



POCKET FULLA SPIDERS

VOLUME ONE
AND OTHER SHORT STORIES



TABLE OF CONTENTS

POCKET FULLA SPIDERS

Chapter 2 - The Birth of the Squirm

Page 1

THE LINK BETWEEN THOSE WITH THUMBS

A Darkest Entry Special

Page 9

FERTILE TROUGH

Standalone Short Story

Page 25

Chapter 2 - BIRTH OF THE SQUIRM

The ghostly corpse rolled freely in the back of the hearse, bumping into the sides of the wall and other boxes that were carelessly stored in the back. Beneath it was a large and empty casket that would be used tomorrow to forever contain the flesh and bones, eventually all bones, of an elderly man to be laid in his final resting place. Uncle was presiding over the service, a stranger to the family but the source of comfort and strength during their dark and vulnerable time. He'd place the casket on a stand, opened for all the guests to have one final look of a man they would only barely recognize, shriveled and gaunt in places where there was once a full smile. Then Uncle would repeat some words from their religious texts and slowly lay the body down in the hole opened deep into the soil.

But for now, the dead man's velvet palace was just a box in the back of an old car with an ensnared vessel of a past-dead creature clunking on its roof. Arath looked into the back a few times throughout their drive to refresh his confidence that there was no exit for the beast that was inside. There was probably a proper term in some paranormal educational textbook that defined what exactly this creature could be classified as but for now, Arath and Uncle only referred to them as ghosts. This was the eighth ghost

that the two had dealt with so far, all unintentional and more burdensome than exciting for Arath especially. He had never asked for the life that he was living and while others would kill for the chance at seeing these supernatural apparitions, he was not a fan despite having the proper tools to deal with them without worry or fear of succumbing to a nightmarish end.

The spiders were the least of his concerns. Arath was once outgoing, spending everyday with different friends as they would ride bikes throughout the city, deposit bags of coins at the arcade and play in short-lived bands. Over the last five or so years during the transition from the end of high school to the last year of his time in college, Arath had not been able to maintain these friendships for a number of reasons but mostly simply put, the result of time moving forward and life taking people to places where they had to go. Another school, another city or another job, one by one until he was the only one left. He hadn't formed any life-changing friendships since starting college, just casual acquaintances to pass the time, learning their name and no more than two or three interesting facts about each other. Now, Arath had the spiders to keep him entertained. Though they were attached to him in a way that most people would only wish on

their most hated enemy, they counted as company and would fill the room with life, dulling any aching silence that had cursed the young man before. Friends. Eight-legged, demonic and otherworldly friends.

The part of the curse that annoyed Arath a great deal was that the spiders attracted beings that were typically beyond human perception. His once quiet stay in his Grandma's house would occasionally be interrupted by a vengeful passerby that he had no connection to, yet they called for his blood and soul nonetheless. Every time, he'd remove his hand from his pocket and the spiders were beyond quick to recognize the danger, weaving a powerful tomb that would subdue them quietly and permanently. They didn't act as an extension of his body directly but somehow they listened to him, without words or instructions, as if the synapses in his brain were firing off their signal to them as well. He could only watch and try to learn from them as they were in action. Only through talking with his Uncle did they begin to put some theories together.

Uncle was the perfect person for Arath to share this information with as he was the only one who was standing with his nephew as the curse became reality in a stoneladen room inside a tribal temple with a 'Do Not Enter' post clearly at the entrance.

Back then, they had traveled outside of the city to a nearby countryside town with a history of indigenous civilization.

Trophies of monumental achievements, centuries old at this point, were spaced out among the provinces in their ruined state. At this point there were more fragments scattered and difficult to find but a few temples remained put together despite all the years of weathering and erosion. This particular location that the two had traveled to was probably the most famous of all, much larger than modern churches, with tall and wide stone blocks that built the foundation in a rectangular shape. No one was allowed inside the building itself but they could walk the steps to the top and see the many shrines that were on the outside on various levels. Each floor decreased in size until the summit, where it peaked like a pyramid but with a glass ornament that allowed the sun to send its light inside to dance along the mysterious, ancient ritual rooms.

Arath and his Uncle stopped by many of the shrines and took a few pictures on a disposable camera, still making photo albums the old-fashioned way. They explored attractions such as this more like explorers rather than tourists, trying to find the answers themselves to any curiosities that came to mind.

Alongside one of the shrines that appeared more broken down than the others, Arath and his Uncle noticed a tiny walkway that extended to the inside. No one was around to deny them access but they knew it was off limits like the rest of the rooms. It was only a few steps to get inside and appeared to be a balcony that provided a better vantage point for the overall room.

They carefully kneeled and ducked their way in,

carving their way around the glacially collapsing stone structures, making sure as to not create any noise or break any of the ancient columns. The sun shone through the top and bounced around on mirrors then dimly lit the inside. It looked like the indigenous ancients that erected the temple had a deep understanding of geometry. Triangles of light showed the earthly skeleton but nothing more. There were empty stone clips on the wall that appeared to be holders for torches but alas Arath and his Uncle were torchless. Except for a lighter his Uncle had in his pocket. They thought twice about and decided they would light it just to see if anything else could possibly be seen on the balcony they stood on.

Uncle flicked his lighter to life and disappointingly, nothing more about the temple revealed itself. A few moths flew over to see the flame and a frog hopped right behind them, making a loud, wet thud, looking for food amongst the hovering insects. The frog stared at both of them but the two men didn't scream or make any big sudden movements, just looked at each other with relief that the amphibian was the only one that had discovered them.

They expected the frog to sling its tongue outside of its mouth and onto one of the moths but it remained shut with cheeks bulging, like something was trapped in the back of his throat. Arath reached out and grabbed the frog to see what he might be able to do to

help. It was girthy and large, and didn't put up a fight to run away when grabbed by this human. Arath stared at the frog and examined to see what might have been making it so puffy and strange. He gave its belly a small squeeze and its mouth opened, showing that the frog was fully stuffed with an assortment of shiny objects. Arath held the frog upside down and began squeezing to eject all the misplaced treasures onto the stone floor. The frog shrank with size as its financial future was now in jeopardy.

Arath and his uncle were shocked to see just how many coins, about 45 or so, had been in the frog this whole time. Could it have eaten them one at a time and realized too late that they weren't going down? Or did someone use the frog as a purse and it hopped away? Whatever the case was, the frog, now empty, was eager to hop away and return to where it came from. Arath and his Uncle surveyed the area outside to see if anyone was running towards them after hearing the clanging of the coins as they fell to the floor but the coast was clear.

They both looked at each other and uncle nodded with his eyebrows raising, suggesting that they had found a worthy souvenir. They picked the coins up one by one and placed them in their pockets, knowing they'd share whatever the find was once they talked about it later. After their pockets were stuffed, they quickly made their way back to the outdoor portion of the shrine and began to walk back to the stairs.

There was no point in risking their find by exploring more of the temple so they hurriedly strolled back to their ride. Before they reached the truck, Arath's pocket had begun to tighten and it felt like several threads of his pants had begun to tangle themselves around his hand. He tried to pull away but it only got tighter, he looked at his uncle with a sense of urgency.

"Hey uncle, I can't take my hand out of my pocket. Something's holding it inside," said Arath.

"Huh? Did you grab a snake or something" Replied his uncle.

"No way. Come on, it's starting to pull my hand in deeper."

"Come on Arath, stop kidding around. Here let me see what's going on here."

Uncle at first tried to grab Arath by the arm and pull his hand out but he saw that his nephew wasn't playing a prank, it was really stuck in there.

Uncle stuck his hand in Arath's pocket to see what was binding him to his denim and was met with several insects that quickly bit his hand and began to crawl out of the pocket and onto his arm.

"Arath! It's damn spiders! Pull out before they bite you too. Son of a gun that hurts." Yelled uncle.

"What?! But nothing's biting me. I can feel the crawling on my hand but no pain yet."

"Look at my hand! You see those bite marks right? Let me squash them, they must have bitten your

hand or something and made it numb."

Uncle began to swat, punch and kick Arath's hand in his pocket and tried again to pull his nephew's arm out of the pocket.

"Uncle stop! I can feel everything. It's not budging!" Arath said with uneasiness finally reaching his voice.

Arath began to move and wiggle his fingers around to see how many spiders were actually in there and to see how they could possibly be holding his hand down. There were countless arachnids amongst the coins and they'd build a silky prison that might as well have been steel threads. One of the coins jingling in his pocket felt vastly different than the others. It felt almost hot to touch and the moment he touched it, it felt like his eyes blinked but he hadn't blinked at all. Grazing the coin with his fingers was blacking out his vision each time.

The two men were already near the truck and uncle decided to pick Arath up and run for it. They were either going to get in trouble for stealing from the temple or Arath was going to die from some strange species of spider.

They arrived at the truck and uncle was going to take Arath to the hospital. They would have to worry about the bigger trouble they might be in if it came to that but he only cared about saving his nephew at that moment. Arath said next to him, contemplating what

he might be able to do in the meantime. The spiders were not biting him after all.

“Don’t worry kid, we’re going straight to the emergency room. Surely they’ll have some type of anti-venom for ya. Damn, I’m starting to feel a little sleepy too. I think these bites are starting to knock me out.” His uncle said, eyes starting to slowly droop down.

Arath could drive them if he could get his hand free and help his uncle move over. He started to forcefully shake his hand around and pulled as hard as he could. In the struggle, the warm coins slipped into his palm and Arath felt compelled to squeeze it with all his might. In an instant, his vision turned to black.

He was not unconscious. His senses were working fine and were picking up all kinds of strange signals. He heard a rustling noise all around him that only got louder the more he paid attention to it. His eyes darted around where he was and tried to make out any shapes but only hill-shaped silhouettes appeared in the distant horizon.

He was unable to yell or call out to anyone. Even opening his mouth to breathe was impossible. The light must have slowly trickled into his eyes and he could now see the hills were vibrating and moving. He looked down to where his feet should be and the ground was squirming and moving in strange patterns. It wasn’t grass swaying in the wind or water washing onto a

beach. It was spiders. Everything, everywhere, was spiders, as far as his eyes could see. This was the first vision Arath had into their world.

