



THE CORRUPTED
KINGDOM

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Without God, I would not exist. Without my family and friends, I would not be alive. Without my wife, I would not be here. Without you, I would not have a reason to write.

This book is for you, for me, and for everyone who wants to read.

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Prologue

They say the shadows of that place birth your deepest fears. The moonlight that filters through the sickly clouds can pull the darkest nightmares from your imagination. Once freed from the realm of the mind, it grants them inhabitation here, making them tangible. Physical. Killable.

Perhaps that is what draws some people here. It is a place where denial holds no point, where the most repressed fears and thoughts can surface, forcing us to overcome them or succumb to their will. When the mind-shattering images manifest with claws and teeth and repressed emotions, what good is a blade or an axe? If the power we possess could subdue it, would we not have slain it in our sleep, when all the world's laws and possibilities were at our command?

Time holds no perceptible pattern there. It flows from past to future and back like sea foam in the tide. Is that how it remains after so many years of neglect? Is that why they say some of its structures still dare to pierce the clouds while others lay in ruin and decay? Are the lost souls who wandered that land still roaming within it?

Far on the horizon, I can see the marred walls and decaying structures that lie in that massive kingdom. Gray clouds of unnatural origins circle its borders. The clouds devour the light that dares to penetrate them. They chew it with unseen teeth, stripping it of its radiance. What gray shreds remain dribble from its maw down to the land below. The abnormal clouds diffuse the now-colorless light, casting an atypical glow rather than true illumination.

While the mystery of its fall and the nightmarish creatures that dwell within have never left its borders, its skyward spires and mountains are visible from the surrounding lands. The looming clouds that circle it are visible from even as far as the eastern ocean. That kingdom is a wound upon the world, one that will not heal. It sits on the edge of humanity, its presence felt beyond the reaches of its borders. It is an isolated plot that reminds us that there are forces beyond our power and beyond our understanding.

A feeling of inescapable dread washed over me as I beheld the ruins. I shuddered at what impossible sights may wait for me beyond those borders. While want of my fears taking a physical form was not what drew me to this cursed land, neither would fear of it keep me from entering.

Part Four

The wavering light from the fire bathed them in an unsteady red. The boy's pale skin seemed to reflect the color from the fire light. The woman's darker tones pushed altered color away, keeping her naturally brown skin nearly the same. He knew not what to expect when he went searching for the old recluse. Whether she was a stable crone or a withering madwoman with a rickety mind corrupted by the horrors she had witnessed, he was still unsure.

Her home was sturdy, made of treated wood and sealed well despite being intentionally far from civilization. The windows were solid and lacked any tarnish. There was a squeak when she opened her door, a natural strain on the hinges from the heavy wood rather than from faulty craftsmanship. The inside was void of art or items to draw a guest's eye, but it did not lack personality. Books lined one wall. Firewood lined another. Two rows of exotic spices hung above shelves of fine, dried and sealed foods from distant lands. A single, well-constructed chair made of an elder tree, with beautifully stitched cushions upon it, sat before the fire. A small, wooden table stood beside the chair. Her only plate rested on it, a few crumbs of food still littering its surface. Her home and everything in it only accommodated one.

She answered his questions, but the half-answers from her thin, wrinkled lips never satisfied him. He continued sitting on the floor, growing increasingly uncomfortable as the moments passed while he waited for her to speak again.

"The rumors cannot be true," the boy finally said, his annoyance echoing through his tone. "A land that only has monsters and moving statues? There must be an ecosystem. If it were only monsters, what would they eat? There has to be some sustainable source of food. Some supply of fresh water rather than the stagnate ponds and salted stream you saw. Even the most fearsome predators require these basic needs. It would be impossible for life to be sustained otherwise."

"You assume they *need* food," the old woman said softly. She curled her long, bony finger and he found himself leaning toward her without thought. "Eldritch creatures of that purpose do not eat for nourishment. They only eat for pleasure. Something else keeps them tethered to this world."

Deep in the boy's brown eyes, she saw the terror he tried to keep hidden. Her haunting words clung to his mind and rattled his heart. In that moment, he knew that the memory of her—her voice, her words, the smell of burning wood from the fireplace, the sight of her full, graying hair, and the feeling that she invoked—would never fade.

Despite her conviction about the unholy accounts of the horrors being true, they were too unsettling and illogical for him to believe they were anything beyond delusions.

"You said those things were alive," the boy said, regaining his composure. "They need something to sustain them. Living things need food and water and—"

"What does a thought need to exist?" she asked dismissively, cutting him off. "Does it need food or water?"

"No," he replied quickly, "but the person thinking it does."

"And what if that person tells someone else? Then he could die and the thought would live on. What if he announced it? More people would know. What if the world knew? What if he wrote it down? Would that thought ever truly die?"

"Perhaps not, but those people still need sustenance. They would need an active mind to think and ears to hear. He would need paper and ink to scribe it."

"So food and water become less important. There are many ways for the idea to circulate and spread. Many ways for it to live."

The boy grew tired of speaking mad philosophy with the half-cracked woman, but he was not

willing to concede.

"But an idea does not become tangible when it is thought. A craftsman needs iron. A seamstress needs cloth and thread."

"Yes!" The woman lurched from her chair. Excitement ignited her blue eyes. Her hands latched onto the boy's hands. Her old, dry fingers were rough against his own. "The poet needs paper. Without metal, no one believes the smith can craft. What if metal was a concept people did not believe in? Is the smith worthless, or do the people simply not understand the material he needs?"

"There is something there, something in that dreadful sarcophagus of civilization that can manufacture creatures beyond our understanding. A material or method we have yet to uncover for ourselves. Perhaps the discovery of this is what corrupted that wretched place into what it is now."

The boy chuckled, the laugh tasting sour in his mouth as he beheld her reaction. What she said was impossible, yet it stirred a fear within him that he refused to admit.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I am not here to debate theories about how it might have happened. I want to know what you saw. What is really there?"

The boy's eyes were wild with lust for something beyond his grasp. His lips pressed together like a drunkard eyeing a fresh bottle. She could almost hear the thoughts that spun inside his skull.

"The riches of an abandoned treasury?" he asked, the lust slopping over from his eyes into his speech. "The designs for buildings that can withstand storms, tides, and dragons? Potions and brews for curing incurable diseases? The promise of immortality and restoring life to the dead? You have been there. You have seen it. What truly hides beyond the borders of that corrupted kingdom?"

The old woman stared at the boy with dull eyes and a vacant expression. His voice was soaked in a familiar longing that was an unpleasant memory. She remembered saying the same words, questioning all she could to gather information about the abandoned kingdom. His words were an echo of hers across twenty years. She knew what he thought beyond his words. She knew the constant pulse of curiosity and unrelenting desire that fueled him. Adventure. Riches. Priceless artifacts of unnatural and impossible power. And, like her, the want for something even more powerful and rewarding than those. All was possible within those borders.

"If you believe such wonders can exist behind those sickly borders and near the shores of the great sea, then should you not believe an equally powerful, elder spectacle of terror could also reside within? Could your eyes be so poor they cannot see that if one is possible they both could be?"

