.

The debased figure of Yarlaganda hung like some pornographic totem set in exhibition, the meaty limbs dangling at a slight pitch with the shoulders dappled in newly mottled bird droppings and his bowed and sunken face conveyed from its lofty mantel a kind of fatherly displeasure as if the bloodless Nephilite had received news of a wayward son. All this seemed to invoke within Samael a disquieted spirit as if he felt some inner turmoil or needling desire for greater purpose or ritual. He sat staring at the lifeless figure with his machinations astir, eating but little of the meat. Standing suddenly he informed the group that a ceremony was to be conducted and orders

were given for the body to be removed from the pole and severed with the upper torso placed to one side and the lower set six feet distant forming a kind of grotesque portal between the sections. When this had been done and all were watching with a peculiar sobriety, the prophet announced with a solemn oath that this would be the fate of any failing to pursue to the bitter end the head of Ubara and his sons.

May it be so for me if I do not fulfill the vows of this covenant, the prophet said, positioning himself before the entrance of the two halves. A hundredfold if I do not return with the objects of my intent.

And with these brief words he passed between the pieces, watching on with quiet expectation, eyes brightened like a poet availed of some insight. Ngannou rose from a stone landing near the steps and strode between the pieces striking his chest with a balled fist. After him all moved with determination towards the bloody entrance and there they entered into that fateful vow with many adding their own excited sounds and overwrought encouragements. The boy watched uncertainly from the well and as the last were passing through Samael fixed on him in invitation saying he was no less welcome to enjoy the fruits of the covenant. He rose and stood before the opening like a hesitant groom before an altar and he passed therein and Samael grinned and the men took this with a certain humor and shouted all the same, their spirits freshly enlivened with food and ceremony.

## XII



Anatomy – Riders from the north – A beating – On  
morality, on the utility of torture – A burial – A tomb –  
Shulgi silences a woman – Ubara's legion – Hill of the dead  
– A ruined city – Venturing westward – Samael has a dream.

**I**n the courtyard the Anukites sorted the newly acquired goods, bundling up various foods and skins of water, with no one taking so much as a cooking knife from among the stores of weapons. The eunuch squatted by the remains of Yarlaganda with one of his many scrolls laid open, sketching by sunlight the inner contents of the corpse. With the tip of his dagger he lifted the sagging skin around the frayed torso and peered in as if one trying to read fine print. Then he set the blade down and took up his charcoal and scribbled among his notes various shapes in imitation of organs. Shulgi stood by the man watching on like some medical initiate in service to science.

The gate lay partially open and some of the men were hauling sacks of food to the camels and securing it to them with ropes. Dungtree stood searching the southern waste, staring out over the long palings of sand to where faint crest-lines tore up the horizon.

In the courtyard the toothed shadow of the embrasure narrowed as the sun curved along its axis, and in the bright glare of the sun's climbing several men atop the wall rose at the sight of riders in the north. Four in number trotting down out of the higher country. They shouted down to the others and Samael joined them and stood peering. He ordered the men to fetch up from among the dead whatever beads they could find and they rubbed off the soot with their thumbs and thread the colored stones into the beards of the newly posted watchmen. The gate was closed and the mouths of the camels were belted shut with straps and a handful of Anukites crouched along

the southern wall with their weapons in wait.

The riders halted before the great doors and sat squinting up at the sentry who gestured lazily and called a word of greeting in the accent of the Nephilim. They were wild looking with twisted beards the color of the earth, men of height with rugged shoulders and hard jaws. Two stepped their horses around scanning the horizon. Their swords sheathed.

The sentry called down, You see the Anukites? Passed through two days ago, going northwest.

One of the men held the sentry's gaze, a figure with a forehead like that of a droughted parmacetti. His deep eyes shifted.

Where's Yarlaganda?

Not here. Pressed out after watering.

The riders exchanged looks. The sentry called for the gate to be opened and the Nephilim watched uneasily as the heavy doors cranked open. The lead figure looked over his shoulder and he shifted his horse, pulling the strap. The gate swung slowly and the Nephilim did not move. Leaning with mild theater the sentry pointed behind them and asked whether more of their own were coming. The Nephilim turned to look, and when they did so, the scout and the eunuch raised up with their bows while the Anukites rushed out in a wordless torrent. An arrow passed through the neck of one. Blood spurted and he clutched at the fountain and another pitched with a shaft buried in the top of his head. The others wheeled their mounts and tried to kick away but were pulled off their screaming horses and beaten senseless in the sand and dragged forthwith into the courtyard where they were questioned with fists and other blunt instruments. They told all they knew and they said they were sent to see about the pursuing Anukites and whether it was of any account and they bore news of conquest in the feral borderlands of the north and they spoke of a man of renown named Golyath and how his great legion had sacked a Sipparian city and were returning with spoils to Shuruppag, Ubara's capital region, four days ride to the northwest.

The men were beaten further and their distended heads were bloated and swollen and they spoke insensibly. When they would not wake to pain, Ngannou pinched the life from them.

The Anukites took counsel.

Reckon Golyath to be blood of Ubara? Ngannou said, wiping his

hands on a rag of cloth.

Samael nodded. I believe so. Where's the eunuch?

Ngannou roamed with his eyes. The eunuch was standing atop the parapet. He called after him.

Know anything of Golyath?

The eunuch shook his head. No. But there's lore about Shuruppag. They call it Land of the King's Seat.

Figure Ubara there?

Perhaps. The kingship was taken from Zimbar to it.

Ngannou turned to Samael. What about Kalidd-Ahri?

The prophet lowered his gaze to his arm and thumbed up a stain of blood. He examined it on his fingers and rubbed it thoughtfully. It's of no account. We have our higher aim now.

So for Shuruppag?

The wind swept along the ground swirling in the stronghold.

There is no other path.

They set out well provisioned to the north riding under a sun set in a wealth of blue. Yarlaganda's head hung by a leather thong, swaying pendulously from Samael's saddle, the eyes drowned and lost. There were cactus with cream tipped thorns growing among huge plates of stone and there were reedy stalks sharp as bayonets spearing up in bundles and the Anukites maneuvered among them, trotting across scrub plains to hills and beyond hills to where there arose great plateaus puzzled across the desert, trailless, chipped gaps like cleft pallets. They wove through the narrow gutters with the stone walls scaling fifty feet above them and they slapped over rock floors to boulder choked passages where they were forced to dismount and squeeze the camels through torturous openings, yanking at the beast's snorting heads as if the whole affair were some elemental birth, such was the moaning and travail.

The evening sun found them on a naked plain moving with purpose, moving judiciously, watching the land unfold slowly, the long legs of the camels striding like the legs of spiders in the tilted light. Even in the dry desert air the scout was sweating with fever, his eyes shadowed, face drawn. He mended his throat with fresh bandages. The boy watched him.

They made a small and fireless camp on the brow of a hill. Above them great swarms of bats darted overhead, twitching fitfully in the oily sky. Soundless myriads of the things flying to and fro while the Anukites sat in the unalterable dark eating. They drank water, drank their ale. They conversed about the rearing of animals and then the rearing of children, so much the same they were in their eyes, and some told of their own sons while others who had none ventured what would become of their lineage when they did. They bantered about meat and the manner of its preparation and the ways of hunting and then the prophet spoke briefly about the utility of torture.

What is in a man is hidden from the eyes of man, he began. Each carries within his chest a small bottle wherein are concealed his true thoughts. It is a latched container, a corked jug. This allows men in their deceit to conceal from the world the things stored up in it. In so doing there is no necessary corollary between what is seen outwardly and what is actual. Expressions lie, utterances prove false. The wonder of pain is that it supersedes all guile, peeling it away like a knife to bark. For who can hide the truth when compelled with torture? It always manifests itself. Always sounds its note if the pain is severe enough. We witnessed its usefulness today. Pain ushers forth what is otherwise locked away.

Some sat staring out at the quiet darkness and some were lying in the sand silently watching the night sky. Shulgi propped himself up. He said, Is it not a strange ingenuity that men can hide what he believes to be so? Or that he can say that which is not so?

So it is, said Samael.

Is this a form of power?

Falsity, you say?

Falsity.

Certainly. Do you see it any other way?

Shulgi shook his head. Nay. But some of the scribes say it is a form of unrighteousness.

The prophet smiled. What do you think?

Shulgi reflected. Seems so.

Does that lessen its power?

Don't seem to.

No, it does not. Men congregate unto themselves moral statutes of every description and do proliferate these notions forthwith, supposing

in all their erudition that the least of these ideals compels some form of compliance. This is for those with a child's mind. But even supposing it to be, it ought be said, and it ought be said candidly, that such imaginations do not reduce in the least its utility. Therefore postulate virtue with sincerest alacrity but do not confuse it with the exigencies of life, as that is more cardinal to the attainment of one's ends, and which itself rests in the cradle of men's judgments. What is proper for one must be proper for the other. Can there be any other way with the ways of men?

They ventured out at first light and they rode all that day through low barren hills where broad and misty palisades stood in the distance. In the afternoon they stopped to eat in a thin slip of shade and the men sat on the ground with their uncooked meals saying little. Birds like feathered rodents were resting atop poles of cacti craning their devilish heads at the fallen scraps. As they rode out, the creatures dropped and trotted in the sand and pecked in flurries and jousting amongst themselves, as did all living things in that scarce land.

An ancient and cracked playa leveled out before them to the north and they rode through the windless heat into a ceaseless terrain where they came upon the remains of long dead oxen. Tattered lumps of scoured bones with rough carpets of gray flesh stiff as wood and strung out along the hard ground in lonely piles as if some wandering long ago herd had ventured forth to its remote cemetery end. The air was very dry and it smelled of parched stone and the sun stood in its anger laminating the world with its toilsome heat. They pushed out into broken rises of sandstone and they followed an old hunter's trail northward where there were colored rocks and stunted scrub and no signs of their enemy.

Night found them on a dark mesa under stars so white and thick they seemed newly forged in a furnace of pure light and now freshly hung to glow in their cooling. In this pale register the Anukites seemed to be remnants of an older legion sent to journey, pushing into territories utterly remote and beyond man's reckoning to what seemed the world's interminable edge. The scout grew worse and in the morning they found him stiff and cold with ants crawling into his cracked mouth. All stood in quiet observation. Mushdamma and

Kobid trenched out from the nameless ground a shallow pit with their hands and the giant slid the body in and covered it with dirt. None spoke and as the camels were freshly fitted the boy stared at the small mound and then mounted up and rode on.

In the east above the low hills the sun stood robed in clouds with its feet dipped in orange. It was terribly dry and the wind was blowing sand through the legs of the camels and they rode singlefile like aphasic wanderers appraising the future and all the world was remote and without definition. They drank and drank yet more and after many hours they came upon a solitary monolith of rock that had a kind of temple or stone sanctum carved into the face of it. It was forty feet high and the stone was pale in a vast pale of sand with rounded pillars chipped with age and lined with the ornamental etchings of predatory beasts. Two enormous statues flanked the entrance, men with heads like lions gripping long handled swords. Weathered, ancient.

The eunuch rode around it in a wide sweep. After he signaled all was clear the men gathered about its steps. There were no openings save a single entrance tunneling into darkness. Dungtree and Kobid pressed in with torches, shuffling along a low corridor, and after several minutes they emerged and said it was some kind of tomb full of looted sarcophaguses.

Bones and worthless cloth, Dungtree said. Might of been kings'r somethin.

Samael eyed the upper carvings. His garments snapped in the wind.

Kobid chucked his spent torch. The air's thick with stank, he said. His feet were caked in a foul dark paste.

Bat droppings near a hand deep, Dungtree said. A shit tomb if ever.

Samael approached the entrance and peered in and then straightened and called for the men to move out. They rode out as before with the noon sun shrieking with light. There was but only cactus and scrub brush for miles and the crust of the earth seemed to crack up from the sand in huge slanted tablets and there were mountains beyond. They wove among the immense slabs and picked their way up a faint path to a high shelf where they could see the blackened remains of a village laid out on a lower plain. Nothing



stirred and there was no smoke and the earth lay silent and scorched from fire with the reduced buildings no more than mounds of blackened rubble as if the underfloor of a kiln.

They advanced with their weapons and stood without the walls listening and watching before kicking forward their mounts. They moved slowly through the streets and there were charred figures lying about in all attitudes of death, androgynous beings of charcoal, some stretched and reaching, others balled up like dead spiders. A horse lay bloated in a hardened dough and there were headless goats in a collapsed pen and ruined chickens scattered about in dried clumps and the buildings were bowls of ash with exposed ribworks of blackened poles. They rode slowly to an open concourse where there were yet more of the slain, dried and gnarled with ropes wound about their wrists and necks. The Anukites sat appraising the sight. Dust rolled through the streets and a burnt dog scampered away in the distance.

A war party's touch, said the prophet.

Ngannou looked. He rested his hand on a charcoal beam. Not recent. But the destruction says a war party.

Might of been Golyath.

Might so.

Aemon knelt over a body. Hard to tell the breed, he said, prodding its head with a knife.

Shulgi's voice rang out and the men turned and saw the man on his hands and knees straining after something in one of the piles of rubble. He jerked forward as if snatching after an object and fished out an elderly woman in a long tattered wrap composed of the skins of field mice. Her hair was burnt away in parts and she was thin and partially nude and she lay shielding her face as if unable to bear the light. Shulgi stood over her with his weapon.

Ngannou dismounted and strode near.

Who did this?

The old woman was muttering to herself. She tried to scabble away and Shulgi fetched her by the foot and slid her back and the old woman moaned with her arms flung across her face. Ngannou regarded her impatiently and then looked at the darkening circle of urine in the sand beneath her. He looked away and shook his head. Then he looked back.

Look at me.

The old woman did not look.

Ngannou commanded she look.

The old woman slowly revealed her small dark eyes. They seemed unHINGED from sanity.

Who did this?

The woman's pupils skittered and she began jabbering incoherently. They stood watching.

What's wrong with her? Shulgi said.

She's deranged, Ngannou said.

She might be faking.

Ngannou looked at her. She kept babbling with her hands pressed over her eyes.

Ngannou straightened in disgust. Find out then.

Shulgi looked at Ngannou and then down at the woman and he struck her shin with the edge of his sword. The woman cried out and balled up clutching herself and Shulgi shouted at her to speak aright. Nonsense came out. He struck her other leg and the old woman floundered strangely on the ground while trying to crawl away with her arms.

Shulgi spat. Must be deranged.

Ngannou bore a look of displeasure. Shut her up.

Shulgi stood back and swung with a heavy blow. Then he stood regarding his handiwork and adjusted his grip and wiped with his free hand the speckled blood from his chest.

They spread out among the ruins and upon finding no provisions of worth they grouped up and cast out from the blighted village. A dusty path curved north along windswept slopes and they traveled along it fanned out, sitting erect on their mounts, watchful and grim. By late afternoon they came upon more of the slain strewn on the ground like dead insects fallen from the sky. Some were missing arms and feet and the sand fell about them in rings of black. Scattered about the hills were articles of clothing, severed cords, iron utensils for digging.