At Arath’s Grandma’s house, Uncle got out of the hearse to unlock the squeaky metal gate, opening it up so he could back the hearse into the driveway and park in front of the garage. If it wasn’t for Uncle’s unique self-employment, the neighbors eyes might have been lookingly onto the two men worriedly as they unpacked a silky casket bag and walked straight into their front door.

Grandma was tending to her garden in the backyard, paying no attention as they walked straight to the bottom of the basement. She never went into the basement, leaving it to Arath as a space of his own, where he and Uncle would play music together or spend a late night in a video game session. She hadn’t seen the cocoons that were down there, tied to the floorboards using the web from Arath’s pocket spiders.

This was the eighth overall phantom that he had collected and there was no sign of slowing down. Uncle slapped it one time on the side after it was tightly secured in place and he left to go play a late night gig, to sing background tunes for drunken partygoers. Arath wouldn’t spend another thought on his new prey this evening. He grabbed the remote, sat down on the couch and so began another episode of a decades old sitcom.

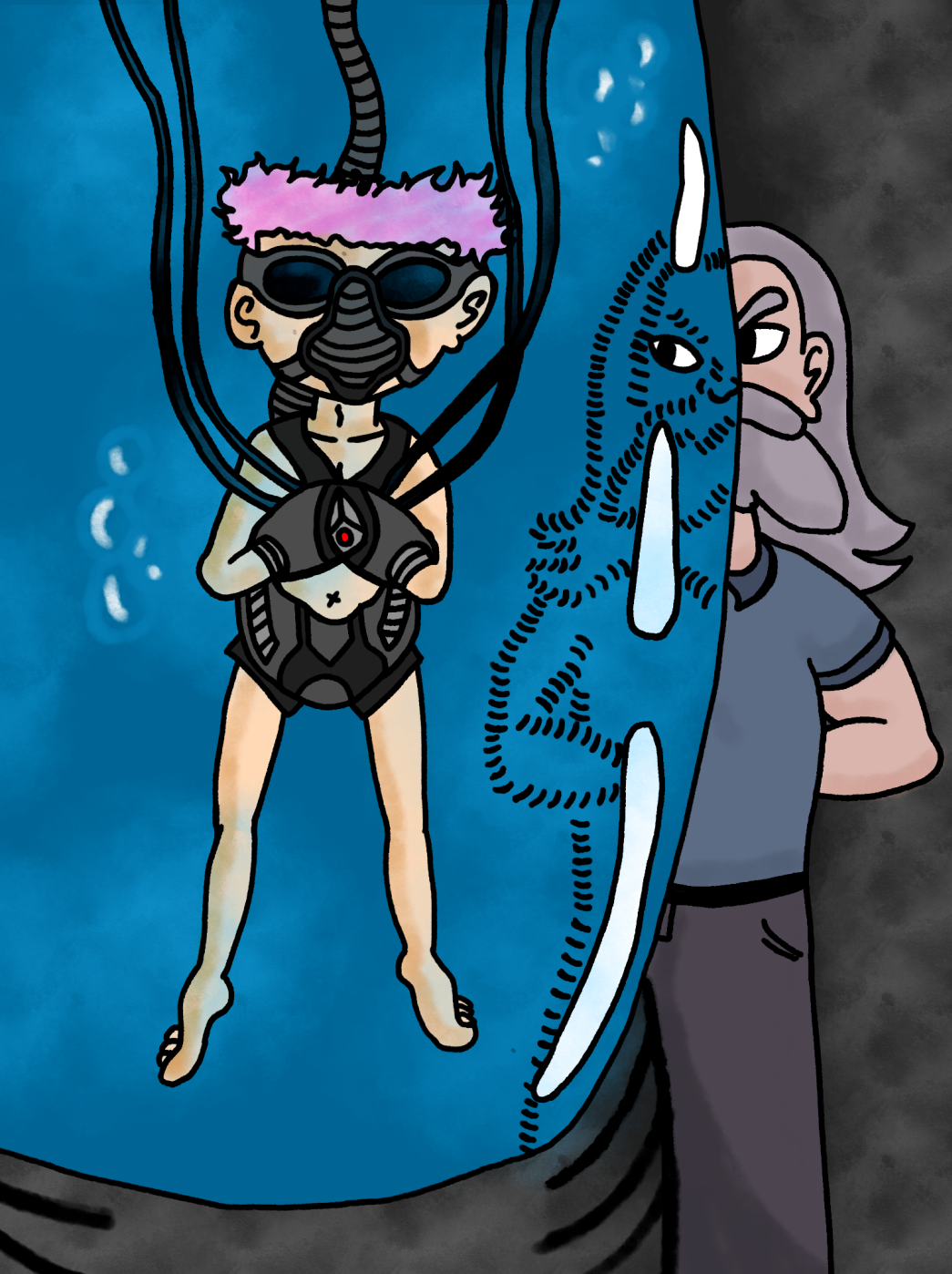
For more: **POCKET FULLA SPIDERS**, read the first eleven chapters of the novel in progress at:

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The Link Between Those With Thumbs

There are topics of the paranormal that have been studied and explored to such a tiring degree and yet have yielded no fruitful truths, only generating electrifying false narratives that keep people up at night. These tales will mostly make their way in and out of conversation with real detectives with no new angle or development. The Author didn't know why he took this particular caller tip more seriously than the others but it was based on a gut feeling, the least scientific measurement possible. It wasn't for absolutely no reason, however, as his interest peaked after one tiny detail emerged – "no human could have strangled this bear," said the caller. He asked for what evidence the caller had and he simply said "the bear, I have it, right here."

The Author loaded up his truck with camping equipment and decided to pay the strangled bear a visit. The caller lived in a small country town just about an hour and a half away, finding the scene while hiking in a nearby park. The Author arrived at the edge of the forest and parked in the visitor lot, a few kilometers walk from the final destination.

It was early in the afternoon and the sun was still shining through his shaded sunglasses as he stroked the handlebar mustache that sat on his face and around his lips like a half-coiled, fuzzy anaconda. He wore a camo hat to further conceal his identity, despite his celebrity status being limited to a radio host of a show with only double digit listeners.

The rendezvous location was at one of the checkpoints in the park where the caller would then lead the Author to the slightly decomposed bear. The man told him that he was just getting some extra exercise and relaxation by hiking when he came upon the animal. He was an amateur powerlifter who often lifted stones and pulled heavy tractor tires, telling the Author so because in all his years competing, he never saw anyone that strong to not only withstand a bear's offensive attack but also crush its windpipe in the manner that he saw.

He was standing at the agreed spot and they shook hands, introducing themselves. The caller, real name Otto, brought the Author about 2 kilos further into the forest, trying to conjure up some small talk but this was strictly business and any personal information about the radio host was locked away.

The Author questioned Otto's theories on what he saw to hopefully extinguish any doubts of a hoax. Otto was an avid bigfoot believer after all, as well as many other cryptids, but he

made it a point that this was the only in-person experience he had ever had. He wanted to believe it but had enough self-respect to not try and talk himself into a life if he hadn't ever seen something with his own two eyes.

The two arrived at the bear, laid on its back and now further turned into mush, collecting legions of hungry flies and pulsating munching maggots that would help nature run its course. They walked over to see the all-telling neck of the bear and a single bead of sweat quickly formed on the side of the Author's forehead at the sight. It was totally crushed, squeezed like an aluminum soda can, completely contrasting the size of the head above and the mighty chest below. A grip unlike anything on earth.

Next, the Author examined the nails of the bear, where there was plenty of dried and crusty black blood to give evidence of combat or possibly, self-defense. You could spend all the time in the world thinking of animals that could win fights against bears but none of them would match this description. If someone smuggled in an animal for some sick deathmatch, it would take an elephant, rhino or maybe a hippo to outlast a bear and their attack methods would never match this.

The Author took several pictures and samples of the area, thanked Otto for his information and was about to part ways

when he mentioned one last nugget of knowledge of the area. There was a famous stock car racetrack nearby that's filled with a group of bigfoot hunters. Otto claimed that he never talked with them about the subject and didn't want to report this particular find because they emphasize that they are hunters of bigfoot, not just curious enthusiasts wanting to witness the 'squatch. For the listeners of Darkest Entry radio, the Author encourages an attitude of coexistence with the paranormal and Otto recognized that these people had perverted aspirations of mounting Bigfoot's head like a trophy on the wall. It's possible that they have more information from their excursions in the same forest, drunk as they may have been.

The two said their goodbyes and the Author promised that he would share the results of the investigation on the airwaves with all the other listeners. The scene was well documented and then it was time to set up camp for the evening. In a few hours, mosquitos would begin their sundown feasts on all exposed flesh and the owls would hoot along with the arrival of the moon. The Author would be returning here but after first making a quick trip to the race track just to make sure he had exhausted all resources. He didn't want to get too close with wannabe paranormal trophy hunters but if they had any recent observations of this bigfoot or whatever it may be, then

it could potentially make the investigation that much easier. It also might help to know when their hunts take place so there is not a drunken present delivered from the barrel of a gun.

The evening races were in their final preparations when the Author arrived. You could hear all the engines revving up, the raucous crowd was pouring in with their ice chests stocked with beer and their favorite racer's faces printed across the shirts they wore. The Author was no stranger to the countryside or the people that lived there but the town where the races were taking place truly had the reddest of necks. Hardworking farmers, truck drivers and tradespeople all looked to wash away the day's stresses with the roaring motors and thundering pipes as they made their way past the vibrating asphalt and up the clunky metal bleachers. The Author was wearing his camping attire and fit right in as many others were also making a weekend out of the event and would be around outdoors as well, pitching tents on the campgrounds with friends and family.