"A cure for diseases is possible," the boy said. His condescending tone, accompanied with his dismissive smile, shut her ears to whatever following words sloshed from behind his teeth. Unsure if he still spoke, she cried out.

"I have seen!" the old woman shouted. "I thought it to be rumor and madness, as you do now. Your fear of a spider or flame or death is not a simple image there. You do not fear its spindly legs or its heat or its uncertainty. Your innermost thoughts perceive every hair on its leg. You feel it pierce your flesh as it crawls across your spine. You know the sting of its fangs and the effect of its toxin. You know its blinding light and horrid touch. You know its unfeeling cold and wretched stench. Your blood will press against your flesh in an attempt to escape it. Your bones would shred your muscle to run from it if they had a greater will.

"If you fear the spider in your nightmare, the land does not make a large spider or a hoard of them to crawl across your flesh and into your mouth and ears and eyes. It produces a creature that manifests what you truly dread about such things. What the deepest, most unexplainable portion of your inner being fears more than a vision of its form or mere utterance of its name. It takes that.

It takes it and molds it into a beast. And when it ravages you and does whatever you fear most to your remains, it stays. It haunts those grounds and preys upon others as it preyed upon you, giving each subsequent traveler another creature to fear or to fear becoming!"

She found herself standing over the boy, who still sat on the floor. Her arms were up, aching slightly as though she had flung them wildly. She recalled doing none of this. She wavered as she pulled away from the boy. The loose skin behind her narrow chin wavered as she settled back down in her chair, her face warped with exhaustion and fear.

"It will take all that you love," she said with limited breath, her eyes distant in the firelight, "and it will leave you a shell longing for death but too fearful to take it."

The Middle of the Road

My eyes fluttered as I woke, and I saw her. The dim light of the dawn made her visible. On the other side of a deep scar in the earth, standing between a tree and a lone pillar to a structure long destroyed, she watched me.

Though she was clad in fine, metal-lined armor, it was her helmet that caught my attention. A metal cylinder covered her face. I didn't see any slits where her eyes or mouth should be. The helmet continued to rise until it split into two metal necks that continued to rise above her head. On the end of each neck, there was a metal face with proper holes for eyes and a mouth. I saw no eyes behind those masks. It was a unique and strange helmet. I had never seen anything like it.

Her armor was fine enough to be that of a royal guard or well-paid mercenary; sweat-soaked farm clothes covered my body. She had a blade forged by a master artisan who knew steel like a lover; I had a knife at my side.

My eyes were still weary from sleep. I closed and rubbed them, and when I opened them again she was gone.

Was she one of the monsters they spoke of in this land? No. She seemed to be human. Could she have been the one who was following me before I entered this place? Why would she follow me this far? If I had any other options, I would not have come. Perhaps she was going to punish me for my crimes. The punishment for murder was execution. Why would she come this far? Despite my desperate hopes, there was little chance I would retrieve what I wanted and escape from this place.

I rose. Grass and red-petaled flowers gave as my feet trampled them. A dip in the landscape nearly went unnoticed, but my naked feet felt the grass give way to dirt. I stopped as my eyes turned from where she had stood to what lay before me: nothing. The ground fell off. A massive chasm resided between my still-distant destination and myself. My stomach filled with sickness at the sight of the sudden drop. I stepped back. My knife slid back into its sheath as I regained my balance.

I looked back. She was still missing.

Who was she, and what was that thing on her head? My view of her was ever brief, and I could not help but keep thinking about her. The image became neither clearer nor more corrupted with each moment I thought.

There was no sense resting any longer. I was as awake as a man could be. I started the day early.

I found a way across the chasm: a long walk south brought me to a bridge. It was old, but less so than the rest of the ruins. Rope held together boards that nearly matched in depth and length, leaving gaps smaller than my foot between them. The ropes that held it together were still sturdy, upon inspection, but that did nothing to settle my fear as I made my way across the bridge.

The bridge groaned at my weight. The ropes strained as they tightened. The bridge sunk with every step as if it was slowly lowering me into the mouth of the chasm, hoping I would not notice. In my need to be certain my feet did not slip into those gaps, I looked down. I saw the pit over which I traveled. Creaking rope and waterlogged boards were all that kept me from dropping into the depths.

The stone walls of a great building had broken away as they reached over the edge of the pit. The chasm must have opened and taken part of the structure with it, leaving the other half a broken maze. A shattered wall revealed the contents of the room that hadn't fallen down the chasm: there

were tall cages and nooses hanging over the edge of the cliff. Was this once a prison? Was it simply a place for executions? If so, it was a fitting place for a murderer. My stomach turned at the thought. Two of the walls reached out to either side of the bridge. It was forcing me to enter.

As I drew closer, I saw a silhouette standing on the edge of the roof before the brightest part of the sky.

It was the woman I saw earlier.

She held a long blade that curved like an S, making a horrid, rounded edge perfect for gutting. The end straightened into a dagger-length point. A thrusting point like that would puncture the leather that protected me. A sword of that size could easily run me through and split me in half.

The light behind her shadowed the colors and details of her armor. I could make out nothing else. When I blinked this time, she did not disappear. She stared at me. Watching me as I continued into the building on which she stood. The roof of the building was too high for her to jump down to the bridge. For the moment, I was safe.

Did she construct the bridge? Open the chasm? Was it all just to lead me here? Would she find me in there? I couldn't think like that. There was nothing behind me. I had to press on.

I walked with my knife drawn and my hands out before me. There were no windows. No light. Darkness overtook my senses. I knew not which direction I faced and thought I would just as soon slip off the edge of the cliff as I would find the exit on the other side.

Echoing through the unknown depths, I heard the woman call out, whether in pain or pursuit I was unsure. Her screams fell between a beast's wail and a lady's cry. The echoes granted the noise the unnatural feeling of having two sources.

My hands felt the cold stone of the walls. I followed them, continuing into the black. In the darkness, I could not tell what was a doorway or a destroyed portion of a wall. In this place, each held uneven edges and great wear. What drove me, even more than the fear that my quickened pace would lead me into the chasm, was my need to get away from the screams of that woman.

The broken walls and collapsed ceilings offered limited light in one of the rooms. While the view of the sky gave me little bearings on which direction to travel, it revealed a hole leading into the chasm and a mural painted on the wall.

The painting was old. The characters in it were like dirty white shadows. It showed a massive, serpentine monster rising from the depths. It stretched to the ceiling and curled back down toward the ground. A dozen people with outlines that suggested they wore armor stood before it, prodding at it with weapons.

As I walked past the image, a strange smell filled the air. I breathed in quickly, catching the scent again. It smelled like charred flesh.

I stepped closer to the painting, and the smell became more powerful. Eyeing the mural, I realized that what I thought were faded details were just lines from the cracking wall. I reached out and touched one of the images of the soldiers. Part of it came away on my fingers. The smell grew stronger.

In that moment, I realized it was not an old painting depicting a battle. It was the charred remains that made an outline of the people and things in this room.

Fearful of what could have turned men, metal, and beast into a swath of scorched remains, I delved back into the black maze.

