

# WORLD MOTHER

## ASCENSION



AN

# ASH BORN

NOVEL

# KONN LAVERY

# WORLD MOTHER

## A S C E N S I O N

A N  
**ASH BORN**  
NOVEL

== Written by: Konn Lavery ==  
== Edited by: Cara Flannery ==



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THE  
**MACROCOSM**  
STORIES

# AUTHOR MESSAGE: THY NATURE'S ROOTS

This book was complicated, which made it a fun challenge. I wrote the events of the World Mother's summoning in my horror novel *Seed Me* back in 2016, with an updated narrative in 2021 titled *Cultivate: Seed Me Relapse Edition*. The hellseeds also appeared in *Purity: Part 3 of Mental Damnation* as an easter egg.

*Seed Me* ended with an apocalyptic bang, which proved to be a major concern while building out the shared universe of *The Macrocosm*. I always intended to revisit this event and expand upon it with some fantasy hero saving the day, tying it into the Mental Damnation series. In the beginning, I intended for Scalebane, a character found in *Crystal Moth Conspiracy: Ash Born Book One*, to be the one who stops the World Mother. In the end, her agenda didn't fit the role.

While writing book one of Ash Born, I took a break and wrote the first draft of *World Mother Ascension*. Thus, Synarion was born. I respect nature and it appears in my writing on multiple occasions. Creating a Mother Nature defender was bound to happen.

This novel contains additional characters that lead into *Crystal Moth Conspiracy*. I'll let you discover those. Or, if you're new to the series and *The Macrocosm*, this is an excellent place to start. Welcome.

# THANKS TO YOU

I'd like to thank you for grabbing this book. I hope you enjoy reading a key event within *The Macrocosm*.

Thanks to my mother, Brenda Lavery, for the love and support of my art from the beginning. You used to drive me around to grab the tools I needed as a kid, such as clay, paint, and paper to explore world building.

A big thanks to my partner Lindsey Molyneaux for putting up with my writing and blabbering for years and giving great pointers on flow and character. Thank you to my brother for always reading my work. Thanks to Kit, and those mentioned above for beta reading the book. Thank you to my father and sister for cheering me on.

Thank you to my editor, Cara Flannery for polishing this story along with *Cultivate: Seed Me Relapse Edition* to make these two books, covering the same events, work in harmony. Thanks to my friends Nastassja Brinker for the excellent photography work and to Nadia Dzyakava and Lee Nielsen for the crucial pointers regarding the cover illustration.

Thank you to friends, family, colleagues, and readers who keep diving into uncharted territories within *The Macrocosm*.

WORLD MOTHER ASCENSION BY KONN LAVERY

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WORLD MOTHER ASCENSION BY KONN LAVERY



PROLOGUE  
TENEBROUS

*Do you remember when I first found you?*

*Yes.*

*Was it what you hoped for?*

*No.*

**M**emories matter little, for history repeats in the present. Though we attempt to make ourselves better than the former, we need rules and expertise as guidance. This was why Synarion refused to let go of his past, despite the sea-kissed ashes smudged on his face and hands, reminding him he was the last.

Metallic flavour ran along his taste buds. It was his own blood, which complemented the sting from the relentless sun sizzling his back as it grazed the horizon. The waves splashed against his flesh, sliding into the sand and soaking his front. His eyes flickered and he questioned, *Why?*

No one would answer this. He could replay the events that led him to these mysterious shores, reminding himself that it was not his fault the balancers of the Grove didn't foresee the catastrophe. In the end, how would obsessive analysis aid his duty? It wouldn't.

He was weak; the shaking arms proved it as he attempted to push himself up. The beach could belong to any continent. The air tasted staler. Unlike the vibrant green forests and broad mountains he knew, the rocks further inland, past the first sand dune, were saturated pink and tan. This place was new, and that didn't mean he could let go what he was. A balancer.

A being on a camel trotted over the hill forty paces from him under the purple and red sky. Synarion stood, wobbling in the process. A small trunk rested by his side. The documents survived. Some proof of his past would live on. He pushed his jaw-length champagne blond hair from his face, tucking it behind his long, pointed ears. Next was brushing the sand from his torn clothes, awaiting the arrival of the hooded figure.

Though a desert creature, the camel was armoured. The plating shielded its eyes, forehead, neck, and upper thighs from the sun. Drapes of blood red and emerald-rich silk fabric ran to its knees, complementing the dual-coloured sash of its rider under the pearl cloak. This stranger belonged to some legion beyond Synarion's knowledge. He felt inapt within Mother

Nature's world. He served her, protected her, and thought he understood what she was. The loss of his home and this strange new land proved her mysterious nature had far more to offer than he could have imagined.

The rider brought the camel to a stop ten paces away. The face was difficult to see due to the scarf and metal goggles on their face. Small slits let the newcomer gaze into Synarion's violet eyes. They had wrapped layers of tan and white clothing tightly around their entire form, covering them from head to toe. The intriguing characteristic was the dusted pendant attached to a chain around their neck. Its circular form contained a naked woman with flaming eyes. Vines draped from her scalp, like hair, and over her breasts. Her bark-covered hands and feet pressed against the rim, covered in leaves. The mini sculpture's body stood in front of a pentagram made of holes cut into the round petals of a flower.

"The sun is dangerous," they said with a voice coated in honey and ice, two features Synarion wouldn't relate to here.

"Where am I?" Synarion asked, throat coarse.

"Nowhere near your collapsed Zingalg, nymph." Their gaze moved to the ocean, examining the rocks and the sand. "The shore is moving inward."

"Where are we?"

The stranger didn't answer. They stared. It wasn't a usual look, even while being faceless. The newcomer sucked Synarion's vision in. The darkening world around blurred, homing in on whoever this was. Inside the metal slits was a glimmer of jade eyes. They looked past his own and pierced his psyche, pushing into his memories of stone temples crumbling

due to the cracking earth. The waters flooded into elevated forests at the base of mountains. They, too, tumbled to the violent tides, sending mass avalanches towards the countless screaming souls begging for a saviour. Their cries failed to be answered. The sentient and the beasts alike failed to escape. Death . . . so much death for one soul to bear.

Further, the hypnotic eyes moved past the recent terrors, beyond his balancer duties and into who he was. Synarion, the nymph: born and raised to protect Mother Nature. Simple. Why would there be a need for anything else? Their host was the most important thing, and his humble sacrifice was what mattered.