He sat smack dab in the middle of the bleachers to get a good observational point to look for those folks that matched Otto's description. Most of the teams were wearing matching uniforms with sponsorship logos across nearly every available space. He used binoculars to scan around and observe the various pit crews until one particular fellow stood out. He was

very large compared to the rest of his team and any other teams for that matter. He was easily over two meters tall with a huge, healthy bush of hair that went down to his shoulders with an equally bushy beard covering the front of his face as well. He wore a long sleeve shirt and long pants with knee pads and massive boots, covering almost all of his skin from head to toe. The arms of his shirts and pants stretched from the bulk of his flesh as he spun several tools around various nuts and bolts on different parts of the car. He was an intimidating figure and certainly someone you'd want your team to hunt down a bear-strangling cryptid, though even someone like this might not be able to overcome that strength.

Among all the sponsorship patches seen on the various team uniforms, one team patch stuck out above the rest – Sasquatch Watch. The Author heard of the company before, some sort of tactical gear company that claimed to be owned by military veterans and sold over-the-top tools for civilians that they would wait all their life to feel that the purchase was justified. For example, the local TV commercial for the brand advertised thermal glasses with full-body heat imaging. It showed some guy in cargo shorts using them to hunt down a deer with a rifle with so many attachments, you'd think he was hunting a group of rebel mercenaries. "A man's way to fight

the unknown", the tag line said with a deep baritone voice over the twangs of a distorted guitar.

The driver laid on a hammock next to the teamcar while wearing his uniform, a mask over his eyes and his shoes kicked off. They were clearly confident at what they were doing and were fan favorites as the face of the driver was on so many of the shirts that were around the racetrack. Many of the crew members were rowdy, horseplaying around as they suited up the car for piston-firing battle.

The Author cracked open a lemon-lime soda and watched on as the cars lined up to the starting line and the crowd began to roar louder and louder for the carbon fiber horses. He talked to a man sitting next to him with his family and asked what were the storylines of the drivers this week, were there any rivalries or underdogs that should be paid attention to. He told the Author the Sasquatch Watch car was on a streak lately, winning four of the last five races. The Bobby Bobby Bobson's Tires car came in second several of the last races and was looking for their first win of the season. He mentioned four or five cars that could potentially win but he would place his money on the Chili Bean Dreams car because he heard they had an engine overhaul done thanks to a huge donation from local business man, Turk Madderson.

The Author then asked what he thought about the hulking mechanic that dwarfed those working alongside him. He said that he was an all-star mechanic that die-hard fans spoke about with high regard. Not much was known about him, he didn't say a single word to anybody. No one knew if it was by choice or if he was physically unable to. He just did his job and did it with ease thanks to his calculative brain and sturdy strength behind the tools. The Author thanked him and gave a friendly smile to the man's family, enjoying the kindness that one doesn't easily find in the city. They clanked their cans together in hopes of a good race.

The race was eventful with a tight four way dogfight over the second half of the two-hundred lap race. Sasquatch Watch mostly stayed in first with Chili Bean Dreams, Bobby Bobby Bobson and the veteran Dr. Willie's Wild Willie Pill cars changed their places again and again throughout the race. In the end, Sasquatch Watch pulled away and secured victory after one last close call with the Bobby Bobby Bobson car where they nearly collided with each other but Bobby Bobby Bobson's evasive maneuver blocked the other two cars, causing them to slam their brakes and lose all their momentum to catch first.

The driver of the Sasquatch Watch hopped out of his car triumphantly, blasting a champagne cork straight into the

crowd, hitting an older gentleman right in his bald spot as he wildly waved his cowboy hat in support of the car. Deder Vonman, the driver of the victorious car, had his name flashing on the large LED screen at the center of the audience stands as his theme songs rattled the ears of all those either cheering in support or booing out of favor for their chosen driver. He was cocky and waved goodbye to the other drivers that were piling in behind him, not exchanging any friendly wishes with the losers of the race. The scenes continued for quite some time but it was apparent that the party was not stopping, meaning that the Author would not have an opportunity to meet and talk with the day's heroes as they turned to beer and whiskey to fuel their good time. He knew who they were and would have to find another way to talk with them on another occasion as time would be much better spent at the site itself, seeing what was out there to find during the late night hours.

When he returned to his truck, the Author unpacked a few more investigative tools and set out for the campsite that was set up before traveling to the races. The walk back was different through a nocturnal lens, the shades of black layering the landscape with mysterious twists and turns in every direction. The moon painted the trees and soil with its pale blue light, revealing the next steps in the path only to those that kept moving forward.. As he walked around, he looked at

the surroundings and listened to all the buzzing life that was sitting, watching his every step. It felt isolating in that he was the only human taking these steps at this time of night but through all of his work with the paranormal, it almost feels more natural to be among what wishes to remain hidden.

At the campsite, the Author placed most of his belongings in the tent and took a seat at an unlit fire. If he were to light it at the moment, that would be the end of all subtlety and would certainly end any chance at finding the hairy beast. He gathered a few tools from his bag to help scout the area better. First was an electromagnetic field detector that would be used to detect any irregularities in the electronic frequencies of the area. All places with life have vibrations that form a natural amalgamation of interacting waves that become harmonic over time. If a paranormal creature was lurking in these woods, they'd likely emit a wave pattern that causes some dissonance in the magnetic fields. Next, a friendly can of bear spray and tranquilizer darts. The Author was not a lowly trophy hunter, no bodies would be going cold tonight.

After two hours of searching a large radius around where the bear was found, the Author found several squirrel tails laid next to each other like the tails of shrimp on the side of a plate at a seafood buffet. If it were an owl or fox, they would not leave the tail meaning this predator was advanced enough to

have tastes and preferences when eating. The amount of tails seen meant that the creature was quite large, requiring a healthy amount of protein in their diet.

About an hour later, the racket of squawking birds filled the air as they appeared to flee their area. They should be asleep at this time of the evening, making this disturbance certainly worth investigating. The Author took just a few steps into this new path and the EMF reader began to twitch, indicating a change. Walking around the city, this type of change could be shrugged off for a hundred different interference related reasons but in this secluded area, there are only a handful of causes and they all require caution.

Around 50 meters north, the Author saw something ahead in the forest, limping as they walked, holding onto one tree at a time while dragging a large metal clamp around their hairy ankle. They looked to be over two meters tall but it was hard to tell in their hunched over position, wincing in pain with each step while dragging a metal trap audibly as they powered forward. It was as the legends say, a mighty ape with the touch of humanity. She had bushy, wooly hair around everywhere but her feet, hands, breasts and face, similar to a gorilla but her hair was a dark shade of brown.

The Author was not the only one searching for this apparently female bigfoot as she suffered in pain by what

might be the luckiest catch a bear trap has ever had. She had ripped the chain out of the ground and had a chance to escape but at the risk of potentially losing her foot. The Author loaded the tranquilizer into a now extended blowgun, playing it safe so that he could remove the trap and bandage her up. He could take a fingerprint, a lock of a hair and a photograph while the bigfoot was unconscious and then wait for them to wake back up to see if he could possibly communicate with her.

The plan could not move forward though as a thunderous fist then smashed onto the Author's back with a hammering blow. His gut collided with the ground with such force that he bounced up a few centimeters but didn't touch the ground again. Whoever hit the Author grabbed the back of his shirt and tossed him to the side and into a tree with tremendous force. He clenched his teeth in pain and looked up from the dirt and saw only the back of the assailant.

That giant man from the track was standing in front and looking onto the hobbling bigfoot and then back again at the Author. He once again saw the bearded face, his eyes covered by the brim of his hat, but this time up close and with a threatening glare aimed right at the Author.

And then he spoke. .

"What did you do to her?" He said.

"Nothing. Found her like that." The Author replied.

He said to the Author with his voice grumbling lowly in a murmur. "Sorry you saw us."

He leapt off the ground and landed about fifteen meters from where he originally stood, now right in front of the Author, with dirt and dust cast into the air. He lifted his foot to stomp directly on the Author's head but he quickly rolled over and with the bear spray in my left hand, sprayed the blinding mist into his face. The massive figure lurched backwards and grabbed onto his face but the spray had also wet his beard, providing a long-lasting extra layer of defense. The Author quickly got to his feet and ran over to grab the blowgun that he dropped when he was initially hit. There was enough ammo left to incapacitate both figures in front of the Author, so he aimed for the man in front first to quell the immediate danger but the female bigfoot roared a mighty roar, disrupting the Author's aim.

The man leapt forward towards the howling beast, searching around her body until he found her leg and reached down to the trap. With just his hands, he destroyed the punishing grip of the bear trap by widening it until it snapped. He then grabbed the bigfoot and placed her arm around his shoulders and hoisted her up. He looked in the Author's direction and shouted with a primal yell, still with his eyes

clenched shut, then leapt forward and began to run with impressive speed. The yell was too similar to the bigfoot's to ignore. The confounding part of it all was that it clearly looked like he had lost none of his vision with the way that he moved through the forest as if the trees themselves were whispering where to go next. The Author sprinted after the two as he swerved and hopped around the trees with ease. It could not have been more difficult to follow them while his body ached with potentially broken bones from the beastly bludgeoning that was just received. The Author could not have kept pace if it wasn't for the fact that the man was holding the bigfoot who undoubtedly was quite the weight to bear. She was not fighting back against him, it was with familiarity that she clung to him for safety after he had freed her.

A loud shot rang out through the night and both men slammed their feet to a stop in the dirt, looking dumbfounded at each other as they knew it was neither of them firing.

"Are you protecting her?." The Author asked the mechanic.

"Yes." He replied.

"Then go." The Author said.

The Author looked at her face, with fear painted all over her face but it was directed at the Author, her hands squeezed around the man with comfort. The shot wasn't far off so he

could investigate it while the other two ran off deeper into the forest.

The Author began traveling into the direction of the shot, soon confirming that he was going in the right direction as he could hear the voices of a group of people. They were loud and argumentative, shouting at each other about the situation. The Author climbed up a tree and jumped a few branches forward to listen in on what they were saying exactly. They were angrily arguing about what to do following the firing of the shot, now obviously a mistake and with one person from the party lying flat, blood splattered all over his clothes and the ground. The Author recognized some of the faces of the group as part of the victorious team members from the race earlier, the Sasquatch Watch car crew.