The woman's screams continued, my heart tearing in my chest as they got closer. When they became distant again, I felt no relief. The tension that twisted my body never ceased.

In moments, her screams grew louder once again. I could hear her footsteps now, growing louder with each scream.

Plagued with fear, I ran. Through the mystery of the black, I trudged through without knowledge of what was before me. I staggered over planks, nearly goring myself with my knife in my haste. I would not put it away, nor would I slow my steps. My fear of the woman finding me was too great. Stumbling in divots and holes of unknown depths, I continued.

I saw light. The gray of the outside world was suddenly beautiful compared to the eternal black of the structure. I found a destroyed wall leading into a mass of old stone walkways with trees pushing through them.

I ran past fires that did not spread. On stakes or engulfing bushes, the fires, fueled by something beyond the objects on which they burned, tinted small patches of the landscape in misty red. After every crack in my body was slick with sweat and my blood threatened to burst through my flesh, I fell. Deep in the corrupted lands near a large, burning tree, my body gave.

In the warmth of the blaze, the grim shroud of the night came. Despite the hours that passed, no rest came.

My eyes refused to close. My pulse refused to slow. Terror wove itself into my skin and bones and gnawed at my soul. I saw the stars move across the sky. I saw shadowed images of the sunrise behind the clouds. Exhausted beyond what even a night's rest could recover, I rose again.

The distant cries of my pursuer returned as I continued.

A few scattered, standing walls surrounded by rubble and weeds were all that remained of what I suspected was a gathering of closely packed buildings. There were so many odd walls, they kept me from seeing too far in any direction.

The ground was still stone. Grass and a few trees burst through it. Perhaps this was once a market, bustling with people haggling and shouting. Now the only sounds were my fleeing footsteps and her tormented wails.

Exhaustion plagued me to my very bones. I stumbled from the area I thought of as a market place, collapsing on the stone path. The strength of my fingers failed to keep hold of my knife as I struck the ground. The twang of steel on stone rang as it slid beyond my grasp and struck the ground.

The chapel, larger than most castles, towered before me atop a mountain. Beyond the chapel lay a forest, and beyond the forest lay the place I meant to venture.

Meant to.

I was not going to make it.

"I was going to bring you back, my friend," I mumbled, my voice pointed skyward. "I risked everything to find the way to bring you back. I wanted atonement. I wanted forgiveness."

Nearer than before, I heard the cries.

My mind and body warred over the choice to remain slack on the ground or to stand and defend myself. I wanted to live, but I knew I did not possess enough strength to fight her.

Her cries grew louder.

My belly dragged across the ground as I pulled myself. My mind mocked my body's efforts. Despair and death called for me. They were coming for me. *"What good is a blade?" Remember?* Those were my words once.

Her cries grew louder.

My fingers slid across the eroded stone to grasp the handle of my knife. I rose to my feet, my

legs willing to possess life once again. I turned from the chapel.

I saw the lady who cried. I saw the long, curved blade in her hand. I could feel her hatred, her need for my blood.

“I have failed you,” I said, unsure if the dead could hear apologies.

Part Three

Lavin led Cul farther away from the twisting towers. His leg was terribly wounded, but she refused to believe he was without hope. She had already lost the other three. She refused to accept the possibility of another friend dying by some equally unnatural creature or event. He was short but heavy. Aside from his suit of half-plate armor, he was a stocky man with rounded features. She could see his gentle eyes twitch in pain with each step.

He was all she had left.

The path narrowed until it met the rocky slope of the mountain. Spilling over the edge of the mountaintop and sliding down its face, tombstones and partially unearthed coffins cropped out. From years of erosion, the tombstones and coffins protruded over the edge and crept out of the side of the mountain, making a ragged, ill-proportioned, hundred-foot-long stairwell for them to ascend. They often had to jump from one to the next, and the tombstones were too small for both of them to stand upon together. With nothing but the rocky mountainside between them and a sudden, unforgiving stop far below, she feared the tombstones would fail to hold their weight.

Lavin often stretched over the emptiness between the stones to help Cul onto the next platform. Their groans and heavy breaths drowned out the odd chorus of unfamiliar noises from atop the mountain.

After the grueling climb, their hands grasped the edge of the cliff and they pulled themselves atop the mountain. A multitude of gravestones and unearthed coffins overtook the landscape and showed no path among them. Their tight, uneven placements made it a low-walled maze she and Cul would have to weave through.

As they lay alongside the tombstones, their chests heaving for breath they feared they would never hold, their ears opened to the source of the noise.

Draped in black cloth that masked their true shapes, figures wept over the graves. Black lace hung before their faces. It shrouded their expressions, leaving a featureless shape that mocked the form of a human head. Some shuffled between the tombstones and coffins. Their calls were dreadful, throat-splitting cries that fluctuated in volume and lasted longer than lungs could.

Their long-winded cries of pain and unending sorrow burrowed into Lavin's skull. The sound infecting her mind would haunt her thoughts until her breath failed.

"We have to leave," Lavin she said as she rose to her feet.

Several of the wailers turned to her. Whether the jingling of the bags or Cul's yelp caught their attention when he stood, she knew not. Their veiled faces twitched. Gnarled fingers wrapped in black cloth stretched out from their frayed sleeves. Their cries grew louder. Unseen limbs propelled them toward her. The fabric bowed and stretched, but their odd saunter made her wonder if they possessed legs.

Unsure what the wailers intended with them, Lavin guided Cul through the maze. Cul's impaired position slowed them, allowing the ghostly figures to advance.

Their movement, Lavin's labored breaths, and Cul's grunts drew the attention of more of the crying figures. Their indecipherable dialects ran over each other, creating a cacophony of over-extended cries that drowned out the noises she and Cul made.

Countless hands stretched out for them, forcing Lavin and Cul to run. The tourniquet strained, and blood spurted from Cul's wound. The wailers closed in around them, their screams seeming to attract more of the ghostly figures. Lavin lowered her head, trudging through as bandaged fingers brushed over her arms.

The mouth of a cave embraced them, leaving only the light that bled through the opening to

guide them.

They continued running into the cave until the wails began to fade. Lavin glanced back. The wailers shambled at the mouth of the cave, their ragged forms refusing to cross the threshold. It was dark in the cave, but void of the crying creatures. Empty and still-sealed coffins plunged through the walls and ceiling, protruding like crystals in a fantastical cave.

With only the bleakest fragment of sunlight shielding them from utter black, Lavin drew an oiled rag and wrapped it around a broken plank from a coffin. The light from the torch revealed a grimmer sight. Cul was pale. His sharp spurts of pain-stricken reactions diminished into the rhythmic, shallow breaths of someone with a dwindling number of them left.

“We’re getting through this,” Lavin told him reassuringly. His eyes met hers, tearing away from the blankness he stared at lifelessly. His mouth moved—a quick spasm of his upper lip. No words accompanied what appeared to be his attempt to speak.

She pulled him to his feet. The gentle sound of running water in the distance gave her hope.

