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The Giant Hunter

Jesse Bilyeu

Words&Pixels LLC

Santa Rosa, CA

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The Giant Hunter

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As I write this, I realize it has been exactly one year since this all began. A year without you and my beautiful babies. A year on this cursed campaign to rid the land of these foul giants.

We are now hunkered down on a lonely mountainside, waiting out a blizzard from the third hell of legend. Three days and nights it has besieged my men and our sacred mission, but we will endure. We will cling to this forsaken rock until the end of time if we must.

Dellic, my second, has bid me command my men to use this time to write to our loved ones, that the idle time may not trouble them so—that, should all go poorly, their families might know of our sacrifice and our love for them in our final hours. A great scribe himself, for all his terrible skills in the field, Dellic has offered to sit with any who do not write nor read, that they be not excluded from this mercy.

Then, sweet Almeya, the man looked me straight in the eye and said, “It will do you good, as well, Rahik, to perform this task.” I dismissed both the man and his foolish idea for the first two nights of our frozen siege. Then, finally, I have relented. It is difficult for me to do this. I find myself marveling, in that morbid sort of way of old soldiers, that so much time has passed without so much as a moment to reflect. That, in itself, is often a mercy to the military man in the field. What we do, what we risk, what we see befall others of our company, is best left in the dark recesses of our waking minds. For to look too closely, or for too long, is to invite madness—or despair. While one might serve a man well in battle, the other will ensure his death.

One year ago this very day, my love, I returned from my lord's wars to the lands of our ancestors, to find our village in ashes. Our families butchered or run off. Our homes crushed flat and burned to cinders. You, my dear sweet wife, no more than blackened bones where our wedding bed once stood, the scorched bones of our sweet babies in your arms. There, on the bloody, ashen ground, the sunken footprints of one of the cursed Reaper's dreaded behemoths, pointing the way of its escape and its path toward other foul deeds. Pointing the way of my retribution, and the living death of my life without you. Your murderer was the first to fall. The first of many. We had not paused in our pursuit since that day.

I fear I have done something horrible, my love. I would not cower in the wake of those deaths while the fiend responsible walked this world. I did not lay my loved ones to their rest, Almeya, my sweet, as our Creator would

command. In my tortured grief, I found my father's spears, collapsed together in the ashes, fused together in the hellish heat of that inferno. In the forge, its stone walls the only structure left standing, I hammered with all the ferocity of my pain until one great and fearsome lance was the result. Vicious, ugly and unrepentant—like the monster I would gut with the thing, three long days after. About its shaft, at the base of its gnarled, serrated blade, I hung a blessed token. A holy symbol of my wrath. I gave it no thought then, nor any moment since, until this cursed siege.

Almeya, my love, I fear I have committed a great sacrilege. I fear I have done you and Greta, Abboss and sweet little Kaya a vile injustice. For that token, that talisman of which I speak—it is made of five things, most sacred to me, my love—my wife, my children and the scarf you gave to me to take into battle, as proof against my fears. A proof that did not fail me, but did nothing to save those I love. That scarf, crimson as the blood of innocents, I bound to that weapon. Depending from its silken folds, the bare skulls of those the fiend had stolen from me. I beg your forgiveness, my love. For to speak of it, hurts me deeply. It was my fury that had urged my hand, but now it is done. My talisman has given me the strength to hunt down and butcher every last beast to stalk our land. Thirteen in all.

Only one remains. And it awaits us in the mountain pass above—so near, yet so damnably far. When the blizzard clears, we will hunt it down as well. I will see the last of these unholy demons back to the Seventh Hell, even if I must drag it there myself with my bare hands.

Then, my love, I will find us new land, where the sun is always warm and men stand sovereign above all else. Then I will find the most beautiful hilltop and place my loves in the shade of a sapling oak, there to reside throughout eternity in peace and justice. I only hope the creator will pardon my rash heart, that I might join you all in the end. If I must spend eternity in the pit with those monsters I sent there—so be it. This I will accept, if I must.

I love you, Almeya my wife, I love our babies, our life together.

One more beast to bring to account. One more demon to send back to hell and you will be at peace. I promise. One more. Until then, my love.

Your loving husband,

Rahik

When I woke this morning, the storm had finally broken. The mountain all about us was white on blue, a soft languid blanket upon all and everything. The snow was nearly as deep as a man is tall, drifted two and three times so in gullies and ravines, along sheer walls and hiding all evidence of the pass we seek and the tracks of our prey. Men grumble and beseech their gods for mercy, but mercy does not reside up here. Not from the heavens and not from the great mountain itself. Not from our enemy, certainly. And so not from me, as well. Never. As we strike our hasty camp, the pall in my heart lifts—ever so slowly. Today it is finished! I swear it is so. I have told my men this and some rejoice at the fire of my words as if that alone might save them from the frozen wastes I have led them to. I have led these good men to this place, to the fate that awaits them beyond the far peaks that stare down upon me with their icy disregard. They loom like judgmental gods, or the ancestors of the murderous giants I have cast my fate against. If I could, I would cut *them* down as well—heartless rock that they are—that I should never again be reminded of the scourge I now hunt.

I find, after my letter to you last eve, my love, that I feel like you are right here with me, in my heart. That you hear every word I speak—every thought I hold in my mind. I do not know when next I might have the leisure to write again. Until then, dearest Almeya, I will tell you all I see, all I feel, that you might yet comfort me with your wisdom and empathy. I had not realized, until this very moment, how very much I had depended on the simple gift of your compassionate ear, all those long, restless nights lying awake in your arms, bragging of my greatest triumphs and confessing my greatest fears.

Mercifully, Dellic chose this moment to seek me out and I am saved from my misery.

...

Midmorning was slow as molasses in coming. But grumpy or no—fearful or no—my men stand ready to move out. I insisted on leading the way, but Dellic sent our best trackers ahead to scout our path through the treacherous rocks and precipitous drops, alerting us to dangerous places and avalanches lying in wait above for a wind or bark of sound to unleash our doom. The going is galling in its snail like pace, but a more treacherous path we have not yet faced and I will not waste their courage on a foolish death, while our quarry

runs onward, free and un-harried. I assume the trail is more easily passed for those downslope from the vanguard, snow and ice trampled to a clear, but mortally slick roadway. We must walk, leading our terrified horses more often than not. I feel we are poised on the head of a pin, so precarious is our path.

...

We have lost three men today and it is still an hour or two from dusk, though in the gray purgatory of these bony peaks, it is difficult to tell. Three men lost and we have yet to confront our prey. Thick black clouds, fringed in purple and shot through with wicked fingers of lightning licking at the ridges all about, have moved in, threatening more snowfall. Avalanches roar to our left and right, perhaps close to hand, perhaps a league away. The silence of the blanketed mountains, so velvety that every scrap of sound echoes on for long moments, spooks the horses—and the men as well. The twin sheets of vertical rock marking the pass we seek are menacing silhouettes, seemingly so close before us men have reached out snow-bit fingers, marveling that they could not yet touch them.

The monster is near, my love, I can smell it. With my soul, if not my nose. We must be careful. It lies in wait somewhere. My bones tell me so. It has had four days and nights to run on or to ready itself for our coming. I have never marked one of these mindless fiends as intelligent, in all these lonely, haunted months of my odyssey. This one is different somehow, not merely in its gargantuan stature, though it towers above every fiendish monstrosity we have run down and butchered thus far. It watches us from its vantage. It waits for us.

I fear this one—as I have feared no enemy before—not because it's footprint is big enough for five men to lay within uncrowded, though that would be reason enough. It is the cold regard it casts back whenever we are close enough to pick its massive bulk from the eerie contours of mountain and forest, in the gloom of day's end. It toys with us, Almeya. I swear it does, though I do not speak of this with any but faithful Dellic. But I fear no sane man among these brave forty could possibly fail to note this, as have I. To their credit, they do not grumble of it within my hearing. I suspect that is not true, among themselves. Dellic has told me so. Although grateful for it, I have never needed his insight to know the hearts of my men. Every man here has

suffered a loss, as great to their hearts as your loss is to me. No man will waiver until this is done.

For good—or for ill.

...

Dellic has appealed to me to make camp one last time on this side of the pass, to await dawn's clarity that we might better challenge our quarry. I am restless, my wife. I cannot abide any more delays. We will push on until we crest this bitter mountain and find shelter somewhere beyond the pass. We have torches plenty. I fear our hearts are at a crisis point, and that if we yet cling one more night to this slope, another brutal storm will trap us here for good. The simple victory of reaching the pass will be a profound boon to flagging spirits. I captain these good men and, as ever, it falls to me to bear the brunt of responsibility for their courage, as well as their lives.

The pass is so close. We must push on.

As our vanguard reached the imposing twin peaks, standing mute guard above the pass, my brave steed snorts and bucks as if he were treading a bed of vipers. I feel it too and push to the fore of my company, despite Dellic's objection. Men and beasts crowd along behind me, their own concern thick in the deep violet of the frigid night. The air here is calm—dead calm. Brutally silent to ears long accustomed to the roar of wind and storm. Had our quarry been men, or even one of the monsters we had chased down before—huge, but merely twice the height of a tall man—I would have called 'ambush' just then, so vivid was the icy certainty creeping up my spine. But this monster, taller even than the tallest sequoia, could not hide in wait, certainly. With the distant lightning flashes, marking the storm stalking our trail as we stalk the monster, I see nothing but snow-drifted rock—boulders, as well as sheer promontories. There is no trace of the foul thing. It does not huddle to the sides, nor straddle the trail like the great Colossus of legend. Its cavernous footprints are now far too blanketed by recent snowfall to locate.

It is so near, *dammit all!* How has it concealed itself from us? Cautiously we advance, my valiant Argos beneath me, 'Vengeance' in my fist, itching for the fiend's blood. All I can hear is the haunting hiss and snap of the torches my men hold up against the cloying dark. The trail winds relentlessly through close-pressed, vertical monoliths of bare stone and ice. Here the trail threads along a horrifying shear drop so vast our torches cannot pierce the distance to its treacherous base. If I were to set an ambush, to rid myself of a pursuing force, this would be the place. The mountain thrusts straight up so close on our right that men can reach out and trail numb fingers along its surface from their horses' backs. It falls so precipitously to our left that every pebble we dislodge flies unencumbered to the far depths. Surely no beast of the size of our prey could possibly lie in wait here. I'm astounded it could even move along this trail itself, without falling, or collapsing the narrow ledge with its tremendous bulk.

Then, suddenly, something changed, though it took several blood-chilling moments for it to sink in. Where my mount now stood, the monster had not yet tread. Ask me not how I knew this, my love, but believe me when I say it is true. We had passed it somehow. Then, just as I was about to call out a warning, the storm to our backs caught us, lightning striking so vividly all about us, I nearly thought the beast had called it down upon us with some foul sorcery. A shaft of blinding white hit the trail barely a dozen meters ahead of

me, spooking my Argos and causing him to rear up, nearly throwing me from the saddle. In that blaze of blue-white light, I saw a fiery glint of amber in the endless blue and white of the mountainside. It was a huge eye, baleful and filled with malice, reflecting back the warm glow of torch flame.

Then, as if out of nightmare, the mountainside shivered free of tons of snow and ice and separated from the stone of the cliff face. The avalanche it provoked swept the bulk of my men and their mounts from the precipitous trail before many of them had even located the threat, howling their terror as they fell away into the void. What at first I took for massive tree trunks tumbling down among the falling debris, I saw were arms—massive and gnarled. One held a boulder in its misshapen fist, bigger than the largest draft horse—the other, the desiccated remains of an ancient tree trunk. With these, the beast swept at the trail, crushing and casting to their doom, the rest of my company. Only my forward-most position spared me that fate, but even that reprieve was only for a dozen adrenaline-charged heartbeats more. As Argos regained his courage—and his balance—I lifted 'Vengeance' above my head and threw it with all my strength.