They were drunk and loud, shouting blame chaotically as their friend was already too close to death to help, with wide-open holes showing that he was shot from the back. The Author listened in for more clues to why they would be out here in the first place when they had left to party earlier. They were discussing how to not get in trouble for what went down, as their friend was still breathing on the ground. It was an awful group of people that believed in self-preservation over all else. They were shouting out ideas to each other about potential solutions.

“Feed him to a bear!”

“Write a sad note!”

“Terry sucks! Put his fingerprints on the trigger!”

One of the men shouted that they had to get back to why they came here in the first place, time was of the essence. He was heard shouting at the others, “The trap! The trap! We have to go before it gets away!” They had left the celebration early after receiving some type of alert about the activation of one of their bear traps. This was their hunt and they had such faith that their target was captured that they ended their party just to see the hopefully trapped bigfoot. Now, they have lost one of their own and were in a drunken panic.

“Let’s just get the ‘squatch and blame it on them. This is the closest chance we’ve had since Derek saw her washing in the river. I forgot, did she look good at least Derek? Pervert, heh heh.” One of the men laughed.

The Author had to hope that the mechanic had taken her far away by now and was somewhere safe. The only thing he could do is go back to the trap that they were searching for and find the sensor in it. Thankfully, their drunken stupor wouldn’t allow them to challenge his pace towards the trap nor put together what had been done with their trap by the time they got there.

The Author arrived at the site and observed the mangled trap, finding a compact black box on the back of it with a dimly blinking green light. He could smash it right then and there but then they might still have the last known location which would lead them to a still fresh trail. The Author didn’t have the strength of the mechanic or the female bigfoot but he was able to use two large rocks to break the rest of the chain off so he could move with just the sensor. Quickly he set off towards the parking lot where he could return to his truck and then drive off with the sensor and dispose of it somewhere that would forever throw them off from the trail.

When he was nearing the edge of the forest, there were dozens of red glowing dots that could be seen between the trees. Reinforcements had arrived for the bigfoot hunters and they had come prepared to carry out the same mission with torches in hand. The lie must have spread across the small town already. They must have called somebody and a community like this sticks together, especially when faced with the danger of a wild beast on the loose. The Author moved closer just to confirm and saw a large crowd of the local town people, carrying torches, guns and various weapons such as baseball bats and crowbars. It was an angry mob here to avenge the fallen human by capturing the evil beast of the woods.

The forest was not so large that it could not be combed through if you had enough people and by the sight of the crowd, it looked like a large militia had arrived. The Author only had to worry about whoever had the tracking communicator and had to think quickly of a good location that would buy the mechanic some time. Nearby was the sound of a rushing river, its water moving fast and far like the arteries of the park. It would hopefully discourage its pursuers, showing the ‘beast’ was too fast to possibly capture or they might assume the injured creature had drowned while escaping. Either assumption was a better choice than keeping the device and moving around on his own two feet in random directions. So he stood on the mushy gravel on the river banks and tossed it right in the middle of the passing current.

Afterwards, the Author could not in good conscience leave without at least trying to find the mechanic and let him know what was coming and see if there was anything he could do to help. He quickly made his way back to the path that the mechanic had started running down and followed the tracks, spotting the mark of his boots in the mud that would help the Author find them. Several meters ahead, the boot marks became erratic, showing the swerving that the man had to have done to make his way through the woods, not having much difficulty in doing so with his minimal vision. Could the

temporary blindness boost his other senses so much that he could sense things around him? It shouldn’t work this well. Not for ordinary people.

The footsteps started to run parallel to a river moving downstream and ended in a waterfall just a little bit more ahead. When the Author reached the edge of the waterfall, he saw a large lake below that the water fed into, big enough for kayaks and canoes but not anything bigger. The outlet where the lake drained was much smaller and moved slower than the rushing stream before it. The footsteps that Author was following ended right before the water and didn’t move to the side, appearing to show that the mechanic went into the lake below and if this river was the same that the Author had thrown the tracking device in, the hunters now had a direct path as the tracker likely floated down to the bottom of the still lake. At every step of the investigation, luck was not on the Author’s side. He found a sasquatch but they were injured. He found their ally and then blinded them moments before the true devils had come to hunt the innocent down. Now, he did the hard work for people he was actively working against, bringing them to the very last place he wanted them to be.

The Author dove into the lake but it was nearly impossible to see where the two might’ve gone from there. He could only swim forward and look for evidence of new tracks on the

lakeshore but a hand gripped tightly around his leg and pulled him deep under the water. Before the Author could try to pull away from his new assailant, the other hand of the submerged attacker grabbed his face, the palm covering from the bottom of his mouth to the top of his forehead. He was quickly pulled away in an unknown direction, unable to see in the blackness of the water before he was finally dragged onto dry land. The rushing and whooshing of a waterfall could be heard and when the Author finally could adjust his eyes to the darkness, he saw that he was in the alcove behind the downpour of the river.

The Author was grabbed by the shirt and lifted up where he could finally see the stranger's face and for the first time his eyes. It was the mechanic that had taken the Author to this place.

"Who are you? What do you want?" He asked the Author.

"For now, know that I'm a friend. There's a much bigger problem." The Author replied, telling him about the incoming mob of townspeople and hunters that were going to find them in no time. Even worse, the waterfall would have a plunge pool that would keep the tracking device underneath it where it likely sank. The mechanic looked furious but then crouched down to his knees with a more defeated expression on his face.

"This...is my mom." He admitted to the Author. "They always look for her. Today they will find her, it appears."

"That's not certain, yet." The Author tried to comfort this son of a bigfoot with his mind filled with shock, amazement and curiosity that he had to momentarily conceal. He couldn't keep to himself one question however. "How come you speak my language? Aren't you like her?"

"She is what you call bigfoot or sasquatch. My father is like you." He told the Author.

"Your dad is human? Where is he now?" The Author asked.

"At work."

I have many questions after all of this."

There was so much more the Author wanted to know but he had to help them ward off the mob first. He turned to see the mother bigfoot now sitting up with her injured ankle turned, with blood dried black all over. The Author and the son of Bigfoot had to be quick as flickering tops of torches showed in the reflections of the water and through the waterfall. They were far away but soon would soon figure out their location.

The two sasquatches looked at each other, gesturing with their hands and changing their facial expressions, having a conversation without words. The Author began to wonder

just how deep the connections are between those with the ancestral primal blood of the forest ape and how bound they are to nature itself. The woman stood up with the help of her son and the Author asked him for his name. Junior. Simple enough.

The Author then asked Junior if he had any plans for an escape route at the moment, the mob inching closer. Junior looked at the Author and nodded. He walked over to the edge of the alcove, the waterfall dumping deep into the lake right before them, splashing onto his fur. Junior pulled out a knife from his pocket and ripped open his shirt, showing a chest more ape than human, with flesh that puffed with hair similar to his mothers.. He cut a line across his chest and then did the same to his mother. He helped her over to the water and both of them painted their hands with their own blood and then knelt down, washing it off and letting it diffuse into the lake.

A mist began to form over the top of the lake as if it was a boiling kettle but without the heat. It turned into a milky fog that rose and covered the entire surface before spreading to the lakeshore and into the forest itself. Both of the sasquatches started chanting in an unknown language and placed their hands in the water once more. The EMF was nearing 50 milligauss, much higher than the threshold for human safety. There was nothing the Author could do but watch in awe as

the two of them interacted with nature in a way that surpassed all reasonable understanding. The blood signaled a message to the living ecosystem of the forest itself and it seemed to be responding.

The Author placed his hands in front of his face, fingers spread and began to focus his mind on this feeling he was getting from the tangible spiritual presence arising from this bestial ritual. The Author was so close to a powerful irregular energy of the paranormal and the two sasquatches guiding him into a nighttime escapade into the edges of understood reality. Their ritual activated the collective energy of the forest and the Author wished to be plugged into it, for it was vast and infinite. He was drawn into the stream of energy as if he was a cell moving in a greater body. For all of his physical and mental training as a paranormal detective, there is no more essential skill than to wet your feet into unknown spiritual energy, whether it be in dissonance or harmony. He felt the essence of the forest as he surrendered his own energy into the system and attempted to join in. It was like being at the feet of a god with every part of the forest combined into one living body so connected through the roots, the flowers, the predators and the prey. It poured back into the Author as he opened himself up and felt just a sample of what the sasquatch probably could. The invaders of the town were aberrations that the

forest system deemed unwelcomed and was preparing to expel them like white blood cells tending to an infection.

“Please, don’t kill them. There has to be another way.” the Author said to Junior.

“Not my choice.” He replied and pointed to the middle of the lake.

Pointed antlers rose from the waters, twenty times the size of an Elk’s. It was translucent like a cloud with the sun shining through and rose further to reveal its long snouted face. It was textured with fur on the sides of its face despite the body being made of the lake water itself. Water churned and spurted as the rising forest ward spread its limbs, splashing out of the water and spearing its hooved feet into the dirt of the shore. The mob was frozen in place as they gazed onto the mighty spirit that towered over them, casting dread deep into their hearts.

The Author remained locked in with the body of the forest system and felt fear stirring in his chest as he sensed the longing for cleansing. Most of these people were innocent, looking to avenge a fallen neighbor at the hands of an outside. Though they were deceived by drunken morons looking for stolen glory, they did not deserve the same fate. Justice was needed but only in the case of a few but the Author wasn’t sure how merciful the lake spirit would be in its slayings. The

Author focused hard on visualising the faces of the Sasquatch Watch crew and waited for a response from the forest.

“Human...Are these your offerings?” A voice said to the Author, turning its head to scan the crowd.

“They are the ones at fault here but there are mostly innocents among this group. They were misguided,” He replied, “Your presence should be enough to scare them off. They will not come back.”

“Then come be their final warning.” The horned beast replied.