“Do you hear that?” she asked, not waiting for his response. “A stream. We had to cross this mountain to get to the twisted spires. We left our horses by a stream that came out of a mountain. Do you hear the water? We can take the stream down and escape. We’ll get treated, and we’ll live in wealth from our findings. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Spending easy nights by a warm fire. Good food to eat every meal. A worthy reward for just a little more work, wouldn’t you agree?”

She nudged him with her fist, coaxing a smile from his pale lips.

The noise grew louder, and soon the flames showed the edge of the swiftly moving stream. She eased Cul to the ground and moved closer to examine the water. It was mostly clear, tinted slightly white. She placed her leg in in the stream but could not feel the bottom even near the edge. It was deep, and she dismissed the idea of wading in it. The fast current, unknown depth, coffins, and rocky, blue-tinted stalagmites that rose from the bottom of it were enough to deter her from riding down it without a craft.

Lavin dragged a still-sealed coffin to the edge of the water. She turned it onto its top, hearing a meaty thump from inside as it turned. She pushed it into the stream, the curved top submerged and the flat bottom floated above the water. Its buoyancy brought a smile to her face. She led it to two stalagmites near the edge.

“Cul, we’re leaving,” she said with a hopeful tone.

She aided her friend to the coffin, helping him lie gently upon it. She grabbed the side and plunged into the water. The water slipped through her clothes. The coolness of it felt pleasing, but her soaked clothes made her inadvertently cringe. The weight of the four bags and her attire attempted to pull her into the stream’s unknown depths. With no room for her next to Cul atop the coffin, she held onto a handle on its side and pushed with her legs to dislodge it from the stalagmite.

The current swept them down the stream. She tried to avoid hitting outcropping coffins or rocks, but there was little she could do to control their coffin. After a few scrapes and bruises from minor collisions, Lavin sighed, relieved that the coffins ceased appearing. Clear of the graveyard, it was only those jagged spires of rock that caused her any grief.

Her heart shuddered as she saw the stalagmites move. In the distance, they began to wade from the edges of the stream toward the center. Whatever means propelled them was hidden beneath the current.

A rocky spire rose up from beneath their coffin. It knocked the back half of the coffin into the air as it scraped across the rock’s jagged edge. Cul grasped the handle of the coffin as Lavin steadied him. The coffin slid from the spire and crashed back into the water, jolting Lavin and blinding her with a wave of water. Cul’s shoulder dangled off the edge. His head bobbed with the

waves, causing him to slip further over the edge. Lavin would not let him fall into the stream. She knew what strength she still possessed was not enough to pull him back to the surface.

The speed of their craft increased as another stream flowed into theirs. The moving stalagmites moved toward them, too slow to catch them at such a pace.

Through the darkness, a distant pinprick of light told of the end of the tunnel.

As a smile graced Lavin's lips, another stony spire sprang from the water before them. The front of the coffin splintered as it struck, lodging itself into the rock. Cul crashed against the rock, throwing part of his body against it rather than slipping into the water. The wood around the handle shattered. The impact left Lavin holding the dislodged handle and floating away from the coffin. She twisted and reached out with her other hand as she floated, snagging the leather strap of Cul's bag. Wrapped around his body, the bag pulled against his chest and the underside of his arm. Still on the sinking coffin, Cul turned his near-dead gaze to his friend, who refused to release him.

"We can make it!" Lavin called out. Her eyes stung from the salty mixture of the second stream. Her lungs caught water that rushed over the splintered edges of the coffin and clawed at her face. She coughed to expel it, but any opening only offered more water a chance to assault her in the same manner.

Turning her head for a breath, she caught the dreadful movement of something below the surface. More rocky spires were rising, closing in around them. The stalagmites were forming into a pattern she recognized. With movement independent from each other, the stalagmites formed the image of teeth in a beast's jaws. Glimpses of the bottom of the stream revealed blackened pits that stared intently at them.

The coffin sank, releasing Cul into the stream. Lavin and Cul flowed with the stream, but Cul's limp arms allowed his bag to slip over his shoulder and release his body. Still holding the pack, Lavin reached out to catch him with her other hand. Cul was too far, and the weight of all five bags pulled her downstream faster than her companion.

Their eyes met as the stone spires rose between them, and she watched as they engulfed him.

She drew a deep breath as the weight of the bags dragged her below the surface. Her speed increased, granting her no power to avoid the rocks. Her chest ached as it begged for air. Her frantic struggle brought her no closer to the surface as her increasingly battered body careened downstream.

Then a light washed the back of her eyelids in brightness. The oppressive clutch of the water was lost as she fell from the mouth of the cave. Her lungs gasped for air she was uncertain she would truly taste. Her eyes opened, the remnants of the stream flicking from her eyelashes. She was falling. She had been expelled from the cave and was dropping before a waterfall. The sun's full light fell upon her, and the warm air and the taste of the water on her lips made her desperate breath all the sweeter.

Her body crashed into the water, the sound of the strike muffled as she submerged. The weight of her bags still pulled her down, but the ease of the current from the wide stream allowed her to grasp the closest rocks and surface.

With her face wet from both tears and water, she swam to the edge of the stream. The rocks along the shore gave her proper footing as she climbed out of the water and flopped onto the grass beside it. The blades of grass were sharp against her bare face as her tears fell to the dirt. In that moment of unequalled sorrow, she mourned. All were lost, dead or worse from unholy means in this corrupted kingdom. The sun warmed her soaked clothes, but what should have granted her a feeling of peace crumbled under the weight of her grief. Those she cared for, those she wished to protect and to be with, were gone.

She knew not how long she lay there weeping. As she began hearing herself and remembered the sounds of the wailers not long before, she clamped her mouth shut and rose to her feet.

The weight of her five bags, four of which belonged to her now-deceased friends, made walking all the more difficult. Each bag possessed enough gold coins and precious artifacts for her to live better than she ever had. But such wealth held little value compared to its cost. Compared to what it took from her now and for the rest of her days.

The Beginning of the Road

"That's an interesting story," she said as she stared at the man sitting before the bonfire. "And not without its poetic sound. But I do not believe it."

The evening sun still shone in the sky, aiding the fire in lighting every crag in the weathered man's face. He did not seem displeased or upset by her words. The fire gave his eyes a reflective brightness that she suspected they once had on their own.

"Such is free will," he said, his accent muddying his words. "The ability to ignore the truth whenever you favor a different meaning."

The narrow slits in her helmet corrupted her sight. His graceful gestures made her nervous. She flinched at his every movement as if he were going for the thin swords on his hips.

"Why are you here?" He inquired. "And why are you wearing that goofy helmet?" He eyed her, his gaze scrutinizing her attire. "Is your head really so far above your shoulders, or is your face hidden behind the neck of that helmet? I know it seems like a silly question, but in this place, you really can't be too sure about anything. I'm not completely convinced you're really there. I'm not convinced I'm actually here before you, either."

"Why did you make a waist-high fire long before the sun went down?" she asked, her defensive and unpleasant tone echoing in her helmet.

"Answer me," he replied, "and I will answer you."

"Alright," she said. Tired and in need of a quick rest, she sat with the fire between them. "I am here to kill a man."

The man reeled back, nearly lifting from the stone on which he sat.