That was the last clear image I can recall, for a wave of white fell upon us, my faithful warhorse and I, taking us over the precipice. I was prepared for an endless fall before the end, but nearly as quickly as I was swept over, I felt my body thud hard into the rib cage and belly of my horse as it collided with some outcrop of stone. We both bounced and tumbled, the sickening pop and crack of equine bones filling my ears. Then my fall was arrested, as the bulk of my Argos fell away and I was swallowed up in icy black silence.

"Almeya, my love, how have I come here?"

"You are not here with us, my love," you say to me as I reach for your outstretched arms, but they mutate into the great boughs of a massive tree or ragged shards of living stone. Monstrous fingers, gnarled and inhuman, grasp at my soul and crush it with a grip of iron, cold and unforgiving.

"Almeya! Stay with me, please!" I call to you, but you are not there. Our babies are not in your loving arms, our home no longer protecting us with its warmth and shelter. I am alone, a broken bit of frozen debris left in an avalanche's passing, awaiting eternity. I can hear nothing, buried as I am in white. I can feel nothing, numb with a cold so total I can barely complete this thought. I must move, if I am yet to live. If I am yet to end the fiend who has done this to my men, my faithful Argos, my desperate quest. In the way of fallen warriors, I try to assess my condition, but I cannot. Up from down is all I can manage, but even that I dare not trust. I will my limbs to move, yet I can feel nothing at all. Am I paralyzed? Is my back broken, my neck crushed? Am I a corpse awaiting the final useless breath of failure to flee my dead breast? I cannot tell, my love.

"Take me, you bastards!" I yell to the gods. "I am defeated, give me my rest! Give me my final reward! Give back to my sweet wife, her loving husband! To my babies, their papa!" But they do not listen—or care, I suppose. I cannot find you my love. So, I search and grasp and plead. "Curse you in your heavens and your bloody hells!! Take me now or give me back my soul! If I cannot be with my loves, return me to my quest... to my purpose." My voice drifts to mush even in my own frozen ears. How might gods or demons hear me if I cannot hear myself? "Curse you all! I will not lie here like so much feces to enrich the soil, like a ball of ice unable to do even that much good in this world." I curse them, my love, over and over—each time feeling a faltering ember swell with my determination, within my dying breast. Soon, it is no more than a hot ash, desperate for life. Now, as I fan its burgeoning reawakening with the breath of my hatred, my fury, I feel it catch.

It is a flame now, my beloved, a raging inferno the next moment still. I can feel the weight above me lessen and shift. A weak pink light is there now and I realize my eyelids are frozen shut, the first rays of an icy dawn radiating through them. I have been moving, my love, though still I can feel nothing but a cold so absolute I cannot now recall the warmth of the sun—nor of your love. One hand comes free of the crush of ice and snow. It wipes at my face

as if of its own will. Another shift of this funeral shroud the mountain has laid upon me and I can tell I am able to move. Though I am so numb with cold, I cannot tell you how I could be so sure.

As first one eye, then the next cracked free of the ice enclosing them, I can see clouds above. Gods of mercy and light, Almeya, my love—I still live. *How*, I cannot say. *Why*, I do not care. My terrible 'Vengeance' is gone, though my bare frozen hands are yet weapons of my wrath. My mind and heart, stronger still.

My men will be avenged. I swear it, my love. Should it take a lifetime—short as that may yet be.

...

I cannot tell you how long it took to crawl the twenty body lengths I had fallen, up the sheer frozen stone wall. Below me, as I turn, is a wonderland of white on white, veiled by tattered shreds of grey mist spreading away as far as the eye can see. A weak golden sun is suspended in a blue so vivid it would make even a heartless fiend cry wonder. Wisps of white scud along with a fine breeze, high in the sky, yet far below my towering vantage. Had not every soul in my care just plunged to their doom down there, I would be awestruck by the magnificent beauty of it. It has always astounded me, my love, how the Creator can paint the most violent and terrifying things with such delicate beauty.

Is the Creator *mad*, I wonder, or do *we*, battered about in our lowly plane of existence, simply fail to see its majesty for the pain in which we drown? Wiser minds and far more poetic hearts than mine have been equally dumbfounded, I suppose.

Realizing I am still on hands and knees in the compacted, blood-drenched snow of the pass, I push, with some reserve of strength I cannot credit is left to me, up to a staggering stance. Turning, for the first time, away from the heartbreaking vista, I see the truth of our undoing, vivid in the light of day. There, across from the scene of the demise of so many good men and beasts—where I had thought the mountain to be a sheer vertical cliff, lay a deep fissure in the rock. Big enough, tall enough, for even a monstrous assassin to press its mighty form. In the days of the blizzard, it must have crouched thus, allowing the snow to blanket it, making of it an indistinguishable part of the

mountainside itself. Had we not been forced to delay, for the sake of the storm, the fiend's deception would have been in vain. But still, Almeyra my blessed, I do not see how he could disguise himself so totally, even with so very much snowfall. Its demonic face, the details of its gargantuan form, would have given it away. Now, its murder-hole lay open to view, its rock bare of all but the windswept remnant of the avalanche it provoked. It looked as if a force from the gods had blasted the mountainside.

Releasing this mystery and the grip it had on my soul, I turn to the north. There, no longer hidden from the pursuit it thinks forever shaken, were the assassin's massive footprints, through snow drifted higher than my head in places. I am still in my armor, with heavily quilted undertunic and trousers. Yet, my only remaining weapon is the short-sword I carry, given me by my father as a young man. It is less than a toothpick to a lion, yet it is what I have. That, and my sacred mission, my blood oath. I *will* track that fiend. I *will* send it back to the hell that spawned it.

With that fire raging in my soul, I collapse to the ice in a pool of despair. Oh gods, my love! It had not yet taken hold in my frozen misery. In my last act before my fall, I cast 'Vengeance' at the beast. It is lost, my love! My talisman! My family's bones! Lost in this forsaken place.

Lost.

I have no idea how many days I have walked, in blind despair, upon the tracks of my quarry. The days of snow and ice are like an eternity of nightmare I cannot awaken from. I've not slept, my love. I *will* not. I push on until I fall. Then, with the return of consciousness, I rise and walk again. I am a walking corpse, animated by hatred alone. One foot, then the next is all I know. Rage is all I feel. The despair nips at my frozen heels but I will not give it succor in my heart. I cannot. It would be the end for me. The end of my quest—my only reason to keep on. Death walks at my side, whispering of sweet release into eager ears. When my mind wanders to those I have failed, my beautiful family, the brave men who followed me into hells and worse—in those moments I envision the great beast, dead at my hands. Chopped into tiny pieces, burned to cinders. I piss on those ashes and scuff them into the muck they have made of the earth and snow. I stand and bellow a challenge to arise, that I might relish in the bastard's demise again and again—for all eternity. I call down mountaintops on its lurid skull, pummel its bones to dust with catapults and battering ram. Fire it with torch and pitch, watching it writhe and lurch in its agony. It ends all too fast and I must chase its image in the madness of my fervor over and over again.

Then I fall. I float in an ecstasy of nothingness until my bitter need hauls me back to the purgatory of the living world. I move my feet once more, a gluttony of murder and vengeance driving them as I spin in my misery within my tortured soul.

If only I knew how to reach you, my perfect wife. I would give up this hopeless task and forever lay in your arms, our babies fat and sassy, frolicking ever about us. But, I am lost. Well and truly lost. In *this* world, as well as the next. For all I know, this is one of the Great Hells of ancient lore. Perhaps I fell with my men after all, or even now lay frozen and starved upon the monster's trail, a blanket of white hiding my failure from the Eyes of Heaven. If this is so, let me hunt the beast from here. Surely it will come one day for its Eternal Punishment. When it does, my sweet, I will be ready. I will harry it and cause it harm forever and a day. I will cast into its ears the names of every soul it has taken, until it begs me stop. Then I will laugh and shout with greater glee. I will never stop. It will cower and wail for release, but I, who now know no release, will only teach it how eternal torment feels, as it has tutored me. It is all I have left. I will not fail now.

In death, I am invincible.

...

“Almeya... how have you found me, Lady mine?” I ask the gently wavering vision of loveliness that shakes me awake and lifts me from my gloom as effortlessly as she lifts our babies from the crib. “Go, my sweet!” I yell in panic, “Go from this horrible place before you are trapped here...”

But you are not here. I see that now. But, I see the world has changed. Only if I look to my back at towering ridges, do I find white. The ground beneath me, as I shudder on hands and knees, is green. It is the weak, grey-green of high country scrub and moss, evidencing its struggle for water and nutrients so high above the sea. But it has life. I find my hand has grasped a clod of it, dirt, rock and all. My mouth is full of the stuff and it tastes of the grave, almost. Almost, but not quite. There is moisture in its pulp, a faint sweetness I would never have noticed had I not been moments from starvation. Gravel crunches as I chew, or perhaps the gravel remains whole and it's the enamel of my teeth that fails. I find I care not one whit. With every swallow, I *feel* more — more life, more vitality, more *rage*. “I still come for you! ...” I bellow with all my strength, to my hellish prey. Even I can tell my words are but a pathetic mumble, barely trickling from my cracked and swollen lips.

The lips of a man yet living!

With the vitality and clarity the scrub has returned to me, I find I can raise up to kneeling, but no more. My extremities burn like fire, my love. I am snowbit, I don't know how bad. The knowledge that I may have to use my father's blade to amputate my own dead flesh makes me sick and soon all the mossy muck in my belly spews forth, returned to the home from which it came.

...

What has happened, now, my wife? I wake to see a roof over my head. Thatch, laced through simple branches leaned across the bulk of a fallen tree's trunk. Some sort of blanket, woven of strong smelling herbs and flowers, lays heavily atop my body. It feels warm in here, but there is no heat source I can find. My hands and feet tingle, but do not burn as they had before. I am wide awake, my love, at least I think I am, but my body is languid and unresponsive. Only my eyes obey my command to move. I do not feel

trapped, Almeya, though there is no logic that I should not. There is a vitality to my thoughts and to my body, though it is beyond my control just now. Forest song surrounds my shelter, every note seeming to refresh my heart with its beauty, as if it were a sumptuous feast, or potent elixir coursing through my veins.

I know I have a quest to continue. I know I have great emotion for its pursuit, but I cannot, just now, find it in me to care, or even to recall its purpose. My body tells me to lie still and breathe. Breathe in all that is given, freely, to me here in this strange place. By whom—for what purpose—I cannot seem to find the will to wonder. I have never in my life felt so at peace. Even lying in your gentle arms, our first born babe at your lovely breast, was not so sweet as this. I search my surrounds in drowsy wonder, my wife, but all I feel is...

Love.

...

When next my eyes open, I am again, back upon the trail. No roof closes over me, the powder blue shot through with pink and lavender tells me the day is done. Or perhaps it is just born. I have no way of telling. I feel—wonderful—in body, at least. My hands and feet no longer burn, nor tingle. I can feel my toes wriggle freely within my boots. My fingers, as I hold them before my face, are filthy, but no longer evidence the telltale blue-black of necrotic flesh in need of amputation.