In the end, the Author accepted fault. If he hadn’t thrown the sensor away then Junior might have handled it accordingly by hiding in the waterfall until the group gave up. The Author walked forward to the end of the alcove and nodded to Junior and his mother, jumping into the water. The water gripped his entire body and whipped him forward to the center of the lake, pulling him up into the body of the hooved-spirit and to its mouth where he was vomited out into the dirt. The townspeople around had no clue who the Author was. He was a stranger visiting their town in disguise but a fellow human nonetheless so they felt fear for what would happen to him. The Author was on his hands and knees, staring at the scared faces of those with lit torches around him who had clearly lost their will to fight. He stood on his feet and turned to look at

the spirit but it was already making a move as the watery horn skewered into my abdomen and lifted him straight into the air. At a great height now above the ground below, blood spattered from the Author's flesh and rained down onto those standing below.

The screams of the townspeople filled the air as they turned to run for their own lives while he remained floating in the air on a pike as their sacrificial lamb. Life was leaving him, drop by drop. The Author tried to once again tap into the energy of the forest and the symptoms of the sickness seemed to leave with each step of the evacuating invaders. Even those careless and vain folks that let their friend die for the sake of their desired treasure would live to see another day.

The antlered protector finally dropped the Author back onto the soil after the rest had fled, scraping him off its liquid spike. The Author placed a hand on his abdomen and searched for a hole that drained his blood but found none. There was blood all over his skin and the pain was visceral and deep but the evidence of it all was much more subtle, only apparent with a large red ring. The water had gone through his body, the spirit only piercing his skin where there would not be a fatal blow. Mercy was gifted and if his strength could hold up, the Author would walk out of here on his own two feet.

"Thank you. Will you tell me why?" He asked of the spirit.

"The barrier between worlds is not so easily crossed. It will be a long time before I can be called again. Protect this land at all costs. It may yet use you again if you survive." The spirit warned me.

The Author nodded.

He fell to his hands and knees first before finally collapsing onto his face, falling out of consciousness.

He awoke with the sun shining on his tent, with bandages around his waist. He quickly leaned up and momentarily flinched in pain from any of the dozens of injuries received the evening before. Through the tent wall, the Author could see the campfire was now lit and something was sizzling on an iron pan outside that smelled like fish. He unzipped the tent and peered through to see Junior, cooking a large catfish over the fire.

"You can move?" He asked.

"Yeah but not one-hundred percent yet." The Author replied. "You brought me back?"

"Yes."

"Is your mom okay?" The Author asked him but he hesitated to reply for a few seconds.

"Yes....what are you really doing here? What are you searching for?"

"I'm a detective. I investigate paranormal irregularities."

“For who?”

“For myself. I share information with others. Normal people.”

“So you will tell the world what you have seen?”

“I’m not sure exactly what I have seen yet but no, not everything needs to be disclosed.”

“Why must you share anything? Secrets can be secrets.”

“Yeah, but this world is already too dependent on us not knowing the truth.”

“So what does any of that have to do with me? With my family?”

“Y’all are unlike anything else on Earth. A true testament to evolution and life on this planet.”

“That’s why humans want to capture and kill us. Too different. Too scary.”

“I get it. A bunch of hunters just want you and your moms head on the wall. I don’t want those people to know. I want all the others, the curious and the bold, the ones that would defend innocence no matter the creature.

“It’s too late for them to change. We will wait for the end of humans and survive in that world.”

“That’s morbid but I guess I can’t blame you. Will you stay here?”

“Yes, my land to protect.”

“What about me? The spooky lake spirit said it’s my job too.”

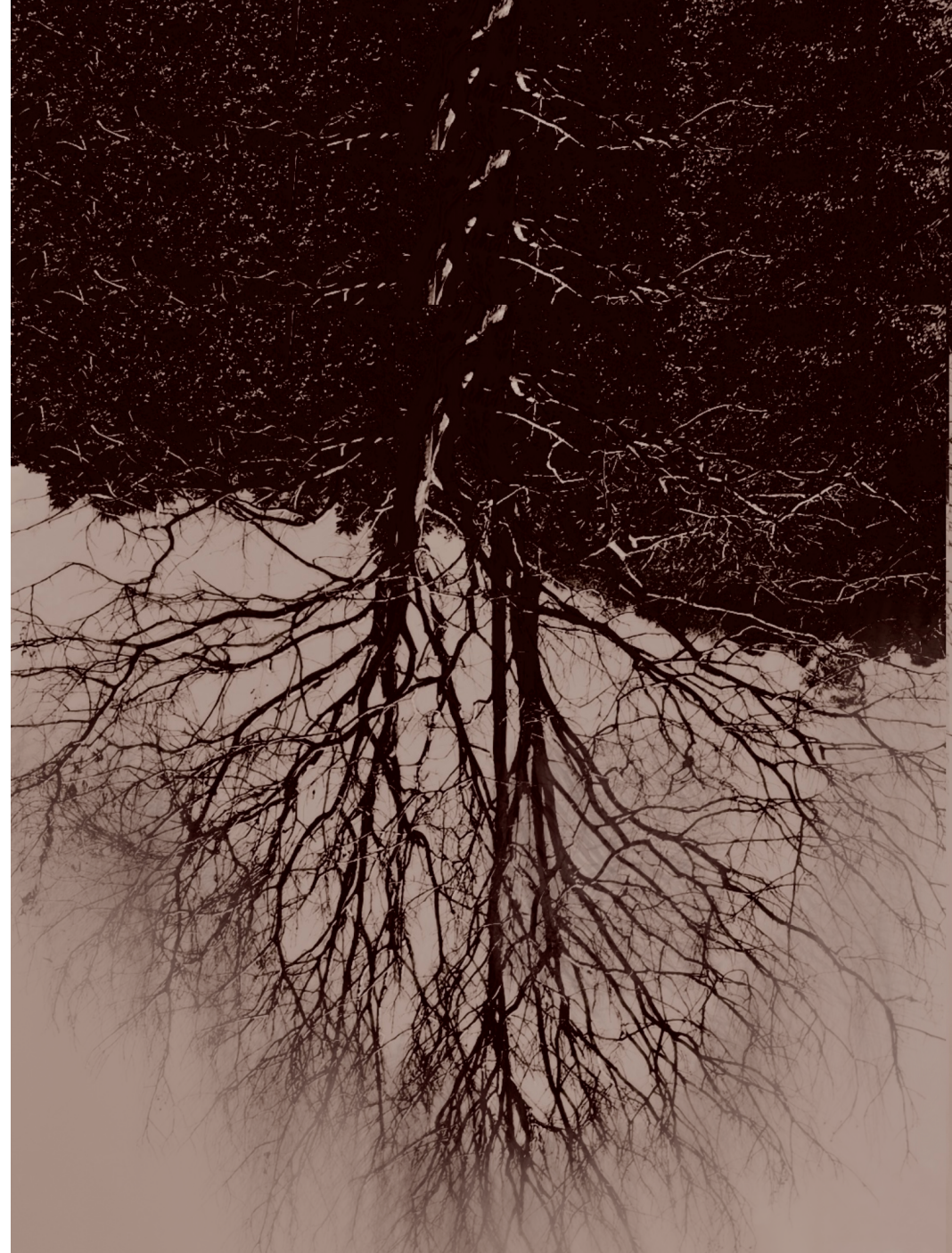
Junior let a defying “hmpf” but conceded. “Do you have a card or something? Will call if you needed.”

“Sure thing. So bigfoots have phones?”

“Human side have phone. So many spam calls...”

They finished their meal and talked about his job at the racetrack and the Author’s radio show, sharing a few details about what they liked about their jobs. The Author asked what Junior’s dad is like but he only said that he’s a very normal man who travels for work often and that his mom loves him very much, living together in the forest. For a man to be able to communicate to the point of love with a bigfoot, he must have quite the stories to tell. The Author doubted that a man who knocked up a bigfoot is anything but normal but Junior’s existence alone shows that common ground can be found and that their DNA must be extraordinarily similar.

Junior seemed more human than bigfoot at this moment but it was a strange sight to see in daylight the titan of a man-thing that he was. The Author hoped to learn much more from him but he knew that trust is built over time. He left for his truck after they finished eating and began the trek



FERTILE TROUGH

The island of Mulamayora was about twenty five kilometers to the west of the coastal nation of Dunnelezara, isolated from the many scattered tourist destinations that were found further north the coastline. The government's climate research department had designated it as a priority research destination recently after collecting and assessing data regarding the air quality on the island and the surrounding areas. It was far enough away from any large city that would pass on its pollution but that alone couldn't explain the steadily decreasing carbon dioxide levels that were observed over the last couple of months.

The climate research department was underfunded since their inception nearly a decade ago but because of recent donations of non-dispersive infrared sensors by donors, the team had made great strides in creating an environmental profile for the country. They were most often concerned with the general pollution levels of cities and enforcing industry regulations but the data collected regarding the island's remarkably low carbon dioxide measurements was most notable to Dr. Simeros and her staff. She herself was a botanist and environmental engineer, a burgeoning force among academics that had secured a

position where she felt she had the most resources to do the most good for the world.

When she discovered the peculiar case of Mulamayora, she brought it to her team's attention during an early Tuesday meeting, where each expert could propose an explanation or suggest why this might be the case. Some suggested that the jungles were primed for carbon dioxide reduction due to the offset by heavy and dense vegetation. Another scientist postulated about wind streams in the areas and their potential to divert the carbon dioxide in a way that would disperse the mainland air outwards in wide patterns that would affect Mulamayora less than the other islands. None of these suggestions satisfied Dr. Simeros; the experts themselves now curious after thinking aloud with the group and hearing the opinions of others.

It was decided by the department that it was worth the short trip to the island to spend a few days collecting data and analyzing the potential causes for the phenomenon. After a call with her accounting department and a few hours of filling out the essential documents for her official request, she waited a few days before being officially denied the funding. It was disappointing although not surprising in the least as this was the standard route of trying to accomplish

her goals with the government's assistance. Fortunately for Dr. Simeros, she was able to secure funding through previous partners who benefitted from the public relation campaign as well as a tax-write off donation, collecting enough funds to purchase and transport equipment roundtrip from the campus, to the docks and back.