Two hours later they came upon the tracks of a vast and incalculable army cutting across their path. A swath of disturbed ground half a mile wide with the earth trodden deep with hooves and bulky wheels and stomping thousands beyond reckoning. It coursed

like a dry riverbed to the northwest. The Anukites rode into the churned up sand and they contemplated its significance with surest solemnity. Samael spoke to his men and the camels stood in the open sand swinging their heads in search of foliage.

A day later they found the destroyed city and the hill of bodies outside the main gate. They reared their mounts, saddling side by side. The heap was a vast corpus of dead dragged to a ruinous mound, putrefied and gelatinous, the slain hacked and thrown together in a horrible bowl of rotting flesh. Swarms of flies buzzing in feral agitation, the earth a marsh of human blood that shone black in the boiling sun. As they drew near an unbearable stench fell upon them and the camels barked and jerked in protest. Even for this grizzled lot the scene evoked within each man a primal abhorrence of death. Aemon and the eunuch wrapped their faces and beat their mounts forward and the rest stood at a distance watching them slog through the mired ground in investigation. Aemon was not half the height of the pile. They rummaged briefly among the dead and returned.

Mainly children, some men, some beasts, Aemon said, removing the linen about his face.

Samael turned on his saddle to see about the city in the distance. He pulled at the strap.

The main gate had been ripped from the stone and there were signs of a great rushing horde of men trafficking through the streets with no dead to be found save the remains of animals. The company moved among the silent ruins as if they were surveying an ancient dig housing something inimical. Vultures watched from the wreckage like miniature reapers robed for assignment and there were shadows penciled in the darkening dust.

The Anukites moved among the rubble marveling at the destruction. By some unknown device the stone buildings were no more and the collapsed rocks lay in far flung piles with the flax roofing strewn about like the floor of an enormous stable. Near the central square an ornate temple stood snapped in half as if the upper towers had been gripped by the hand of an otherworldly being and crushed and let to fall on a terraced promenade. The design of such a war machine eluded the Anukites and they postulated that some system of ropes and pulleys were used to devastating effect. They moved on to a vast marketplace where there lay broken carts and upturned tables and

the rinds of fruit and other rotting foods trampled in the dirt with gnats clambering in swarms. The fruit did still bear some color.

They gathered near the eastern gate. Sentries were posted along the walls and counsel was taken among the group. They could not discern what number of men were taken, as well the number required to take such. Aemon said it had to be ten thousand and the figure was deemed absurd by those who could not imagine a force of men greater than the tribes of the Anukites. Ngannou studied the razed structures and he knelt and scooped up a handful of sand and let it fall from between his fingers. Samael ordered they move out in pursuit.

In the canted light they rode out following the tracks to the west and the air grew cool and there was little wind and the world's own silence became each. Behind them in the equal night wolves slank forth to feed on the ripened dead and by some unspoken invitation other dark creatures ventured from their dens to partake in the communal feast that so befits nature's menu. Claw footed lizards and small desert rats and yellow spiders with black clustered eyes wet as dripping cave rock and other soulless organisms in which there is no awareness of tragedy or loss but only a tight-fisted subjugation to futility if man is something more.

That night they slept in a ring of spinulated brush with sentries posted a quarter mile in all directions. In the still darkness the boy woke to the sound of someone snoring and he lay on his back watching the stars wondering if his mother could see the same. When he woke again the sun was breaking in a haze of pink. Breakfast was eaten by all and they sat in the predawn light grinding their teeth on dried figs and beans. Mushdamma soaked a hunk of bread with the last of his ale and folded it into his mouth and he sat watching the stars dissolve into day.

While the men were still eating Samael told them to hear the dream that he had dreamed. He said that all the world was a great vineyard and ripe for harvest and that the grapes represented the nations and that his cluster was finest above all others. He said his stood among the clusters and called out for them to bow down but

they would not as each believed they were tantamount. At this he said that all the grapes were gathered up with a tremendous sickle and thrown into a great winepress whereupon they were trodden to a blood that flowed out from the vat to a bridle's height. He said that the dream was true and that he was the fateful sickle for the day of reckoning and that all would kneel before him and thereby confess that he alone was king over all the kings of the earth.

When the prophet finished saying these things, he assured his men that it was so and that it was certain.

## XIII



Ubara's horde – Ngannou looks at the boy – Shurrapag –  
Bathing in a river – Reconnaissance – Breaking of fingers –  
Meat is prepared – A plan is formed.

Two days later, morning found them in an open valley dotted with creosote and prickly pear ribboned with tiny yellow flowers. Low mountains flanked their sides and the tracks were as tilled farmland curving to the southwest. Much of the sand lay freckled with blood and there were crushed plants and human waste and the fibrous droppings of horses and bloodstained footprints partially imaged on rocks. The land flattened and on that long plane they saw a lone volcano smoking on the horizon, gathered up like a steaming anti hill, the smoke billowing soundlessly. They turned in their saddles studying it for miles.

They rode on with the wind stirring before them pales of fine dust and they came to the doorstep of a broad and forlorn mountain. The tracks circumvented it by a southerly route and the tracks looked fresh. The Anukites figured this an opportunity for high ground and they rode up the red clay negotiating a mild incline with growing haste. Upon an old hunting trail wobbling up through the taller cliffs they trudged up a steep bank to a bluff and there looked down on a vast sea of men pressing westward. Countless thousands brindling in the stark light, flowing forward like a dark mat with slaves by the hundreds loping in long lines, nude and hooked with speared ropes jabbed up through their lower jaws and pulled out their mouths like captured fish strung on a line and painted horses with painted riders flanking in mass, trotting and shuffling with whips, their long lances held vertical with red tassels forking in the wind and violent minded dogs with rugged shoulders tethered in packs and rows of massive elephants lumbering by the dozens, the gristled feet pressing holes in the earth

like the ends of logs being dropped and they were configured with thick ropes and long pale bones bored with holes and fitted with nets that held goods dragged by travois poles that slithered in the sand like the tails of giant lizards. A cloud of dust rolled sluggishly through the ranks and fell off to the south where it bled out into the open air and was no more.

The Anukites lay watching on the heated stone. None moved nor spoke. Far below the sound of the teeming horde drifted soft and muted. Only the faint report of dogs barking could be heard rising over the low rumble of man and beast grinding forward.

The boy looked at Aemon. The man's splotched face was fixed on the army and he looked at the boy with something unspoken in his eyes and then looked back again. Every man lay staring out and the boy studied them in their quiet considerations. He detected, or so he thought he detected, a momentary hesitation flashing briefly as lightning before thundering away under the turning eye of Samael who fixed on them all.

Shuruppag is not far, said the prophet. We follow from a distance. Eunuch, watch our rear.

Ngannou lifted from the rock, dropping back from the lip. As the men mounted up and began their descent he turned and eyed the boy as if he knew something was astir. The boy held his gaze and rode in step with the men, picking his way down the bitter slopes to the roiled earth of Golyath's westward march.

All that day they followed the smoking cloud of the horde on the horizon, trailing among pikes of stone the color of dampened sulfur. Come evening wagons appeared in the south rolling across the pan in a racket of dust. From a bench of stone the Anukites watched them meld into the quivering mass of men. After an hour the merchants broke off rolling back with their loads of human souls along the dusty waste where the sky was growing dim.

We get'n those? Kobid said.

Dungtree was crouching next to him. He turned to regard the man's sudden enthusiasm. Ain't no purpose in em.

Kobid's eye twitched. He looked. Purpose enough if they be Nephilim.

We'll have our hand on the Nephilim soon enough, Kobid, Samael said, shifting. Our aim is in that legion. I believe it sits on that

painted elephant.

Kobid looked and squinted at the red elephant, no more than a dot in size. His face twisted in thought and then hardened. So we cut his throat this night? You know I will die by your side with a sword in my right and left.

Not this night, said the prophet. The wolf does not barge into the grizzly's den. It lures it out, plucks away its cubs, leads it to the trap. We shall see about their city and coax out the bear for the day of slaughter.

Kobid nodded and the men lay watching with their stony eyes.

Darkness fell and the wind cried all through the night and the fires of the army shone in pinpricks of light that marked out the world's contour in a shelf of serrated fire. Jackals moaned like wayward children from some darker province to the north and in the blanched moonlight the Anukites watched the fires diminish by ones and twos until none were seen.

In the morning the horde lurched into motion and the cloud of dust bloomed and the Anukites took up their mounts and as they did so some believed to have heard a lonely chorale drifting faintly over the desert. Ngannou turned his ear to listen and warned away the imagination saying it was the wind running through rocks.

They favored a more northerly flank following banks of cholla until needful of cover they broke for a huge wedge of rock to the north. The eunuch scouted ahead and when they saw him fixed atop it pointing they turned to look but could not see beyond a curtain of low hills. So after dismounting they set the camels and made their way up it and stood staring at the famed city of Shuruppag in the west. It was immense and ghostly in the desert pall with walls fifty feet high, bounded with mortared towers and bedecked with copper shields glinting in the morning light. Blistered from sandstorms, footed with filth. A metropolis of stone and paganism with settlements hemmed about with scraggly fields quartered in fenced patches. A broad river was coursing under the wall of the city and out a northerly duct, muddy, brown, chugging, the tilted palms and long grass greener than the green found in dreams. They could see the legion of men funneling onto the central road like a dark liquid draining into a channel, stretching narrow and black into the mouth of the main gate.



For the next two days the Anukites would lurk by night, stalk by day, accounting every means of travel and denoting with a watchful eye from their clefts of hiding all who sojourned from beyond in wagons or by foot. There were packs of rangy camels and horses and long-haired oxen plodding slowly with gorged ribcases, the roped slaves and stolen women shuffling in tow, devoid of all earthly hope.

Such as these trod in while the lower winds scuttled debris by paling light, and then by night branded hills under an eyelet moon sliding to morning with fragmented trees bearing in the slower dawn.

They restocked upriver far to the north, dipping down into the muddy banks with their water skins. They waded waist deep in the slow murk, bobbing like creatures unnatural to it and they scrubbed their faces and greasy heads and plucked from their thighs pigmented leeches long as fingers. Their camels drank in the high grass while brightly colored birds jaunted for insects among the palms. An egret white as child's teeth stood in its wicker rookery.

The eunuch sat leaning over his map in the shade of a chasteberry and Samael and Ngannou stood behind him conducting their plans in sober tones. At a curve in the bank, Dungtree seized from a moist hole two bucking groundhogs and clubbed out their brains and jerked and peeled away the tough skin on a rock. The boy sat watching in the mud. Dungtree sliced up thin slivers of the bleeding meat and dangled it over his mouth and ate. He squinted at the boy and shaved off a portion and tossed it over.

Along the river to the south, they spied out thatched hovels of gray mud, impoverished settlements of half breeds and others of a lighter tone with debased and superstitious minds. Small raiding parties were sent out and one maneuvered among the hills and cut along an old cattle path and there fell upon a lone man working a dry and sparse field. He was plodding back to an outbuilding with a burden of sticks lifted on a shoulder when they struck him with clubs and dragged him kicking inside and held him against the straw packed dirt while his mule watched on absently. The man was all sinew and bone and his face looked like a used up elbow. A length of rope was hanging from a crossbeam and Kobid uncoiled it and looped it around the man's neck and hoisted him in the air where he hung struggling, revolving slowly. His hands clutched after the rope like an insane mime. One of the Anukites drew near the man's face. Wheezed with humor. Kobid

stood dark against the light of the doorway watching outside. Light cut through a window onto the ground. A cot of sun, the clipped straw bright in its path.

The man struggled for air. He was beginning to rotate and the Anukite reached and gently spun him back.

You tell us all we desire.

The man sputtered, eyes set on some upper point in the ceiling. The Anukite watched. When the man's hands fell limp the Anukite gestured for Shulgi to slacken the rope. The body twisted against the ground and the man jerked with life, rearing up drunkenly. The Anukite gestured with one hand and the man was hoisted again until his face brimmed with strain.

When the man told all he knew they dragged the body into a small and feeble wheat crop and went to ransacking the lonesome shack. They claimed a dark jam sealed in a clay cup and four copper pieces and a blanket of cobbled sheepskins. Outside barren hills stretched for miles and they stood scanning the horizon and then left. Feral dogs would come for the body in the night and in two days return and clamber over the stall with whetted teeth and tear apart the dying mule.

The other scouting party sighted an inebriated hermit living miles off river in a ragged tent. They raked aside the hide flap and found him lying on a filthy cot. He lurched up squinting in confusion and they pinned him with one arm outstretched and snapped his fingers back by ones. Aemon stood examining a bowl of wine while the man shrieked in pain. He sniffed at the remaining dregs and then drank with mild satisfaction. Then they scaled up to larger bones. Both of the murdered believed Ubara to be at Shuruppag and they said it was a great fortified marketplace and a temple for the gods of the Nephilim and that Ubara was enthroned as divine, a son of the gods and hailed as supreme among men.

They made camp in a remote and solitary wilderness along the northern outskirts where the wind was restless as was their restless hearts. None were content any longer with patience as there gestated in each man a growing ardency for resolution. Destiny was a thing to be inscribed by their sole doing and they believed it so, as it was the

shadowed hand of autonomy stoking to flame what could not be surmised in the folds of their violent and darkened minds.

Windows of light fell from between the evening clouds stabbing the earth in showered beams. In the yellow wash of the sun's declining they sat devising a plan. One of the pack animals was slain and the rib racks were hoisted over a bright flame and none cared to hide their presence that night. They glowed like men common to wilder regions. Like men ready to end a tale. Sparks rattled off into the darkness and by turns of discussion agreement was finally made by Samael's quiet prompting. Aemon and the boy would venture into the city posing as a common merchant and slave to determine with certainty the whereabouts of Ubara, as well the city's layout. After that a plot of infiltration.

When all fell to silence, Ngannou leaned into the firelight, his eyes orbs holding no flame. He stared at the boy and then retreated to his former posture. Then he fixed on Aemon.

Much depends on you, he said.

Aemon fanned the two ribs of meat he was holding, working the end of it with his teeth. He held it momentarily and nodded with confidence, his own face shadowed in the night.

We gonna kill some merchants comin' in? Kobid said, pacing in the darkness. Get a wagon or somethin for em?

I believe three camels outfitted with goods will suffice, Samael concluded.

## XIV



Aemon and the boy enter through the main gate – A bazaar  
– Sights of Gomorrah – The boy peers over a wall – A  
tavern with a view – *Species universales* – Herald of  
righteousness – The boy draws a map – A price for pleasure  
– Rooftops – Sacrificial altar – Alone by the gate.

Aemon and the boy drew along the northern road in the still morning hours while the shadows were yet long under the sun's newly hostile stare. The orange light splashed across the rippled sand, the sides of their faces. A thin haze slid across the wind tossed hills. In the coming miles other travelers converged from winding footpaths and settled out along the road in solemn clusters. Used up men on foot and beast and jostling carts. Aemon rode with his shemagh hanging loosely, his face partially hidden.

Old wattles lined the outer settlements and there were tangles of thatched huts and rock shielings and there were women in dusty stalls with their breasts exposed, the infants cocooned in filthy slings hanging about these bent and toilsome mothers.