"M'lady, no men live here, only monsters. And as for travelers, most people know to stay clear of this accursed place. Besides, I have not seen anyone other than you in all my time here."

"He came here," she said.

"Why?"

"I don't know. There are many fabled things in this land. Some are good. He could be seeking them."

"Most are bad," he said with a slight chuckle.

"I doubt he came here looking for those. I assume he came for something precious, or else he learned I was following him and he came here thinking I would not dare cross into these lands."

"You chase him?" He asked as though the concept of pursuit was foreign to him. "Why?"

"He killed someone."

"Who?"

She paused, the foul taste of the words coating her tongue before she spoke. "My husband. They worked together. The axe was still pressed into his skull. I found my husband dead in the field with an axe pressed into his skull. His partner was gone. I swore I'd follow him until I found him and I killed him."

"Seems a bit unnecessary," the man said, with a muted laugh behind his words. "This murderer of yours made it into this kingdom. It is far more likely that he will die here than escape. You should not have followed him."

"And what do you know about it?" she shouted.

His eyes turned from the view of the distant mountains to her helmet. They darted between the different sets of eyeholes, trying to find where her eyes truly were as she continued to speak.

"I am here to see that justice is served. I am here to make sure he pays for what he did!" She

paused, breathing gently to calm herself. "It is a just act to punish him."

"Not here," the man said with urgency in his words. His eyes shined as brightly as the fire in the wake of his words. "Being here is punishment enough for him. Now it will be punishment for you, too. You'll go mad here, or perhaps you will die. Neither is a particularly fitting outcome."

She readied herself, clutching the handle of her curved sword. She expected him to draw his swords and attack. Instead, he remained relaxed as he sat upon the stone with a grin that looked like a guise for sorrow.

"But my warnings and insight are rather useless now. You're here. Hell, even I didn't listen to my advice. What else is there to be done?"

"So tell me, why do you wear that silly helmet?"

Part Two

After years of preparation and weeks of travel, they had arrived. Now within the borders of the kingdom, they stood before the structure they sought: the twisted spires.

The spires rose up from the ground, twisting into, through, and around each other, stretching even further into the sky than the rumors told. Some towers held gentle, astounding curves that defied architectural possibilities.

It was once an architectural marvel of the world: a city-size network of weaving towers. No one was sure how the spires managed to stand. They were taller than any building ever constructed, and yet portions of them stretched horizontally above the ground before snaking around once again. After centuries of stagnation and neglect, the overgrowth of nearby plant life appeared to be their only sign of age.

The five approached cautiously. They had seen a few creatures since breaching the borders of the kingdom, but they knew worse things remained unseen. Navigating the inside was far more difficult than anticipated. The interconnected towers weaved in and out of one another. The twisted paths disoriented them, sometimes to the point where they thought they were walking upon the walls. Narrow corridors led to stairways of uncertain heights, and windowless passages granted them further uncertainty of their location. When windows appeared, they would gaze through them, seeing new portions of the kingdom from angles they were uncertain were not skewed from delusions. At times, they found themselves a safe jump from the ground. Other times, they could see the tops of most of the nearby structures in a haunting, if not beautiful, view of the kingdom.

With words of encouragement, they remained calm. Their leader never let her worry or fear hinder her companions. She never let their dismay grow to where laughter could not cure it. They were her priority. The treasure was secondary.

But with the treasure, each of her companions could retire from lives that revolved around the sword. Combat was a fickle god to serve. Her promise and blessings were uncertain, and her presence was intoxicating. She could offer a bounty just as easily as she could remove your head. That harsh duality was something they had all learned to respect. But if they were successful, it was something they could also leave behind.

Their leader was taller than the rest, her straight, blonde hair pulled back and dangling between her armored shoulder blades until it ended at her lower back. She used her long spear as a walking stick, tapping the ground with the squared end to a rhythm when they needed a song. When her body ached, she asked one of her four companions how they were feeling to distract herself and let them know she cared for their wellbeing.

With nearly two-thirds of the daylight gone, they found what they sought. High in a spiraling tower, in the widest room of all the twisting spires, the long-dead king's prized possessions stood unscathed by time and untarnished by decay.

Between the multitudes of windows, a finely crafted suit of armor stood against the wall. Each one possessed a different look, function, and smithing material. Some had hooked headpieces, thorns across the limbs, and sliding plates of heavy metal. Massive scales from what could have been legendary creatures made up several different suits. Some held weapons, each as well defined and ornate as the armor that grasped them.

In cabinets of fine wood and dust-tinted glass, sculptures, paintings, pottery, and jewelry of unmatched beauty hung suspended on clear hooks. Atop each cabinet, a stack of gold coins from the far reaches of the world sat and spoke of nearly limitless wealth.

"Move quickly to take what you want," their leader said, unable to hide her joy about the

discovery behind her caution. "We don't know what guards this place. Don't squabble over what to take. Everything in here will fetch a fine price, and if you are uncertain, then fill your bag with coin."

Each of the five retrieved their bags and began filling them. Within moments, they had all found what they favored most and nearly filled their bags.

Dust fell from the hanging chandeliers as something on the floor above them moved. They heard a light rumble mixed with the muted sound of something soft striking the floor. They could hear it skittering in an irregular pattern.

"Close them up," she called out, trying to keep calm as she shoved her last item into her bag. "We're leaving."

She retrieved her spear and moved for the door. She pulled back and opened it. The grinding door felt heavier than it had when they entered. She waved them through, ordering them to keep going as she held the door for the next. As her last companion crossed the doorway, she rushed through, allowing the door to swing shut by its own desire.

As they ran down the hall, the doors behind them burst open. Their leader turned to see the horrid figure. It was as wide as a double-horse carriage and twice as long. The hall was barely wide enough to contain it. Dozens of glaring eyes darted between each of the five, a few eyes residing close enough to scrape across one another as they moved. At least two dozen sets of teeth constructed a mockery of a mouth, snapping hungrily in segments and clacking with each strike of the enamel. The deep red and blackened flesh behind its jaws shone as globs of saliva slipped out of its mouth. The flesh on its head and body was slightly lighter than its glossy, saliva-coated maw.

Along its body, rows of disjointed limbs covered its long, slug-like form. Its saggy belly remained close to the ground while arms and legs kept it from dragging across the floor. It clawed toward them, shaking with unbridled rage. As it ran, only the half of its limbs that were close to the ground aided in its sprint. Most of the other limbs held weapons. The swords, axes, and spears in its grasp swung wildly with its stride.

"It's going to outrun us," Cynthia said, the grimness of her thoughts slipping into her shout.

"Up there!" their leader shouted, pointing toward a stairway. "If it makes it up those stairs, we'll fight it in a larger room where we have the ability to surround it!"

They rushed up the stairs, their boots clacking as they went. The stairwell opened into a round room filled with old furniture, a room once meant for entertaining guests. The moist slaps and ravenous groans of the creature told them it was indeed traversing the stairs. Four of them took formation near the door, tossing their bags of treasure into a pile nearest the door they thought they would use as an exit. The fifth slunk back into a corner of the room, ready to take whatever orders were given.