Dr. Simeros recruited three department scientists for the upcoming excursion based on their particular expertise. First was Dr. Uluru, a foreign-born chemist who had studied at a university in the country, working for the past fifteen years on large government contract projects such as crop revitalization. Second, was the young meteorologist, Dr. Cliffyerros, who at only thirty-years old had already completed several academic studies that better dissected the changing weather patterns of the region. Finally, there was Dr. Rettersom, a highly analytical ecologist with decades of experience and a heavy dose of skepticism that paired with his grumpy demeanor.

The team was created so that tasks could be delegated efficiently; time would be short, and they had to move swiftly and with confidence to complete the collection portion before their analysis. The only

obstacle that remained was to find proper transport from the docks to the island itself. The government was not willing to send a navy ship to escort a research team, citing budget cuts and personnel issues, and all local guides ran dry with visitors, closing the doors on their businesses over the last couple of years.

Mulamayora had its fair share of tourists once upon a time that would at least go to the shores and take photographs on the photogenic island, documenting their arrival and soon departing without setting foot into the interior. There were old stories and rumors that kept people from traveling inside the jungle, some that were inspired by reasonable concern and others born of pure fiction from superstitious minds.

Historically, the island was home for several hundred years to an indigenous tribe that had an established village, riding longboats to the coast to trade and interact with their sister villages on the mainland.

Over time, the land tribes assimilated during the industrialization of the country, along with much of the rest of the world but the island remained populated until roughly fifty years ago. The longboats stopped coming to shore and the systematic seizing of the waters in the name of fishing and trade by wealthy businessmen and government

contracts prevented mainlanders from visiting their people. When members of the community communicated with government officials, they were assured that they would do a welfare check, returning to state that a localized epidemic must have eradicated the population. The officials then stated it was unsafe to set foot on the island out of fear of bringing the disease back to the countryside. None of the community members accepted the results with the lack of evidence of their discovery. They had seen their lives interrupted and disturbed in the name of financial gains so they waited to see the remains with their own eyes.

Mulamayora offered a lush array of plant life with an expansive and diverse assortment of tropical trees and fruits. Amongst the sprawling green life were families of colored frogs, scaly reptiles and a few species of primates and large cats. The wildlife was beautiful but not without safety concerns; there were plenty of creatures with venom or fangs that could easily end a person's trek to the interior. Even the plant life was not risk free, with many species of toxic plants that would leave the body splotched and red with an itch that could not be scratched away. For these reasons, most people opted for the less wild and more beach focused excursions, to run with sand in their toes and dive into the clear blue water in the warm light of the sun.

Dr. Simeros spoke with local residents as she searched for a guide and was given the contact information for an indigenous fisherman who was known to take occasional trips to the island, both for personal reasons as well as for the rare venturesome client. She arrived at the pier where his boat was docked and found him sorting and packing materials on the deck. He had long hair fixed in a braid and wore a long sleeve shirt and jeans to protect his skin during the long hours baking in the ultraviolet rays. The older man had heavy bags underneath his eyes; he worked himself empty on most days with it being a busy season for both tunas and marlins.

He met with the scientist and they discussed the scope of the research trip to the island and he agreed but conditionally; the man had a mystery of his own to solve but lacked the investigative skills that the scientists themselves might possess. Ataw recounted how he was the first from his village to be born on the mainland. His mother was born on Mulamayora but was raised by her uncle on the mainland where she would eventually meet Ataw's father. At the time he was born, the indigenous community he was a part of had been forced to spread throughout the country while looking for work in the modern era. He told Simeros how no one

trusted the government's conclusion regarding his ancestor's fate.

Dunnelozara was in the midst of an economic boom in his childhood but rich benefactors had mostly taken over the fisheries and trade routes. His father worked on these boats while he mother delved into crafting and selling her goods to tourists in the area. Ataw's father noticed that the longboats hadn't visited the mainland in quite some time and pleaded with his supervisors on the ships to go check on them. Without telephone lines or mailing routes, they were without contact and his father was uneasy about their absence. Eventually his father had ejected a lifeboat off the side of one of the fishing boats and tried an overnight journey to the islands to visit his wife's family. In the early dawn hours, he returned from his visit to the trip but was confronted by military officers that provided security for the fisherman against thieves, protecting the assets of the wealthy investors. They knew he had stolen the boat and as he pleaded with them to let him return the small vessel to its rightful place, he was taken ashore by force and was taken to a prison, never to be seen by the family again. It was reported to the family that he had died from a simple case of tuberculosis contracted in the jail cell and that his body was already cremated. Ataw and his mother rejected

this fate and protested what Dunnelozara had become as a result of the pursuit of wealth and exploitation.

Ataw's mother wished to see the people from the island of Mulamayora everyday until her final breath was taken, succumbing to cancer early in her sixties. It was then that Ataw promised her that one day that he would find out what really happened with his people. He was able to purchase a worn-down trawler that he had to learn to repair thanks to other fishermen's assistance and eventually was able to take groups to the various tourist islands to make a decent living for himself. The other guides warned against going to Mulamayora, they either accepted the official cause of disappearance or held their own opinions, wildly influenced by late night stories that people seemed to make up when bored at sea. These current guides were not indigenous themselves and lacked a relationship with the locals, ignorant of the tribe's culture and the kind of people that they were. As far as Ataw knew, it was possible that tragedy hadn't even struck the island as his father was never able to speak to them to tell of what he saw.

So Ataw eventually traveled to the island himself, searching far and wide for a place most unfamiliar to him. Throughout the entire island, there was no one to be found — not on the beaches, nor in the jungle, not near the creeks,

nor at the end of any trail. There were no remnants of life to be found across the island with housing structures, cooking supplies and many abandoned plots of farmland. Ataw returned again and again, searching for graves or evidence of an evacuation but they hadn't left a thread for him to follow. He despaired for so long at his inability to carry out his mother's dying wish but now with the scientist's promise, he had a final chance in his golden years to investigate Mulamayora's greatest secret.

Simeros assured him that she would carry out her end of the bargain, promising to use all the tools at her disposal afterwards to search the area forensically for a reasonable cause of disappearance or making proper calls to get someone capable of doing so. She was a limb of the government but it was precisely this familiarity that made her give more value to Ataw's suspicions.

All the scientists in the group traveled to the port of Mulamayora where Ataw had outfitted his trawler to carry all of the gear that the scientists had prepared. Together, they embarked for the four day trip, dancing with the waves as the ship sliced through the ocean for nearly five hours.

Dr. Rettersom sat reclined on a mounted deck on the bow, falling asleep for most of the journey. Dr. Uluru vomited a handful of times, eventually finding her sea legs and sitting in peace, now empty. Dr. Simeros sat and conversed with Dr. Cliffyeros for the first part of the journey, talking with the younger scientist who was beaming with excitement for the fieldwork that took them outside for the first time this year. Ataw, captain of the Alumzuqar ship, drove patiently and focused; his eyes fixated on the great empty horizon as he navigated effortlessly to the destination.

Mulamayora island finally came into view and the scientists, save for Rettersom, came to the edge of the rail on the bow to look towards their destination. They had all been tourists themselves to other islands and Rettersom had even set foot on Mulamayora's sands before when boats would at least make a quick stop. Still, they felt childlike excitement that beamed from their face as they mentally prepared for the job at hand.

Once near the beach, the boat found its place to drop the anchors and settle in for a few days. The first anchor flew fastly downwards into the blue depths, hitting the bottom with an unknown sound to those on the surface. The trawler drifted backwards to fix the anchor into

place and then the second anchor was dropped, keeping the boat from spinning in place if without it.

The group descended into a smaller boat that would take them to the island. A few trips were required as they had to move some equipment to the shore as well as camping supplies and other travel tools. None of the equipment was particularly large for this investigation as they would be mostly taking readings and the sensors themselves were compact. After three trips back to the trawler, all of the equipment was now on shore, with the time just approaching noon. This left the scientists with roughly four hours to work before they had to prepare the campsite before sunset.

They decided to start with the beach and the edges of the jungle, observing the carbon dioxide levels on their devices, making detailed notes regarding the plant life on the edge of the shore and taking some samples of various species. It wouldn't take long for the differences of this island to be noticed as the initial carbon dioxide readings were all recorded near three hundred parts per million. This carbon-diluted sample of the air would have last been seen before the age of industrialization forever changed the landscape of the world. The island was fighting off the outside world from its deadly interference and winning with

overwhelming dominance. Dr. Simeros checked the device and reread the readings a few times, waiting for about half an hour for each trial and finding that her device was precise.

"It's remarkable," she said to the group, "Numbers like this haven't been seen for over a hundred years."

"Indeed. How refreshing" Dr. Rettersom replied.

After two hours, the group started to trek further into the jungle, carrying all the gear they had brought with them, assisted by Ataw who suggested they camped nearby a waterfall further up the trail around two kilos. They agreed and walked through the lush array of jungle life, a living painting with more beautiful details the further one looked.

About one kilometer into the forest, the verdant vegetation began to fade into smaller, less productive plants with a yellowish tone. Near the entrance, the trees, leaves and vines all popped vibrantly but now these interior plants lacked the bursting vibrance like the others before. They walked past shrubs in the understory, the leaves falling off without putting up a fight against the gentle wind following their footsteps.

"It wasn't like this the last time," Ataw remarked.

The trail was littered with struggling greenery but as they neared the waterfall, there was a branching off of the trail, contrasting the colors of

the surrounding area; it was green and luscious like what they had seen before. The scientists set down their belongings near the waterfall to set up camp later and carried a few of the sensors along once more to investigate the other side of the trail.

Simeros took a new reading of the new part of the trail, with slightly lower readings compared to the beachside. Low carbon dioxide levels could safely explain the changes in color from the yellowed plants on the first trail but with even lower readings now, the sudden liveliness had no reason to diverge this way.