The road curved and they passed a cluster of bony cattle driven by a child with a stick and in another mile they came upon a company of slaves shambling along the widening road carrying huge bundles of straw on their shoulders and the boy watched them trudge along with life's profoundest despondency, their thighs dark and thick among the slackened ropes. A pair of half-naked taskmasters rode lazily in a rear saunter.

Other roads converged near the northern gate and the dirt was dry and filled with refuse and the number of foot travelers swelled into a mumbling congestion. They padded forward in a windless heat, jostling through a foot cloud of sun cooked dust. A number of guards stood in a loose line with dour expressions. Two stamped along the

road shouting angrily, parting the crowd with the butt of their weapons. Man and beast alike skirted off the road and stood watching as forty horses with mounted Nephilim fitted for war galloped past in a thunder of hooves and breath. The crowd drifted back into the road without effect and the boy looked at Aemon and the man said nothing.

They rode past the guards without notice and they trotted through the immense gate and under a vaulted archway into the ungodly clamor of Shuruppag. A vast and teeming throng of commerce opened before them. Men of every kind and description bustling throughout the sprawling bazaar amid a treasury of goods: gutted pigs with exposed ribs and moist gibbets doused with flies on hooks and goat heads with the eyes stolen to bare sockets and birds drowned in ale and red peppers and lettuce in slatted carts and brightly colored fruits and greenery with white roots still freshly stapled with dirt. A marble-eyed chihuahua trotted under the legs of the boy's camel with its tongue aloll. He tipped and watched the small creature pass through the rabble and disappear under a vendor's wagon.

They pressed along the main road under layers of stretched tarps and the buildings loomed in towers of stone and were atrophied from older beginnings, the entablatures worn from sand and sun and black smoke was rising in the distance between the tallest structures. They angled away from the crowds to an arched passage along the wall and Aemon dismounted and led his camel by foot to a low mural chamber. Long trestles of light fell from an adjacent arcade onto cobbled stonework. A beggarly man meseled with a yellowing crust sat in a corner staring at the ground. The boy's camel moaned and tossed its head and he stood holding the strap like a dispossessed gnome in an uncertain country.

Aemon flicked open a pouch and withdrew a parchment and unrolled it half cocked on his saddle. He looked over his shoulder at the stream of figures passing through the arcade and turned back and began sketching a map of the city with a bit of sharpened charcoal. The man possessed no artistry of hand and he could sense the boy's disapproval. He thrust the charcoal out with a look. The boy took it and made a fair reproduction of all they had seen. Aemon's eyes shifted. Let's go.

They drifted through the tangled streets and they passed peddlers

crying out their foretold elixirs to watching fools and they passed mangy cats of no good fortune and a toothless vendor with necklaces of teeth and there were diviners huddled with chalked faces probing pans of bleeding viscera and there were the maimed with their rattling cups and the milky-eyed blind and able-bodied miscreants posing the same and grinning perverts of little discretion, and there passed before them a funeral procession intoning some mournful dirge with the wrapped body held aloft and adorned with wilting flowers and loud wailing.

Aemon stopped at the sight of two girls conjoined at the head in a cage of gopher wood. They sat arched in a bow of flesh with bent legs and small fragile arms, dark-eyed things with disordered faces that neither cared to hear, nor see, the passing intrigue of visitants. Their owner was fat and he sat waving away flies from his bloated face. A lurid price for the exotic.

Aemon stared silently and then sallied the camels forward.

They rode deeper into the city. In that gomorric dwelling were yet other displays of degeneracy and what was seen was no pure reflection of what lay deeper within as men hide their darkest crafts in secret until the night lays claim and they no longer blush to conceal it. Yet the sun was still bright and Aemon and the boy walked the streets until they came upon a defensive stone wall cutting east to west. Ten feet of slabbed stone crowned with iron impalements. Aemon stood back trying to find an angle to see what lay beyond. No air moved and the heat was stifling and he could only make out the top of a formidable keep. The boy positioned his camel along the wall, gripped the saddle, and with a quick movement sprang atop the creature's back and stood peering over the lip. Aemon looked up the road warily. A sooty artisan in a shop was drawing a whetstone across an iron coultter set in blocks. Several lank women were lugging baskets of provender.

Another section of city, the boy said. Stone buildings.

Aemon stepped nearer and hissed, Get down.

The boy looked again and then dropped to the ground. Nephilims there.

Aemon glanced about and then squinted up at the buildings and he followed the curve of the wall with his eye and they led the camels along the winding streets after it.

Their way brought them to a district of a more seedy and

miserable kind. Dilapidated buildings of mud and brick stained with grime. The streets were narrow and littered with garbage and occupied with wild looking indigents with stubbed hair and leathery faces wandering the roads to no real purpose. Aemon led his camel at a slow walk studying the tallest buildings. Birds edged the roof lines in dark collections.

They stopped in a squalid courtyard. A ferocious dog sat tied to a gnawed hitching pole and stretched hides were roped between the lentils making kites of shade on the uneven and patchy cobblestone. Aemon eyed a foul doggerly to his right. Then he eyed the covered windows two stories above it. Behind them a man squat over a bucket and shat and wiped the refuse off his hand on the corner of a building. The boy watched him hike up his foul garment and limp down an alley.

Stay with the camels.

Where you going?

Get'n information. Stay with the camels.

The boy pulled the camels out of the road and Aemon ascended a pair of worn steps and entered a cantina of smoke and clinging darkness. The room reeked of unwashed men and sour ale, urine. Dark figures sat hunched in the gloom, dingy tables scattered everywhere. Aemon moved across the scuffed floor to a rough hewn bar. A thick man with a face of hair waited without expression.

You take copper?

The man nodded.

Aemon doled out two bits on the counter. The barman turned and dipped a vessel into a vat of dark liquid and set the cup before him. It was dripping and black where it had been baptized. A lantern hung from a cross plank, a round pot with meshed holes, the orange flame dancing to see out and throwing skewed rib shadows on the barman and rear clay wall.

Where's a man to find legs in this city? Aemon said.

Harlots? the barman muttered.

Aemon nodded.

We got it.

They good?

It'll fit you.

Aemon drank.

I need a night entire. You've rooms upstairs?

The barman laid his hands on the counter. It costs for that.

How much?

The barman said.

That include stabling camels?

It can.

Aemon glanced at the other reprobates sitting in the darkness that so became them. Some staring at nothing, some at him with their nocturnal eyes. Like black beads set in unfired clay.

Not some inexperienced thing, Aemon said, rattling several gold rings onto the wood and sliding them across with the back of his hand. The barman looked and then glanced quick-eyed about the room and slid the pieces into his hand.

Outside Aemon found the boy sitting on the ground in the shade with the camels. He stated his intentions and he told him to wait a time before coming up to the room.

A desperate whore'll tell a man most anything for money, Aemon remarked. We'll have more than a sketch from that window. You'll see.

The boy didn't speak.

They led the camels to a cramped and filthy stable rear the cantina where there was a lone mule stalled with raw ulcers galled about its scruffy head. Aemon ascended a set of steps to a back entrance and rapped his knuckles against a stout wooden door. Standing there in the stark light he looked like a blotched tetrarch awaiting the bestowal of some long awaited gift. A woman with a broom of a body and a wanton stare opened the door and admitted him. The boy tethered the camels. The mule shook its head and watched him with a crusted eye. The beast was panting loudly, its nostrils gummed shut. The boy leaned against the feeding trough brushing away flies.

Behind the stable there was a low courtyard wall butted against the back of the soiled buildings. From somewhere beyond he could hear the low hum of activity and a single clarion voice rising above it all. He sat trying to listen in the stifling heat. After a time he rose and hurdled the wall and slid between the pinched buildings negotiating piles of trash. He stepped out into a sprawling square where there were caged animals of every imagination stocked for purchase from lands of no right knowing, the merchants sitting idly on stumps and on leather



stools, their own wild hair tied up in thick black braids. Wagons filled with exotic creatures rolled through archways carved out of the surrounding walls and men of no common appearance were unloading bags of feed and bundled hides and other curious goods in makeshift stacks. These strange men chattered in foreign tongues and there was the clomp of hooves on stone and the sun was angling across the bustling crowds. Amid the throng stood a dusty ring of shirtless men gathered about a strange preacher ordered from a more ancient time. A herald of righteousness proclaiming judgment to the provoked onlookers.

The boy tipped a tall basket and peered down upon a squirming pile of fire salamanders. He let it back and looked around. Cages of all sizes. Some stacked, some hanging by cords and domed with wicker. Tree frogs with blood-moon eyes peering out and willow cages stuffed with marbled polecats and green parrots screeching at the sun and lashed caracals and oryx and huge tarantula touching the air like sorcerers invoking a spell. One of the merchants fixed on the boy's scar and smiled grievously and the boy passed without a word, angling off into the crowd. Here he could clearly hear the preacher's throaty appeals.

Is it not plain, the strange preacher said, that the idols ye carry about like sticks cannot hear or see? Ye choose the cedar from the field and warm thyself with it, ye kindle a fire and bake bread. Then ye makes a god from the rest and worship it, falling down with loud prayers, saying, 'Deliver me, for you are my god!' How can this be? Ye carry it like a burdened ass on the dusty roads, like a fool clutching a block of wood, knowing not that yer as blind as it is blind and deaf as it is deaf.

The man's voice thundered holding the crowd's attention like a lodged burr. Someone shouted that the old fool had lost his mind at last and there arose a swell of agreement. The grizzled preacher stepped closer with a sharp eye, his gaze dividing marrow from soul. He told the man that men in their insanity believed they were gods and that they were the measuring rod by which to measure the rod and were clay made hard on the potter's wheel, thinking themselves divine by an unsound means and made forfeit, not knowing the absurdity of sin without God, as well the absurdity of gods without sin, end to end without knowledge, a proud eye darkened for to all and for

whom nothing is pure and made ready for judgment. Like an object that has no original light and does grow cold as it moves away from the Light that lights all lights. It hearkens close, he said with an air of bitter finality. Can't ye feel its brooding presence? It crouches by the door. It peeks under to take ye. God is war, ye say, and I would to agree. Love compels it as heaven is no heaven with hell biting at it. So God is war unto the heathen. And ye would do well to take heed. Your own foot slippeth soon enough. It draws nigh unto Sheol.

As the boy listened from afar he thought the man sounded like the prophet. But then he knew he was not like the prophet. Not at all like the prophet. He turned and regarded again the other manifold wonders of creation and then cut back through the buildings to the stable where he waited in the toilsome heat.

After some time Aemon appeared in the door and called sharply for the boy. The boy rose and climbed the stairs and they walked down a long hallway lit only with a small wood planked window at the far end. Light was bleeding around its edges shaping a slatted rectangle on the plastered floor. Dust all astir in the bright beams. They climbed a stairwell to another tight hallway and entered a soulless grotto of a room. Soiled bedding with a rickety table, a jar of water on the floor. It was dark save for a round window covered with hide that glowed dully in the sunlight. Aemon stood with his head grazing the rough stone ceiling. He seemed a man beset with a dark and troublesome thought.

What? asked the boy

The Anukite fixed on the boy and then turned and slid the table to under the window and untied the leather strapping and yanked back the blind. He gestured with an unforgiving look. The boy leaned to see. Beyond the barrier wall stood a mountain range of strongholds made of fear and rock. Monumental beyond any foreigner's reckoning. The evening light was throwing fire and gold on the towers and casting long shadows across a vast ward where there swarmed a hive of men among tents and garrisoned bulkheads. Among them were great machines of war standing like mobile turrets wrapped in hide and they were hitched to elephants with long bundles of rope spooling to harnesses crafted by hands of an advanced learning.

Aemon hissed at the boy's ear, You call this another fuck'n section

of a city?

The boy shifted with a look. I couldn't see this.

Aemon placed a hand on the table and worked his jaw while staring out.

You got the parchment?

The boy looked.

Get the damn parchment.

The sun fell beyond the western wall of the city like some uvietic eye drooping with sickness and the boy sat sketching best he could through the darkening portal. Aemon paced about and then sat on the edge of the bed like an enormous agitated child with his legs bent and spread apart. Night was beginning to fill the room.

The harlot returned bearing a candle and Aemon rose to meet her in the hallway. They spoke in whispers while the boy rolled the parchment. Aemon ushered her in the room and shut the door. Her hair was long and greasy and black as was her eyes and she moved like a creature used to caution. The small votive candle seemed somehow religious in her possession and it cast a glow about her face that made her almost beautiful. The harlot's eyes darted from Aemon to the boy. Then she turned and lit a metal lantern fastened to the wall. Bracelets jingled about her wrists and ankles as she moved. Above the lantern soot bled up the wall in a dark stain. Her eyes shifted between them and she said another prostitute told her that the Nephilim were preparing to move out and that there were rumors of war in the north and that she didn't know anything else.

Where'd she get the information?

She shook her head with a slight wanton jostling, Men say things.

And Ubara?

She's finding out.

Aemon squinted, articulating his fingers in a strange procession. The woman looked at the boy and brushed her hair back with one hand.

She'll be back soon. You'll be all right here.

Aemon's face clouded. I'm all right now.

The harlot smiled weakly. Why don't you go down for a drink?

Here's fine.

The harlot shifted uncertainly and said she had to go and she padded down the hallway in a ring of candlelight that threw her image

against the corridor in a sawed nightmarish portraiture. They could hear the jingle of her bracelets tolling away down the stairs. The glow receded to nothing and darkness swam back into place. Aemon moved to the corner of the room where he had laid his weapon and pouches and he gathered them up and gestured toward the door, We're leaving.

What is it?

Somethin's off.

The boy watched him. What'd you get us in?

Aemon halted searching with an ear. He motioned with his hand, Listen. They stood listening. A dog was barking rhythmically outside. Aemon peered down the hallway to the staircase. The corridor was narrow and low and lined with doors blackened with soot and dirt. Four, five of them, all duplicates. Aemon turned and hissed through clenched teeth, Blow out the light. Blow it out. The boy did and the room fell to gloom. Aemon stood gripping his iron cudgel. He waited. Nothing stirred. A throaty lute and stringed dulcimer had earlier taken up a lively note in the bar below and there had been loud guffawing muffling up from the rambunctious night crowds. It had now fallen away to silence.

Stay here, he said.

He moved across the hall to the opposite door and tested it, easing it open slowly. He yanked off the hide curtain over the room's window. The skyline outside was footed in a soft pink with the chambered night draining away the world's color. He poked his head out the small portal. The desert wind blew across his face. Nameless vagrants were funneling out of the bar into the darkening courtyard, some ambling drunkenly, others limping and peering back over their shoulders. There was a cook fire burning across the yard and three figures were gathered in its light watching with interest the unfolding of some disturbance. Aemon returned to the door. The boy whispered something but Aemon didn't respond. He was standing with his face set flush against the framing.

Shapes of men appeared in the darkness creeping up the staircase. Advancing with silent footfalls on the stone. Forming into things of girth trailing in succession, the knives but black lines tipped forward. Aemon slowly straightened with his back against the wood. Eyes burning with cruelty. The boy could see the whiteness of them turned.