This psychic connection was a two-way channel. He could glimpse into the stranger. She. Hers wasn't as clear. Not an Earth-giving being, not at all. Foreign. The energy radiating from her was far darker, containing a power he hadn't encountered. It had the depth of a thousand lives intertwined with endless youth. Despite the magnetizing grab, it made his gut want to dig itself into the ground.

The sun slipped past the horizon, and she lowered her scarf, exposing the milk skin. Peeking past the lush apple lips were hints of canine fangs far too long to be human or nymph. His trance ended with the commanding word, "Come." The stranger pulled the leather rope attached to the camel's head, turning east.

He grabbed the trunk containing his past with both hands and followed, dragging his bare feet in the scorching sand.

PROLOGUE: TENEBROUS

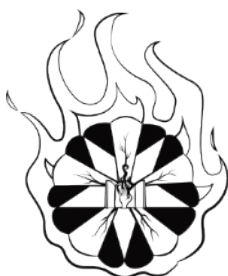
*Was it what you wished for?*

*No.*

*I wish it were.*







# CHAPTER 1

# MORE THAN BLOOD

Day one, Thursday.

The living in Mother Nature's garden isn't different from the thousands of bacteria required on and in one's body. The difference is that Earth's most intelligent bacteria attempt to destroy its host. If more souls understood her wrath as Synarion did, they wouldn't need balancers.

Maintaining order took him to the darkest depths of the world. For example: he held a left arm, severed at the elbow, covered in puncture holes forming rings running along the arm to the palm. He was no fool and wore a rubber glove, knowing how practical human forensics were.

The limb was one piece of a hacked body that belonged to a man whose head lay sideways, wet in blood. It, too, had puncture hole rings covering its form. The formations were on an angle, with one piercing through the eyeball. Rings wrapped around the legs, torso, and right arm, causing blood to drizzle from each new pit in the flesh.

Synarion dropped the arm in the tub and stood, taking the rubber glove off and stuffing it into his pocket. *What a mess*, he thought while walking across the creaking hardwood floor and into the kitchen. A balancer must stomach the most grotesque Mother Nature had to offer to be rewarded with the most beautiful. He hadn't seen the latter in centuries.

Balancing, on occasion, also meant launching silver throwing stars into a hand, keeping it pinned to an old, warped desk. Synarion did that on arrival, making the tenant wheeze in this filth-and-dust-covered studio apartment's kitchen. It is not the scenario you would imagine an ancient protector of the world to be in. Life's nonlinear path is ever-winding.

The balding man in front of him grunted and spat curses, for the pain overwhelmed his nervous system. His fingers twitched with blood seeping from where the throwing star shredded through the surface of his pretendinous bands, keeping him married to the table, inches away from his Glock.

"You cauliflower-eared piece of shit!" the man hissed.

Rule one: look like you belong.

Synarion kicked a glass pipe on the tiled ground, walked to the man and snagged the Glock. He examined the weapon, fascinated by the weight and craftsmanship. Guns were not for

him, though he was forever curious of man's evolving empire. "These are so barbaric, aren't they?" he said.

"Says the psycho using throwing stars." The man groaned. He'd use his other hand to pull the star free if Synarion hadn't beaten it to a purple, red, swollen mess minutes ago. It lay lifeless to his side.

"They're cleaner," Synarion said, tucking the Glock under his belt. "Less waste, and if you're capable of aiming, they're silent and don't leave a trace. Unlike your dismemberment methods. So brutal."

The man bit his lip, face scrunching into a prune.

Synarion examined the room, seeing the small unit had little to offer. The cracked ceiling had brown water stains around the openings. A hole-covered mattress rested in one corner. The lamp by the window flickered in inconsistent pulses. Living this type of life illustrated that the man wasn't interested in finer details, unlike Synarion.

For example, the throwing star, speckled in scarlet human fluid, had the balancers' once symbolic icon of a gate covered in vines engraved into it. Above were four finger holes, engineered for a second function of close combat.

The human, on the other hand, had a lime-green fridge coated in mysterious brown splatters, matching the dirty stove. To the right of them was a crumb-infested counter with a bag of black and red seeds. The plant embryos looked familiar. They flooded Synarion with a sinking feeling he hadn't had in a long time. The texture had a cosmic depth and the red burst with vibrant flame of another world.

"What are those?" Synarion asked, pointing to them.

“Quit pussyfooting around,” the man said.

“Pussyfooting?” asked the other. “I haven’t heard that in quite some time. A person a good century old used to say that.”

“Get to the point. You got me.”

“Yes, I have. A familiar blessed with elongated life at the promise of immortality. In exchange, you perform services for your master. Like whatever you did to that poor man in your tub.”

“An unusual request.”

“Like those seeds? A lot of unusual in this space.”

Synarion placed one black boot on the empty chair beside the man, mastering the classic power stance, and leaned into the human’s coffee irises. “What did you do to that man?”

“Cut him to pieces.”

“The puncture hole rings?”

“A weird kink.”

“Uh-huh. What are those seeds?”

“You’re one weird fuck, aren’t you?” the man said. His eyes moved side to side, analyzing his victor. They move past his eyes, unfazed by the brown contact lenses, to the scarred ears.

“These?” Synarion asked, pointing at the bump-covered cartilage. “Not one of my preferred choices I’ve had to make. Yet, I had no other options since you humans have done a fine job of managing the planet.”

“What the fuck you sayin’ man?” The man grunted as he experienced another wave of pain.

“What’s your name?” Synarion asked.

“Does it matter?”

“You’re not into answering any of my questions.”

“Yeah, well, you got me dead,” he said.

“I’m not the killing type. I will if I must. That there is where I differ from the cat.”

“Metaphors? Fuck.” The man rolled his eyes.

“Okay. No more *pussyfooting*. We’ll get to it.”

“End it.”

Synarion shook his head. “Not my style.”

“You prefer to cripple them, eh?”

“This country has healthcare, doesn’t it? Quite progressive.”

“Fuck you.” The man spat a thick slime of saliva at him. Most of it landed into his tattered beard, glistening in the blinking light.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Synarion said. “You don’t want to go anywhere near public service.” Synarion leaned over the table and tapped the throwing star, causing the man to grind his teeth. “Not with your history. Do you want to keep roleplaying as a baboon and me the playful feline, or are you going to tell me who your master is?”