With each step forward, there was not only a difference in just color but also in some of the species present. There were blossoming flowers they hadn't seen to this point and a splattering of mushrooms covering everything from the ground to the trees; round, fibrous roots wrapped around nearly all of the trees; it wasn't easy to distinguish which they belonged to. Insects were crawling and buzzing through the area at a higher frequency, with flies and mosquitos densely packed all around. Each member of the group was swatting the few areas of exposed skin such as their necks and hands. Rettersom wielded a large can of insect repellant packed with picaridin and misted his skin before passing it to others.

The onslaught of insects didn't slow them down for a moment as they continued onwards. Simeros looked closely at the non native mushrooms and exchanged a glance with Rettersom, who quickly responded, "Those don't belong here do they."

"No but they see. Everything around is thriving." Simeros replied.

"Doesn't mean they can't become a problem."

As they began to take pictures and record remarks into a notebook, Uluru stumbled a few steps into the bushes near the path. The rest of the crew turned to her direction, Cliffyeros walked over to grab her by the arm.

"Woah, are you feeling okay?" She asked.

"Yeah, just feeling a little lightheaded. Maybe I'm just tired." Uluru replied.

Cliffyros didn't let go of her colleague's arms, looking upon her with worried eyes. Uluru started to walk again but fell forward, falling out of Cliffyros's grasp and landing on her hands and knees. The rest of the crew ran to her side before she plummeted to the ground, collapsing face first into the muddy earth beneath her.

Immediately, Simeros ran to her side and checked her wrist and throat for vital signs, the ailing scientist's heart

maintained a normal pulse, breathing on her own. She lightly slapped her face, failing to wake her out of the sudden slumber.

“She just appears to be unconscious.” Simeros said optimistically.

“Could be the heat. She was puking her guts out on the boat so maybe she’s just dehydrated.” Rettersom added.

“Let’s bring her back to the boat, it’ll be more comfortable.”

“That’s too far of a walk. I can take her to the campsite and set her up to rest inside a tent.” Ataw said. “Go ahead and do what you have to do here.”

“Just a few more minutes should be okay. It’ll give us more to discuss in the evening so that we can start prioritizing and narrowing down what we’re doing.”

Simeros felt guilty about leaving Uluru in this state but this far away from immediate medical services left her without any real aid to be rendered. She agreed with Rettersom’s assumption of dehydration, drinking some water and getting rest was all that could be done anyways.

Rettersom looked at the others and back to Ataw, nodding his head in approval and shaking his hand. They helped lift her body up and handed her over into Ataw’s

arms and he made his way back to the camp as the others gathered their belongings to continue on. Simeros noticed on the ground a large binding of roots covered with fungi leading further up the path. And so they followed.

She walked quickly with her eyes and feet following the trajectory of the roots to the top of the path, the other two scientists following slowly behind her footsteps. A few meters at the top of a hill, she looked down and saw great mushrooms that were beyond the size of any known species in not just the region but the entire continent. The two colleagues gazed with amazement at the extraordinary find; all of their hearts began to beat with excitement and curiosity took their minds flying with possibilities. Fungi pull carbon dioxide from the air and store it inside of their submerged networks, allowing the jungle’s plants to feast on the now available nutrient. These plants were working past expected natural limits of carbon consumption by working in unison with the fungus, preying on the compound at an unprecedented rate.

Simero’s excitement wavered as she felt a flash of fatigue over her body. Suddenly, her eyes began to droop and she swayed forward, catching herself and shaking her head vigorously to keep her eyes open. She looked at her two

colleagues and their reactions were similar. Each of them began to shake their limbs to increase circulation and stave off the drowsiness creeping into their minds.

“I don’t think it’s the heat. We need to leave this area.” Cliffyeros suggested and the others agreed.

All three of the scientists clamored together to support each other while walking as they started their way back down the hill. A few meters downwards, loud and repeated huffing could be heard beneath the bushes alongside the path, just a few steps away. The scientists looked at each other with confused expressions, listening together for just a moment more as the huffing continued.

“Is that person?” Cliffyeros asked.

“Did they maybe fall in the bushes?” Simeros said.

“I can’t think straight. Maybe.” Rettersom said, pressing his hands on his forehead.

Simeros moved to the side of the bush, the noise continued to get louder; she saw the leaves being blown by air coming from the interior. Rettersom got on his knees as well and pushed aside the branches, his fingers grazed flesh near the bottom.

“What in god’s name is that?!” He shouted, turning to Simeros. “Do I see a person under there?”

A human face was nearly totally submerged into the ground at the bottom of the bush. They were breathing laboriously, with a large volume and a dull scratch accompanying each inhalation. The only part of the head that remained above ground was from the tip of the chin to the crown at the back of their skull. Roots similar to those covered by the mushrooms extended from the ground and into the sides of their face, penetrating the skin, dried blood crusting the perimeter. Their eyes were open but the pupils had separated into pieces, a milky glaze blurring the dead stare.

Cliffyeros legs gave out and she began to crawl backwards, inundated by the rooted human and its gasping respirations. Simeros reached forward and ran her hands over the human in stasis, unsure if her perception had been altered by the bout with drowsiness. Rettersom pleaded for her to take her hands off but she had to confirm that her brain wasn’t playing a trick; that this was indeed a flesh and bone human in an arduous situation.

“Don’t just sit back! We need to get them out.” Simeros shouted at the other two scientists, neither one inching forward to help her as she began to claw around the face, digging up the dirt surrounding the face.

Cliffyeros drifted backwards and tried to lean

back but succumbed to the somnolent feeling in her body, unconscious as Uluru. The two able scientists looked at her with Rettersom moving to her side and slapping her with great force.

“Wake up damnit! What the hell did you bring us to Simeros!” He shouted angrily, turning his glare to Simeros.

Simeros returned to try to help the sunken person out of the ground, finding more and more roots that were penetrating their body, now expiring with more strenuous intensity with each breath. As much of the dirt was removed down towards their shoulders, Simeros began to rip some of the roots out of their body so she could continue to separate this stranger from the earth below. After a handful of roots were ripped from their head and neck, they began to open their mouth, slurred words began to dribble out. Simeros attempted to decipher what might be said but all of the words were unintelligible.

They began to pull their arms without aid out of the dirt. With one hand free, the stranger began to feel their face and the expression they wore melted into consternation. They began to cry a terrible noise as they clawed and felt their own face over and over again, feeling everything from their cheeks to their eyeballs and inside of their mouth. They were able to pull the other arm out as well and tried to pull

themselves out of the ground, Simeros's trying to come to their aid, unable to bear being an audience to their suffering any longer.

Once out of the ground, they began to crawl displaying pathetic strength, never ceasing to stop the screaming. Crawling hardly let them get anywhere as they began to writhe and shrivel into a fetal position, some of the roots still unremoved from their back, down their legs and even from their feet. Neither of the scientists could take their eyes off of her but when Simeros finally turned her attention to Rettersom, he too had succumbed to the sleeping plague sweeping through the group. She stood up and tried to run and get the attention of Ataw before he was too far away but she came crashing down to the earth as well, eyes falling shut and her mind slipping into an unconscious state despite the screams that filled the air from the floundering abomination of a human flesh that continued its agonizing squirming in vain.

When Ataw had not seen the others return to the campsite, he went back to look for them, finding the three scientists still motionless on the ground. He stood still while his eyes slowly scanned the jungle floor to search for a perpetrator, finding a fourth body sent a cold shiver down

his spine, raising thousands of tiny bumps under the skin of his arm. It laid with its mouth open and eyes agape, the roots extending from its body now curled in surrender from the death of its host. The body looked like that of a woman, her skin dark like his with a broad bridged nose like his mothers.

He dashed over first to Cliffyeros and checked her pulse, her heartbeat appearing normal as Uluru's but there was a strange movement on the back of her arm, a worm-like wiggling underneath her skin and moving downwards towards her elbow. He pressed down on it and tried to pinch it but it was very firm, sinking down when touched. He lifted up her shirt and found two more branches of squirming lines beginning from her stomach and moving towards her back where they punctured the skin and stretched into the ground beneath the surface. It was dark brown and fibrous, branching off at several points like the roots of a vegetable securing its place. He lifted her up far off the ground and stepped on the root simultaneously, ripping it out of her back as blood slowly began to leak out. He placed the scientist's body back on the ground then ran over to Simeros and quickly checked her for a similar affliction but couldn't find any immediate similarities as she began to flicker her eyes open, coming to consciousness. He grabbed her with both arms and

shouted to keep her from falling back into her involuntary slumber.

"...where am I?" Simeros struggled to ask.

"You're still on the island. There's something strange happening to us." Ataw replied.

Simeros retained her consciousness and began to wake up more as she brought her limbs back from immobility, maintaining her escape from the clutches of cessation. She followed Ataw's lead, moving over to check on Rettersom, finding the roots already making the presence pervasive in his body. She had never seen anything like this with any plants, animal or otherwise. No known parasites, infections or viruses behaved as what they had seen here. Ataw was never told any stories of the island that involved the grotesque trespassers and had not come into contact with them during his excursions on the island so far. They quickly ripped out the invasive cords from his flesh and tried to wake him but were not as lucky as Ataw was with Simeros.

There was no easy option to transport the two immobile scientists; Simeros placed Cliffyeros's arm around her shoulder and Ataw followed suit with Rettersom. They walked back to the waterfall where their camp was set up, discussing how they could escape from the jungle while

carrying the three bodies of her colleagues along. Ataw suggested crafting a makeshift stretcher from the camping equipment; the research equipment would have to wait until they returned again with the boat.

“We’ll come back. I haven’t forgotten about our agreement. I think we have enough evidence to convince the government to begin a large-scale investigation of this island.” Dr. Simeros said.

“Let’s take care of your friends first. I fear that I may be closer to my goals than you are.” Ataw replied.

“How come you haven’t collapsed as well? Are you feeling well?”

“I feel a bit strange but it’s nothing.”

“And your family? Did they ever speak of something like this being here?”