Almeya! Sweet, wonderful Almeya! I am still *whole!* I tell you true. *Alive and whole!*

As I roll to my side, I find I can stand. My armor lays beside me on the trail, my quilted gambeson still on my body. I look upon the grisly trophies adorning my garments of warfare. My helmet, with its great, yellowed horns to either side, tusks I tore from some fearsome corpse, still twitching, fist-long fangs arrayed down the back and crest. The great, wide bronze yoke, I once girded my shoulders with, likewise covered in the teeth and claws of monsters fallen to my blind wrath. Suddenly, they began to look to me as the armor of a Demon, rather than an Avatar, the raiments of a murdering fiend, rather than a protector of innocents and of good. I find I am loathe to don the foul things, my love, and so I leave them where they lay. My chain-mail, still packed with ice

and snow, quickly melting in what I see now is the rising sun of the new dawn, I shrug into once more. I am yet a soldier, Almeya, a man with a mission. A rabid wolf on the trail of one last kill, or so my mind tells me. But, Almeya my lost love, my heart does not take up the war chant my mind would force upon it. I do not know what has changed. Is it you, my love? Is it your memory that now steals the power of my madness from me, or is this merely another, stranger madness still?

...

There are other beings all about me as I take up my march afresh. Subtle things, not merely the fauna of the high country, but something more. Where I might otherwise feel I am in danger, my steps dogged by supernatural demons, I find I am haunted by a knowing acceptance. As if I had wronged this place somehow, yet it still welcomes me. It makes no kind of sense, my love, yet that is how my soul responds to this place.

I stopped earlier, to strip a branch from a birch sapling as a lance shaft for my father's blade, that I might have the most effective weapon for my task. Almeya, my cherished love, I cannot voice the weirdness of that moment. As I lay my blade at the crotch of the branch, I heard a voice in my head plead 'no'. I gave it no more consideration than any other of the odd happenstances of late, dismissing it as symptomatic of my madness. But as I began to saw its woody flesh, my wife, I was felled by a shriek that drained my limbs of strength, my mind afire with its pain and terror. A tree, for the sake of the Creator! The voice of a plant, my sweet. How could such a thing be so?

Gathering my wits and rising to resume its amputation, I was overwhelmed with an image of slicing free my own dead fingers and toes, black and aflame with agony. I could not force my hand to harm this mindless thing, Almeya, as if it were my own dear, sweet baby. Madneses aplenty have haunted me since the black day I found my loves dead and gone in the ashes of our life, but this, this I could not reconcile. The captain of the Black Riders would have hacked free that branch, hacked apart that hapless sapling for no reason but to vent anger, giving it no quarter—nor any further thought. But I am not that man any longer, my love. Who I am, I cannot say.

I do not know myself in this peculiar land.

...

I walk now, leisurely, yet with great purpose. Though, I suspect that purpose has altered somehow. I carry a lance, of sorts. My family blade now lashed to a grey pole. This the forest offered to me. It lay dead and dry across my path, not twenty paces after I apologized to that strange, screaming birch and continued on. It had trapped a bit of parasitic vine in its fall from an ancient oak, long ago. Vine perfect for binding my blade to the staff. Almeya, it seemed, nearly, that the forest gave this to me. Willingly. Thankful for my compassion in not wounding the young tree. Where *am* I, my love? Why do I feel the very land all about me to be alive? *Aware?*

I walk on, unable to put my questions to rest. But I am alive. Whole. And now, I am girded with a weapon—archaic as it might look. I remember the past. All those good men lost. My family, blackened bones, now lost to that wasteland as well. Only *I* remain to make things right. Only me, Almeya.

Creator bless or curse me—I must finish what I have started.

...

As I walk, nursing forth the righteous fury that saved me in the mountains, I am forever awash in waking dreamscapes of the past. That first demon, the one murdered our clan, it's twisted features begging mercy as I gut it with 'Vengeance'—the first of many. How it shrieked its regret. How it pleaded its innocence at all those good souls it had unwittingly slaughtered. I did not listen. I did not care. I only called out your name, my love, and those of our babies. Over and over as it howled. I cut out its foul heart and threw it to the dogs. I butchered it so viciously, none could recognize its nature when finally I stood, dazed and spent, knee-deep in its entrails. A fog built in the icy calm of the snowy ridge where I had caught up to it, as its lifeblood cooled and congealed at my feet. It was not enough. Not by *any* measure. More would have to pay. All the unnatural monsters of the foothills, all the trolls and goblins of the passes and water crossings. All the inhuman fiends of the forest. Every last beast I could find, until the world belonged only to the Sons of Man. Never again will a man bury a wife or child, dead at the hands of inhuman freaks.

For the course of an entire year, I courted the annihilation of all the creatures of legend and nightmare. With honor, I told myself. With righteous

fury, with the Creator's Blessing, so I *thought*, my love. I had *no* doubt, in fact. Never so much as a *tremor* of doubt. What has come of me, Almeyra my sweet? Where has that certainty gone? Why do I now see so much I did not see as I blazed my bloody trail? Is it only that I am reduced to tread at this snail's pace, afoot and alone, that these doubts harass me, as I would harass the thing I track? Could some of the creatures I have hunted have been... *innocent*?

No. *No!* I cannot allow that shred of wonder to infect my heart, lest it attack like a fever or a cancer, burrowing deep and undermining all I have accomplished. Turning me aside from my sacred oath, cursing my mind with second thoughts and dousing the fire in my soul with ice water. I have nothing left, my love. Only *this*, this quest, this dire task. I will *not* relent! I will *not* soften, my love. I will be strong... for *you*... for our darlings... for the brave men who followed me into hell, never to return.

For my own *sanity*, what there is left of it.

I am still following the path of the creature from the ambush in the pass. The monstrous craters left in its passing, its terrifying footprints, I find still. Though they seem to scar the land here far less deeply as it moves. But they're still there, a trail of breadcrumbs of gargantuan proportions. In my drudgery, I've counted my strides versus its own. Twenty-seven of my tiny, exhausted paces fit within one mighty stride of the beast. More when the going is uneven and harsh, my steps becoming minced and meticulous. I cannot think of the end game I play with this thing. I am but one angry man against a colossus. I have but one blade, a pig-skewer on a stick. It will not be enough, my sweet wife. I know this. I do. But what option is left to me? Do I turn and crawl back to the frozen pass and search for the rest of my days for the bones of my family, that I might find some small solace in my failure? *This* is my madness now, Almeya. This damnable circle of thoughts.

I must follow. I must avenge. I must survive.

I will not succeed. I will not avenge. I throw away my own life for naught.

It circles my mind, my heart, Almeya, like a plague of sucking, biting insects, until I must scream my frustration to the stars above. But, still, I push on. What else is there, my love? Tell me true—I ache so for the gentle caress of your compassionate whisper in my sleepy ear. Your fortifying kiss upon my chapped and bloody lips. If I could only have back my talisman, my sacred touchstone. My babies and my wife, if only in your fire-purified remains. I would bury you deep in the most wondrous glade these unworthy eyes could find. Mark your resting place with a sacred stone, your blessed names etched into its surface for all time—should I be forced to do so with my bare hands. Then, my love, I would lay myself down in your perfect glade and wait for my end to come. I have cheated you of even that final comfort—that scrap of loving respect. There is nothing left me now, sweet angels, but to end what I should not have begun. Damn me not for my failures, my love. I was crazed by your loss. A madman with an army at his back. I should have laid you to rest in our native soil as is your right. Instead I made of your bones, a tool of hatred and revenge.

I see it now, my love. My foolishness. My heresy. My pride. Gods above, Almeya! It is true! Pride took my soul that day. Pride drove me on when there were rituals of respect and farewell to perform. I stole good men from their homes, their surviving family members. Drove their ire with my own. Convinced them to follow me to a glory of endless retribution. I damned them

all, Almeya my sweet. Every last one. Their souls haunt me now. Their names are burned into my mind with molten iron brands. For what? That I might heap together their bloody bones, crawl on top and decry my power and superiority to the world? I crawled to that grim mountain top, my wife. But it was built of human bones — yours, our children's, my soldier's. From my vantage, I see one mountain heaped upon another. The vanquished of my armies, in service to the pride of other men — other monsters, in their own right. A lifetime of butchery, all in the name of honor, in the name of greed and retaliation. One that ends with my *own* bones heaped upon some other killer's skeletal mound. They, in turn, become a cornerstone in yet another's macabre cairn.

How, in the Creator's Name, can a man be so *blind*? I have advanced the avarice and hatred of greedy, power-hungry men all my life. Never did I question their deeds. Never did I hold the honor they offered up, to the light of the Almighty—that I might see their madness with the eyes of a sane man. That was not my role, nor my duty. That was not my place. Mine was to make war, on whomever I was pointed toward. For whatever purpose I was told... without question... without hesitation. Without thought or mercy. I had done this, Almeya my angel, and I had thought myself a patriot, a saint even. Creator help me. How pathetic my blindness seems to me now. I could've stayed with my family. I could have raised up strong sons who would not murder for another man's pride. I could've kept my people safe and warm and strong.

But hungry men do not hunker down and nourish what is the theirs. They take from others—and call it Divine Right. They murder and rape and burn and call it God's Plan. They compel the idealistic and the weak-willed to perform their atrocities while they sleep on silks and feast from golden plates.

Heaps of bones.

As I wake this morning, I am as hungry as I have ever felt. I realize, as my belly churns and announces my hunger to the forest all about me, I have eaten nothing since the mossy scrub, as I tumbled from the snow-laden heights. For a time, the effect of the strange herbal blanket within the thatched lean-to left me feeling no need whatever for nourishment. I had not noted it at the time, sweetheart, so deep in my mental fugue was I. But now, I am famished, far beyond the needs of mortal man. The nourishment I need goes deeper than the simple requirements of a physical body. Odd that I should put it such, Almeya mine, for I have no idea how that could be—or how I might name those deeper needs. But I feel it, like a newborn aches in its need for its mother's milk, never yet having tasted it.

I do not know myself here, my wife, my love. I am changing somehow. I know it—but I know not how to describe it. I find my legs yet carry me forward, my makeshift lance in my fist, without my consent, nor my notice. Wild creatures abound, my love, yet none come close. Spoor and tracks are all about the trail, but they never come within range of my weapon, though you well know I am a consummate hunter. It is almost as if the forest protects them. I do not understand why I would even say such a thing. Yet, hearing it said, I recognize it as truth. The forest will not let me kill. Even thinking this thought delights the ancient wood all about me. I feel it in my bones, as I might hear the laughter of children with my ears, or the grudging approval of an old tutor.

As I press on, desperate for nutrition, I find the forest has led me to an orchard, wild and untamed. Untended by the hand of man, yet lush and healthy. Nearly every tree is of a different type, each bowed with ripe fruit of endless variety. There, in the orchard glade, are a boundless array of the most astounding creatures. Many I know, others I have never witnessed before. I am certain, sweet wife, I could take down any of them with my lance, so close and so at ease are they all. But my killing tool feels heavy as lead in my hand, and the fragrance of flowering trees and overripe fruit sets my belly to churning in a way that fresh-roasted meats have never done. Even the thought of roasted animal flesh sickens me, here, among such strange bounty. I feast until I am languid and satiated—then my eyes close of their own need.

...

“Almeya, my love... is it truly you? Have I then passed some test, that I might follow my loves to the Great Beyond?”

“I am sorry, my sweet husband, but you are not yet with us. I find I can reach you in your heart, as it opens, but only for a moment.” I hear your words, though already your voice fades, your exquisite face a lacy mist even a hummingbird's wings might dispel. *“... But it is true, my husband, that you have passed a test... of sorts...”*

I listen so hard my head pounds, but the roar of silence deafens my ears and you are lost to me — once more.

...