The Nephilim crept to halfway and stopped. In that corridor a deep stillness buckled under the scurried breath of men in wait. As if the very silence of the stones were too brittle a thing for the systole of men's beating hearts. Aemon slid his grip up the handle. The dark figure in the lead swung his head and then inched forward, edging along the wall. His hair was long and greased with animal fat and a bodkin of bone softly scraped the wall. The sound was enough. Aemon swung and the cudgel struck the man in the lower jaw, shattering it like pottery in a meat sack and the others rushed over the body in a rancorous tumult of feet and steel and Aemon swung again and hit the lead figure in the chest. The man let out a deep expulsion of air and buckled and then lunged opening Aemon's thigh with a knife. Others surged with their blades, cutting and stabbing with the bitter tips, two men abreast in the tight corridor as if they were two headed mutants with Aemon kicking and swinging and bleeding and the boy plunged his knife into indefinable flesh and he kept stabbing in that hallway of madness where the figures surged like giants in a funhouse made by dwarfs. Men were swinging wildly in the dark and pressing Aemon against the wall. He growled and bit and clawed at faces while the cold blades found his hot blood. The boy could hear his bitter cries and he sliced a man entering the room and turned and leapt over the bed and dove on the table and scabbled through the window as the Nephilim poured in the room behind him.

He would have fallen the twenty feet if he didn't let loose his knife. It went skittering off the stone to the ground as the boy began to fall. He flailed at the air and snagged a rope with it caught under his armpit, swinging sharply. Those below in the courtyard watched dumbly as the boy footed up an eroded pilaster to the roof like a soul escaping the cliffs of hell. He darted across the clustered rooftops, leaping wildly, scabbaling insensibly from building to building. The city lay circumscribed in darkness with beads of firelight swimming in the night haze.

He had run far from the cantina deep into the unknown when he stopped on a mud-thatched roof and lay looking with a wild expression, trying to catch his breath. A pale and anemic moon stood among the lost stars. The air still hot. To the west he could see a vast multitude of torches burning among the Nephilim horde and he could see something like an altar rising from the earth with two great fires

heating the underbellies of brass statues fashioned in the likeness of seraphim. From them came the hollow sound of men in terrible agony.

He dropped down into a dark alley. A pair of dogs lifted their heads from a pile of bone scraps and then trotted off with the tattered remnants dangling from their mouths. He ran on.

As if in preparation of some dire looting, all earthly items in the streets had been swept away into storage. Not a basket or crate or wagon cart was left unattended. Window lights spilled onto the chewed up roads and street lanterns hanging from porch stands cast yellow stains of balled light. Vendors were now few and men of a more questionable heart progressed among the deep shadows.

The boy was mad about the eyes and wretched looking. The street upon which he was running drew to darkness near absolute and he dissolved into the terrible blackness. The walls all about fell away to night and had no depth in that equal frame and he alone was ordonnance to it. A particle drifting in an eternal void, the keyhole of stars above alone referent. A series of diminished fires drew out an adjacent alley and the boy took to it like a moth. In this dark passage sat the diseased and mentally deranged of every kind. As if the space was the outer yard of some befouled hospital ward. The boy passed warily with his head down. A man with a malformed head looked up from his rude bedding and followed the boy with his dead eyes. Someone was retching with cough and the air stank of feces. The corridor melded into a road and there were articles of clothing hanging from long cords and an enshadowed figure was parading strangely with disjointed movements as if he were swatting away ghosts with a nervous tick. The boy silently pressed by. He looked back. The man prattled on in a foreign tongue and he was laughing unto himself.

Nothing availed as a sure direction and the boy staggered on and soon came upon a cobbled bridge arching over a waterway chugging beneath. It was very dark and the boy descended to its brim and squatted like a beleaguered Gideonite cupping the black water to his mouth. Buildings rose along the river like things chiseled out of the night and beyond stood the moon-blanchéd form of the wall towering over all. He drank again and footed upriver along a grassless towpath and came at last to the northern entrance where a number of guards stood idly among fire lit pillars. The boy watched from afar. The

bazaar lay shrouded and empty and a horse with a cloaked rider clattered slowly across the stone. Torches lined a vast arcature leading to the gate and the immense doors were barred shut with beams of stone. None entered and none left that night and the boy slid into a small cleft in the stonework and there slept in fitful starts as was his fitful heart.

## XV



Stowaway – To the camp – Dungtree and the boy – Atop a low mountain – Ubara on the playa – Samael calculates his destiny – Riding forth – Lancers – Samael presents a head – Court with King Ubara – A champion's duel – The intimacy of a bite – Ngannou roars – The boy gallops away – Mushdamma, Dungtree, and Kobid on the altar.

The wind newly stirred from the north and it bore in its currents the distant cries of coyotes beyond the wall. Out to the east the earth was a black plate with the finger of dawn cracking through in palest orange. As if the sun were holding a match aloft to see its way forward along the dark rim. Roosters cried from their dwellings and merchants lumbered forth in the still dawn with their varied goods, trundling along the dusty paths outside the city and from out of the stone chambers within. By some loping mechanism the gate rattled open with a horrible grinding of stone and steel and the waiting merchants hustled into motion with flatbeds and handcarts and trains of men bearing harnessed loads atop their heads and bare backs. The boy straddled alongside a wagon loaded with spices and he slipped in among the fragrant sacks and was wheeled out through the gate, a stowaway freighted with his own urgency.

They rode beyond the inner wreath of villages onto the warning plain where the sky was becoming a perfect blue. The boy jostled in stow and from between the heavy sacks he watched the landscape grow sparse. After another mile he dropped soundlessly into a track of tall grass and he made for the northern camp at a run.

He ran for miles through those wild northlands to the place where the Anukites had set camp. When he reached it he stopped and turned uncertainly. The camp lay utterly deserted. The boy looked all



to the north panting with exhaustion. He bent with his hands on his knees. Then he moved about studying the ground. It still held evidence of foot markings, man and beast alike. The charred remnants of the fire half buried in sand. He footed out to a shallow rise and stood looking about again. A soft line of mountains drawn along the northwest and before it stretched a vast and naked waste. On this there approached a solitary rider. Burnt looking in the shimmering heat. The boy thought to hide but there was no place to be had and he stood watching in a fateful posture.

The figure of Duntree slowly materialized and hauled up before him in the inerrant light. The man's wide jaw was set.

Where's Aemon? he said.

They got him.

Who got em?

Nephilim ambushed us.

He dead or taken?

Dead, I think.

The man's hard face tightened. His mouth worked as he stared at the boy.

You left em?

Wasn't like that.

Duntree jerked his mount to face the boy. Wind swept through his bedraggled and untamed hair.

Ought to leave yer ass, he said.

The boy waited. There were dark rings under his eyes. Duntree seemed about a thought and then fished out a flask and pitched it at the boy's feet.

The boy stooped and eyed him as he drank. Water ran down his chin.

Didn't leave em, the boy said, staring up.

Duntree gazed out to the south. He glanced back.

Get on. We gotta ride. The rest'r trackin Ubara.

The boy stood holding the flask, his brow folded. Seen the horde in the city.

Not anymore. Get on.

The boy corked the flask and swung rear the camel in an awkward stance and they bounded across the vast sweep of desert at a gallop.

Word had come from the north that a retaliatory force had been marshaled and were now thirsty for vengeance and advancing south for war. News of this reached Ubara and he departed with his legion in the predawn hours to greet them. Scouting parties were unleashed to the fore and flanks and the Anukites intercepted a reconnaissance of three and butchered them among the rocks some miles distant the river. These Nephilim were of a more devout kind and they divulged little. Only the knife of Samael brought success. By choice of lots Dungtree was selected to wait for Aemon and the boy. The rest sped off in hunt.

They rode for miles along the barren waste with Dungtree viciously kicking the beast in the flanks. The boy scanned the distant skyline for signs of life, signs of hostility, clutching the frayed saddle with one hand and a tuft of camel hair in the other, jolting and slamming about with each stride threatening to knock the bones from him. By afternoon they came to a string of rock chins where the Nephilim scouts were ambushed. Low ridges sprang up in starts along a slender and faint footpath and Dungtree trotted the camel round a stone outcropping into a small alcove. The bodies of the slain were lying face up on the ground and they had been lacerated to the bone, their blood black and sponged about and there were drag marks from their heels trenching through the sand to their location. A pair of horses stood hobbled to a narrow pinch of stone and a third was lying on its side in a wreckage of entrails, the hind legs missing with the abdomen splayed like an unnatural dissection conducted with razors. Black flies were hissing furiously in the still air.

The horses stamped in agitation as the boy drew near and he led one out and mounted up and the large male tossed its head and kicked out in agitation and the boy reared it sternly and then touched its head with a gentle hand. He walked the horse in the bright light of the sun and he turned it back and fetched up a bloodless sword left in the sand near the bodies. He slid it into a sheath. Dungtree sat watching without expression, leaning. The boy tested the gourds for water and he pulled a small knife out to halfway and pressed it back into the stitched casing and he looked at Dungtree and they set off

toward the northwest following the precise coordinate of the distant mountain.

It was late evening when they found the Anukites. They were nestled among the cracks of a low mountain watching Ubara's horde slowly advance across a stark and lifeless playa. They had been at it for hours. All the world was open and the sun was enormous in the primeval west and light fell across the ground in a kind of molten lotion as if a chemical had been concocted by the sun in its madness to liquefy the farthest reaches. Birds trailed across the migrant sky. As if the company of Nephilim below were nothing to them. And altogether subject to things terrestrial.

When Dungtree and the boy fell in with the group little inquiry was made into Aemon. Samael regarded the news with a curious tilt of the head and was no longer favored to its discussion. Ngannou studied the boy's face with his great eyes and then fixed anew on what lay downcountry. They huddled together in counsel and the boy kept to the rear, peering cautiously over the thin crest onto the untold thousands below.

If much of a man's destiny is hid from him, the predestinated ends that day were thought not so, for to the mind that believes all its glory is foretold and secured by divine right, that same mind will argue no case against its audacity, even if by all sound considerations the action is deemed forfeit and dire. For these were men hammered out of scarcity and fed with war, knowing the bitter toil thereof. In this, pride is no foreigner to bravery, and so joined they mask folly with rites of valor made hagiography in the eyes of emboldened followers.

The men were squatting on their haunches locked in discussion when Samael rose to his feet and gazed off toward the horde with a look of grim resolve. He stepped to the edge in full sight. No one moved. He stood staring at the mass of warriors. Then he turned and said that this game of cat and mouse was to be no more. That the days had been bled of all patience and that the night was thirsty for resolution. I will take Ubara's head this day, he said plainly, and chase his soul from this world. The boy watched the men's faces. A wind from the north was blowing over the top of the sun and rolling down through the flats and up the mountain, hauling forth the night in its

train with the unseen stars waiting in their dens. Samael descended the rugged slope to his mount and he drew upon it and adjusted his sword with a regal touch. His dark eyes surveyed them with unquestioning determination. Then as if suddenly made aware of a faint sound he looked down at the carnal head of Yarlaganda hanging from his saddle and he gripped it by its dark hair and unwound the rope from its raw and leathery face and he chucked his camel forward through a wedge in the rocks toward Ubara's legion, clutching the thirdborn like a lantern. By ones and twos the Anukites seemed to wake unto action and they mounted up in silence and drew down among the stones in a line behind the prophet and out onto the cracked playa. The boy trailed in the rear.

The ground was flat as beaten copper and splintered in a vast mosaic of dried earth. Not a living thing lined the cooked floor. The Anukites were black against the dark of the mountain and then they were not, progressing into the open like beings emerging from its adamant heart. Wind sang through the groutless cracks, throwing bits of scrub, tossing hair, shaking the weft of things.

Ubara's legion halted a quarter mile distant. Out there it looked like the blood throb of some pulmonary organ, dark and breathing with life. From among the sea of men a contingent of riders spurred out towards the Anukites at a gallop. Sixty on horses with long shafted tridents tucked under their arms, the tips forking the sky. The sound of their hooves rumbled across the expanse like the distant pounding of a foundry.

Samael raised a hand.

His men halted.

The horses were huge as were their riders and they reared up before Samael in a wide arc, formidable and austere, with their bare chests dyed red and black. Their faces were wild and their coarse beards were all but unmanaged briers save for the twisted cords of hair that were tied and ornamented with beads and nuggets of bronze jewelry and bits of bone etched with serpents and old arcana. An enormous man riddled with scars nudged his horse forward and inventoried their every part with his broad eyes. He had huge arms and a wide set head and a stump of a neck. The lancer shifted his horse so that it trod in place, stamping its legs as if to fulfill some necessary ritual or required sequence of steps and then they all sat

tightly gripping the long shafts of their weapons. None spoke.

Samael approached holding the desiccated head aloft in the manner of a talisman and then pitched it to the ground whereupon it rolled before the lancer, its paper eyes wasted away and furred within as with the nests of spiders. The lancer regarded it darkly. Then his eyes flicked toward Samael. The prophet held his gaze with a knowing look.

There lay the head of Yarlaganda, son of Ubara, Samael announced. I require audience with thy king.

The lancer's face clouded. He shifted his horse to better see the severed head and then jabbed his trident into the brittle skull plate, lifting it in observation. He turned it slowly about and then looked at Samael much the same. The prophet leaned and hissed, Tell Ubara that Samael the prophet of the Anukites has come to claim his throne. Tell him that the kingship has descended from heaven upon its true heir. It's true heir. Say these things even now unto him.

The lancer stepped his horse in a fresh line and rode turned, studying the prophet with his fierce eyes. Samael lifted his chin following the man's movements. The lancer turned in agitation, retreading his steps more briskly, littering the ground with puncture marks. You are no king, he shouted.

I am the king of kings. Now tell him.

At this the lancer trotted toward the prophet halting but feet away. Every hand dropped to a weapon and the Nephilite stared intently, jostling his mount, and then kicked away with the other riders falling in behind him.

Samael shifted his camel. He regarded his men with a sober stare and then kicked his mount into motion.

The sky was all troubled and a pale yellow was newly thrown across its face lighting the countless myriads of Nephilim in a film of painted light that so became their own painted savagery. Samael approached as a tribunal of one. He sat his mount gazing out over the watching throng. Untold eyes fixed on him, their crimped grins murderous, sneering. Some were seated atop unshod horses black as ratsnakes and some were perched atop great wooden ballistas harnessed to elephants bearing riders of another kind, thin, rawboned, demented about the eyes, clasping their long spears with spindly fingers and wearing necklaces of human ears. Thousands suffused with dreadful

weapons standing afoot.