The man’s face dropped, skin turning ice. His gaze narrowed in, brows slanting as if he weren’t in pain. No more bullshit as he requested. He lived in a polluted pig’s den and participated in recreational drugs based on that pipe on the ground. He was sober due to Synarion’s words.

“Don’t know nothin’ about what you’re saying,” he said.

“I’m sure you don’t. That’s why you were so keen on going for that Glock of yours, moments ago?”

“You came from the fuckin’ window, what’d you expect?”

“A little more decency. I thought you were inviting people in with that open window. Canadians are supposed to be polite. Now, who is your master?”

“I am.”

Synarion revealed another throwing star, slipping his fingers into the holes to form a small blade. He brought the fine metal to the man’s brown shirt and down, peeling through the fabric. The edge poked against the human’s sweat glazed torso and the shirt’s fabric flapped open, revealing a golden pendant of a naked woman with fire for eyes. She stood in front of a flower-pentagram. Yes, that same iconic flowergram that Synarion first laid eyes on that fateful day on those sandy shores.

Synarion leaned away, taking the weapon away from the man’s skin. His squinted face said more than words could. The balancer was expecting a pendant of loyalty to their master. Each familiar had one. This pendant, though, was not supposed to be here. It made him question his balancer profession. Had he become so incompetent in his own skills?

“Where’d you get this?” Synarion asked, staring at the golden woman’s vines for hair.

The man glanced around, eyes shifting, breath rate increased. Beads of sweat grew on his scalp, drizzling on his face.

“Answer me,” Synarion sneered. He lunged the blade to the man’s throat, poking into the flesh. The hostile nature was not in his character. All it took was one symbol to knock him off equilibrium. He took a deep breath and retreated into his mind, retracing the steps that brought him here.

Yes, he caught wind of a bloodsucker in southern British Columbia. Yes, he went to investigate. They had a habit of

forgetting their place in nature, which required a balancer's fine touch to keep them in line. Bloodsucker origins were for more gothic, following their classic mythos. Yes, bloodsuckers was slang for vampires, not to be mixed with vampyres with a *y*, which were your fallen angels. Yes, it was rare to find one so bold and in the open, leeching off people's life force, and being deemed a localized serial killer on the Canadian All Media Broadcasting channel. Yes, Synarion had to enforce balance.

His balancing process was simple and direct. Bloodsuckers, like most old world beings, must hide or follow rule one: look like you belong. It maintained order.

The investigation of the bloodsucker led Synarion here because most bloodsucker mythology holds true. They like to keep a human familiar around to do their dirty work. They promise these poor saps they'll be converted into a vampire if they complete *x*, *y*, and *z*. Their quests include luring people into a den, like this place, to be murdered. Unlike the usual bloodsucker scenario, this man didn't have his master's sigil resting on his chest. Instead, a pendant from his long-forgotten past.

His balancing process was clear. He hadn't seen a bloodsucker and their familiar step out of line from their cliché. This man should have his master's emblem.

"Answer me," Synarion said, lifting the throwing star under the rope necklace. With a single pull, the blade cut through it, and he snatched the pendant.

"You're too late," the other whispered. "In four days, the World Moth—"

"World what?"



The man looked to the window, eyes glimmering, and swallowed a lump of saliva. “You’re invited in!”

*Shit*, Synarion thought.

A loud bang erupted from behind them. The man’s head throttled with brain matter and skull fragments splattering the wall.

Synarion pocketed the pendant and raised his throwing star to see a man in black across the room leap from the window frame. Even with Synarion’s keen vision, he was too fast. It was not over yet, and the balancer bolted from the chair. He placed the throwing star in his mouth and hopped through the window, descending the fire escape, and into the alley where the assassin ran ten meters ahead. He moved too fast, indicating one thing: this was the bloodsucker.

The balancer took his throwing star and flung it at his target, pulling a second from his belt. The first blade spun at lightning speed, plummeting into the vampire’s trench coat. A hiss bounced off the brick walls. The bloodsucker spun around, walking in reverse, and raised a handgun. It spoke once, and twice!

One bullet missed. Another clipped Synarion’s shoulder, ripping the trucker leather jacket. He launched another star. It pierced into the bloodsucker’s gun-wielding hand. He dropped the weapon with a yelp, stopping under a streetlight, and boomed the roar of a tiger. The jaw elongated further than any human’s, showcasing the protruding canine teeth and black gums. The slicked-back hair shone from the lamp post light. A strike of jealousy hit Synarion, for this bloodsucker kept his

pointed ears on the side of his blanched face. A bold move, like the sudden sprint forward. Synarion skidded to a stop.

He reached into his jacket's inner pocket and revealed two hand-crafted silver spiked knuckles as the bloodsucker rushed at him with sharp claws. The bloodsucker leaped into the air, spinning at high speeds, turning his body into a cyclone of blades.

Synarion dashed to the side, avoiding the landing death twister. The assassin clawed with both hands. Synarion dodged. He lunged his left fist, slamming it into the foe's gut. His second fist landed in the forearm.

The bloodsucker swung, slicing Synarion's cheek. Too close. The bloodsucker continued, pushing Synarion with one arm. His wounded one reached for his coat's pocket. He lifted a burner phone, pressing some buttons, and Synarion lunged a knee into his face, pushing him away. The phone slid into the pocket. An opportunity opened: Synarion took a throwing star and hacked into the open hand, slicing the fingers clean off. His opponent yelped, hunched over and hobbled from danger.

"These fights get old, bloodsucker," Synarion said, stepping forward. He couldn't pause. Vampires were opportunistic.

"A balancer, eh?" the bloodsucker sneered.

"You say eh? Please. You're too old to be Canadian." Synarion launched a fist, missing the first, and threw an uppercut, jabbing his forearm. The bloodsucker took a wide swipe with their good hand, a kick, pushing Synarion enough to give him a running start.

*Coward.* Synarion thought.

The assassin gained distance and extended their arms upward, remaining fingers pointed to the night sky. They leaped into the air. The skin shriveled with their body shrinking. The black hair shrunk into peach fuzz. The legs shrunk faster than the arms which became too long for an anthropomorphic form. The bloodsucker slipped from the collar of their black shirt. The clothes fell to the floor as the fingers and skin expanded into wings. Their skull stretched into a muzzle. The ears ended on a point, finalizing the transformation into a bat.

Synarion threw another star at the flapping creature. The blade sliced through the wing and the bloodsucker headed for the skies, screeching. Blood dripped from its new wound.