Jerking awake, I see I do not cause my entourage of forest creatures even a flicker of surprise. They graze and lounge all about me as if I were one of them—and not a fell hunter of man and beast. Some weak and foolish tatter of my pride urges me to grasp my spear and bloody this heavenly glade. Prove my manhood. One of the elk yearlings near my blade, where it lays nestled in the wildflowers, tilts its graceful head my way, its eyes filled with that unassuming trust in me that our sweet babies' eyes once held. I lift my battle-scarred hand from the turf and it nuzzles my palm with its remarkably warm, soft snout. Are all creatures so gentle-hearted? I had never before bothered to wonder. Pulling up a fistful of the wildflowers it seemed to favor, I let the wondrous thing lift them to its mouth with delicately quivering lips. *My love!* Can you see this scene from your seat in the hereafter? Can you believe this is me?

For I cannot.

Suddenly, I see your loving eyes in every doe and ewe. I find the innocent regard of our own little ones in these fragile yearlings, newborns and fledglings. Even the protective glare of the stag, yet the only creature here to shun me, is but a mirror to my own eyes. As I stroke the downey fur of four-legged forest children, now hopelessly curious of *me*, I see the stag return to his hesitant foraging, turning his protective vigilance outward, as if I am no longer a threat. As if I am 'one of the herd.' It feels like that moment, so long ago, when your mother placed our firstborn babe into my arms and taught me how to hold *her*. The forest looks on now, as you did then, my beloved, its joy thick as amber, rich as pastry and cream. My eyes are a blur. I am... my eyes

are...

I am *crying*, my love. And, curse me for the admission, I realize now, I had yet to shed one single tear for you and our babies. My *God*, Almeya! I never let myself grieve your loss. Never let myself be a father... a husband. I only buried it in my rage and shed *blood* rather than tears. Why are some men built this way, my love? Asking this, I am sure you would gladly bend my ear for a fortnight or longer on that *very* subject, if I were but graced to hear it. How I long to take that sweet punishment from your delicate lips, Almeya. My love. My rock. My...

...

I am cried out, I daresay. The yearlings free me from the evidence by licking the tears from my face, and I love them all the more deeply for it. The stag is here as well, near enough I might stroke its mighty mantle of horn as it grazes at my feet. Songbirds rest on my shoulders and knees as I rise to sitting. I must have collapsed to the grasses as I wept. Turning to regard the woodland fauna all about me, I see the wispy evidence of other beings beyond, clearly seen only as I look askew of their direction. If I force my eyes to regard them straight on, I see only forest. This should alarm me, I'm sure. But, it does not.

Where have I come to, my love? Where *is* this place?

I walk and I walk. Still I walk more. I have a vitality I've never known. One not built of rage or pride. One that seems effortless and eternal. It is this place, I must assume. It has altered me in more ways than saving me from snow bite and starvation. I have long since forgotten how long I have traveled since the nightmare in the pass. I wonder, my love, if time has any true meaning here. If time still holds true, it has been at least a dozen days and nights I have wandered here and not one taste of meat have I had. Yet I am lighter and clearer-minded than I have ever been. Every time I feel a pang of want, another orchard—sometimes a single tree or berry bush—appears in my path and I stanch that need even as I continue on. A few bites sustain me better than an entire game bird's death once might.

Never, my darling, have I walked entirely alone. Always a creature of the wood, an avian of the trees, is with me, often so close to hand I can reach out and pet its fur, or stroke its feathers as it takes its rest upon my shoulder. I realize, my love, that I have never seen one of these creatures up close, except as a corpse, or as well-cooked flesh, stripped from bone. Anonymous meat dangling from the end of a skewer or a knife point. Another life taken to give me another day's existence.

What once I took as a given, I now feel compelled to regret. There are so many ways to sustain life without taking life. It never occurred to me before. I am guessing, my gentle wife, I speak words you have always known. You, who once fed does and their yearlings from your delicate hand and always tempered your pride in my hunting skills with a haunted sadness I only now recognize. You knew, Almeya my strength, did you not? It seems so ignorant of me now, to realize these things, and to recognize and respect your compassion for all life.

How did you come to love such a man as me? A killer, a hunter, and a fool, blind to the majesty all about him. How did you lose that perfect heart to one so heartless, my love? How?

...

The air is hotter, hotter and wetter, as I descend the foothill forests into what I must label as jungle, though I have never seen one myself — not in all of my murderous campaigns for prideful men. I realize, with a start, no animal accompanies me here. I have heard men speak of these lands, where the

flora is so verdant and wild, so imbued with life force, they fight one another for supremacy, growing atop one another when no more territory is available to dominate. It seems, now I speak of it to you, my love, a land of plant-life made in the same mold as the men of ambition and greed I know so well. Unable, or simply unwilling, to curb their aggression to possess the world around them, until every inch of the world is a battlefield. A test of will and power, it is aggression personified, heaped upon the wasted death they deal in their blind assault.

It is very odd, my sweet wife, how much of the world of men I now see in the forces of nature. Predators and prey, in the animal kingdom, predatory plants in the woods and the jungles. Life that offers up its bounty willingly, and those that guard it jealously with vicious thorn and poison, fang and claw. I see the balance that keeps all in check and promotes the health and well-being of all, and the desolation that tells of ambition gone unchecked, that inevitably brings ruin to all life—aggressive and benign alike. I am not a man of deep thoughts, my love, that you know better than most. I am, leastways I have always been, a man of action. These objective analyses are foreign to me. I see myself now as one of these terrible predatory vines I must hack and rend as I clear my path, mindless and destructive, following the commands of any with the gold or the position to direct armies. I was blind to their unworthiness, their greed, their bigotries.

I did not care, for it was not my place to care, only to destroy. And that, my love, is what I had always done best. Why, now, does that feel so empty, so wrong, so cursed foolish of a way for a man to live his life? Again, I must marvel my sweet, how on earth did you come into my life? Was your loss merely my proper punishment for a life of evil? And why should my punishment be heaped upon so pure a soul as you, my love? On purer souls still, in our babies.

I must wonder again—is the Creator mad?

I am sweating oceans in this heat, even more impressive as I descend. Am I walking into the Hells of legend? I have already shucked the over-tunic. Next, that under-tunic, as well, I shed. I carry these things at first, but the heat continues to build and the going becomes slower and slower still. I hack until my hands bleed, my under garments shredded and pink with blood and sweat, rent by a thousand thorns. No forest creatures have accompanied me here into this hellish swamp. My aggression, my only salvation among ancient bramble that irony tells me is but a reflection of all I once was, has driven the gentle creatures away, more so even than the swamp and the bramble itself.

With this strife, with these endless, burning slashes to my skin, I feel my old self begin to arise. I see all my foes, my love, in the dank press of steamy, razor-studded jungle. I hack and rip and tear—and they return the favor. Somewhere, behind me, I have lost my tunic, shredded and flayed from my bloody back by the teeth of the foul swamp, lost with the chain mail and over-tunic I long ago threw down. I feel I am starving, my love, but no fruit nor flesh is at hand. Only decay and filth abide here. I am just about to give up my quest and turn back, but a rage builds in me. There is a poison in these thorns, a disease in this swamp. My mind is thrown into chaos and violence becomes my only path through, my only guide.

Then, I fall. Not far—only into the black ooze at my feet. But, standing, I realize it is the footprint of my quarry that I have found, a huge hole punched into the brutal tangle of deadly bramble I battle. It *wants* me to turn back. It has led me here in the hope that the softening of my heart will sap me of my rage, of my killing skills, of my madness. It nearly had me, Almeya. It had very nearly turned me from my duty, my vengeance. I will avenge my family, my brave men, lost to the frozen wastes at my back. It nearly turned me, my wife, that monster and its insidious forest. But, I have not been turned! I will not fail in my sacred oath. I will defeat the beast's jungle. I will dog its steps until I find it. I will kill it! I will. I swear! *Death* is my angel now. Death is my companion—my confessor, my guide. I will feed it this one last evil. Then, it will be done. Then, let the fates do with me as they will. I will no longer resist.

With a fervor I had thought long lost to compassion and regret, I hack and rend. I rage and tear at the bowels of the beast. I will not relent until I am painted in its blood, if blood is what it holds in the pit of its filthy heart. It will *die*. I will *slay* it—as I have slain every enemy I have ever faced.

This I pledge, on the blood of my family!

The swamp relents first, my love, not I. I can feel its strength wain. It's black, filthy muck is shallow here, shallower still ten paces later. Bramble has thinned to the point I need not hack at it to pass through. Weak sunlight greets my eyes, crusted with blood and sweat as they are. I can duck under a branch here, step over brambles there. Soon, no arbor nor vine stands between the gray light and my shredded skin. The suck and slosh of muck as I walk fades to a subtle splash. Looking down, for I have no energy left to look up, I see clear water, only inches deep. Algae floats atop, but holds the verdant green of life, not the brackish black of dead ooze.

My lance drags in the shallow stream, merely holding onto it has become a monumental chore. I have won through, my love. I did not fail and feed the swamp the flesh of my body, nor give it bone to drown invaders. Ten endless paces more, Almeya, then ten more beyond that and I feel solid earth beneath my boots once again. I cannot focus my eyes, cannot lift my head. I can no longer lift one foot after the next. And so, between one footfall and the next, the grey earth leaps up to strike my face and I realize I am down, face down. Even lying prone and conscious seems a heroic feat—and then I see only blackness. I feel—nothing.

...

'Go back Child of Man, you can go no further. This is not your land, not your world. Fire surrounds the one you seek. Primordial fire. It will consume you as your hatred consumes your soul. Your heart defiles this place and He will have none of it.

'You will not survive. Your hatred will not be tolerated here. It will be burned clean, you will be purified.

'Hold on to your precious hatred if you must. But you will be consumed as well, should you fail to learn this last lesson. Take your foul heart and go trouble the World of Men. It is anathema here.

'It will not survive.

'You, will not survive.'

...

As I float in flame and retribution, I hear the words my quarry puts into my

head. I hear them, but I will not relent. Sear me if you will, monster. Burn from me my weapon, my flesh. I will yet find you, wherever you hide. If no more than an evil thought, I will still come for you. Spare me your warnings! I will not be moved by them. I will not relent. I will find you.

I will!

...

“You must relent, my love...” I hear you whisper into my tattered ear, Almeya, but even your sweet advice I will not embrace.

“You need not return, but you must relent, my brave husband. I cannot stay here with you... I feel my connection waiver even now... I can tell you no more... Relent, my love, release your hatred... Remember your soul... Remember us...”

...

“Wait! No! Almeya!”, I yell as I wake. But you are not there. Even as I lift my jaw from the steaming, baked mud I sprawl upon, I cannot hold to your warning. I cannot hold the sweet sound of your words in my ear.

“I know it was you, fiend!”, I yell to the monster. If words came forth, I doubt any ear is near to hear them. I doubt even more that my throat lets them pass. I am so parched, my love. Even starvation is long lost to my thirst. I look about me, but I cannot focus. Steam, perhaps smoke, likely it is both, swirl around me and I can barely see a hand-span before my eyes. I would be lost, but I can feel the monster near. I can tell its direction as I might tell the sun's at dawn by its warmth on my skin. It draws me. It... it... *welcomes* me. It does not fear me. Nor does it mock me, as a triumphant foe might. I might well puzzle over that, my love, but I cannot think. I cannot focus.

Am I dead, my love? Am I truly in the Hells of the Ancients? Am I damned to chase this thing for eternity without end, doomed to be forever separated from you and our babes?

I nearly let this despair swallow me down. I find I do not care—cannot care—for I have no strength left.

...

'*Almeya?*' I must have slept. I thought it was over, *all* over, but here I still lie, fire-baked mud like flaming tiles beneath my face. I push up and am rewarded with movement. My limbs still obey my will, my love! It is a wonder. I feel pain in every fiber of my being, but I am yet alive. I still breathe, though the air is like a forge's blast. Somehow, I have managed to rise to my knees. The land here is bare and heartless, much as I have become. Cracked, steaming mud stretches as far as I can see, but that is not far. The ethers are a thick cloud of smoke and steam. Acrid, as if I breathe the breath of Hell itself. Only shallow gasps can be taken and, even that, burns like Hades.