By some unseen force of will the mass of warriors parted revealing a horse drawn chariot plated with gold and bronze spikes. It was thick and regal and terrifying with brass scrollwork etched along the carriage depicting some ancient confrontation between men and dragons. The horses were bound up in studded leather and they bore on their covered heads the horns of bulls and they were yoked with chains and the rattle of it sounded like the invitation of war. Above it all and mounted like a cultic icon stood the rider. He was a tower of flesh and he had no hair and his godlike face was of bronze and there were strange piercings trained together, looping through his nose, his cheeks, next to one eye, rings of silver thread with golden strands that hung like the chains of necklaces. His great dome was perfectly smooth and he wore a collar of roped serpents that traced about his neck to a fanged pauldron molding his right shoulder. His chest was massive and tattooed with runic symbols and his hands were obscenely large with stacks of thick rings on his fingers.

From that royal chariot Ubara beheld Samael. He looked amused at the revelation. His eyes widened and he said in a voice that sounded like rushing water, What is this that darkens my counsel? You bring a child unto me?

Samael sat unmoved as if hearing nothing. His eyes swept across the horde in search of the rider that still bore in his possession the head of Yarlaganda. He gestured towards the object. Why not ask thy son, Yarlaganda, what visited him? I believe he has an opinion.

Ubara cocked his eyes towards the head. He looked back, smiling. He says he is my son, and he is right, Ubara said, speaking past Samael to the line of Anukites beyond. But a half breed born of my harem. A noble heritage yet no pure seed. But I commend your efforts all the same. He was a spirited manstealer.

Ubara smiled again. His wide teeth shone.

Samael eyed him. Horses were snorting, stamping against the hard ground. More figures had crowded closer.

What he was is of little account, said the prophet.

Ubara raised an artful brow. Have you come to tell me that, small Anukite? That Yarlaganda is of little account?

Samael shifted his mount. He marked the sun draining into the western expanse. The wind was blowing, rifling hair, rifling straps,

garments. Then he looked back and dismounted and there withdrew from among his tack two serrated blades and stepped forward into the court carved out by the watching Nephilim. Samael tapped the steel together as if to awaken them.

Ubara lifted his hands in a gesture of theater, See how he comes forth so seriously. I'd say your long journey has made your mind unwell. The man's laugh was deep and throaty.

The prophet stepped nearer gesturing with the tip of his sword. How long shall the words of your mouth be a great wind? Come down, Ubara. Come down if you are not afraid. Samael's words grew more fierce and he stood stabbing at the ground as if to signal the precise spot where Ubara should stand.

Ubara sobered. He placed his great hands on the lip of the chariot and leaned. Then he motioned as if a parent seeking to calm a tantrumed child. The tone of his words that followed could have been thought sincere. He said, The child reared among the plains sees the tallest of the surrounding hills and thinks it a mountain. When the day of his youthful adventure comes, he climbs it, and he stands upon its small mount and gazes out across the sweep of his tiny village. The hill is so grand, he feels so tall. He thinks it greatest in all the world's farthest corners. But he does not know what a real mountain is. How could he? It is a thing measured by the hills he knows. It is a thing beyond his small comprehension.

Ubara paused studying the advancing Anukite. Hear me, small Anukite. Hear the question I would pose to you.

The prophet was standing before Ubara's horses, his dark rippled back expanding and contracting with air.

Ubara straightened. Do you think you've seen a mountain? he said, gazing down.

Samael's face twisted and he roared at the man to come down at last. Ubara watched him with his strange face. The small gold chains swinging lightly. Underneath his watchful stare a darker being was beating insanely against some inner cage, pressing out his eyes. The Nephilite lord reached and drew forth a huge and terrible sword and he fastened on his left hand a gauntlet fitted with an iron spike. He regarded the implement with an air of solemnity, testing its feel, and then stepped from behind the chariot before Samael. The man was huge and horrible.

Samael circled him, his arms slightly bent, the serrated blades moving with subtlety. Ubara watched him indifferently. Samael feinted. The Nephilite smiled not moving. Samael walked slowly in an arc and then darted with a quick thrust that was parried easily.

Have you really come so far just to be embarrassed in front of your men? Ubara said, opening up his stance.

Samael crouched and was suddenly very low before Ubara cutting with both blades. Ubara shifted deftly and Samael cut again but was parried with a resounding strike that threw his arms wide. Ubara stepped forward and swung and the Anukite brought up both swords to block. The force drove the steel into his chin and chest, splitting the skin to the bone and the Anukite backpedaled awkwardly, stumbling momentarily to the ground. Blood ran from the wounds. He rose and wiped the blood with the back of his hand.

The hills, Anukite. The hills.

Samael's countenance changed. He advanced with a psychotic stare and lunged thrusting his swords, but Ubara drew up his huge frame and made himself narrow, slipping a thrust while parrying the other with his blade. Their flesh met momentarily and Ubara latched onto Samael's head with his teeth and tore away a flap of skin. Samael cried out. The lord of the Nephilim spit. Samael's eyes were bright. Blood dripped from an ear. He attacked again, cutting and swinging, spinning. Ubara's feet were nimble. He seemed to be dancing. Dancing with the spark of steel. A ghost among the strikes, playful almost, moving like a shadow, his feet so nimble and light. The Anukite said the man was weak and a false claim and he cut and dipped and spun, swinging the harder until the Nephilite slammed the steel away with a bitter swipe and drove the gauntlet into the Anukite's chest. The spike slid into him and through him and when it retracted there was no mark. Then blood welled in a dark circle and Samael's reeking blood spilled out.

The prophet stared down at the wound. His face twitched. He deigned a false smile and came forward not the same. Ubara knocked the blades aside, and as if completing his dance, he slid the length of his sword across the Anukite's abdomen, the edge arcing gracefully as he passed. Blood flew. Ubara turned and stood sucking air into his great nostrils. Samael tottered, his gut pursed lips sputtering blood. He turned toward his men and walked, staggering oddly. The long wound



opened and there spilled from it contents of a dark and meaty kind. Samael was swallowing strangely and he dropped to his knees with his arms loose by his side. The bloodless swords cradled on the ground.

Ubara turned briefly to Golyath who was standing nearby. Keep the giant and one or two others. Let them be an oblation. The rank figure nodded and Ubara swung his head slowly toward the Anukites. Ngannou was charging wildly, roaring, his weapon unsheathed. Others were strung behind him galloping in a mad delirium while some sat dumbly on their mounts not moving. The boy was already in flight.

The vast abhorrence of the Nephilim horde drew around this feeble band like a dark shadow and tightened to a small ring, enveloping them in a pit of flesh and steel and ruin and there the Anukites were ingested and devoured without ceremony or notice to history.

Out across the darkening playa the boy was thrashing the flanks of his horse, drawing hard for the mountain with Nephilim riders tearing off in pursuit.

That night the figures of Mushdamma and Kobid and Dungle were hauled bound into Shuruppag and borne aloft in view of the city's nightcrawlers like captured game caught for the day of feast. They'd tied them with ropes and were gagged with sticks cinched tight about their heads and their teeth bit onto the wood like men under surgery with the saw at work. The ziggurat loomed beyond the dividing wall like a huge meat table in a madhouse butchery. Fires burned along the steps and gouts of smoke darkened into the darker sky and the great slabs bore the blood remnants of a thousand slain, black and tacky in the summer heat. The Anukites were hauled to the summit where they were laid before figures wearing the crafted skins of humans like costumed mutiles installed in a monastery. From that lofty plane the night sky seemed a temple vault with the stars stored in a vast feretory above. A bare chested priest emerged bearing strange regalia his own and he looked down on the watching Anukites with eyes shouting madness. His hands trembled in prayer over them. A pyre was lit and the flames rose crackling, heating the underbelly of an angelic statue, the charred bronze shimmering brilliantly. The giant lay fastened to a pair of wooden poles and they dragged him up a rise of steps and laid

him over a black opening fixed in the statue and cut him free. His great body plunged into the hollow vessel and the cry of him rang out through the seraphim's mouth. They hurled the others in and sealed the hatch and the Anukites slid and struggled in the darkness, each clawing at the other to find some temporary relief, rolling and screaming and the sound of them ran along the streets in night.

## XVI



In pursuit – A horse breaks its back – Curled among the  
stones – Afoot and alone – People of a foreign tongue –  
Meat strips – Children laugh at the boy – Perverts –  
Running through blackness – A deft throw, speared, sword  
to skull – Favor of a moonless night.

The last remnants of light were breaking on the mountain as the boy galloped up its footed slopes. Behind him ten Nephilim riders were pounding across the desert floor, trailing no more than a shout away, each man leaning forward on their huge mounts with the necks of the creatures thrusting in stride. Some bore bows as long as a man and they were fingering off the long shafted arrows that fell like spears from the sky all around the boy.

He crafted a line up through the rugged jags and he cut across the face of the mountain to a wide rockslide where his horse stumbled among the bulky stones, the long legs tramping awkwardly and sliding. Behind him he could hear the wild hoots of his pursuers still lofting arrows from their mounts. One of the arrows struck the rump of his horse and the creature screamed and bucked and the boy could see the thick shaft jerking in the thick muscle. The Nephilim were spread out on the slope below him, struggling all the same, and one of the riders leapt from his mount and began scrabbling hand to foot up the long bank like some bizarre humanoid goat in the darkening light.

The boy crested the summit with his face pressed against the neck of his horse, thrashing it wildly with his heels, the arrows snapping against the stone. Along the spine of the mountain the way was narrow and uneven with precipitous drops falling about on all sides and when he glanced over his shoulder he could see the man on foot sprinting along the vertebral stone, curved sword in hand, bounding across

the tops of the rocks. The boy kept looking back while fumbling for his weapon. But as he did so the horse lost its footing and fell hard against the stone, pitching forward with its front legs and chest sliding against the ground. As it tried to right itself in a floundering shuffle of hooves it veered sharply and plunged off the edge, casting blindly through the air, sliding and rolling across stone and gravel in a terminus of no right degree, flesh to fur making a tumult of crashing until they came to lay among chips of scree at the bottom of a sloped landing. The boy rose tottering and limped to his horse. Blood was running from a deep gash in his shin. Above him he could see the figure of the man shifting along the upper lip. Seventy, eighty feet. The figure turned and began shouting something.

The boy stooped over the horse begging it to rise. The creature's back was broken and its head flopped with its visible eye rolling with madness. He yanked free his sword and snatched up the waterskin and looped it over his head and hobbled down the mountain, cutting across the steep pitch to an enormous projection of rock. In the accruing darkness all contours were dissolving into an equality of night. He could hear voices and the report of hooves stamping along some higher plane and small rocks tumbled from their places of rest, chittering like bone chimes knocking in the wind. Night was igniting the stars by turns and he kept low and was limping terribly, lurking among the rocks, his left leg all but dragging. He could hear them moving in the darkness, venturing down the mountain all around him. Leaning he saw one advancing midstride in the distance, low and stalking, the black outline shifting like some creature summoned from the aether. He waited and then slinked off toward a cut in the mountain and when he found a thin slip between a wedge of boulders he dropped onto his belly and slid into the dark recess, curling against the cramped stone, listening to the sound of horses snort and men call out for him with false sincerity. Like masters intending the presence of some tentative farm animal to be butchered.

He remained hid all through the night and long into the day. Wind hissed through the intolerable rocks and there were the sounds of no birds, no life, and the sun was exceedingly greedy in the empty sky. He slept huddled in the small cavity, waking in starts and casting about

in confusion, the dull pain of his leg throbbing sternly. Come evening he slowly ventured out peering warily, creeping, studying the ridgelines. Standing on that mountain he seemed small and of no account and he knew it was so. His eyes traced along the upper line of the mountain, swept over the open desert. Mountains ranged far to the north, faint and appalachian, little more than brown ghosts of things. He climbed and sat in the shade of an overhang watching the spot where his horse lay fallen. The stone curving over him carried in it veins of old varnish long held to memory. Wind was casting grits of sand off its lip.

The horse had been looted of its goods and lay with a ruptured throat, the hack mark efficient and gaping. Flies snarled about its black eyes, its mouth, the curdled blood. Its legs stiff as beams. He stood over the carcass. He spat.

He edged along the mountain to a stone cap and stood surveying the world's barren face. Far out on the cracked playa he could see the place where Samael had perished. The ground swam in the heat. Nothing stirred. He pulled free the plug on his waterskin and lifted it and soberly shifted the water in his mouth. He swallowed, stood breathing. His eyes held no light of hope, no hope of light. All to the west the land was burning in the evening light and the wind was dragging agony with it, grinding away everything like a coarse sandpaper made to erase existence. The river lay somewhere beyond. He turned and squinted and ventured forth without reference into that harsh and barbarous terrain making no amends with what all had come before and the sun was quaking with heat and colossal and tramping around the globe, no respecter of men.

He slept curled in the sand with the desert resolved to darkness complete. No moon, no stars, things nocturnal crying out and skittering with their leathery feet, the endless wind blanketing the earth over him like a wound mending itself. When he woke he was half buried in sand and there were beetles managing the dark, scampering about on the ground and flying with a loud buzzing and the new risen sun appeared in the impenetrable blackness like a torch coming around the bend of a subterranean tunnel.

He walked all day through those barren flatlands, finding no river, finding no shade. He mended his course more to the south thinking the river to have curved and he came upon raw mounds of stone and

there sat to tend his wounded leg. The gash was the size of a fist and deeply bruised and crusted black with fresh fingers of blood trailing down his shin. He straightened his leg and pressed sand into the wound and rose and set off limping again.

By late afternoon he could see the river. It curved along the desert floor into a distant haze, thin and muddy, a thread of vegetation in a brown waste. Within the hour he was stooping along its dry and cracked bank refilling the waterskin. He eased into the shallow water, cupped water over his head. Blighted palms footed the riverbank and the angled sun drew its elongate form across the water's face while the sluggish current mired past the boy.

He ventured downstream among the withered reeds and stinking river grass and evening fell in efflorescent pinks and vermilion to the west. By dark the wind had returned and he trudged out to a band of scoured yardangs, covering his eyes with his arm like someone counting in a child's game. He sat opposite the wind with his back set against the rippled stone and trenched out a bed of sand and lay curled in it. All the night a wind howled across the open desert sweeping past him and around him in a swirling turbulence. He tucked his chin to his chest, covered his face with his hands. It was long before sleep found him and when he woke the sun was fully risen with a raw sky peeling away in all directions. He lay staring up into the untold firmament where the eye cannot discern for want of alteration. A blue of heaven to satisfy infinity. After a time he stirred from his listless reverie and rose stiffly, limping out into the open brightness.

The wind had remolded the landscape filing away the sandy deposits into the lower bins of the earth and thinning riverbed. There were now plates of shaley rock showing in a light brown pavement and in the remaining pools of sand the boy could see the whited remains of some former legion long buried, the skeletal frames partially exhumed with the ribs arching out like bizarre birdcages and the legs jointed and bent and the skulls pitched at angles with mouthfuls of sand and blown eyes. Hundreds of them in cemeterial monument to bygone war. He stood silent among them. He turned. A clawed hand was still clutching a large implement. He crouched and brushed away the sand. It was a crude stone hatchet. The corded thong wrapped about the heavy stone was frayed and partially unraveled and the wooden handle was scoured and archaic. The boy looked about.