“Bastard,” Synarion said. He stopped by the abandoned clothes. Either this bloodsucker had some cunning moves or Synarion was getting deficient with balance enforcing. He wouldn’t have let a careless throw like that happen on an escaping target. Either way, the fact was that the bloodsucker got away.

He kicked the pile of fabric to move the coat, the pants, and shirt to see if there was anything of value. The prick was traveling light. He must have known he would have to flee. Not many people have a fighting chance against balancers.

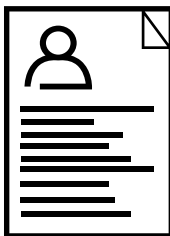
Those decapitated fingers on the concrete floor didn’t matter. Food for the rats. Bloodsuckers healed; unless you used a wooden stake, or the right prayer, you wouldn’t damage them. As if prayers mattered anymore.

Synarion had memorized the checklist on how to rid a bloodsucker disrupting balance. Under his jacket he kept his small stake. He didn’t want to kill this one. He needed

information. A bloodsucker doesn't kill their familiar unless it is of grave importance. The foolish man trusted his master and gave him permission to come into his home, a requirement for vampires to enter a space.

The bloodsucker's leftovers didn't offer much except for the burner phone. It was unusual for them to reach for the cell during combat. How it related to the forgotten ghosts of Synarion's past is a new mystery that could not remain unresolved. The balancing offense deepened.





## BALANCER PROFILE SUMMARY

**Name:** Unknown

**Species:** Vampire (Bloodsucker)

**Location:** Surrey, British Columbia, Canada

**Description:** Five foot eight, pale white. Harsh mutation. Pointed ears, flat and wide nose, black eyes, and irregular fangs. Sharp claws. Black hair.

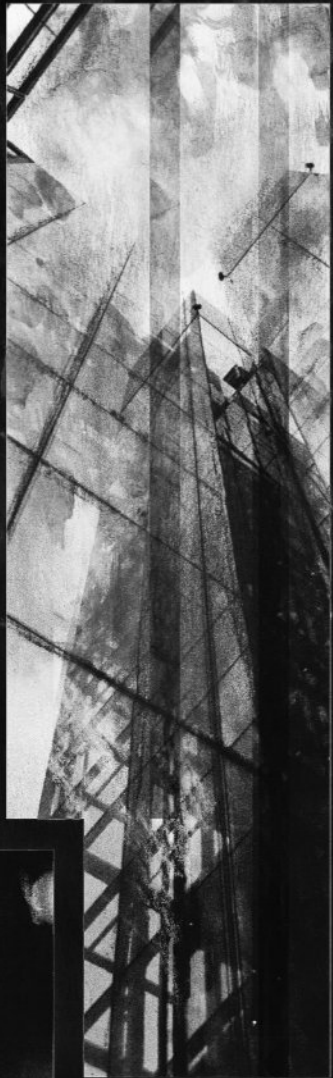
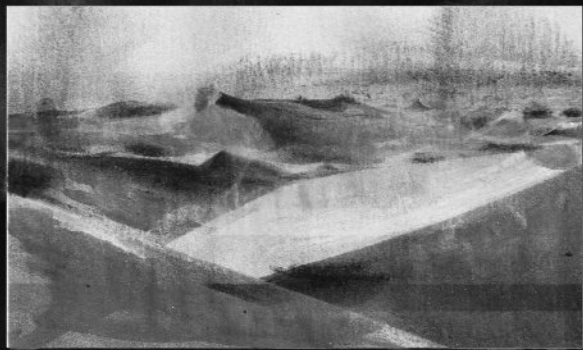
**Balancing Offence:** Gluttonous. Kills too many humans for their blood and has police looking for a serial killer. It draws far too much attention, jeopardizing what remains of the old world.

**Notes:** Travels light. Decent in hand-to-hand combat. They covered their last victim in bite marks forming rings. I haven't seen this before. He killed his own familiar. The vampire wanted to hide a secret involving a golden pendant of a woman, which must have a more profound balancing offence. It's a symbol from my past. It should remain there.





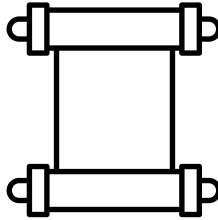
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I







ACT I  
**EROS OF  
WANDERLUST SIBYLLA**

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Page 1/3)

*Through cosmic creation,  
life flourishes,  
century, millennia, eons,  
life continues in Mother Nature's libation.*





## CHAPTER 2

# SHEEP IN WOLF'S CLOTHING

*Did you enjoy our time together?*

*Yes.*

*Can we make it last a little longer?*

*No.*

Strangeness is all around. An alien land leaves creatures under the moonlight on alert, for danger lurks in the shadows, and in front of them. Even the sentient beings, like Synarion, reverted to this primal instinct. He's trained for survival, and

the night's cold embrace left him shivering, following the mysterious fanged rider.

She rode the camel, taking him over giant sand dunes far from the ocean where they met. His comrade hadn't removed their hood or goggles. On occasion, they looked behind at the hills they had travelled. She did this action several times as if they were being followed. With each glance she made, Synarion mimicked her and saw sand. He lost track of how many dunes they had gone over. His legs were tired, his skin burnt, his arms sore from holding his trunk, and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

"Where are we?" Synarion asked, for the fourth time.

No answer.

It compelled him to leave. There was nowhere else for him to go. The stranger was his best option. Fate can be cruel, and Synarion didn't wash onto the shore with any supplies, weapons, or even intact clothing. His future was at the hands of the camel rider and Mother Nature. One could pray that she hadn't abandoned Earth after the colossal failure from his people.

Their travel gave Synarion too much time to wander his mind. The events leading to the collapse of Zingalg were evident for hundreds of years, and they were too foolish to do anything. Even Synarion took share of the blame. Logic told him there were far too many moving parts to point fingers at an individual. Life would be more straightforward if you could.

They reached the top of a dune, the largest yet, giving them a broad view of endless sand. The two would be traveling for days at this rate. Synarion questioned if he had the strength to

do it. His companion took one last long gaze at the dunes they'd passed and commanded the camel down the hill towards two isolated limestone boulders. Upon closer inspection, glyphs of unknown origin engraved the rock.

"What is this?" Synarion asked as they reached the stones. He knelt, resting the trunk on the sand for a moment. His arms thanked him.