I cannot stay here, that is certain. I must push on. Somehow.

...

Somewhere, somehow, I have managed to get to my feet, my love. I do not remember the act. Only that I now stagger onward—upright, for the most part, my lance now a wounded man's staff I lean upon. The baked mud is quite level, though some of the fissures are as wide as a man is tall. Red ooze bubbles up between the cracked plates of mud. I have stripped, now, to only my boots and a loin cloth made of the tattered remnant of my trousers about my middle. The remaining shreds I tie about my boots as frail insulation against the searing heat of this place. The branch lashed to my father's sword, blackens and steams in the fumes. One last scrap of cloth I wrap about my hand, that I might grasp it still. I have no sense of time my love, none whatsoever. I can barely think beyond the need to put one foot before the other and the effort not to howl my agony to the taunting mist above.

Then, the mist clears some, not much. I can see the ghostly contours of the land beyond. There, not twenty paces beyond, is a fiery lake rimmed by conical mounds of ash or pumice, like hellish beehives or tomb cairns. Beyond that, so near I must fight the urge to race across the hellish lake, I can see a lone mountain. Not huge, as mountains go, but clearly, even through the tendrils of mist, I see it is topped with white. *Snow!* By all the gods and demons, *Almeya*, I can almost feel its blessed coolness as I gaze upon it. Lower down its sides, I find green — the green of life, my love, the green of a living forest. It looks like Heaven to me, my wife, if such a thing exists. Heaven ringed by Hell.

But between here and there, lies death. A lake of fire to make even this hell I have crossed seem a refreshing pool of water in comparison. As I stand at its verge, a tall cone of cinder at my shoulder, I realize this is my end. I am overcome with a languor and I wobble on my burnt feet. As I begin to fall, I see there are nooks within the cinder-cone. One of these I crawl into and find a reprieve from the searing heat of the mud flats. Not much of one, my love, not much at all. But even this is a blessing. Once within, I collapse in a pile and fade to a beckoning void.

“So... this, then, is Man—heir to the Stewardship of the Forest. The paragon of animals, so they sing. I do not see it.”

“The FirstOne says it is so Erebus, he feels it in them. In this one more than most.”

“And yet this one falters and blusters... filled with hate. Thinks itself and its kind superior forms of life. It has no love of Life. Only of death. It has no respect for the Forest or Its Children... Nor the FirstOne himself.”

“The FirstOne says this is a poison infecting its race... it is not their true nature, Erebus. It can be purged.”

“You are naïve, Aegle. So is the FirstOne, if He means to pass the Stewardship on to these violent, self-involved creatures. They lay waste to the forests... kill its children. They believe it is theirs to exploit and ruin. Even that is not enough death for these lowly beasts. They kill their own kind! ...And name it noble. How can such a demented species have lasted even the short while they have defiled the world they claim to love? How long will the land survive their predations?”

“The FirstOne is certain in this, Erebus... We are not worthy to question his wisdom.”

“Speak for yourself, Aegle... I will not assist this murderer... or its race of death-dealers.”

“Come back, Erebus... we are bid to watch over it. It has love within its tiny heart. I can feel it.

“As can the FirstOne.”

...

I hear voices, my love, odd, wondrous voices that tickle my brain with the elemental purity of their sound. One is cold and angry... the other not. I hear every word, yet I cannot find any significance in them. I am close to death, my love, if I am not already in the Beyond. There is a glow beyond the mouth of the cinder cone where I lay. A new day? Do day and night even hold sway here? I ooze out of the stifling heat of the cone, to one far fiercer. My unconsciousness has restored a minute fraction of my clarity and energy. I do not name it sleep, for it is more akin to a taste of death.

“You cannot reach the source with such a weapon, Son of Man...”, I hear the mist whisper. If I struggle, my love, I can nearly see the form of a being, of

a face, made of the smoke and steam I battle to see beyond. It is the monster. It must be, unless I am now mad. I cannot deny that possibility, my sweet wife, though it matters little enough now. The beast is just beyond this lake of fire, by the mountain in the distance. I can feel it. It waits for me there, my love. The battle is soon at hand.

“You will not survive the crossing, Son of Man... No weapon may cross. The Source requires purity to approach.” The voice is relentless in my ear. It is merely a trick of that monster, my love, it *must* be. One last attempt to turn me from my quest, my sacred odyssey.

“It will not work... Beast...” I shout to it and am shocked to hear my own voice so clearly.

“I am not the one you seek, Child of Man... I offer no trick. No weapon may enter the Source. You must release it or the crossing will be the end of you.”

“I will not surrender my blade, Beast... I will slay you as I have slain all your brethren!” I call out, rage and wrath thick in my voice.

“Many of those you have slain thus far are not brethren to the One you seek. Huge and misshapen as they were, they too were Children of Man.”

“You lie, Beast!... Those monsters I have eviscerated were not men!”

“They were, poor, naïve child, though you do not care to hear it. In time, perhaps a thousand generations from now, men will stand twice your height, carry thrice your weight. It is the nature of existence. Species change. Not all will be so grand, but the ones who are will be champions of the masses. In games rather than war. Your people will glorify them with riches and fame. Young ones will aspire to their greatness.”

“They were twisted and scarred, monsters not men!”, I insisted, caught in the voice's thrall despite myself, my love.

“It is only that others of your own kind had dogged them... burned them... cut them... hated them... that they became feral and monstrous. They were Sons of Man as surely as you... Nature refuses to be idle or content. In every generation are born experiments, variations on a species' theme. Some are strong and successful... some fare less well. These are the poor souls you have slain. All but one.”

“Lies!!” I screamed so violently, blood, mixed with spittle, flew from my lips with my tortured denial. My God, Almeya... I can feel the truth of these words. Even as my soul senses the truth in these words, my anger wins out. “Leave my ears be, Beast! I will not listen to your lies,” I bellow, “I *come* for you. I will

slay you as I have slain your brethren. I will not relinquish my blade!”

“That paltry bit of steel is not the weapon of which I speak, Son of Man. Hatred is your weapon. Has always been your weapon. All others are but tools. Hatred kills... not steel. And not the horrid tools future Sons of Man will create. Ugly, terrible tools of mass destruction of a scale your contemporaries cannot conceive, even in your worst nightmares... Nor in your fevered dreams of avarice and conquest. These horrible things do not kill. Hatred kills. Hatred is the weapon you cannot carry across. You must leave it behind. Or you will burn.”

With that, the voice—and the spectral presence accompanying it—was gone. Pushing its lies from my heart, I let my anger propel me onward. Hefting my makeshift lance, I stride toward my fate.

The Lake of Fire.

As I stand at the verge of the fiery lake, I wonder if I might find a way to circumvent it. As I swelter and broil, I scan to the left and right, but I see no end to the barrier. Granted, my love, the fumes and mists do not let my eyes search far, but it matters little. If I do not cross *now*, and quickly, it will have me. No hair remains on my body. It sizzles and smokes with the fierce heat, and my topknot only survives in its tight twist atop my skull. Even that is only a temporary delay. My eyes cloud, but it is not the steam, nor mist, nor flames, my angel. Their fragile tissue dries and begs for mercy. I blink furiously but must hold my empty hand across them lest I fall blind before I begin.

The lake is not all liquid fire, I see—though barely. Much is scummed over with semi-congealed pumice. I do not know if it can support my weight, but even the moment I delay is killing me. 'Caldera' is the term I only now remember. One of my men told me this word once, as we stood atop a ridge in the far north country, hunting our fiendish quarry. It is a lake of volcanic magma, oozing from the bowels of the Earth.

I will not survive this, my love! I am dying, even as I hesitate. I step onto the darkest, coolest mass, though 'cool' is an insignificant term in this hell. It does not swallow me up—and so I move, cautiously at first. Gods and demons, Almeya, I cannot describe the agony I am holding at bay. Without thought, I find I have stepped back. The cloth wrapped about my boots is aflame, my feet so nearly so, I marvel that I am not ablaze as well.

Frantically, for I count each heartbeat as my very last, I strip off my puny loincloth, tear it in twain, and stuff the singed remains into my boots. Shoving them back on, I run, nearly blind, no longer naïve enough to think I have the luxury of caution. I race and leap, amazed I have yet to plunge in and vaporize. Though my free hand covers my failing eyes, I see that flame has consumed the dry vine that holds my father's sword to the smoking branch that bursts a second later into flame in my hand. The blade drops, point first and pierces the semi-hard skin of the lake of fire, but is not swallowed up. I let fall the flaming branch and reach for the hilt of the blade as it slips into Hades jaws. Mother of Mercy, my love! It sears my flesh and my hand betrays me and it is lost. I am running again, truly blind now, my sweet, blind, naked and unarmed, the smell of roasted meat and hair a sickening addition to the foul breath of the caldera. I can see, in my mind alone—for my eyes are dead in my blistering face—the lines of fire, the cracks in the cooling skin of the magma, red-orange against the ebony void of my blindness.

A gift of the monster? Why? I find I can't care. I have only a moment of life left to me and all is panic and fire. I hear my skin crackle and sizzle, feel the resistance as it shrinks tight and fights my movements. I am nearly across, my love, though how will I find myself when I have reached the far side? I feel the flaming ruin of my boots as they burn free of my feet, or is it the flesh of my now-bare feet, flayed to ash from my bones? My manhood shrivels and burns away, my fingers and ears to follow.

All is flame, all is fire.

...

So, this is the Final Hell of the Ancients. The stories of our fathers, and their fathers' fathers, do not do it justice, Almeya, my salvation. For to say I am merely consumed in Hellfire is to say that a tear is an ocean, a grain of sand, the great wide world. I stand, agony upon blessed agony, no longer bothering to run. I hold up my hand before my dead eyes, I am not so much burning—as I *am* flame! It looks almost as if my form is but an empty silhouette I look through, into the Flames of Eternity, as if my flesh *is* the Sacred Flame. It is as if the flames form my likeness, but not one bit of the man I once was still exists.

As I stroll about in the hell of my retribution, I see endless scenes carved from the flames themselves. As I look on, mesmerized—horrified—I realize they are scenes from my own lost life. They dance and twist in endless variation, as is the nature of flame. Yet, I may look upon any one at my leisure, backward or forward, still or in rapid fire. Oh, how strange, my love, I stand outside each and every one. I see with objective eyes what I lived, viewed only through my congested and limited focus. How very odd and different all my deeds and victories seem viewed this way—as the gods must have watched them.

Almeya, my darling wife, I see our first night together, and the birth of our babies. They are the only blessed moments in all that I am now shown, and it burns away even as I shudder with the grief I had never let myself taste. Then, as I defile your blessed bones with my blind rage, I realize I am revisiting my quest, what once I considered my sacred cause, my righteous vengeance. How vapid and small I seem at this distance. How foolish I look as I hide from my grief and deny my family their due.

I see the one responsible for your deaths, my precious girl, racing in blind panic and pain, fearful and confused. Layered upon this chase, I see what I had no way of knowing. I see the death of our village, Almeya. I see fear-ravaged men chasing this thing. A man, tall and misshapen, cursed to live apart from its own people, for it was born wrong. Creator forgive me, my love, it was born of a human woman, raped by one of my own grandfather's soldiers, long ago. The voice in the mist did not lie, my love. It *was* a Child of Man, gone feral and desperate into the wilderness even as its mother was burned at the stake for witchcraft. The only being in the world who saw it—him—for his heart rather than his hideousness. She was immolated for the sin of giving birth to a monster. She might have given the poor, twisted thing up to those who so feared it, and been allowed to live. But, she was a mother—a human mother—like you, my sweet, filled with love and compassion for her child, monstrous as the poor thing had been formed. She sent it to the forest for protection and fed *herself* to the ravening hatred of her community.