As the grunts and slaps grew louder, their leader readied her spear.

"We'll have its head above our mantel yet!" their leader called out. She was so tall, her long spear looked almost average sized in her hands. "It will be evidence of the abominations we overcame!"

The other three with her drew their weapons. Exquisitely crafted, each of them held notches or hooks in the blade. They were dire in appearance, and their gnarled form would leave grievous wounds in their opponents. The pain from a single wound was often enough to cause beasts to retreat.

With its sides pressed tight against the walls of the stairwell, the creature slipped into the room. It stumbled as it popped out, swinging its nubby tail and flailing armed and unarmed limbs alike.

The four moved in, weapons ready to strike. Their coordinated attack displayed their teamwork. Their four different weapons struck at four different places on the monster. Its seemingly uncoordinated limbs lashed out, clashing its own weapons against theirs. It shifted and twisted, moving as though a nervous twitch influenced its ragged movements. The weapons it held struck wildly in all directions. There was no pattern or technique to its flailing, but the power and speed with which it swung its weapons knocked their own weapons away.

The creature rotated its neck, flinging its head about. Their leader stabbed with her spear. The spear continued to move, striking the creature's teeth and sliding into its mouth. She retracted the tip just before its snapping jaws shattered the shaft.

Its legs skittered, turning its body as it lurched to the side. Its nubby tail struck Cul, his armor protecting his ribs from shattering from the impact. His axe slipped from one of his hands as he landed on his back. The monster rushed toward him. Focusing on its fallen foe, Cynthia thrust her sword into the monster's leg, and their leader gored it with her spear. The monster slowed none.

"Cul!" Cynthia shouted.

Cynthia crouched low and raised her shield as she rushed toward the creature. She ran with a fierceness and speed that matched the monster's. Her arm rattled as an array of weaponry and empty limbs slammed against her shield. The strikes knocked her to one knee, but her tenacity forced her back to her feet and kept her moving toward the monster.

Cynthia threw down her shield and leaped, placing both hands on the hilt of her sword. The blade plunged into the creature's neck. Its flesh was as soft as a person's. She placed her feet on the beast's neck, using the weight of her whole body to tear the wound open further. Her sword slid down its neck, leaving a gaping wound in its wake. Blood poured onto her as the sword slipped from the laceration and she struck the ground. Its insides stank of iron and rot, and she held back a gag. As she landed on the ground, the monster's snapping jaws whipped toward her. Its teeth clacked together, slamming open and closed with horrid grunts as breath shot from its maw and blew her hair back.

Their leader moved in, her blonde hair waving as she jammed her spear toward the monster's most exposed parts. Her companions tried to do the same, cautiously wielding their weapons to get as close as they could to the creature. The beast's erratic and forceful flails pushed them back, making sure they only took one step toward it before retreating from the swing of another limb.

Three of the monster's empty-handed limbs stretched toward its wound. Fingers and toes grasped the severed flesh, pulling it shut as it continued to flail about. Cynthia jabbed her sword at its approaching face, forcing it to pull back its snapping jaws. A leg struck her from behind, and Cynthia stumbled forward. With her sword lowered, another limb swiped at her face. The strike disoriented her, causing her to stumble back into the path of another thrashing limb. The hit turned her about, and a large hand snatched her at the waist, digging its fingers into her stomach. Another grasped her arm while a foot crashed into her face, holding its heel against her mouth. Cynthia turned her head to attempt to dislodge the foot, but the heel slid to her jaw, locking her head in a twisted position.

Regaining his lost breath, Cul rose before the creature. He favored one leg terribly, and an increased trickle of blood spilled from the other when he placed pressure on it. He grasped his axe and swung, but the assault of multiple limbs and weapons forced him to retract his axe and protect himself.

Twisting her wrist, Cynthia slashed at the limb that held her arm. Blood poured from the severed limb, and its grip went limp.

The jaws of the beast swooped in behind Cynthia. It opened above her head, engulfed her, and

closed around her waist. Its teeth pinched her armor to a point. It thrashed and tore wildly until it pulled her torso away from her legs. Its jaws frantically chewed flesh, armor, and sword with the same unholy veracity.

Cynthia's legs stumbled as they tried to stay up, wavering back and forth as if confused by how dark the world had become.

The beast swallowed her body, still mostly intact by what brief glimpses they caught as it chewed. Its head lurched toward her legs, its mouth snatching them with ease.

The bleeding stumps of its severed limbs moved as though they were in pain, but its face showed no sign of such discomfort. The rabid, nearly psychotic presence in its eyes told of a disconnection from its appendages.

Their leader's spear found a break in its thrashing and gored the creature behind its head. The monster threw itself into violent spasms. She twisted her spear before it tore out of its flesh. The beast called out in gargles of pain mixed with the sound of gnashing teeth.

"Grab the bags!" their leader called out to her only unarmed companion. "We're running!"

"Is it dying?" a small voice called out as she obeyed her leader and gathered all the bags.

"I don't know," she said as she aided Cul to his feet, "but we are not winning this fight."

As the four of them ran through the door, the beast began to steady itself. They slammed the doors shut, sliding a piece of metal through the handles to keep it closed.

They could hear the abomination pounding upon the barred doors. The pounding ceased, and the moist slaps of bare flesh smacking the ground replaced it. The slaps faded, and they realized the creature was running away.

"Will it follow us?" a meek voice inquired.

"This place is a maze," their leader said. "Each room seems to have at least three exits. It could catch up to us yet. Hell, we may find it standing in front of us again before we escape."

Cul limped heavily as she aided him. His leg was bleeding. There was a long crack in his armor along the ribs. He refused to release his axe, holding it tight as it dragged beside him.

Unhindered by the weight of the bags or an injured companion, Taj led them forward. She held her sword out before her, readied to thrust if another beast were to appear.

"Once we get a place to hold up for a spell," their leader said reassuringly, "we'll tie up that leg. Keep it from bleeding. Get you back to the horses in as fine a shape as the rest of us. You'll have blonde sutures made from my own hair if that's what it takes to get you home."

As Taj stepped into the hallway, the floor beneath her gave. A small crack on the seldom-traveled floor splintered before its center devolved into dust and loose debris. Her feet slipped below the floor before she could react. Her legs twitched to find stable footing and found nothing but empty air. Her knees rose, but they struck the underside of the floor as she continued her descent. The hole grew wider, and her hands reached out to catch what fragments of the floor remained. It crumbled at her touch. Her body lurched forward, her head striking the corner of a jagged piece of floor. Her eyes rolled, her head flung back, and her arms went limp, no longer striving to grab the dissolving ledge as she fell into open sky.

Weighed down by the bags, the unarmed woman stumbled forward, her tiny hands grasping desperately for her companion as she reached the edge of the hole.

Her hands found nothing but emptiness. Her friend descended beyond her grasp, softly gliding with the wind until her body struck the distant stone streets beneath them.

She leaned back, her eyes wet with the promise of tears as she turned to her remaining two companions.