The stranger hopped off her camel, leaned to the carvings, and ran her gloved fingers over the mysterious language. She moved to the edge until her hand reached a hidden lever and caused the sand between the boulders to fall, revealing a staircase.

She took her camel's rope and marched inside. The animal was not hesitant, indicating that the creature trusted her or had been here before. Synarion mirrored the camel's actions and took his trunk, following her into the darkness.

They descended further, and further.

One step after the other.

It went on forever.

After several dozen paces, a dim light appeared at the end of the hall. At the exit, the travellers entered an open space where the stars and moon pierced through holes in the chasm's roof. Countless stone buildings erected the circular cave, each coated in sand, indicating that nobody had touched them in decades if not centuries. At the center of the round city was a triangular temple.

Muffled groans came from the corner to their right, past several skeletons draped in gold, resting against the wall of a single-storied building. The noise caught his companion's

attention. She tied her camel to the post outside the building and stepped inside. Synarion joined her.

Broken wooden shelves and a cracked stone counter, covered in sand, were inside. This was once a storefront. The darkness made it difficult to see more. A metallic tinge filled the air. She walked by the counter and went into the storage room. Past splintered casket barrels was a family of four: a mother, a boy, a girl, and a father tied with rope around their mouths and limbs. Three of them leaned against the wall. The man was sideways in a pool of blood.

This was a trap. Synarion had to leave. His strength was gone, and he had to fight. The balancer kicked the weakest wooden barrel, splintering a plank, and raised it to his comrade, holding the trunk of his past under his arm. She stopped in front of the family, not turning around. It was as if she had expected it.

“Do you think I would be so foolish to leave fatal weapons around my meal?” the stranger asked. Her smooth voice welcomed him.

Synarion took a step to the door. As much as he wanted to save the family, he couldn't bet on his abilities, not in his damaged state. He spoke, “I'm not sure. Desperation makes many a fool.”

“Like following a stranger?” the other asked.

Synarion's foot bumped against a rough fabric, and he glanced to see a grain bag.

He looked at the woman. She was gone.

His ears twitched, catching the faint sound of wind from his side. A breath tickled his neck, and he spun around, bringing the splintered plank of wood inches from the stranger's chest.

Her hand snagged the stake, causing him to use two of his. He dropped the chest with a soft landing on the grain sack. His arms shook, struggling to keep dominance of the weapon. She smiled at him with an open mouth, showcasing the prominent fangs.

“You understand what I am? Hmmm?” she asked.

“As you knew I was a nymph. Do you know what kind?” He grunted and pulled on the plank, ripping it free from her grasp. On second thought, she let him have it.

She remained at the doorway and removed her hood in one flick, letting her thick, shimmering brunette hair drape against her shoulders. She unbuckled her goggles, showcasing emerald eyes with an unnatural glimmer in the darkness. These were the same eyes that sucked him into that trance earlier in the evening. It was a magnetic demoralizing force that pierced into the essence of his being. The balancer experienced vampires in the past. These eyes, though, were unlike anything he had seen before. Her grace was impressive.

“No. I haven't seen your kind in centuries,” she said.

“That makes me a delicacy for your feast.”

The stranger took several steps forward. He snagged his chest by the handle and moved in reverse, pointing the stake at her. The vampire's stride had controlled power; each leg crossed one another in an effortless glide. She didn't lose her gaze on him as her hands slid against the nearby barrels.

Her motions made it obvious she didn't plan on hunting to a swift resolution. She enjoyed playing with her food, hence the room of choice. Synarion squeezed the trunk's handle, his arm burning from its weight. He couldn't abandon his past. It was



far too valuable. He kept the stake targeted on the vampire's chest. Her vibrant irises didn't leave his. Despite his efforts to focus on her action, the gaze kept pulling him in. Through the vast depth they cast, it enticed him. He wanted to explore them further.

*No*, he thought, shaking his head.

*Yes*.

Synarion blinked a couple of times, realizing that was not his own thought.

She chuckled, a low and sinister one from the core of her bowels. The stranger enjoyed her psychic power. How she became so potent was beyond his understanding. Bloodsuckers didn't have such strength. Balancers would have known. They kept a detailed archive of Mother Nature's creatures. Still . . . the look . . . she was in his mind.

"Haaah! A balancer of the Grove?" the vampire hissed. "Intriguing."

*Mother Nature, guide me*, Synarion thought. He had to escape, with or without those people. This was too dangerous not to. They had to work as some leverage. He doubted his ability to make it past the door with brute force.

"What are you balancing?" she asked. She stopped by a barrel and hopped on top, resting her palms on the rim. "Beings like me. Hmmm? Are they the ones who are considered not correct?"

"Perhaps," Synarion said. "What did you do?"

She smiled at him, crossing her legs. "When you've lived as long as I have, nymph, you tend to forget."

"What of these people?"

She removed her gloves, placed them in her cloak's pocket, and examined her pointed black nails. "I need them," she said.

"And they needed their father," Synarion said.

"Do you judge a wolf for killing an elk, leaving the calf to fend for itself?"

"That depends."

"Mmmm. Explain, nymph." She pulled on her hair, twirling it around her index finger.

Synarion's bottom eyelid twitched. He didn't like to be toyed with. She wanted entertainment before going for his blood. "Let's get this over with? I am in no mood for games."

She raised one of her thin brows, slid off the barrel, and walked around him. "Please, lower your guard. I'm not here to eat you."

He didn't listen, keeping the plank of wood aimed at her heart as she circled past him. Her confident stride struck his core. Even a balancer can feel fear of the darker side of Mother Nature's garden. The vampire didn't even look at him while she approached the family.

"See?" she said. The vampire raised her hands and twirled to face him. "I mean you no harm."

"What do you want from me?" Synarion asked.

"Knowledge. You see, nymph, I've been dormant for a long, long time."

Compliance isn't a form of weakness, at least when you're strategizing your next move. Synarion hadn't eaten or quenched his thirst since arriving on the shores, and the vampire was offering to spare his life, for now, in exchange for information. It was a simple transaction. His interest lay in

where she obtained the humans. If there were some, there were more. Humans cluster together and breed like rabbits.

“What’s your name?” Synarion asked.

“Queen Valturus, haaah!” She exposed her fangs while extending her arms as if expecting crowd praise.

He waved the stake in a circle. “And this is your kingdom? Rather dead, isn’t it?”

“Which is why I have so many questions for you. Nymphs live far longer than humans, as I recall. What do you go by, nymph?”