Another skeleton lay nearby, half its skull devastated with the bone of its former face spalled within and without like old earthenware. Its one eye stared without life. The wind stirred, rustling sand over it, blowing across the ground to nothing in memory of the vapid soul long sucked from the foregone flesh. The boy regarded these as he did all in those days and he rose and limped off toward the long horizon and the plodding of him grew small and black and soon he was warping as in a funhouse mirror and his image blurred and broke apart in the mounting heat. Beneath the burning sand ferric stones cried in the moaning wind so held they were with the world's sorrow to bereavement running in those deeper mines where the bones of things lay lodged and silent in loneliness and darkness.

That day no clouds would visit the sky and the heat rose to madness. The last of the river drew out across the desert in a lifeless capillary, fanning away to lower slicks of mud and cracked earth where the plants grew sparse and brown and palms slumped without color in barometers of death. The boy leaned and sucked at a silted pool and he filled his waterskin and set off up a dry arroyo into a highland ranged with sandstone. Reefs of stone were fastened in long fins along the rising slopes and the boy could see wild gazelle roaming the open country far to the east. He sheltered under a rock and slept and when he woke evening had fallen.

That night a mild wind ran through the lower canyons and the moon shone into the mouth of a deep gorge and he trod among the stony scraggs where innumerable insects chorused and he trod among trees that were splintered black like things pounded by lightning.

The morning found him descended upon an open plain crossing under clouds white as milk. Birds with immense wingspans soared among them in the warmer currents, gliding and tilting with the wind. In the mid afternoon he came upon a train of large cat prints cutting through a curtain of brown grass and he saw the tigers terrained in the distance, their striped faces stained in the gut meat of a dead gazelle. One propped to see him pass in the distance. He pressed on, watching.

The declining sun caught the face of a mountain anchored in the east. It was squat and bulky and it burned scarlet in the sun's light. He

picked his way up the darkening rocks to the sun's final showing where huge nests were lodged among the radiant cliffs. He bedded among the stones in a pocket of sand and night closed up the day, invoking within him some dim desire to cry out after something for help. He was very hungry. Jackals cried out in behalf of all. Sometime in the night he woke to the sound of an animal screaming in pain, tussling in the darkness with some unseen predator, flapping and rolling. When he woke a bird was screeching strangely in response to the peeking sun. Like the shrill mating call of some prehistoric raptor.

His wound had congealed into a gelatinous blister and he ambled about testing his stiff leg and then set off in a sapphire dawn, cutting through the mountain and over bouldered passes, trekking along rugged game trails and up winding switchwalks, sleeping under stars so thick and clustered as to be constellated drips of light in a leaking universe. Under that starry estate he dreamed of nothing and he woke early to a gnawing hunger. By the evening of the next day he saw a fortified village of mudbrick and rock pitched atop a mesa.

Three men were posted at the gate and they bore long-handed poles fastened with curved blades. They regarded the boy with eyes gamecock and severe and they inquired into his purpose and the boy stood before them, thin and haggard, his gaunt cheeks saying more than the words of his mouth. They stared at him. Each wore breeches of wrapped cloth long stained with dirt and former meals and otherwise they wore none else. A walleyed man with a head shaped like a testicle spoke in a foreign tongue. Then he grinned and the others laughed derisively. After that he chucked up his weapon and glanced behind him and waved dismissively admitting the boy.

The city was a collection of mud boxes rising in stories of ones and twos and the inhabitants were bestial and filthy, primitive as the stones about. Even atop that windy mesa the village bore the foul reek of the unwashed. In the open yard long sheets of meat hung from ropes like scabbed blankets and there were dark sheepskins pegged to the ground for drying and men with hand axes were dressing various animals and hacking limbs on stumps and tossing the scraps to dogs waiting with eager tails. They watched the boy pass with mistrustful eyes, rising to stare without any propriety to norms of awkwardness. He asked if they might spare a portion and they stood not moving. The boy spoke again and gestured with a hacking motion, lifting an



invisible meat scrap to his mouth.

Spare a little, he said, motioning. Food.

A short scungy man looked at the boy without emotion. The boy again mimed the request. The man spoke. His words were guttural and foreign. The boy shook his head, glanced about. The man spoke more loudly pointing to the north, sternly repeating a single word. The boy looked and the man said something else with an upward flick of his chin and returned to chopping the meat, throwing sideways glances. The boy limped along the footpath.

Naked children were running through the dirt streets like debauched gnomes and there were wretched chickens and hogs roaming about and bearded goats matted with their own droppings and hard women who looked much the same. These did watch him pass in quiet observation, their black eyes tracking independent their heads. As if the sight of him required a stillness befitting some caution.

The central square was an open patch of stamped dirt and rock with crude buildings quartered about. At the far end, emaciated cows were tied to the battered remains of an old tree and they were tossing their heads in irritation of flies. Near them a ring of half naked onlookers were encircled in witness to a butchery, a lone goat with small tan horns standing with its neck outstretched. A rope was lashed about its head and pulled taut and a wiry man stood alongside it holding a thick machete waiting for the struggling beast to settle. The creature was bleating and twisting its head. A kid of nine or ten hauled at the rope straightening the complaining animal and the man lifted the machete and brought it down with an able strike lopping off the head cleanly with the body falling sidelong onto the ground in a spasm. Blood spurted in a dark fount while the stumped neck contracted oddly. The kid snatched up the bony head as if the ground were hostile to it and pitched it into a sack greased dark at the bottom.

By now the last of the day's light was growing thin and the sky had become melded steel in a graying twilight. A few torch fires were set and some number of the village prepared their meats in the square, roasting haunches set across heated stones and boiling goat heads in shallow pots. The boy had found a common watering hole and filled to some refreshment. When he returned to the square he kept his distance, yet still a few of the younglings drew unto him in interest, touching his skin and laughing and drawing away with food clutched in

their small hands. They seemed possessed of gibberish and some thought it humorous to toss their scraps near him and watch him eat. A number of the men observed him silently from afar.

Night brought with it a dark starless sky and the moon was but a dull coin of blurred white beyond the thin clouds. He slept in the square on the hard ground by a retaining wall. Fires smoldered in the yard in shallow pits and the mud shacks were blocks of darkness. A light wind blew, a lantern lighted momentarily in a distant window and blinked away. Two watchmen passed with their bladed pikestuffs leaning against their shoulders.

Near midnight a group of men came leering into view, their voices loud in the fierce stillness. The boy lay watching them. One began to whistle and cast about as if in search of a missing cat. His movements were absurd. When they spotted the boy against the far corner they stopped and slowly spread out in a line. The boy saw no purpose in hiding and rose with his blade. The figures stood featureless and cruel in the darkness and they numbered six. One of them made a seductive sound. Whispered a kind of catamite allurements. He was holding a hand ax. The boy began to edge away along the low wall with his back against the stone. When they shifted to hem him in the boy bolted tearing up a footpath in flight.

Shouts erupted breaking the still of night. Two of the men were sprinting in pursuit behind him and the boy cut between the buildings crashing through a stack of baskets and they kept on him running with their shoulders turned in the choking blackness, shuffling and shouting to the others running along adjacent footpaths. He cast about blindly among the mud dwellings and he emerged onto a narrow path where a figure appeared in silhouette up ahead and he turned and cut off into the dark. Dogs were barking everywhere in a frenzy and the boy hurdled a sheep pen and scaled a stone wall and dropped onto the open mesa where the ground was utterly black against the ghostly night sky. A lone watchmen who saw him hurdle the wall dropped down in pursuit with his spear. They were both running at a clip when the man cocked his arm and launched the spear into the meat of the boy's upper back. The stone tip sunk into him throwing him to the ground. He fell hard, raking his chest as he slid, and then scabbled

up to his feet, reaching for the spear like a crazed contortionist. It tore free mostly from the weight of the heavy shaft.

The boy hobbled a few paces and turned to see the man gliding through the darkness at a dead run. The watchman must have thought the boy unarmed and set to a foot race for the spear. For as the watchmen snatched up the shaft the boy swung hard and struck the side of the man's skull. It sounded like metal chining rock. The man pitched violently and the boy turned and floundered along the uneven stone as others bounded over the wall in chase. Were it not for the shrouded moon he would have been caught. But among those darker recesses along the mesa's edge none found him and he angled off, lurching into the vast shadowlands of the northern reaches dressed in blood.

## XVII



Delirium – A girl and a well – A decision – The boy hears  
his name – Tale of a garden – Wolves – Resupply – The  
searing pain of love – He mends a water skin – Judgment  
begins

He had no water, he had no food. The wound on his back was a pocket that four stiff fingers could slide into. His skin ran slick with blood and the gash on his leg had burst in a watery pus. All the night lay enfolded about him and he was a castaway plodding aimlessly in an unreckonable wilderness. Hours on end. Never in all his life had his own mortality so impressed him. His vision swam and he tottered and he sat on a rock observing the pristine darkness of the world and he wondered if there was another just like him in some far away place staring out into the void. Wondering at the mystery of it. Its unremarkable disregard. He scooped up a handful of dirt and tried to fill the wound. With each futile stretch fire burned within.

By morning he was crazed with thirst and muttering inanely. The extent waste before him was divested and sear and the shrub trees deformed and twisted and altogether lifeless and a mock sun frayed in arcs and came together in a great parhelic eye that filled the visible sky in omen as if the balance of things were upset and tipping into some dire retribution. He stumbled over the plated rocks into the deeper heart of the north and there came a blinding wind, hot and dry running over the outer bow of the world, inflaming his eyes, his tongue, and everywhere the jagged stones stived about in lesser auxiliaries to those more remote calderas dusted translucent so far away.

Sometime in the afternoon he lay in the slivered shade of a broken tree. It was knurled and gray and the wind whistled in his ears as he

slept. When he woke the sun had barely moved and he struggled to his feet leaving a plate of blood printed in the sand. He abandoned the sword to the sand and labored on faint and weak and consumed with thirst and when he saw the trickle of smoke bleeding up from among the rocky hills he thought it somehow the village from whence he came. Nothing made sense to him and he staggered weakly, figuring death preferable to the sun's torture. He groped up the hill and fell beyond its crest and he saw the tawny girl beside the well watching him uneasily and he lifted up and there sat stupefied, gazing at the slender sprite with her braided locks and thin arms. She stood not moving and then ran off over the opposite hill.

The well was composed of flat rocks stacked in a crude ring and a bucket sat beside it knotted with rope. He limped to its edge and peered down into the darkness and then sat lowering the pail. It was heavy with water and he drew it up feebly and tilted the cold liquid into his mouth, letting it pour over him and down him and he stopped to breathe and he drank again to nearly vomiting. Then he lay back in the evening light between the stony hills struggling to remain conscious.

It was nearly dark when the woman sat her camel atop the hill looking down on the boy. She was holding a long knife as did the girl riding rear her. He was finally diminished for want of blood and lack of food and he could not rise. He watched the camel and its riders draw near. They towered over him. The camel's nostrils contracted with air.

He's a slave, mama.

The mother stared down at him with sober misgivings.

He's hurt too.

I see it.

The boy lay breathing with the tipped bucket beside him, a length of rope draped across his legs. Nightfall was setting in.

I ain't nobody's slave, he said weakly.

Who stabbed you?

The boy looked at her. His face was drawn and gray. Don't know'em.

Her face tightened. She chucked the camel forward and stared out over the hills. She pulled the camel back. Why you come here?

His eyes shut. The world was fading.

Why you come here? she repeated.

His eyes cracked and he said that he did not know. He said that he did not know anything.

The woman stared out again into the darkness from whence he came. Her eyes threading the familiar waste. Out there the small wiry trees were black and postured in the shape of beings posted to sentinel the subsumed night. Moving only with the tug of wind.

The woman with her daughter were former slaves living in that forsaken crack in the desert eking out a lonely existence. They'd known the dangers of that land and they'd known the violent wanderers that happened those parts and they figured the boy to be one such slave to have fled and in so doing tasted the price of unredeemed freedom.

The boy was in no right mind and he fell in and out of darkness and the girl argued with her mother over the boy's fate.

They dragged him on a blanket a quarter mile to their squalid dwelling hid among the hills and they laid him in an old and frayed ramada among their scant livestock. The woman sat with her knife watching him. The wind was blowing and the sky was fraught with stars and the stars were falling.

He did not wake until noon the next day. His wound was grave and the woman possessed no deft hand at surgery, nor medicine, and she made no common attempt otherwise. He slept often finding therein a fleeting reprieve from the searing pain. His dreams were vivid. He sweat with fever, his long hair matted and wet. The girl brought him water in a clay vessel. Gave him scraps of bread, egg yokes. She was delicate for all the rugged world and had large brown eyes and long brown hair falling about her petite frame. A single peccary tied to a post rooted among the stones for grubs and two goats bleated endlessly with their foolish stares. The hills about were riddled with stones and they were sandy and the visceral winds capped them endlessly.

The hours passed, the days. He managed to sit up. He was filthy and caked with dried blood. The mother watched him and spoke little and the girl made up for them all. A week on and he struggled to his feet and shuffled about weakly and he found in the girl's eyes a warmth of devotion he had not known and would never know again. He ate with them on the dirt floor inside the hovel. Ribbracks of poles among

the rafters, the night sky slatted through the sparse stubble. A small wooden slab of a table held a candle and a common bowl of meal that they dished with strips of flatbread. The girl asked the boy his name and the boy told her and it sounded foreign to his ears as the land had no need for its use. She smiled and said her own and he could scarcely hold her gaze.

The mother seemed a book long sealed shut with suffering, but on a cool night when the girl had fallen asleep, she came and sat before the boy in the light of the dying fire. The hills about them lay silent. A gibbous moon monocled above. She was lean and hard and a patch of skin the size of a fist had been scalped away from her head and it was pale and unnatural looking. She touched the spot and said that they had always been slaves and that her master was cruel and had struck her with a billhook. He would drink and become animal, she said. I would hide her among the rocks beyond this hill. Tell her to wait for me. His one eye would sag. Then I would know.

The boy said nothing. He watched her.

She stared off into the darkness as she spoke. There is a well in the hills to the west. High among the red stones. Some have said that it is as old as creation and was once a spring in a garden. I know not this truth but it whispers to me. It speaks of times when things were not as they are. Not so unforgiving, not so painful. It says to me that if there was once a good then the good can be again. That the days are not all bitterness.

She looked at the boy. Do you believe this?

His gaze lowered to the fire. I don't know, he said. I haven't seen much good.

Her eyes searched him. She continued, The trek to the well was long and it was early dark when I would set out for it. There is nothing but the hills and the rocks and I would carry the water in a jug on my head, walking the path in the creeping light of the sun. The jug was very heavy. Heavy empty and heavy full. My master would sip the cool water, taste it with pleasure. Tell me how sweet it was unto him.

Every day I visited the well, this well that once fed a garden. Sometimes in the still quiet of morning, I would sit and stare out over the waking hills. The light knows how to play its tricks in the desert but there were times when I could see the flowers blooming beyond. I could see the birds among the ripe fruit, the crystal waters running and

pouring among the mossy rocks. It all dancing in the budding light of the sun.