Mother of Mercy, Father of Dread, my love. It *was* a man! It was my *own* kin! Now I see it burned from its den in the depths of the wood. It was half blind, my love, in horrible pain, driven on by blind, raging hatred. Hatred I have known very well, dear gentle wife—so *very* well. Now, it stumbles upon our sleepy grove, burnt, cut, blinded by pain and panic—as well as an arrow to the eye. It was cornered there, all my family—all my community—asleep in their beds. All their strong men, far away in service to me, in service to our overlord—for pride's need, for greed's sake.

Gods above or below, slay me where I stand! It was the *mob*, my darling! *They* brought the fire! *They* torched our homes, to trap and burn the wretched thing. It only tried to live, only *that*. That was its great sin in this world—that it had been *born*—and wished to live. It had resigned to life as a hermit, apart from all its kin, for men feared its malignant form. But fear and hatred within the hearts of men will not abide what cannot be understood. It was *men* who killed you all, my sweet. A poor, innocent wretch I hunted, in my thirst for revenge for *their* crime. Gods blind me to this revelation!

Please!

Now I must watch as I hunt the poor thing down. His words, heavily accented in a dialect I had never heard, so clear to me now, they burn my soul. How it had howled its regret! How it had pleaded its innocence. *Gods curse me for all Eternity, Almeya!* It killed those men! It broke every back,

shattered every skull and threw their remains into the funeral pyres of our homes. *I* killed the one who had *avenged* my loves' murders. But I did not kill it quickly, my love—nor with any mercy whatsoever. Now, I must watch from this hellish vantage, what suddenly I remember like it was only yesterday. I hamstring the poor wretch, and as it falls, I slit open its belly with 'Vengeance'—your grisly bones rattling together as I slash. Then, as it gurgles its life away, gasping words I will not hear, I loose my britches and piss into its entrails—laughing like a fiend while the avenger of my family's murder wails its agony. As it dies, Almeya, it looks straight at me. For one horrifying instant I see the eyes of our son, Abboss, the first time I ever had to spank his tiny bottom, as if he simply cannot believe I would cause him hurt. Not anger, not tears, only wounded *disbelief* do I find there.

Gods curse me... *I am the monster.*

...

If it were up to me, my Almeya, I would let the flames consume me, that I would see no further *Truth*. But that is a mercy I will not be given, as I gave none. As the embers of that first kill fade, I cannot avoid the others. Their truth waits patiently for my regard, and I must give it, my love. I must relive my bitter deeds now. Perhaps, when it is done, I shall be no more, but I cannot hope for such a blessing. The fire's blessings are not to be coaxed. I try not to look, as one after the next is forced before me, but eyes of flame do not close. Wherever I turn my gaze, I find more of my horrors. There is no end to them. My rage had no bottom, my love. The vicious murder of that poor freak only stoked my need for more. My men—all those good, valiant lads—followed my hatred as if it were the sole torch-flame in an endless black void. They were trained, in *blind* trust, a trust I abused, my wife, oh so terribly. They followed me to their destruction. The next beast we ran to ground suffered as foul an end as the first. The third—worse still. Every murder scorched our humanity, Almeya, until our souls were black as the bones we left scattered and defiled at our backs as we hunted on.

Now, seeing it all as the gods do, I remember how few of our victims had done any wrong. We did not deign to ask villagers what mischief any had perpetrated—only where they dwelt. Now I see how few had met our attack with violence. Most had only run or cowered in fear. In my pomposity, I had

taken their flight—their fear—as proof of their murderous guilt and their cowering submission as a bowing to a Righteous Retribution, well and truly earned. A man who has already passed judgment, sees only confirmation of his presumptions, no matter the truth. The worst any had done, my love, was pilfer from a shepherd's flock. One had only chased hunters from its wood. Now, I see it had not been protecting its own food supply. It had been protecting its community of wild creatures, who had seen the misshapen thing as the mother of the first had—as a kind soul. Its outer covering was of no concern whatsoever to creatures of nature. They saw only a *protector*.

This was how *we* had envisioned *ourselves*, but we did not allow ourselves even *that* much introspection, Almeya my love, so fueled with blind hatred had we become. *... I... I had become!*

This truly *is* hell, Almeya my darling wife, but not for the flames do I name it thus. To see, now that I may do *nothing* to redeem myself, all my blindness. All my sins, this is why, my sweet. This is the *true* hell. On and on the parade of dire memory marches, like a mindless army, driven by a heartless commander. How keen a blade is irony, my sweet! How deeply it cuts! I would beg it to relent, but as I do, I hear my own pleas turn to the terrified voices of *my* victims—as they offer those very same pleas to the heartless commander running *them* to ground. As I must howl for mercy—as I had heard so many twisted voices howl to me—I feel the flames ebb and cool. They dim and the frantic red-orange mayhem of their conflagration fades to the cooler hues of violet, then blue, to the green of dying flame.

Still, it does not release me. One last tableau it paints. It paints no longer with flame. Now, I see only blood—innocent blood—spilt at my hand, on my order. We had wandered over a month, convinced we had eradicated every last fiend plaguing man, when the biggest, vilest creature we had yet encountered, or so I had then thought, came to us in the vast wilderness. No villagers had pointed the way, not from experience, nor with rumor. It was as if it had sought us out, willingly. Again, I had, in my arrogance, presumed that it offered itself up to our vengeance in answer to its crimes, though I had no evidence of any such deeds. I did not need them, as men such as I never do. They were already damned. Their size and shape and color, the unmistakable badge of their damnation.

In hellish, nightmarish slowed motion, I am seeing it all now, my love, in terrible detail. It was *colossal!* Several times as huge as any we had yet

butchered. I feel the fear and desperation of my men at its appearance, suddenly before us in the High Country. I wonder, as it approaches, how in all hells we might fell such a giant. Then it stops before us and kneels, bowing its head low to the trail. *'It has resigned itself to its doom!'* My soul cries out to me, my love, and in my bloated sense of righteousness, I accept. Heavens release me from this misery, sweet wife, let me see no more.

But, mercy denied is rewarded in kind. I must see it again, over and over, until my soul bleeds and begs for release. I watch, now, from so remote a vantage, what I need not. It is forever burned into my mind. I charge the thing, 'Vengeance' in my grasp—as its namesake dominates my soul—Argos' hoofs thundering in the silence of the mountains. As the monster looks up, innocent eyes troubled, but filled with neither fear nor self-protection, I run my lance through its throat, my family's bones slamming against its hide as it sinks to the hilt. It rears back, lifting me from Argos as it topples over backward. I hold tight to 'Vengeance', my grisly talisman, as it crashes to the earth, twisting it with mindless rage. My men fall upon the fallen beast and moments later it is done. Now I must relive the moment I have deeply buried since that date. As I stand, victorious and brave, upon its chest, heaving with its dying breath, it looks me straight in the eye. Gods, my love! *It forgives* me my heresy! Ask me not how I know, for if it has language at all, my lance through its throat has silenced its voice. But I see it in its eyes. It knows me, Almeya. It sees my soul and it forgives me. I see it *clear*, here in this purgatory of blue-green flame and emptiness. I saw it true, even *then*, though I could not reconcile the truth in my blood rage. Then, as the compassionate glow of forgiveness dims in those primordial eyes, a rumble, like thunder, shakes the world to my bones. Gravel tumbles free from the cliffs all about and my men step back in dread, but the sound had not issued from the dying creature. It came from far to the north.

Now I hear it true, as I denied it then. It was the roar of heartbreak. Looking to the direction of that terrifying sound we saw—I see even now, painted in flame—the figure of a gargantuan monster rise up between the distant ridge line and the great northern mountains beyond. It stood upon that ridge as a man might mount a molehill, gnarled limbs raised to the sky. Even veiled and ghostly in the misty distance, it was terrifying. That is the one we chased to the mountain pass, my love, the one killed my men—the one lured me to this strange doom. I see the long, strange pursuit it lead us now—so clearly. It led us, Almeya mine—moths to our flame.

Something else now comes so clear. I had not seen the connection till now. I had not reconciled how the mighty beast had concealed itself in the pass. But here, in this flaming world between worlds, I see it like a drunkard, suddenly sober as a Magistrate. The clues were right before my eyes. I had been so numb, body and mind, as I dug out of the avalanche to follow our assassin, I had barely noticed. Not one hundred paces down from the scene of our undoing I saw a great tangle of brambles, like a vast, thorny blanket, cast from the cliff. We had all been mystified, as we had ascended the great northern mountain in pursuit of the thing, at a vast canyon with not a wisp of snow nor vegetation upon its rocky floor. Dellic had said one of our men knew of this place. It had been named *Valley of Thorn* by his distant ancestors. He told Dellic it had been said to be filled, to the height of three tall men, with savage bramble and briar, but that was all gone. Now, I see the keen mind of what I had taken as a mindless beast. It had trampled that valley until the briar had interlocked so tightly it could tear it up and cast it about itself like a cloak. A cloak that with three days and nights of blizzard snowfall, had so completely disguised the monster's body as it crouched into that fissure, we had marched right past it. Then, it had thrown off its covering, sending the avalanche that took most of my men. The sweep of its limbs, holding boulder and trunk, had taken everyone else, all but me—me and my faithful Argos.

Then, as I cast 'Vengeance' at its mighty form, we were swept over as well. I cannot say, my love, if the thing let me live for some veiled purpose, but I see now, it is no mindless beast.

...

"*Almeya?*" Where am I, I wonder. There are no more flaming visions. Even the cooler, blue-green flames have stilled, yet all I see is green. All I feel is green, green that is not a color, but the very essence of life. All the universe is green, my love. I am green. Gods of Mercy and Mayhem, my sweet lady—I am green! I am green and *leafy*. I can feel every life in this hell, every life across the wide world, every life within this endless universe. It is all... *One. One Life, One Heart, One Mind.*

This is astounding, my love. Can you see it? Can you feel it? But, of course

you can. You, who had always treasured life, not only your own, not only your husband's and our babies', but *all* life! How small of me to give it so little notice. Not that I did not love you all the more for it. For I did—I *swear* to you I did! But I, myself, held so little regard for it beyond yours, my babies' and my men's, I did not see it for the wisdom it was.

You are as wise as you are beautiful, my precious Almeyra. However did you fall so low as to love a wretch like me? I *see* it now. I *feel* it, heart and soul. All life is One. Not simply *of* the One Source, but truly all is One. The fabric of the universe is all made of stardust and love. If only my warrior brethren could hear my heart wail. How they would mock! But, I am all that is left of my brothers, *if* I yet remain, that is. I feel all life as a part of me. We in turn comprise not only Creation Entire—but the Creator above. All One—All the same. I can feel the life of the forest all around me, my love. Each one, from the tiniest quickened seed in moist, nurturing soil, to the greatest of the Creator's creatures upon the land and within the seas. They are all a part of my body—and I am them.

My forest, my body, my soul—all One.

...

Blessed wonder, my sweet. I see you! I see you all. My wife, my babies, my people. Our lives together in those blessed moments between the tortured hell of my overlord's bloody campaigns. Your scent! My sweet Maker, the perfume of your skin and hair so delighted me then. How it fills me now with wonder beyond description. How did I ever leave your side? How could the avarice of a madman lure me away from our paradise together?

I was an imbecile! The simple sweat of honest labor tickling my brow as I watch my little ones chase about, gracing my unworthy ears with their marvelous laughter. The look in your devastating eyes as you find me, so lost in their play. The double lightning strike of love and lust as I see your playful smirk curl the corners of your perfect lips.