“My family were mainlanders but no, no one I met from the island mentioned something like this. The path we were on was new however. I’ve never seen mushrooms like that on the island.”

“I was afraid of that. The spores. It’s possible we’re having some sort of reaction to them but this is happening too fast for a fungal infection.”

“What was the other *thing* on the ground?”

“They came from underneath the dirt...it was still moving when I passed out.”

Ataw’s face contorted as he thought hard, putting the pieces together in a puzzle with no definite end. There hadn’t been a sighting of his tribe in all of his trips to the island, living or dead. The husk of a person had been nearly transformed past any resemblance to their previous humanity.

After a short but difficult hike backtracking their way to the waterfall campsite, the fatigued duo laid down their deadweight companions and sat down on the ground for a moment to relax their bodies; Simeros almost immediately stood up upon seeing Uluru still laying down inside of one of the tents that Ataw had placed her safely in. She asked Ataw if he had noticed any of the growths coming out of her body but he admitted that once she was in the tent, he assumed she’d rest as long as her body demanded.

Simeros rushed over, Uluru was covered with a blanket; her eyes open fully, now foggy with the pupils disintegrated. Simeros began stammering and pleading with Uluru to return to how she was; Ataw came to her side and witnessed her further descent into the infected state.

Simeros wagered her hopes on the possibility of there still being time to revive her longtime colleague, ripping off the woman's clothes to search for the roots that were surely binding her to the earth. She began to rip and tear each of the cords out of skin and held one of them closer to her eyes, seeing spots of fungal mold on the outside of the plant root. She continued to peel the roots off while her mind raced to understand this strange symbiotic relationship. The new mushrooms had begun to intertwine their mycelium into the broader networks of plantroots, connecting the jungle life of the area into one intertwined structure. Yet the mushrooms were exhibiting parasitic features, searching for nutrients that they are unable to produce as compared to plants. Uluru was becoming Mulamayora's meal, its members attaching to her body, several at a time..

Uluru's eyes finally began to shift from side to side and she grabbed the arm of Simeros.

"Hello? I can't see." Uluru was able to say.

"Hold on, it's Simeros. What's happening? How do you feel?" Simeros asked.

"Simeros? What happened? What was that light? Am I dreaming?"

"Light? You passed out earlier but I've got you now."

"My eyes are open aren't they? I...can't stay here. I want to go back but I'm so scared. It's so overwhelming."

"What is it my friend? Stay with me."

"It's so beautiful, there's so many others. I want to go back to them."

"No, who are you talking about? You have to help us understand what you're seeing so we can help. It's the mushrooms Uluru! The mushrooms are inside of you right now! Stay with us!"

"No. It's Mulamayora. It's the people behind her, a part of her. My heart hurts just being separated from them."

"I...don't understand..."

"You were almost with us. I felt you for just a moment. Come to us. Oh god don't make me take you Simeros. You have to kill me because...I think I'm going to kill you first...You're going to be one of us. Don't worry, Simeros, just come. "

Uluru squeezed much tighter on Simeros's arm, looking right into her eyes while still blinded by the infection. Simeros could feel her friend staring at her but there was nothing behind those eyes. She nearly pulled her arm away when she felt the worm-like roots breaching Uluru's skin and then moving into her own arm. Simeros shouted at her converted comrade to let go and began to

strike her hand and then her face. Ataw ran to her aide and apologized to Uluru as he lifted his boot up and stomped onto her face, knocking her back with crushing force and freeing the scientists from the fungal fate at least for the moment.

Simeros began to mourn her yet to die friend. Uluru was no longer the person she once knew, the one who piloted her body alone. She now served a different force from this moment forward. Ataw turned to grab Simeros and help her up but Uluru leaned into an upright position once and again and lunged onto the ankles of Ataw. He stumbled over and kicked at the scientist, unable to undo her grip this time. All down the length of her arm, more and more roots sprouted from her flesh and began wrapping and piercing into Ataw's legs, much faster than a moment ago with Simeros. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a black knife and began to hack away at Uluru's arms, ripping out the penetrating roots as quickly as he could. Simeros jumped to his aid but he protested.

"Go! It's too late here." He continued to slash the fungal human. "Forget the other two as well. They're going to turn out just like her."

Simeros hesitated briefly before letting her intuition motivate her to stand up and make a run to the ship, the wet noises of metal shredding through flesh continued as he fought for a way out in vain. She looked at both of the remaining scientists one last time, pulling each one by their arms and begging them to stand up and follow her but the tension of the roots made her pessimistic. In the short time after they were returned to camp, they two were sewn to the earth to join the network of the possessive parasite.

Simeros surrendered the final remnants of hope of saving the lives of her crew; whether they would truly die or become empty vessels serving the island, they were without humanity, that much was certain. She too had been touched by the infectious roots but as long as she was still the commander of her own sanity, there was a chance to make it back to the ship and set sail to shore. There'd be a chance for her to get proper medical attention but more importantly in her mind, she'd be able to contact other branches of scientific research to explore the cause of the infection. For all she knew, the island was the localized source for this variant species and containment was vital for keeping the danger isolated.

She arrived at the small dinghy that she'd ride back to the trawler with just offshore. There was nothing she could carry and certainly nothing with priority over her own safety. The evidence was safely stored in notebooks, cameras and in memory banks of devices still at the campsite. The rest would stay in her mind as long as she was still breathing and when she made it back to report, she could tell the tale that might lead to helpful conclusions. She owed this much to her team and Ataw. Whether Ataw was alive or not, she would hold up her promise and search for the remains of his vanished community.

She had no formal training to pilot the ship back but once she traveled a few hours back to shore, she'd be able to use the phone and reach out for assistance. She tinkered and experimented with the controls, using the automated functions to reel in the anchor and to start the engine, puttering along and picking up speed in the direction that they came to the island. She took a seat behind the steering wheel, her body reeling from the stress put upon it, mentally and physically. She rolled up her sleeves and inspected her arm, a rash had begun to spread from inside her elbow and down her forearm, rope like bumps underneath.

Simeros questioned quietly why she would be the one to be spared; as the leader of her group, she felt like she should've been the one to pay the price for the mistakes that were made, intentional or not. There was no way of predicting the pervasiveness of the invasive species that had wreaked havoc among the scientists and their guide, yet the guilt remained. A sharp pain began to pang in her arm as the roots began to creep out, piercing through her skin with some blood leaking out on the perimeter. She almost began to chuckle as she predicted her own expiration. The roots weaved around her arm and downwards to the bench she sat on but were unable to reach further inside without any soil. Simeros let the situation play out, observing the lack of latching from the fungal carriers. Without soil or another body to touch, there was potential to starve out the infection. Simeros finally began to feel hopeful again, her journey carrying her from tremendous highs to devastating lows.

Every fifteen minutes or so, she'd grab the phone and dial the number of her office, searching for a dial tone that'd signal her saviors to her dire situation. After nearly two hours and forty five minutes into the journey, she finally made contact with one of the lab assistants who was always typically working late. It was only in the early hours of the

night but past the normal working hours for most of the staff. She communicated the situation in as few words as possible so that the emergency services could be coordinated accordingly. After a few calls back and forth, Simeros was connected with an operator of a navy medical ship that instructed her that she would not be allowed to dock due to the nature of her infection. Instead, the ship would come to her with well equipped members capable of handling hazardous materials. She followed their instructions after reviewing her location along with the map and carried on with the journey.

The intercepting ship came into view at last, Simeros once again calling to the ship and receiving instructions for holding her position and preparing for contact. She gathered some papers that she had been writing on while traveling as well as a toolbox she had filled. When the ships were side by side, she called the other ship a final time.

“Are you sure you’re capable of carrying out what I asked?” Simeros asked the operator.

“Absolutely. We have a set refrigerator for hazardous materials.” They replied.

“Good. Please be careful while handling...you must drain the blood as quickly as possible or else there won’t be enough to produce results.”

“Sure. Don’t worry. We are capable of performing blood transfusions on this vessel. We just need to be careful while inspecting you first...hello?” The call was cut short by Simeros and she made her walk to the side of the boat. A group of navy members were standing by in their hazmat uniforms.

“Please, just stay there and don’t drop what I’m going to throw over.” Simeros shouted. The sailors all looked at each other, unsure of the detour from the instructions they were given. Their commander was called over as Simeros opened up the toolbox she brought over. She was only a few meters away from the ship, just far enough that one could not jump from ship to ship without a higher chance of falling into the ocean than landing on solid ground.

From the tool box, she lifted out an emergency axe with a bright red head at the end of the wooden handle. She rested her arm on top of the wooden table and lifted the axe up, her arm bent at a ninety degree angle before she shouted and swung downwards with all that she had to give. Blood sprayed all over herself as nearly her entire forearm was severed from her elbow. She fell over in agony, screaming out in pain. The sailors huddled to the edge of the boat and begged for her to calm down and

grab onto a rope that they had thrown over. She shouted at them to stay put and grabbed her hacked off arm with her still attached limb and asked if they were ready to catch. The sailors looked at each other in confusion but one man raised his hand and leaned over the side of the boat. She tossed her arm over to the man, falling over to the floor, unable to bear the pain well enough to stay standing. The sailors pleaded for her to remain calm and assured her of their capabilities to save her life.

In the toolbox was a lighter. She pressed her thumb on the igniting wheel and drew a flame, the intoxicating fumes of petrol that she had spread out onto the floor filled the air before she held the lighter to the floor and ignited the liquid. The medical boat crew looked onto the inferno that consumed the woman they had come to save, baffled by each moment of madness unfolding before their very eyes.

Their commander shouted as their boat began to drift away to avoid being caught as collateral damage. On the mainland, the remaining members of the staff would have to piece together each and every action of their former boss. The government that had left her ill-equipped throughout

her tenure now had been hand delivered a prime sample and a warning of the natural horror of Mulamayora. They were left with weighing further research regarding the carbon offsetting miracle island against its relentless needs for living fertilizer. A treasure trove of data remained inside the green depths of the jungle that had extinguished all of those attempting to understand what provides its nutrition from below.