“Synarion.”

The vampire took a curtsy and smiled. “Come, walk with me.” She strolled past him without a concern of the weapon he held.

Synarion looked at the humans. The woman’s eyes were wide, and spoke two words without a sound: *help me*. Balancers are not shining knights of the Knight’s Union. Balancers keep the equilibrium of ecosystems. With that reasoning, his survival was far more critical in the current situation. The knowledge in the trunk and his mind was worth more than gold.

Queen Valturus walked along the main stone road outside the home, leading to a long, wide circular-stepped staircase. More skeletal corpses rested against the wall, wearing the same red and green silk sash as she. Bite marks pressed into their necks.

“How long have you been dormant?” Synarion asked.

“I’m attempting to decipher this myself,” the vampire said.

“It must have been quite some time if this was once yours.” He dropped his guard for a moment, looking at the nearby dust-coated building.

Queen Valturus stopped at the bottom of the stairs. The road led straight to the triangular temple. "It was. I care not to revisit this. Demonstration purposes only, *haaah*." She turned and stepped close to Synarion. He raised the stake, and she paused with the tip against her chest. She spoke, "My interest lies in you. A nymph, no longer from Zingalg. Nymphs don't go alone. Are you the last?"

"Yes."

Her hands reached for his weapon, each finger landing on the wood one at a time. She directed it away from her and stepped closer, pressing herself against him and sniffing his neck in a long whiff. His skin tingled.

She stepped away, releasing his stake. "As am I, hmmm."

*Last vampire, impossible*, he thought. "Who woke you?"

"A kind young man seeking immortality. A gift that I passed onto him."

"So you're not the last."

Valturus ascended the stairs, presuming Synarion followed. "Last of the great, to my understanding. When I pass the gift on, they are an echo of me and cannot do the same. It is mine to give. That boy has so much to discover of himself, a journey that he must do alone."

Synarion swallowed a lump of saliva, concluding what she was. "You're a carrier, of the vampiric disease?"

"A disease? It doesn't reside in me. This *disease* as a whole is what you see before you."

"Right. What makes you so sure you're the last? There used to be many more of you."

"Long ago, yes. A mystery as great as my gap in time."

“As are the vampire’s origins.”

A crooked smile rose on her face. “Not quite. However, I can ask you the same, hmmm? Yet we’re certain we’re the last.”

At the top of the stairs, Valturus sat, as did Synarion. He kept the trunk on his lap and the stake close to his heart. She pointed with her long nails at the dead city. “I understood my unique gift. I was a god among men. Though the history of this civilization matters little. You cannot save them. Humans fail to understand hierarchy. Greedy fools and poisonous to the touch.” She turned to Synarion. “Unlike a nymph, *mmm?* Bold and duty-driven.”

“That’s correct.”

She shifted to face him, her knee brushing against his. “What type of balancer were you in your now-dead mystical land? Balancing is complicated. Many nymphs, many professions.”

*She knows Zingalg’s collapse.* He pushed the thought aside to answer, understanding she was in his mind earlier. “I was not special nor unique. I followed what the Grove ordered.”

Queen Valturus’s eyes analyzed him from head to toe, listening with keen interest.

“We maintained balance in the world for Mother Nature. However, we failed her. I was, I am, the last balancer. This is why my existence is so important, why the documents in this trunk must live on. And-and how did you tell Zingalg collapsed?”

“How could I not? Any eyes residing on the coast could see the catastrophic event. A light so bright, it would blind mortals who stared at it too long.”

"Imagine being in it. You saw it? Where are we, Egypt?" Synarion asked.

"Far from it. Aewouson."

"As in the island, with Life's River?" His stomach twisted, and the hairs on his skin stood.

"An island? Haaah!"

His head slumped into his hand, rubbing his brow with the palm, refusing to let go of the weapon with the other. "By the Creator."

Valturus took his wrist with a gentle grasp, moving his hand aside. The dreadful news was too much for him to care that he was with the vampire. If anything, the caring hand gave a false sense of comfort.

"Nymph, explain yourself," Valturus said.

"We're not safe here," Synarion said, sitting straight.

"What happened in Zingalg?"

"You must have—" Synarion paused, remembering this vampire had been dormant, and they sat in her dead kingdom. "There were signs. Terrible signs that we ignored. You're familiar with words of power?"

"Maghice, yes. A power considered unnatural."

*Yes, like you,* Synarion wanted to say. "Correct. Paladins, priests, druids, sorcerers."

"Balancers," Valturus said with a grin, emphasizing her cheekbones.

"Yes, though balancers of the Grove attempted to regulate the use of maghice. The other civilizations didn't."

"A fear of one another, yesss? Lead one another to build more and better weapons?"

“I’m sure your kingdom had its rivals,” Synarion said.

“And they perished at my hand,” Valturus said.

“Fear led to more dangerous research into words of power. Humans, nymphs, trolls, and shimen are a handful of the capable beings that used maghice. Have you used it?”

“Words of power? Here and there. How did they?”

“Meditation was one method in their research. It helped focus their willpower and silenced their mind. Chants and sound frequencies vibrated doors open that should have stayed closed. Rituals and prayers let them speak beyond physical space to gods and the numens.”

“Haaah! Numens, such as Mother Nature herself? Not quite a god and not quite mortal. Like me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, vampire,” Synarion said. She stroked her hair between her fingers. It caught his gaze. He continued, “Words of power also derived from books. The most unnatural and unholy of books fell into the hands of mortals. This one book could undo reality.”

Valturus’s eyes widened, striking Synarion ill in his gut. She was too eager to learn more. What was done was done, and she wouldn’t find the book anyway.

“At first, signs in the earth escalated over several centuries. It was too small for most mortals to notice in their lifetimes. Humans, what? Sixties years of life if they’re lucky? Trolls, not much more. The soil was dying and dried, and the plants weakened each year. The weather patterns changed. Harsh winds and spontaneous fires.”

“This book sounds like that Erenwill staff you balancers kept. Unnatural.”

“You know our kind well.”

“Who didn’t recognize the great Erenwill? It could command the oceans, skies, earth, and flame. All wanted it.”

“And none shall have it.”

“Did it not survive Zingalg’s collapse?”

“I don’t know.”

“Shame. Fools and power. Books and staves belong in capable hands.”

“Ours was in capable hands. Mother Nature gifted it so,” Synarion said.

“Haaah. Yet you couldn’t counter the words of power from some book? Zingalg is gone.”