"Don't cry for them yet," their leader said, dragging Cul beside her. Cul was a tall man, but his

head only came up to her shoulders. "We're getting on the other side of this hole to get the hole between us and that thing, in case it catches up to us; we're going to properly bandage his leg; and we're going to make it back to the horses!"

Her conviction was convincing enough to dam their sorrow.

They traversed the gap, fear gripping each of the three as they moved Cul over the hole. They made it across, the mouth in the floor taking no more of them. They bound Cul's leg and packed the wound with herbs. Their descent through the twisting spires was swift, now looking simply for a ground or near-ground place to exit rather than a specific room within the maze. They passed through a large archway whose intricate details had eroded over time. On the outskirts of the mass of twisted spires, they found themselves on the opposite side from where they came in. A mountain stood on each side of them, the western mountain possessing the gaping mouth of a cave.

"There," their leader said, her long finger pointing with her free hand to the eastern mountain. "Our horses are on the other side of that. We could go around or take the path up it and hope there is a way down on the other side. There may be fewer monsters up there." She stopped, eyeing her two companions intently, waiting for a response from either of them.

Cul's eyes grew large and fearful, his mouth opening without sound or utterance. A black tendril that looked like a deep shadow rose up from the mouth of a cave and snaked around them. It reared back, reacting as though it was surprised. The S-shaped curl it took poised the end of it as though it was staring at them.

"Get away from him!" their leader cried, slashing at it with her spear.

The sharpened head of the spear cut through the black tendril. Its inky form slipped around the spearhead, reforming when it passed through, the spear looking like a hand slashing through running water. Unscathed by her attack, the tendril snapped back into the utter darkness of the mouth of the cave. Three more tendrils birthed from the cave. Their long, slender forms surrounded the three, lashing out at them two at a time from opposite sides. Cul readied his axe, but, barely able to stand by his own power, there was little he could do. Their leader continued to slash with her spear, herding her companions away from the cave.

A tendril caught her leg from behind. She turned, her reflexes still sharp, readying her spear to stab it into the ground. Another caught her arm, holding her back from the thrust.

They pulled her off her feet. Her body crashed to the ground. Her free hand clawed at the stone streets, but her fingers found no hold.

The tendrils retracted, pulling her back at such speeds her body lifted from the ground. Her hand never found a hold, her pleas slowed her none, and her eyes, though they briefly met those of her companions, held no power in keeping the darkness from consuming her.

The other tendrils slunk back into the cave, fading into the black. The darkness lowered, sealed behind the jaws of a massive creature, muting her cries as its lips came together. Its skin was a drab brown, covered in warts and aggravated sores. Its head was round like that of a toad, but the eyes that peered out at the two remaining people were set in its head. While its face was as wide as the entrance to the cave, they knew not how big its body was. And in their fear, they cared not to discover.

The End of the Road

Through marshes with dread as present and palpable as the muck, over crags that sank to depths I dared not fathom, up towers guarded by creatures comprised of stone and flesh and nightmares, and through fields where the bodies of the dead remained standing and coated in ash, I found a new fear in the network of tunnels in the mountain beneath the chapel.

A crushing darkness spanned through it. This darkness slowed my steps and pushed the air down, forcing me to gasp harder for weaker breaths. The eldritch walls seemed to embrace it, for the wet stone would recoil when my lantern drew near. The moisture itself would bead and slide away from the flame, stopping when it was free of the light's brightest point. In my morbid fascination, I heard a muffled cry from a distant corridor echo across the stones.

I prayed to gods I believed in and those I had abandoned, hoping one would hear my plea and offer hope and peace among such trials.

It called out again in sorrow. An almost-human murmur was nearly lost in the powerful groan. The cry sounded disjointed, as though it were two creatures attempting to make the same noise.

The fine steel of my rapier slid out of its sheath. Despite my fear, my hand remained loose upon its handle. Blood from the creatures I had slain still lingered on the blade. I would have to remember to clean it better this time. I drew the dagger with my other hand, readying both weapons for whatever abomination came.

I heard the sound of it running. Clomping footsteps with an edge of softness, like massive slabs of meat slapping stone. Two by two. *Duh-duh, duh-duh*. Quadruped. The sounds of its mushy feet and horrid cries grew louder.

Despite its appearance when it rounded the corner of the cave, the flame of the lantern that hung from my pack did not waver. I, in fear and shock, did.

Hunched forward to run on all four of its limbs, it was half again as tall as I was. Mounds of rounded muscle and flopping fat rolled over each other, giving it a wide girth. Its legs were thicker than my whole body and its arms not much thinner. Its hands were far broader and thicker than any human hand could be, but they were hands nonetheless. Five fingers and all.

A thick, dark brown coat of hair ran across its back and draped partway down its sides. Other patches of stiffer material covered portions of its pink flesh. The hair wafted as it ran, giving its bulbous appearance a strange elegance.

The hair stopped at its neck, but not from any natural anatomy. A steel helmet, straining to keep what lay within contained, ran from its head down to its neck. The ends of the helmet splintered and coiled as its neck grew thicker. A strange, steel beak grew from the front of the neck. Above it, the helmet split. Resting on short cylinders, the helmet ended in two steel faces, as though each face wore a respectable helmet of their own. The faces were weathered, scratched, and twisted by years of neglect.

As the creature barreled toward me, I leaped to its side. I slashed at its hand while it passed, slicing its tender flesh open.

The initial stab sent blood arcing out from the wound. As the blade slid and the wound widened, blood poured from it.

The creature slid to a halt. It turned ungracefully, swiping at me before it fully rotated.

The meaty hand passed me, its clutching fingers threatening to grasp my whole body if I had stepped any slower. I plunged my dagger but struck nothing, for it moved too quickly. I regained my footing as I retracted the blade.

With another dreadful cry, it opened its hand and swiped down at me. I dove forward, landing beneath its elbow. My lantern chipped the floor in my roll, but its sturdy design held true.

I slid my rapier deep into its leg. The crouching monster screamed. I dragged my dagger across its flesh as I slid between its legs. While it began its lumbering turn, I gouged at it with my blade, quickly leaping back to avoid a strike.

But as it turned and grasped the wound on its leg, I saw something I recognized on its finger: a gauntlet. Worn like a ring, the gauntlet had burst around its finger. The twisted metal had melded into its skin.

As it faced me, I could make out the details of the solid patches of brown that clung to and bubbled from its body. When it drew close, the light revealed all. Swatches of cloth and pieces of leather hardened enough for armor protruded from its flesh. They were weathered but sturdy. Its body enveloped them as they slumped back into the folds of fat and muscle.

Would this creature fight with the veracity of the beast it appeared to be or with the cunning ruthlessness of the person it may have once been?

It reared up on its hind legs. Its breath stuttered in pain as it wailed. The voices emanated from inside the helmet. I saw nothing move within the small slits each helmet had for eyes and a mouth. It held nothing but an empty darkness.

Its massive fist came down. Leaping to the side, my shoulder caught the edge of a protruding rock. Uncut, I felt my flesh begin to bruise as I tumbled back to my feet. My arm hurt as I rotated my shoulder to confirm that I still could. Satisfied with my range of motion, I thrust my sword into its leg once more.