A wind rattled through the camp and sparks ran from the fire along the ground. The fire kicked to life. She pulled a thin blanket about her. The day came when the well began to run dry, she said. I stood lowering the rope and the pail clattered against the stones finding nothing. Not even a palmful. When I returned with the jug and set it before him, having nothing, having not even a sip, he became enraged and demanded that I obtain the pleasure of his desire. I said that the well needed a longer rope and he struck me, and then struck me again, and then he set off with a fresh coil, telling me to follow with the jug. When we came to the well, he knelt working at the frayed knot of the old rope. The jug on my head was thick and heavy and I was gripping it with both hands. I can remember seeing the back of his head, his bent frame at work. I remember seeing my shape in the sand, the shadow sliding across his back. It was so strangely simple. Do you understand? So incredibly easy. As if it was not something to fear or question. The simplest of acts.

The boy's eyes were fixed on her. Her face showed no emotion. Small flames stood among the embers.

He was not dead. So I looped the rope about his feet and drug him across the sand and lowered him into the well. The hole was just large enough. I eased him head down and set the crossplank and left him to dangle in the throat of it. I kept calling to him, saying his name, and when he woke he was terrified, thrashing wildly, trying to reach his feet, trying to reach anything, but he could not. It was so perfectly narrow. As if it was made for him. I called down and told him to be silent and to listen and he stopped to hear the words of my mouth. But I spoke not. I left him there to die.

That was two weeks ago. It has been only her and I since.

In the coming days the boy improved but little. The wound on his back burned garishly red and it was seeping and the girl tended to it. Her touch felt cool on his skin. They had few supplies and fewer meals and the grains they ate did not go far. The mother and daughter talked of venturing the nearest city for fresh goods.

That night the sky was bled of all light and there came wolves



lurking in the darkness. Eyes glowing in pairs shifting among the hills, winking to nothing, trotting away and reappearing as yellow stars against the horizon. These slinking lobos issued up their lonely cries in offering to the vanquished moon and sidled among the darker plains, moving with their black snouts set to the ground, catching the scent of game. They returned in the cool of dark and they stole away the goats in a flurry of snarls and the boy limped after them with a stick, shouting vainly at the wind. The wound on his back split anew and a foul and bloody liquid leaked from it and the girl's singular voice called out to him to return from the darkness, and he did so. The woman let him sleep in the hovel and he lay on the ground listening to the soft breathing of the girl and the rising sun drew a soft ribbon across the sky and it shone pink through the open slats of the wind torn roof and the boy was awake to see it.

When he woke the woman and the girl were sorting out bundles of food and simple trading goods for their forthcoming journey and the boy wobbled outside demanding that he go with them. His eyes were caved and shadowed even in the bright light. The woman told him that the city was far to the north and unforgiving and that he could not go with them. The girl softly touched his arm and said that they would be back in three days. He looked at her. The waterskin slung across her shoulder seemed huge on her small frame and he insisted on carrying it. As he reached for it, the mother spoke his name with stark finality and he withdrew his hand as if seized by an old and forgotten acquiescence. Then he slowly nodded and eased onto a stump of rock watching them gather the last of their meager supplies. The woman left him a knife and then they tended to the north, walking across the barren plain beyond the hills and the boy stood watching them. In the distance the girl turned to see him. Then she hurried off again and melded into the horizon, blinking away into the fallow line of bygone earth.

He sat in the shade of the ramada listening to the wind. The hours drained away slowly. He slept and drank from the well and watched the shadows of the hills tilt and wheel with the turning of the sun. At night he could hear the thin cry of the wolves drifting in the wind from some more remote desert stead. The clouds had been dragged away and the bent trees were alone cardinal in the blue waste. He kindled a fire. The shoreline of light played across the nearby hills. He sat alone,

the dark of night pressing all about.

The hours turned to days and troubled thoughts took shape. He benched on a hill facing the north and there waited and in his waiting he looked fifteen going on some far older age. He looked as if he were tooled from the splintered rocks of that wasteland and made to adorn it for eternity. He looked as if he were bearing the weight of some grievous and choking knowledge revealed about the world. As if some dark parcel of the future had been disclosed only to he and it was terrible to know and soon to pass. As if love itself would be crushed to dust and blown beyond the map's edge. Shadows and sorrow folding to the bite, relinquishing whatever joy remained to the vast and industrial storehouses of pain.

The last of the evening light fanned on the hills behind him, landing lightly on the hovel, throwing its angled form across the cooling sand in a molded blue dusk with the last of the birds migrating across an emptying sky. He should have been hungry. A light wind brushed his face. All to the west a diffused reef of velvet lined the visible world. Sliding away, reducing to blue to gray to dark.

Morning found him slumped on the hill. A lone hawk panned the radiant dawn, gliding in the hidden currents and climbing to join the vaults of the northern expanse. When he woke he stood staring off for a long time. The burning sun soldered shut his wound but it could not touch his heart. He waited two more days, pacing about the camp, climbing atop the hill and descending again. Hour after long hour. He fashioned from the girl's bedding a crude knapsack that held what little possibles of use were left. Several handfuls of grain bundled in a cloth, the thin knife, four copper bits, a ragged blanket, a set of bone needles, flint rocks and a few tattered linens.

An old waterskin hung from a peg and it was dry and cracked and the boy sat mending the rawhide shell on the hill. Several hours later he held it at arms length in examination. He rose and limped down to the well to test his handiwork. While pouring water slowly into its narrow mouth he saw the object in the northwest. A single bead of light plummeting to the earth. Glowing like an ember, ripping the blue sky. He stood watching it holding the waterskin in one hand and then shuffled up the hill to see it fall pulsing beyond the horizon where it soundlessly disappeared. The smoking scar of its train slowly dissipating. He squinted up at the heavens and then back toward the

remote edge. A jet of light sparked impossibly far away. He stood staring. Then he felt the deep concussion rumble underfoot, a reverberation issuing up from the earth's core as if some tremendous anvil buried deep within had been struck. He looked about. The well stones were chattering. Pebbles danced in the sand. Out along that distant terminal a minute cloud of dust began to bud and expand with an insatiable appetite. Then by degrees the rumbling fell away and the silence the boy knew so well returned and he stood watching the impact blossom. Wind began to blow.

## XVIII



A well in a garden – In the fading light of fire – Lightning,  
ash, rain – Out of the gloom a city – Searching for the girl  
– The nude children – A drunkard tells a story –  
Remembrance – Into the latrine – Two ears – Water rising  
– Onto the mountain – Verdict rendered on the children of  
men.

He set off to the west to find the well and by the mid afternoon he fixed upon a trail that tracked up a hill littered with enormous red stones. He gingerly hitched up the waterskin on his shoulder and struggled up the path. There were tailorings of scrub woven among the rocks and patches of prickly bear running along the gravel slopes and the air was dry and hot and the huge red faced stones were riddled about like brooding titans. He stopped in a wallow of sand to regain his strength. All to the northwest a dark line was spreading across the sky consuming the day without remedy. At its center stood a tower of dark ash breaking the ceiling of heaven and it was swelling and the earth seemed lost to it there. He trudged up the windy path, eyeing its awful majesty.

The well was hidden in a grove of rock perched along the hill's southern face. It harbored the feel of a sanctuary. The boy eased off his waterskin and he set down his sack and approached the old coping of dried mud and stone. A limb of gray wood was lying across the opening. Knotted with a frayed rope dangling taut. The boy rested his hands on the lip and peered down. Curved stone dropping into an absolute pitch of black. He squinted. Flakes of grit fell and winked in the light and then fell to nothing.

A stiff wind kicked up from the north rustling his bag, his filthy hair. Bits of sand ran along the ground. He looked at the darkening

sky and then back to the well. He tugged at the rope testing the weight it bore and then set his feet and went to hauling up the rope, grabbing hand over hand, lugging what lay beneath to the surface by measured increments. He sat back and dust smoked off the bend in the rope and it snapped free and he could hear the thing tumble like a bag of sticks down a shoot. He regarded the frayed end of the rope and tossed it and then peered down again thinking he might see something new.

From among his goods he retrieved the coarse flint rocks and gathered up armfuls of scrub and crushed it into a tight ball and went about setting fire to it. The wind would not agree and he gathered up the brush and leaned against a wall of griststone and went to striking. He carried the burning tangle to the well and waited until the flame was strong and then set it loose. It fell whooshing and sparking in a bedlam of tiny firebrands until it came to rest far below on the rocky chamber floor. The flame was small and it threw but little light yet he could still see the withered legs of the figure drawn up in a shamble. Black sticks with two black stubs tintured in the dim cavity. The flame dwindled to glowing wires and the light of it pinched to a shred. Then it drew away to darkness and the image of the flame and the image of the legs in the flame hung briefly as an afterimage, and then that too fell away.

He returned to the hovel and then pressed out for the city with what light remained of the day. The sun drew down behind the darkening mass of clouds, hissing and seething with jealousy while the world dimmed to unnatural night. The great dome of the eastern sky still bore some witness to dusk and the boy groped on until the severed stars appeared and all fell into a formless murk. Dark trees stood stapled across a ghastly contour. All deeply bruised in color. He camped at the base of a raw and stony hill, eating his stores of grain by ones from the palm of his hand. No creatures stirred and none offered up their cries. When he woke it had grown the darker and jagged wires of lightning flared soundlessly far to the north. The desert shivered out of the darkness. Then it was sucked away again leaving only the sound of wind to promise its existence.

All the night was filled with tremors and other comets fell from the

endless supply of stars, tracing in great arcs and strobing like emeralds caught aflame, breaking apart and flaring away into the darkness. Sleep finally overtook him again and he lay curled against the rock, the bag clutched to his chest. An hour later the world heaved in agony, jerking violently as if the very spin of it snagged and broke free. Every living thing hid among the rocks and every living thing feared what lay ahead, waiting for the dawn, but the dawn had come and all lay shrouded in a pale of gloom as if the world's contents had been delivered to some other unreckonable and hostile planet.

The boy rose studying the eastern horizon. A faint disc shone through the roiling overcast, bleary eyed and sickly, a pale sulfur. Flakes of ash were drifting down onto the desert floor. Gray wisps light as the air, swirling with the wind. He walked for hours across that alien landscape and the sun was lost providing no sure direction and all was dim and laden with ash. With evening it grew the darker and lightning forked across the sourceless sky stamping out the jagged rocks, the silted trees. He laid up in the stones of a fingering escarpment, wedging himself in a shallow crack. It was cold and a harsh wind was gusting up the bank. He fished the linens from his bag and wrapped himself in it like some egregious groundhog shawled for winter. He drank and settled in to sleep. Rain began to fall in great droplets that pattered off the stones and pelted the sand. Soon everything was wet and turning to mud and the steaming rocks smelled earthy. Flakes of ash mingled with the rain in dark clots and by morning it was coming down harder and blowing slantwise. He stood peering out across the dreary landscape. Gloom and darkness in a cimmerian haze of rainfall. He trudged on.

Small birds clutched to rocks, to spindly branches. Other creatures had slithered forth in a state of beleaguered resignation as if the rain required their enduring a swarm of bees. Sometime by midday he stumbled upon a small cave set in a ridge and he stood inside ringing out the linens and wiping the sooty water from his face. It had grown the colder and he sat blowing into his hands. He slogged out again into the rain with the bag hanging across his bleeding back. The earth was mired and marshy and pools of water dotted the gray wasteland, splashing up to his ankle.

He walked for what might have been an hour or three hours, four, before seeing the dim glow of a fire under a canopy. It wasn't there

then it was. As he drew near a city wall formed out of the murk. A gray ghost of a thing rising in the fog. Men were huddled by the fire watching him lurch into view. He shouted and one called back pointing toward the entrance. He stood trying to see. Then he set off again, his feet sucking through the sand.

Other dark pilgrims were wandering out of the gloom, trudging through the open gate wet as dogs and mute and the boy drifted among them slowly entering like undead monks called to prayer. In the main court enormous hides were stretched between the buildings and they were black as were the ropes against the unlit sky. Water poured from the drooping sags punching holes in the sand and fires burned pitifully under the dripping canopies. It was dark and everything was wet and the crowd seethed through the streets without meaning. The boy passed a row of tethered horses that looked like giant rats in a bog and he turned down an alley slopping through the mud. Water streamed down the mud buildings. Amid the continual slap of rain, thunder crashed overhead and rolled clanging out into the interminable desert. Figures stood despondently in doorways, under lips of stone. Sopping hags with matted hair, mad about the eyes. A solitary dog saw him and slunk away down a side corridor.

By evening he found an empty stable near the northern wall and he sat in the damp straw with his back against the rear stone staring out at the gray fictions that were buildings beyond. He hung his soaked raiment on a hitching rail and sat with his legs drawn up. Gusts of wind found him there. With night all drew to darkness and but for a few windowlights letting forth and the periodic stab of lightning all was as black as the inner consignments of hell. Sometime later he woke to the sound of voices crying out. Dark figures with lanterns trudging through the streets calling for a lost child. Five of them. One ambled into view of the boy and stood staring with streaks of water running down his wild face. He asked if the boy had seen a small girl and the boy shook his head and the lantern swung away and the shape of its holder bled away into the darkness. Beyond the city walls sheets of rain slashed in the wind and lightning carved out the dismal waste. It was as long a night as the boy could remember.

The morning brought with it more rain and all lay in a shroud of embalmed night. The boy rose. Water had crept into the stable and the streets ran in a muddy gruel. Streaks of viscous ash oozed in a

dark paste everywhere, dripping from roofs into mired pools, smearing down walls. He sat watching the waterline ripple and creep nearer his feet. It was cold and his hunger had grown sharp. His linens had dried none at all. Few ventured the streets in that remote quarter of the city, yet here was an old man leading a mule slowly through the downpour and the boy caught up beside him and asked where he might find the slave market. The old man stopped. His hair was white and thin and dripping. Years of pain echoed from his dark eyes. The boy stood lamentable himself and the man gestured ambiguously westward and then plodded on with his solemn mule.

The streets were flooded and the cramped buildings ran in congested lines, blurred and runny and vaguely skewed as if watercolor paintings left tilted in the rain, the dark stones weeping and slick. All above him the sky was a perfect sheet of gray stained with lampblack. The wind had fallen away and the rain fell straight and heavy, the long puddles electric and jumping. On a narrow road several men strode past him nude save for large brimmed hats curled dark with water. Windows were lashed shut with thick canvasses of leather and there were discarded apparel churning in the rutted currents. A pair of sullen oxen stood with their bony legs mired hoof deep in mud.

He cut through a winding alley and emerged in a courtyard half buried in water. On the far side, shaped dimly in the rain, stood a series of caged wagons cocked at angles, the harnessed horses tossing their heads and stamping in agitation. Slaves were being offloaded with roped collars belted about their necks. Scrawny children divested of clothes and parents. Four men with cudgels herded them into a walled and roofless pen. The boy watched from afar. Ten minutes later the four men reemerged and splashed through the water and latched shut the cages and hauled out bundled sheepskins and two mounted up and drove out the wagons, racketing off down the street from view. The others tossed the skins over the stone wall and scurried off down the street, their long black hair pasted to their backs. They ducked into a wretched doggery tucked off the street a distance away.