Synarion dismissed her comment. Without being present, she lacked understanding of the bureaucracy and arrogance, as well as the insufficient and belated actions. He continued, “Of course, the vegetation and weather changes reflected in the wildlife. The damages were blamed on the other factions, with none taking ownership. This one book was brought into the picture. The Book of Consulo. Its pages are darker than night, and the text is radiant gold and red. That codex is said to be the size of a small child with a cover made of stone, found in Dega’Mostikas’s Triangle.”

“Hell. The book was made in Hell?” Valturus played with her hair faster.

“Not so. The legend goes that the Creator made the book a failsafe to undo creationism. How the book appeared in the mortal realm is beyond my expertise.”

“The afterlife is filled with mysteries,” Valturus said.

“And we’re cursed for their faults.”



“How could I not know of such a book?” Valturus asked, gazing into the distance.

“Life’s history is long and complicated. Who understands the grand story?”

“So true, yes. Who found this book?”

“Renegades. They were a religious sect of humans named the Aureate Rise. I admired their core principle of unification of the factions. However, their religious methods and warped morals denounced Mother Nature. Once they decoded the Book of Consulo’s mysterious language, the fools spoke words of power beyond others’ ability. It was even beyond their own understanding. The Grove dismissed them as a fly, blind to what the sect invited into this world. It shattered the heart of Zingalg.”

“The source of maghice. It’s destroyed?”

“Taking the whole continent with it, including the Grove, the Aureate Rise, the Book of Consulo, and anything adjacent, including Aewouson and its surrounding islands.” Synarion stood. “Which is why the shore is moving inwards. You saw it. It’s why we cannot stay here. Or those humans. Where did they come from?”

Valturus took his forearm, holding the trunk, asking him to sit again. He resisted at first until she gave a slight tug. He obeyed her potent green eyes and sat beside her. Her bewitching stare filled him with the same dualism of fear and fascination. The battling emotions knotted his innards and froze his spine, preventing him from moving as she leaned in and pressed her soft lips against his. His stake-wielding hand froze.

The moment held, and he didn't stop her, getting a brief taste of her saliva until she pulled away.

She caressed his forearm and spoke. "We have time."

"I . . ." This was the single word Synarion could say. He wanted to resist, and in his weakened state, he found the weapon had slipped from his hand. No, he wasn't a meal for her. He was another kind of enjoyment.

"If what you say is true," she said, "Maghice is dead, Zingalg is gone, and the great kingdoms are destroyed. They are relics of the past like my own empire, hmmm? We're the last of an era. Find comfort in that, Synarion the balancer."

She brought her hand to his jaw and pulled him in for another kiss, breaking the mental fortitude he had.

*You were gone before I even arrived.*

*No.*

*I disagree.*





## CHAPTER 3 AN OLD DOG WITH NEW TRICKS

He sipped on his tea, watching the vibrant moonlight glimmer against the dark waves of the ocean bobbing. Each splash against the rocky beach created a gentle pulse. The simple things reminded Synarion why he was doing this. The beautiful relationship of the stars and moon working with the planet's surface reflecting painted a breathtaking scene.

He could turn around and see the skyscrapers of downtown Vancouver, the concrete jungle made by man that infected this world. He didn't want to. Often, Synarion wondered if he

should irradiate the human race. For one, he didn't think he could do it alone. Two: it was humans' turn to shine. Synarion had been around long enough to see the eras change and the balance of power shift. Before his existence the draconem, reptilian winged beasts of terror, were dominant, the nymphs, and now man, who was following the path of their predecessors, failing to maintain the crown.

Dominance in the pecking order is one example of balancing variables Synarion needed to consider. He had archives from the Grove to reference, which aided his judgment to a degree. He lacked a colleague to express concerns with. All he had were his own thoughts. There were allies, sure, but they didn't want to risk their lives, and he couldn't blame them. He could leverage them. One in particular he would visit tomorrow regarding the pendant. Synarion shivered from a chill that not even the tea could help. It wasn't the wind. The thought of her was sickening.

He checked his inner pocket containing throwing stars to see how many he had, and in the pouch buckled to his outer thigh. Not many. More ammunition was required with this bloodsucker on the go. The slithering nature of the vampire struck him to no end. Synarion took another sip of tea, swallowing his shame that the lowlife got the upper hand.

Tea wasn't going to solve this. He required a stronger drink.

Synarion left the coastal shores, throwing his satchel over his shoulder. He tossed his cup of tea into the nearest recycle bin. It's not like that did any good anyway. The recycling system was a complete mess, patching a much larger issue that humans

failed to acknowledge. It was like the nymphs during their reign. Fools. Everywhere there were fools.

He wiped his face with a cloth from his pouch. The scratch from the bloodsucker's attack was light. It would scab and not scar. With a brush through his gelled hair, he became a human, returning to their world, wandering the streets until he found an old dim-lit bar. The floors showed scuff marks and wear. The ceiling curved from water damage. It contained patrons drinking together and alone, not wanting to be bothered. This type of environment was where he could do a search. He ordered a whiskey on the rocks, that type of strong drink, and sat at the crooked bar at the far end. He took his scratch-covered laptop from his satchel.

If anyone from the old world wanted to survive man's wrath, they had to stay hidden in a land that had forgotten them. They needed to blend in. Adapt. You learn the customs and technologies of the new superiors. Otherwise, someone would discover you, and that would cause a plethora of problems.

Humans grew fragile and scared of the unfamiliar over the generations. The people in the bar were a good example: soft, slow, and more words than action compared to their former. Their tragic lives once hardened them far more than the other species. That's why they rose to dominance in this new world. With no real threats, they conditioned themselves to overeat fatty, salty foods. They participated in petty, egotistical wars of resources and religion, failing to uncover the relics and knowledge of the old world. Without a doubt, other species looked for these lost gems, and that was a constant looming threat that they had no information on.

Humans were in luck because one last balancer kept their unknown threats at bay. Bloodsuckers and ancient pendants were a couple of examples. Synarion didn't do it for humanity's benefit. It was for Mother Nature. These humans happened to be here at the right time.

Onto the important work. The latest balancing offence with the bloodsucker, his familiar, the ring-covered body, and the unusual pendant in his inner pocket. Synarion had not laid eyes on this pendant since he first met her. The familiar said four days. Four days until what? The burner phone had no previous calls or data on it; it was too new. Who was he going to contact?