What on God's green earth could a man find in adventure or duty that could rival the simple ecstasy of our love, of our lives together? Hindsight is a hell of overwhelming ferocity, my love. Damn me forever for my foolishness, but, apparently, that is exactly what I have done.

Now the warmth and wonder turns to ice—fire and ice. Our home burns

*while I make corpses and widows in faraway lands. I am forced again to watch as I forge my father's twisted spears into my 'Vengeance', with my vengeance.
Spare me, my Maker! Please... No more!*

My eyes fly open, but all I see is green. I gasp and push free. The world is green and blue and white but nothing makes sense. My vision is clouded and blurred.

'Fight not the bonds of your rest, Son of Man...' I hear, both echoing from the far heights and whispering between my ears. I relent and lie back, a strange languor, vibrant with new life, creeps through me.

"Who are you? Where are we?" I ask these things, but do not recognize my voice—or my words. A wisp of mist caresses my cloudy eyes and I hear a soft crinkling sound, like fine parchment torn away. Suddenly, I see clearly. Above me is a wide, blue sky. So blue I find I am weeping at its beauty. The wisp returns and sweeps the moisture from my cheek. With it, I hear that same delicate crinkle. Lacy white shapes delight my eyes as they tumble through the sky. I find, like within the lean-to after the tragedy in the pass, I cannot move, save my gaze. A hulking peak, blue-white and edged with golden sunlight is just at the verge of my sight, high above.

"You may rise now, Son of Man. You are reborn. You have reached the Source... and the One you seek. He waits for you even now, Son of Man, but no longer than that. It is his time to rest." I feel that presence, my sweet, that voice's source as it fades to nothing... or *everything*. I can no longer distinguish between the two.

Pushing, again, I come up to sitting. I find I am in a grove of unsurpassed beauty. Before me stands the mountain I had glimpsed through those foul vapors of the caldera. To call it heartbreaking in its majesty, is to insult its magnificence with faint flattery. I have no words, my love. If our love, your beauty and our babies' innocence could be made substance, this would be its form.

Vivid scraps of color drift before my eyes and I see they are the leaves and petals of flowering herbs. They adorn my body, every inch of it. Not as a covering, like before, but as if I am its soil—they, my bounty. As I search about me, they spread out beyond undisturbed, covering the holy glade with life beyond measure. Oh, how it burns my eyes with its beauty, Almeya. If only you were here to see it. Then, though I cannot understand how I know it, I feel you here, you *and* our babies. Delicate as morning dew is that sensation, as if you await your return in some way I cannot grasp. Looking away from the mighty mountain, though it takes all my will to let it out of my sight, I see the ring of fire that had held me at bay, that had burned me to cinder. Beyond that,

lost to mist and darkness, the world I once knew.

I look, for the first time, at my hands, as I find myself kneeling in supplication to this wondrous glade and its mighty peak. They are mine—but not. Their shape is familiar, but the skin is pink and fresh, like a newborn's bottom. A man's hand, yet I see not one manly hair, nor scar nor callous where so many had accumulated. As I move, my covering of herbs and flowers retracts, more than falls, from me. Re-covering the soil were I awoke, as if it had never been a part of me at all.

But it *had* been. It still *was*, my love. I cannot describe the sensation, my blessed wife, but I can no longer find a separation between myself and all of Creation, great and small. It has always been that way, I see now, though I only *now* recognize it is so. But you, my marvel, my love—you had always known. I see that now. I could have learned all this from your heart. But I was man. You were woman. I loved you—but I did not see how you towered above me in your wise, open and loving heart.

What a moron I was. Again I must wonder, what had caused you to love a man so thick and prideful as me? You are my salvation—and I was too blind to see it.

A rumble and shudder of my glade draws my eye—and my soul—to the base of the mountain I kneel before. There, nestled into a vast nook in its towering bulk lay the One I have tracked all this time. So near it is in color and texture to the mountain, I see, with newfound eyes, that is from whence it had been born, at the Dawn of Creation itself. My quarry. My tormentor.

My tutor.

I rise to standing, though it seems to take less energy than lifting my eyes to the heavens. I would think I did float, but I see my naked, pink legs move as they always had, one step at a time. What contrast I find, the pain-racked drudgery of my march through hell to reach this place and the effortless glide of my stride here and now. Though, in mechanics, it is identical—one with the other.

The base of the mountain is both distant and close, it seems, in this strange new world, this strange new life. My step is light as a feather, my love. My heart, is lighter still. Has it ever been so? Perhaps, when I ran naked and giggling with other tykes, so very long ago. Perhaps—but I cannot remember it.

A tiny gurgle of pristine water trickles before me, filling a depression in the verdant glade before moving on to hasten the life all about me. A thirst falls upon me greater than any I have ever known—even at the verge of the fiery lake. One sip, my darling! One sip and I am refreshed. Mind and body—heart and soul! I would be overcome, but my reflection in the tiny pool captures my fascination. The face I see is mine—or so I must accept. The contours and planes match the reflection I last saw return my gaze, in the life I once knew, but the innocence of its smile I have never seen there. No beard yet mars the line of my jaw, no scar cleaves my cheek. The skin is as pink and new as the rest of me. But my hair, my love, look at my hair! Whiter than the snowcap atop my tutor's mountain is it. It lengthens even as I stare. Other than that thick shock of growth, I am as hairless as a newborn babe.

One sip more, of the spring, though I need it not, and I move toward the foot of the mountain. I find I do not rise to standing, but approach on hand and knee—suppliant to the Ancient I had hunted as a monster. As I reach the foot of my tutor, I find I am ashamed of my past horrors. I lower my forehead to its stone-like toes and whisper a prayer of thanks and remorse. Suddenly, I am crippled at the thought of my heresy towards you, my love, and our children—your bones forever lost to the mountain pass. Again, I lower my head and beg forgiveness, for so many things—and of so many wronged.

“Steward.” The word shatters my reverie—and my shame. It echoes as thunder on the mountaintop and whispers as a lover's confession within my heart, as if all the world speaks in the Ancient One's voice. It speaks in a thousand, thousand voices, tiny and grand—far and near—as if every spark of life, every particle of existence were its own. *“Steward... do not begrudge your*

past selves... they were only steps in a vast stairway—leading you here.

“Your soul has paid the price of your resurrection. There is nothing to atone... You are a creature of the All and Everything now. As you have always been, though you had not seen it.”

"I have done great harm... and sacrilege, greater still," I call out, baring my soul—exposing my sins.

“You have been forgiven, Steward. Life is a circle. Nothing is added—nothing sheared away. Your heart has saved you, my child.”

"I have butchered innocent beings..." I cry, tears flowing. They reach the rocks where I hunch, penitent and low. I see new life blossom in profusion with every drop. "The last life I took, Ancient Father... it was one of your own," I whimper, my sweet, wishing the earth would swallow me up and take me to the hells where I belong.

“Ragnoss.” The name tore at my gut, tortured my ears. Though it was whispered with great sentiment. *“Yes... Steward. Ragnoss was one of us. My youngest kin. He, of us all, was the most innocent of spirit...”*

The absolute lack of judgment of my blind cruelty was like a lash to my soul. "I was so blinded, I thought it a monster, resigned to its punishment from on high..."

“You did not see how my brother knelt to you as you approached. As the youngest of us, he was the one who brought into being and protected the most recent beings of your world... among them, Man. It is His compassion, His devotion, His forgiveness that is written in your blood, son of Man. He sensed in you what I had. This is why He offered you friendship and honor.”

"I butchered him, my men and I..." I began to confess, my sweet Almeya, but my voice failed me.

“He forgave you, even as you defiled him.” The words were kind and held no malice nor judgment, yet they burned me as even that hellish caldera could not.

"He did," I whispered, as tears flowed and wildflowers burst up, as they rained down.

“All is forgiven, Steward,” the voice thundered, but then I pictured my foul treatment of my family, Almeya mine, how I lost your last earthly remains in that bitter wasteland. *“They are not there, Steward,”* the voice added, but I did not understand. *“Your talisman, your family... they are here. With me.”*

With those words, my gaze flew up from the tear-soaked ground. As I

searched about, a glint of dawn sunlight off of bronze, high above, alerted me. It was gone, nearly as it flickered. But there, high above, where only the gray-brown of stone, the green of new life and the pure white of the snowcap resided, my eyes found a tiny flutter of crimson. I could not see what it was, but my soul sang out what it knew. I did not dare say it, even within my mind. I rose to standing, weak-kneed and dry mouthed. Before I had recognized my own movement, I was climbing. The Ancient One was indistinguishable from the mountain now, and so I used its own contours as a stair. As I neared the thing I dared not name, I realized I was scaling the Ancient's rocky face. There, in what had been its colossal ear, lay 'Vengeance'. Alongside it, as if the creature had adorned itself with them as women accent their faces with earrings of gold and silver and precious stones, rested other weapons. Among them, Dellic's spear, arrows aplenty and the great battle ax of our woodsman, Bennot. Depending from 'Vengeance', from your tattered scarf, my love, hung the bones of my family. All of them, all intact. All as I had last seen them. An ecstasy floods me, my love, even as I hate my past self for its idiocy and sacrilege. As I move slowly, carefully, still naked and bare of foot, I look to the side and find the Ancient's stone-like eye turned to regard me.

“Bury your family here in my Grove, Steward, at my feet. I will watch over them... for all time. Give them rest... and be at peace. You may now return to this place at your whim, as you tend to your duties. The land will no longer challenge you. We are One now.”

I shake, violently my love, as I creep up to find my hand upon my terrible lance. I kiss the remains of my family and breathe my regret to you all. Then, with remarkably little effort, I pull free the shaft of my killing tool from the stone it had pierced and cradle my family in the crook of my arm like a babe. I remove the spear of my lifelong friend, then the other tokens of my brave lads. Turning to the massive eye, only a spear's throw to my right, I bow my head. When I lift my eyes, I find only cold, rugged stone.

Slowly, with regret and gratitude like weights about my neck, I crawl back down to the trickling spring and its tiny pool. Reaching the Grove, my lost-then-found love, I see the trickle has become a stream, the puddle, a pond. A circle of stone monoliths has sprouted about it, as if the fingertips of the Ancient One surround it, cradling the scene as if he held it in his mighty hand.

This is that perfect glade I promised you, Almeya. Where I will lay you and our babies to rest—as I should have so long ago done. I thought to cut into the

soil with 'Vengeance', but the soil opens of its own will. I place four weary skulls reverently within the perfect circle it offers. At the center, as you were always at the center of our lives, I place your token, Almeya. To your left, our son, Abboss. To your right, our daughter, Gretta. Directly before you, where I remember her best—at your breast, or asleep in your arms—I place sweet, little Kaya. I cannot bear to say my farewells, my love. I find I cannot even return the soil to its place.

“Cast only the first grains, Steward, the Glade will take from you that duty,” I hear the Glade sing. I lift four grains of soil only—press my lips to the hand that holds them—and let them fall. Before my eyes, the Glade closes over you as if it had enveloped you for all time.

Where my tears fell, I stab my lance. A moment later, I see an oak sapling has sprouted and reaches over the intimate scene even as I watch, as if years pass with my every breath. My head is so heavy, my love. Rest now—sleep with our babies in peace. Your troubles are at an end. With that thought, I sleep.

“Wake up, my love,” I hear, but the warmth of your voice lulls me further and I am loathe to stir. “... Wake up, sleepyhead.”

“Almeya?”

“Yes, my love... we are here.”

“We?” I begin, but three little treasures pounce upon my head, their giggling mischief drawing me fully awake. “How... where...” I babble, but I never complete my query.

“Kiss your baba, children... then, Aboss, take your sisters to thank the First One while your father and I talk.”