A thrashing wind begun anew throwing rain in blinding sheets. After a time the boy scampered across the yard with his head turned and he moved along the stone enclosure to its rear looking for a way to see over it. Rain was splattering off the rough hewn coping of the



wall and he shielded his eyes while surveying its length. He turned and studied the squat buildings framed about and he climbed the nearest and lay squinting in the clamorous rain. In the small pen some twenty enslaved children sat huddled in a mire of loess and ash. They were chained in pairs to an enormous wedge of stone and they were holding the worthless sheepskins over their heads. The boy shouted the girl's name and they looked up with their miserable faces. He stood and drew their attention with the wave of an arm. He shouted her name again and they watched him without any indication of knowing. The boy glanced at the shrouded yard, the shrouded buildings behind him. Lighting strobed soundlessly in the blowing wind. He fixed on them again and he kept repeating her name and some of them rose nude and pitiful and they called back to him in an unknown tongue. A few were shaven bald and not many were girls. The boy squatted and peered, lingering on the abject litter of stolen children and then dropped from sight.

He wandered in the rain, wandered in the mud of the streets. Beneath him the earth lurched again and began to knock as if the cables of some great stone pendulum had snapped free and was swinging wildly about. Like the unfastened heart of the boy. A low rumble issued up from the lower vaults of the world, rattling buildings, the very stones. The boy stood feeling it in his legs and he did not care and then it fell away without apology.

It was growing the darker in the sky and the long shadow of day thickened and drew colder and the boy searched among the muddy streets finding no trace of her and he was wearied and in pain and he found himself slogging through the deepening water of the courtyard back toward the dingy cookhouse. Two others were tramping ahead of him in the dark rain. Bent and shrouded as if hid in a deep fog by a river.

The cookhouse door stood open and a cut of troubled light fell onto the stone veranda. He stepped out of the rain and stood listening to the hum of chatter within and he looked back along the street and at the swollen sky and at the thin cracks of pale light bleeding through the covered windows up the road. The wooden doorjamb had been worn smooth from the embrace of a thousand drunks and there was a trail of filth tracking through the entrance. He regarded the rain again and then entered. The bar was alive and packed with indigents of all

sorts drinking cheek by jowl. Small clay lamps hung from pegs of cyprus and they glowed weakly among the chambered rooms, dressing the seething congestion in a shadowy garb that befitted their grunts and iniquitous laughter. The air stank of woodsmoke and ale and men. He made his way to a side room sparsely occupied and sat on a worn bench in the corner. Three men were at a game of wager with a black dog lying under the table. A gristly man of some older age sat nearby contemplating the depths of his drink with a tired stare. A batch of tallow candles rested on the table and there hung a single lamp on the far wall. One of the men at play glanced at the boy and then renewed his attention on a fresh string of bets. Above them smoke curled among the sagging rafters and urine drips of clay fell from the beaded ceiling.

The boy sat for some time before venturing a bowl of porridge that took the sum of his monies. He returned to the bench and sat eating the bitter stew with his hand, tilting the bowl to drink its salty liquid. The man's gaze broke from his drink.

The world's a fair rotten tree, he said gravely, catching the boy's eye.

The boy tilted the bowl again, looking away.

I'd say you know it's so with that mark. It's darker than the dark about you.

The boy looked.

But we could all know it if this storm keeps to beating against us. The man's eyes shifted and he finished off his drink and set the large cup on the table, clutching it with both hands as if the thing would dart away if given a chance to flee. He was well to drunk. The men at the game paid him no attention.

You ain't from these parts are ye? the man inquired. I knowed it at once. You've a look.

The boy focused on his clay bowl.

You come from the south? Cause some group of hunters said the south's no better. Said a volcano has blown firing the world with its cauldron. I'd say it's about right. Though a man could guess about this rain. Might to be the end of things. What say you?

I don't know, said the boy.

The man nodded knowingly as if the boy had uttered something profound. Had a brother. Said I was a fish I could drink so much.

Might suit me now, I suppose.

The room was partially open to the main hall and the boy stared out at the crowd of men roaming to and fro. More of the clay liquid dripped to the floor.

You know, the man said, his words slurred, up the street there's fools cutting their arms and thighs with knives. Long haired masochists slicing away like they're made for it. Rituals of propitiation, they said. I asked'em what they be propitiating and you know what they said? They'd be propitiating the gods. As if anything cares what leaks from their veins. The man stopped and laughed to himself, shaking his grubby face. The boy regarded him.

But I knew a man who said he died and had figured a way back. A rock had fallen from a cliff and slammed his head, set him dead right there in the path. He told me that you're taken to a large room white as any white you could imagine. Far as you can see, all white. Said there's a huge balance for weighing things set in the middle and that there was a horned deity or demon or some other kind of awful creature standing behind the balance waiting to weigh your life. On one side of the balance rests a feather. The other scale receives your wet and beating heart. He told me that if your heart is heavier than that tiny feather you'll be thrown into the dripping maw of that terrible creature. Devoured for eternity. Rolling around in its gut with the other sinners. Now if you know'd this man you'd know he was for trouble. But when they took out his black heart and plopped it down on that scale it slammed the floor and shook the walls so hard it knocked him back to the living. That's what he said. I'm no man to say it ain't so. There's mysteries everywhere.

One of the gamblers looked at the boy and then at the man. His eyes were hid in a shadow of beard and concentration. The gristly old figure kept talking but the boy wasn't listening. Someone across the room in the main hall was laughing like a hyena and one among the small group of filthy vagrants grinned in the flickering light of the lampfire. The boy sat staring with his mind drawn back to a distant and painful memory. The dark figure shifted and drank and grinned again and the boy knew it. His countenance changed.

Among the vices of men vengeance is most divine, the man was saying, still rambling on about judgment. The boy sat staring. His jaw tight in a clench of teeth. He chucked up his wet bag and waterskin

and wordlessly left the still jabbering man for a different spot, taking up a rickety chair by the rear scullery. Red coals were burning inside a stone bread kiln. The dark skinned man had long black hair that fell stringy and wet and his face was hard bit from years of sun. He had shifty eyes, a bony chin. Long spindly fingers. He sat among a group of stout figures drinking stouter drinks. One was younger, thirteen, maybe fourteen. All elbows and knees.

An hour ticked by with the boy watching with his own shadowed stare. The deep throbbing of his heart tolling with hate. Outside the sky was the color of a storming sea and it was raining the harder and blowing. All to the north there trembled in the black cognate of the shifting plates an imponderable grinding and the wet mountains stood fitful in the growing darkness and the frightened animals fled from their quaking dens and scampered down the steep rocks and out onto the seafloor of the watery desert where they waited with their small beady eyes. The tremor ran for miles and the ground cracked and the dark lakes shivered and it spread to the city and the lamps in the cookhouse swung on their pegs and the tables rattled and every man stopped to commune in silence with the agitated earth. It lasted a long time. Men held their trembling drinks in wait. Some of the inebriated grinned and laughed out for wonder. A thin fracture split the ceiling in the main hall and a trickle of water splattered on a table that those nearest watched. Then the rumbling slowly died away and the chatter of men enlivened only partially. The boy watched the man through it all.

Others came and went from the cookhouse, dripping and stomping about with their gritty ale. The dark skinned man sat hunched forward, his shoulders high, drinking and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, his eyes darting towards newcomers like a bird twitching at wind blown twigs. After a time he rose from his table and made his way out the back for the jakes and the boy quietly followed at a distance, sliding through the crowd to a rear door where the rain was falling in a muddy and empty road. A short walk away a small daub hut with a thatched roof held a series of stone latrines over a pit. It was dark and the man ducked into the doorless hut. The boy stood watching and glanced behind him. Rain was coming down loudly pattering off the roof, the standing water. He positioned the handle of his knife near the opening of his bag and stepped into the

rain. His left eye was twitching.

A thin blanket of gray light crept along the muddy floor of the latrine barely lighting the room. The man was sitting on a crude stone toilet and he looked up when the boy entered. The boy walked stiffly eyeing the ground and when he passed he thrust the knife into the man's neck. The man flailed and he was slick with water and they struggled in the darkness with the boy pressing against his sinewy frame, fighting off the man's prying hands. He crammed the knife in further and twisted it, cursing through clenched teeth. The man's legs kicked wildly and they slipped to the ground with the boy riding him. When the boy jerked free the blade and drove it down at the man's face the man clasped the boy's wrist and wrenched him sideways and they slogged about in the mud and the dark, corkscrewing in place. Kill you, said the boy. Kill you to hell. Blood was surging from the slit artery. The ground was mired as with wine and the hot blood drenched the boy and he could taste the copper of it in his mouth. They struggled face to face grunting and the man's strength slowly slackened and the boy broke free and stabbed the man in the chest long after he lay not moving.

The boy stood breathing in ragged strokes with scraps of wet hair in his face. Another tremor surged below and the stones in the reeking latrine chattered. The body lay jostling at his feet in a perverse wreckage of flesh. The boy spat staring at it. Lightning flared in the south throwing white pulses of light across the city. The room stuttered into view and the boy's face changed. He knelt studying the man's ear in the black drape of matted hair. He reached and flopped the head over and felt the other side. The boy's breathing quickened. After he found it he raked at the hair. Even in the darkness of the hut he could see the other ear. Lightning flashed soundlessly and the man's lifeless face shaped before him in momentary strobes and he slowly backed out into the rain. A husky figure was urinating on the stone wall of the cookhouse. Their eyes met and the boy stood streaked in paling blood. Then he fled into the torrent of ashen rain and darkness.

That evening he saw them laboring through the flooded streets in the thick gloom carrying their whips. Bits of whinstone were knotted in

the long leathery strands and they were flailing their backs and thighs and moaning in some ancient prayer or pagan recital offering up lamentations in false propitiation. They were naked to the waist and lacerated and the blood of them fell into the rainwater and was no more. They were led by an emaciated figure walking with his hands outstretched toward the heavens and his ribs were as slatted fish bones and he was crying out loudly in mournful stanzas, the flagellants whipping themselves and his bare back in tandem like some ghastly band of masochistic drummers. This strange cult progressed slowly through the darkening waters and the boy watched them from the flooded stable, drawing away into the murk without form or right knowing and he soon heard only the cry of wind and rain and he somehow felt it in him, brewing gray and cold and without meaning.

In the coming days the rain did not abate and the rising waters drowned the streets and swamped the stone dwellings and they were as flooded caves with cold black water and the inhabitants walked shin deep through the churning slag without the light of fire or the light of sun and they were as transients phantomed in that failed absolution. Men killed other men for the upper floors of buildings, for covered rooftops, for common items, and the slain floated face down in the streets like driftwood, clogging alleys with their black floating hair and collecting bits of desert debris in twisted dams. The boy laid atop the stable under tattered skins he had found in an abandoned house. There he peered out at the dark gray world shivering with hunger. A day later while searching among the flooded ruins for food the land retched with nausea and a great earthquake tore apart stone and wood and the very foundation of things splintered into reliquaries of death and rubble. The trapped lay howling at the wind until they grew hoarse and then they were as silent as the stones atop them and the living slank from their ruined homes into what remained of the desert that was no desert. They filed out in packs drifting into the dreadful murk, slouching along hunched and sodden with their burdens of earthly goods bundled in wretched blankets and there were goats slung across the shoulders of women, the shoulders of men, and there were chickens tied in bundles, or clutched in jerking sacks, and children waded cold and miserable, struggling to keep up. The boy trod alone and all was gray and wet and the clouds stormed with fractured light as if the product of some insane alchemist at experiment in a tower. Far

beyond the broken walls of the city the boy stood on a shelf of rock holding the rags of sheepskin about him. He stared out across the landscape. All the gray world lay in a dark archipelago. Gray swallowed up in dark grays. The lines of bitter rain one line and a gray mist with the black twisted trees cracking the horizon. Distant buttes standing like wickless candles half burned in a flooded dungeon.

Days passed and the waters rose yet still as if fed by more than the skies. Men hid themselves in the rocks of the mountains and they called out for it to fall on them and they ate their dead and they killed to eat the dead. Men finally as animals in their barbarity, soulless as rocks. Hunting others on the mountains, searching for tents, for the slightest spark of fire. Which were not anymore in those days.

Once during the day the sky deepened into a terrible red and the rain was as blood falling and the rocks were bleeding and the ruts and gullies were veins spraying off ledges and rocks and those in caves stood watching in horror. At night it was a darkness to break bones. He lay in a shallow cleft where shutting the eyes made no difference. Waking in that terrible black of night he heard a distant booming in the far north and there came the pelting of fused ash and scoria falling from the heavens like hail, rattling the mountain in an endless pelting of rock on rock. During those long hours he thought of his mother, he thought of the girl. He was cold and wet and nothing was dry. The scab on his back was soft and rimmed white as with leprosy and an irate wind sheared across the mountain and it was as a shofar blowing.

He found a dead rabbit among the wet stones and he sat eating it with the fur ripped open, his face buried in the raw meat. All the world was foreign and the waters were an ocean and he held the sheepskins over his head peering out. He did not venture far. The days were seamless as was the rain. Then in the slow gray brim of dawn he saw men cutting across the mountain with enormous knives. Scarred images of humanity set black against the unaccountable sky. Moving with murderous intent. Their savage hunger all but madness. He hid crouched through all the day watching the water trickle from karst and pool into black slicks. Then the night came and the day which was little more than the night and all the world was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep. The sun became black as sackcloth of hair and the moon hung from a string red as blood and the stars they did fall from the heavens unto the

earth even as a fig tree sheds her untimely figs when shaken by a summer storm.

Two days later the rain slackened for but a moment and the boy emerged weak and coughing, his sickly eyes hollow. He panned the dark reefs of water. The bleakness of it. He looked for someone. For anyone. Standing there in that implacable murk. With only the sound of wind and patter of rain. After a time he drooped onto a rock atop that dark and lonesome mountain. He opened the bag and he rifled absently through the wet and filthy items. He stopped and looked about and then dropped to his knees and put his face in his hands and wept. And his tears were added to the water of that forsaken and doomed world.

## Epilogue





Water gently laps along the pebbled shoreline. The water is blue and calm and runs to the visible lip of the world. Where ships go to and fro and leviathan is made to play and frolic. There is a man progressing in the canted light of dawn. He grips in his hand a stick by means of which he uses to walk and his face is old and mapped with lines of wisdom. The gray eyes two witnesses. Behind him are the hills rolling along the curve of the island and on them blankets of viridescent grass sway and the humped mounds in the sea rise like the backs of turtles. There is a natural silence and the silence is not like the one to come. The one to stop the mouths of angels. To hold the world in place as for tribulation of war. He stops and leans with his eyes shut for the seven and stirs to the sound that is the roar of many waters and he falls as one dead and he sees the consuming vision and the sea that is as the glass of crystal and he weeps and does not any longer. He sees the dissolution and the melting and the sky passing away with a roar. A thousand miles away in the dark of the catacombs the heads are bowed and the cupped hand holds the water in the firelight. It pours on them and it is clear and pure not for the removal of dirt and it is a deluge that does not harm.