Blood seeped from its wounds. A person would be long dead from such lacerations, but a creature of its stature held an unsettling amount of blood. The cries that bled through the slits of its helmet grew louder and more pain-stricken. What sort of face could be contained within that helmet? What gnarled, perhaps once-humanoid, features could twist so horribly to produce that sound?

I rolled beneath its swiping hands, continuing to move until I was out of arm's reach. With a cry of indiscernible emotion, its massive fingers plunged into the cracks around a portion of the wall. With a terrible heave, the creature ripped an oblong piece of stone from the wall. It stumbled as it clomped toward me, its bare feet making heavy slaps as they struck the stone floor.

It whirled around, off balance as it released the giant stone. As I suspected, the creature led me. Already prepared, I stepped back, avoiding the projectile.

The creature did not stop its rotation. As it spun toward me, it stretched out its arm. I moved to avoid it, but the size of its opened palm was too great. It struck me, launching me from the ground.

A jagged edge of the wall crushed my ribs as I slammed it. My arm and the side of my face scraped across the wall as I slid. I was breathless as I hit the ground and struggled to stand.

It charged toward me.

Gripping my side, I rolled under it, raising my sword as I tumbled. I slit it from neck to belly, my sword snapping off in its chest. I jabbed the splintered end into its gut as it continued to move above me.

It cried, bleeding profusely out of its freshest wounds. It staggered, feet and hands shuddering with each step. With cries and pain of my own, I moved deeper into the cave, away from the monster. It seemed too wounded to pursue.

Continuing inward into the cave, I felt the wetness between my armor and body. Blood. I still couldn't breathe properly. I had a shattered rib. Maybe a few. Perhaps a deflated lung. I staggered into the cave.

"I'm not going to die," I said, convinced my words had meaning. "Not here. I am going to make it out of this. If I get a bit further, I can sew this up. I can stop the bleeding. I can find it and make it back."

I heard my words echo in the empty cave.

As I continued into the cave and the roars of the beast faded, I saw a figure before me. It was a vision of salvation. An angel stood tall before me.

"Help me," I said as I limped toward it, staring at her crow-like face. "I am not going to die."

I reached up, barely able to touch her solid hand. "You can help me."

I slid to my knees, grasping her cloak as I pleaded. "Please help me."

Part One

She was some tattered demalion, a dirty woman who was desperate for food and drink. She'd lost her husband. She had no money stashed in her weathered clothes. She was living on the streets, long enough to forget for how long but not long enough to be comfortable with it. Her dismay muted her bodily needs until nearly all of her functionality failed her. Her head ached as if her brain was devouring itself, and her stomach churned within her gut as though it searched for the smallest overlooked morsel of food.

"You," she heard a voice call out.

She turned to see a tall woman sitting at a table with three others. She was a head taller than anyone else in the place. Her straight, blonde hair was loose, falling its full length to stop just above her hips. Leather half-gauntlets with spines protruding from them covered the tops of her hands, and each hand held a separate drink. Her smile was warm. It displayed white teeth and a bit of gum.

"You seem in need of job," she said. "No offense."

She turned to hear the tall woman's offer.

"We need a pack mule," the tall woman said, raising her hands as if the statement excited her. "Nothing glamorous, but no special skills are required other than the ability to walk and hold the goods we collect. And you'll get an even cut of the goods."

"What goods?" the battered woman asked, unsure if it even mattered to her.

"Gold, mostly," the tall woman replied. "That's what most people pay us with. But after we get some resources together, probably in a year or so, we're going for a retirement run to the corrupted land. There we can get enough gold and treasure for all of us to live pretty for the rest of our lives. Stay true, carry the load, and you'll get an even share of that as well."

"What do you say?" she asked, her smile growing even wider. Her honest eyes shone brighter in the silence. "Will you join us?"

She remained silent. She stared at the tall woman's blue eyes, but not into them. Her mind was too distant and busy with thoughts of hope and uncertainty to focus on anything physical. Unable to smile, she spoke.

"What is your name?"

"Calazi," the tall lady replied with a reassuring grin. She stood, towering over the woman before placing one of her drinks on the bar and extending her empty hand. "What's yours?" Calazi asked.

"Lavin," she replied.

Epilogue

I saw the churning clouds that circled the borders of the kingdom. I saw wildlife diminish in fear of what lay near its edges. I saw grass wither as the wind blew from that wretched place. But such things would not keep me from my quest.

I avoided the twisting spires, for the tales from the old woman were still fresh in my mind. I saw the mountain in the distance, barely making out the tombstones and unearthed coffins that crept over the side.

I sought the text in the chapel. I sought the holy words scribed on blessed paper by ink bled from the angels. Instead, I found blasphemous images of unholy unions and divinations of unending doom and suffering. My eyes wept blood, and my tongue made its own language as it pulled itself from my mouth. The ink of the ancient scripts sang to me, rattling the spines of their books with a siren's song. The door to the cellar, the innermost library of eldritch texts, opened before me. More songs, constructed of words and noises mouths could not replicate, pulled my flesh from my bone, tugging me painfully toward its blackened maw.

My eyes adjusted to the dark, and I could read the words as if they were text in the air.

I fled; the unseen holds on my flesh tore as I ran. Blood poured from my wounds. My eyes grew weaker. The visage of the physical world faded as my body wavered from the loss of blood. The sounds returned. I saw the text guiding me back. It covered the world in the lexicon of a language I was beginning to understand. I could no longer see the ground, but I saw the words show me where to step. I could not see the sunlight, but the words forged a meaning of illumination.

I followed them. I grew to understand their song. The words made sense to my foreign mind.

It brought me to the deepest library, but I did not turn away from its power. I could not. My lust to understand more of those antediluvian words propelled me into a glorious tomb of knowledge.

It will teach me everything. I will know all a mortal mind can hold. Then it shall split, and I will know more.

About the Author

In the blackness of the night, my mind slipped beyond the confines of mortal planes. Knitted within nightmares and dreams, I found a land where I did not obey rules, I made them. I found a place where the unconventional can become standard; a spectacle beyond what eyes can behold, but not more than the mind can comprehend. May the worlds beyond be as influential and entertaining to you as they are to me, and may I be a worthy guide.

My wife and I enjoy collecting Halloween paraphernalia, making costumes for any occasion we can think of, playing video games, buying too many *Magic: The Gathering* cards, trash talking over board games, and (usually) avoiding human interaction. I enjoy anything science-related that brings us closer to *Ghost in the Shell*, learning about dinosaurs, and sword fighting. I absolutely love tabletop RPGs and if I could only play one kind of game for the rest of my life, it would be those.

We live in a modest quadplex in Charlotte, North Carolina, and dream to one day expand our family by owning a few cats.

For RPG stories and ideas, reviews, other thoughts, and an assortment of fun stuff, go to my website: RexiconJesse.wordpress.com.

To contact me, you can email me at jessegalena@gmail.com, follow me on Twitter @[RexiconJesse](https://twitter.com/RexiconJesse), or like me on Facebook, facebook.com/jessegalena.

You and your thoughts are important to me, so I would love to hear from you.