“Yes mother!” I hear his perfect voice sing out, though tiny lips crowd my ears and I find I have lost track of all else. Then, my baby boy takes his sisters' hands and they run, as happy children again—free and whole. I watch them as best I can through blurred eyes. As I dash them clear, the most wondrous sight in all of Creation kneels down before me.

“Almeya... my love!”

“Rahik... my husband.”

“Do I dream... or am I dead?” I ask, not caring which.

“Neither, my love...” I hear you say, but all I see is your perfect face. I am hopelessly lost in your eyes and can barely stand to close my own, as you lean in to kiss me.

'Take me now, My Maker, that this moment might never end.'

“What a foolish thought, my love,” you tease, as we pull back.

“You hear my thoughts, my love?”

“Always.”

Suddenly, I recall all my sins, all my madness, the sacrilege I had heaped upon these blessed souls. I fall into your lap and weep, my confessions a pathetic mess of halting words and gasping misery. Your delicate hand strokes my hair as you rock me, as I had always delighted in watching you rock our babies.

“What has become of your hair, my love?”

“I don't know, my sweet...” I laugh—or cry, I cannot separate the two any longer. You lift my chin and kiss the moisture streaking my bare face.

“Your chin is as beardless as a teenaged boy, my love, your hair, white as the snow above,” you say, but still I am so overcome by your beauty, by your presence, only a remnant of my mind takes note. “I do not complain, Rahik. It is quite dashing, really. Regal, in fact.”

“Unlike my soul,” I say, regret and self-loathing thick in my throat, in my words.

“You are reborn, my love. Pure as the driven snow,” you whisper.

“You tell such pretty lies, my wife—I have missed you so...” I have so much more to say, but my voice fails me—miserably.

“I speak only the truth, my husband. You, of all the souls in all the Universe, know this best.”

“I do,” I say. Again I am overcome. Again you must lift my chin from my misery—and your lap—as you had always lifted my spirits. We sit, one heart, one being, and watch our babies race about, chasing—and being chased by—tiny woodland creatures. Their laughter is like the tinkling of bells. My family is returned to me, looking exactly as I had last seen them in life, but for a golden glow rimming their forms like downy feathers, made of light.

“I love our glade, my love... I am so proud of you...” You say to me and I am, once again, undone.

...

“Rise up, Steward!...” I hear, but the voice is not yours, my love. I lift my head and I am alone.

“You may visit them whenever your duties permit, Steward,” a kinder voice adds. Still, it is not your voice, my wife. I scout about me, but I see no speaker, only the woodland creatures, still cavorting gleefully as if my babies still race about with them, a swirling mist hovering nearby. I am kneeling at the verge of an intimate pond. The oak sapling, where I had thrust 'Vengeance' into this wondrous soil, is now a fully mature tree, majestic and sheltering, spreading above the mirror-like pond.

“Stand and assume your duty, Steward!” That first voice demands, roughly. I do as I am told, though, still, I am alone, but for mist and bunnies.

“What is my duty?”

“You are now Steward of the World, Son of Man. First among your kin...” the gentler voice answers.

“I don't know what that means, spirit...”

“Pitiful creature...”

“Enough, Erebus... It is done. The mantle has been passed...”

“Woe to us all...”

“Do not concern yourself with my brother, Steward... He does not see what the First One sees.”

“Who is the First One,” I ask stupidly, for I understand, even as I speak.

“Tell him brother... I have no more time for him... nor his brutish kindred!”

“Hush Erebus, the Son of Man has learned forgiveness and compassion. Better than you...”

I feel a blunt dismissal and a stifling presence fades, but of the first voice, I hear no more.

“The One you followed here... and his brethren... have held this fragile world in their care since the Beginning. You stand now at the Source. When first this world was no more than the molten vomit of the yellow star you call the Sun, no life existed here. As the skin of the world cooled, it became solid. Much as the plates of hardened magma you crossed the caldera upon. When it was ready, the Creator of All sent life to proliferate here. Life traveled the vast void within a rock cast from another world. It lay in wait for longer than this world has yet been. The mass of this world drew it near, captured it from its wandering and it plunged down. This is the very place it crashed upon the surface of this infant world...”

As I hear these words, I can see it—as if I were the Universe itself, watching from everywhere. As it pierced the paper-thin hide of the Earth's surface, it punched a perfect circle into this new world. As water splashes in a ring, a droplet the size of the striking mass rising at the very center, this mass of fiery stone cooled in the icy hand of space, leaving its upward thrust captured forever. I see, now, this is how the Mountain was formed. The caldera surrounding it, a perfect circle, never to totally submit to the cooling that had formed the summit above.

“Still, the life delivered here slept on. For untold ages, it awaited the conditions that would foster its resurgence. Only the tiniest forms of life were successful, at first. The ancestors of all flora and fauna that has graced this world since. It was then that the One you hunted stepped forth. Born of the Mountain itself, that a Steward might look after life and nurture it into its endless forms. As more and more life crept over the land, crawled and swam in the seas, other Brethren were called into being, that the First One might have helpers in his Sacred Task. They return, even now, to their Source. Their burden at an end.

“It falls to you now, Son of Man, and to your kin. You have all the strength

and knowledge required, though misuse and discard your privilege, your kind has often done. You, Son of Man, are now First One among your kind. Your trials in the Lake of Fire have purified you and made you ready. The paltry lifetimes of your brethren are but quicksilver moments to you now. You will have many generations to spread the Sacred Knowledge of the First Ones. Many times your people will falter. Many times the fate of the world, of all life, will rest on the shoulders of Man. They will need your perseverance, your understanding, though many will not embrace it in their pride and their heresies. You must not relent. It will come to pass, one day, the Sons of Man will accept their Sacred Duty and throw down their hollow addictions and ugly hatreds. You will see it, Steward... this I tell you now—should it take a thousand lifetimes. Do not despair”

“How can I, alone, do so much?”

“You, alone, cannot, Son of Man. Mankind must heal itself of its many poisons. The key resides in the Heart of Man—where the Creator has hidden it. You must help them find it—hold it—as you have learned. Teach them to see it true. To feed it, nurture it, as you nurture life. Teach them to renounce unworthy goals, to follow not, unworthy souls. The poison clouds your Inner Eye, it does not control, nor pollute, your hearts. It is not who you are, as a people.

“How long will it take?” I ask, but no answer follows. Only a sad grin, full of impish sadness, do I sense, though, still I see no one. “How will I endure it?... Keep the poison from infecting me, yet again?”

“We will refresh you, my love...” I hear at my back. I turn to find my family, innocent as newborns, wise as the ancients, smiling at me. “This is the treasure the First One has given us in reward. We are here for you, whenever you need us, my husband.”

A rumble, beyond the caldera, breaks my trance and I look to the sound. There, dim in the mist of the outer world, stride others of the First One's Brethren. They seem weary, but valiant. As they step, one then the next, across the fiery ring, as I might a rain puddle, they move toward the Mountain. One by one, they pause. Each turns a chilling eye to me. I have never, in all my days, felt so naked... naked and ashamed. I see my murders in their eyes and fall flat to the Glade beneath their scathing regard. I am but a flea among towering trees, a pebble among mighty mountains.

“Rise up steward... You are among Brethren...” I hear, yet I am frozen in

my shame. *Rise up and take your place!*” This time it is as if the earth itself bids me rise, and so I do. I realize I am still naked, in body, as I am in my soul. Before me, a thousand tiny creatures scurry about, their movements a mystery. Of grasses and spider silk, they weave. A shape lifts into being and grows. In moments, I see what has been offered. A robe, like nothing I have ever beheld, lies shimmering among the wildflowers. I bend to retrieve it.

As I shrug it on and stand, I am no longer in my family's grove. I am high in the mountains, flooded with the golden light of a new dawn. At my feet lay the spear of my old friend Dellic and the other relics of my men's battles. I know this place. It is the pass. Where my quest truly began.

I am in the outer world once more.

For a chilling moment, I fear I have hallucinated it all—that I stand in this tragic pass a mere handful of hours after the death of my company, delusional in my inability to accept our fate. One glance at my hand dispels my fears. There are no scars there. I am wearing a robe of wildflowers and spider silk, not the battle armor and quilted gambeson I wore as we ascended the heights. Mist pours from my lungs as I taste the icy winds. It is thick and impenetrable as storm cloud, and so I know the temperature is bitter cold. Yet I do not shiver and quake as I stand, bare of foot, a simple robe of mysterious fabrication my only covering. Wind whips my hair about my face, and I see it is white as the snow all about me. A rush of fear and regret floods me at the realization that I may never see you and the babies again, my love. I sink to one knee and breathe your name.

...

“Silly husband... We are here for you. The FirstOne has told you so,” you tease as you hug my head to your body. Beneath our feet, grass and wildflower flourish. Children's laughter is like the voice of the breeze, warm and fulfilling. “Only whisper our names, my love, and you will find us here...” I hear you admonish, as I straighten and kiss your face.

...

I stand, once again, within the deadly pass, high in the mountains of the outside world. I am relieved, my love, and I feel quite the fool. But foolish, in your arms, I will accept graciously, gratefully. I am *here* for a reason. Not merely to atone for my sins—for the sins of my race—but to take up a more worthy campaign than ever I had in my first life. One I may never be rid of. So long as I have you, my love, all of you, to serve as touchstone in my trials—I am a blessed man. I do not know how much time has passed here in the world of my past—but I feel it has been many seasons since last I strode this trail. Perhaps there are none I once knew left alive here. None with memory of that Giant Hunter, gone missing in the Misty Mountains with his intrepid company, in pursuit of a monster, never to return.

There is one last duty I must perform as commander of the Black Riders. I must speak words of regret and praise for those forty men who followed their

captain through a dozen hells at his word, without question, without fear. They were good men, every last one. Dellic, the best of all—myself included. I look to the snow at my feet and bend to lift Dellic's spear from the icy white. Looking all about me, in the blaze of early sun, I find the massive cleft in the mountainside where the FirstOne had hidden himself to avenge his brother's murder and prevent an army armed with hatred from defiling the Source. Poised very near the center of the space I find a cluster of boulders. Forty, I count. One, the greatest among them, standing sentinel over the fallen. There I drive the tip of Dellic's spear. The body of the stone receives the blow with a firm, but yielding thud—much as thick-packed mud might. A moment later, it is solid as granite, Dellic's spearpoint held firm, its shaft flawlessly upright, a conduit to the heavens. Much like the man who once carried it at my right hand. At its base, I lay the others. With Bennot's axe, I scrape at the sentinel monolith before which stands the spear of Dellic. As when I thrust down the spear point, the granite yields to my will like firm clay.

'The men who fell from these heights were the best men I have ever known.'

It seems far too little to say—and yet, my love, no frilly speech could ever better convey how they reside in my heart. As I trace my fingertips across the face of the monolith, it is cold, hard stone once again. It seems, my darling, that the world now yields to my need, willingly. I will *never* abuse it, and it knows the truth of that. More so, perhaps, even then I.

A warm wet sensation nudges my fingers. Looking down, I find a mighty ram, white as the snow it calls home, nuzzling my hand. It's vast flock wanders about, worrying the loose rocks in search of tidbits to eat. As I watch, they crowd to me. Not to beg my touch, my sweet, but because all about me, tiny green things push up from the harsh soil to find the sun. Drawn by, or somehow nourished by, my presence. I see my task now, Almeya, my wonder. Wherever I roam, the touch of the Source, of your Grove, draws forth life, and strengthens its resolve to persevere.

And so, my love, this is to be my burden—and my privilege. To inspire life with my every stride, throughout the ages, and to turn my fellow Man from its foolish, childish ignorance. So long as I may return to you, my love, and our family, I will persevere, until Man remembers his purpose here. This, my love, I swear to you and to the Creator.

It will be so.

The end

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