Synarion powered the laptop and loaded a word processing software. He typed his balancer profile of the bloodsucker he encountered. It was short and sweet because he didn't obtain enough information other than the physical mutation and their willingness to kill their familiar.

After jotting the notes, Synarion skimmed through his local folders. The bar didn't have any Wi-Fi to access his VPN cloud storage. Again, Synarion learned to adapt to this brave new world. Technology is critical to archiving the old world. His limited resources made him incapable of storing anything he found. The Grove's chronicler met the afterlife during the collapse two thousand years ago. Digital conversion through photographs and scans was Synarion's best option for keeping the old world alive.

He swirled the whiskey and took a sip, skimming through his scanned-in scripts from the Balancer Order that once resided in the Grove. These ancient documents belonged to the highest tier of balancers. They did their best to archive organisms,

groups, and ecosystems under Mother Nature's watch. Synarion was fortunate enough to have obtained a handful of the texts before the old world's collapse, stuffing them in a small trunk. With any luck, these files could offer insight into this strange scenario. The scripts were in the nymph's native language. It was a dead tongue, and Synarion may have been the single person in the mortal realm who could read and speak it.

The first document in the folder illustrated the Grove's iconic symbol. The central gate with vines represented the Grove and Mother Nature's garden, providing life for the creatures in her world. The spiralling staff made of wood to the left had ancient glyphs carved into the pole and a rough, uneven gem mounted on top with the wood growing around it. The English translation for this was Erenwill, the Greatstaff of Equilibrium, used by the Balancer Order with great care, for its powers shifted climates. To the right was a stone anthropomorphic being, faceless and thick-limbed. They characterized one of four elemandriases, elementals, from the Grove. These constructions were protectors of the archives and the staff. They wielded godlike power of the elements they seeded from. Reviewing the illustration reminded him of his home, past, and the lives that had been wiped away.

These pictures, his culture, were dust.

A stroll through memory lane didn't do anyone good. He was reviewing these files for a mission. The documents didn't mention the pendant. Why would it? The balancers of the Grove didn't travel far enough to record the entire world. Not even humans and their internet had done so with success.



Synarion reached into his pocket and took the pendant, spinning it with his index finger and thumb. Indeed, his eyes did not betray him. This was the same relic. Leaves. Flowergram. A feminine figure with a circular encompass was uncommon today.

“Mother of the World,” Synarion muttered. He reached under his shirt and exposed his leather necklace ending in a large jade green circle carved with vines, curved indents, and square groove sockets. The various shapes formed blank eyes, a nose, and lips. He held at least what remained of Erenwill, the Greatstaff of Equilibrium.

Synarion brought the first pendant to the jade one in his right hand to compare. *This one, it’s Mother Nature*, he thought.

A man walked by him, talking to a friend. He missed the conversation. The volume made him tuck the jade pendant under his shirt in a knee-jerk reflex. It had to be safe.

As for the new one, it represented Mother Nature too. It was a conflict of icons. Why the pentagram? Why would a bloodsucker’s familiar have this? Why was it worth killing him over?

“World Mother,” Synarion said. “*In four days, the World Mother—*” was as far as the familiar got before his ill fate.

Synarion continued evaluating his scanned documents containing JPGs and PDFs from the trunk he escaped Zingal with. He took a swig of his whiskey, getting lost in the ancient language’s text, listening to 70s rock-n-roll hits. The scanned scripts recorded guides and scenarios balancers should follow. Classic ritual PDFs titled *grove\_transcripts\_ENG\_01* through *grove\_transcripts\_ENG\_04* offered poems for him to repeat,

remembering the importance of the Grove's ways. They were in English, aiding in mastering the language to blend in. Other files were in the ancient dialogue, documenting plants and locations that no longer existed, and past and present living things. Present as in two centuries ago.

The last file he skimmed focused on kingdoms, groups, religions, and the occult. Zero. This pendant could be irrelevant and it was a fluke that the man had it. Synarion didn't check the familiar's corpse after the gunshot. He didn't want to lose the assassin. The law enforcement came too soon.

This pendant was meaningful in a distant past before he was alive, and the Balancers Order didn't record it. He had few he could consult regarding its existence. In fact, even the original owner of the pendant was within his reach. The thought caused his throat to tense, making him chug the last bit of his whiskey. There was one solution. It didn't involve those scripts. He was versed in them from years of referencing. His plan was settled. He would visit the vampire. For all he knew she was behind this. She put her needs first.

Synarion was a creature of Earth and not a mechanical being. So, he sat, watching the hockey game from the mounted television behind the bar, letting the liquor numb his anger.

A pop-up reminder appeared on his laptop regarding a meeting tomorrow. *Right*, he thought. It was related to a job he picked to obtain currency and pay bills. The underground intranet he was a part of provided odd jobs. Old world beings needed expertise and support from one another. It was tomorrow's worry, not today.

“You want another, sweetie?” asked the bartender in the classic smoker voice.

“Yeah, thanks,” he replied.

“Rough day?” she asked, pouring a new whiskey.

*Right*, Synarion had forgotten the blood on his face. We wiped it with his cuff, which didn’t do much to make him appear less worn. His cold frown and the scabbed ears spoke more than his words could.

“Something like that,” he said.

“You might want to get that looked at,” she said, sliding the whiskey over. “It’ll scar.”

“I’m sure it will, thanks,” Synarion said. Little did the human know that he had natural remedies that could rejuvenate his flesh fast. Botany was a skill he acquired during his training in the Grove. Each balancer did. He’d obtained the plants from the old world with the clever intranet. They’d wipe this wound clean as if it were a smear.

The thought of the plant reminded him how he couldn’t rescue each living thing from the Grove. Most things from Zingalg perished. If other balancers survived, they could have collected more of their past. He prayed their most essential relics, like Erenwill, the Greatstaff of Equilibrium or the elemandriases, were around. Reality confirmed that they had lost them, including his culture and the remaining relics.

The bar roared as one of the hockey teams scored on the television. Synarion sipped on the drink, washing away his frustrations. He let that damn bloodsucker get away. His skills were not primed. He questioned if he could maintain balance on his own much longer. If she returned and was involved, he’d

. . . it was a thought he didn't want to humour. He would talk to her first. The old world's ways were gone, and the remaining souls understood that. It made him question his duty. To what end could he keep doing this? There may be no point in maintaining order. Mother Nature did fine on her own, shaking off the pests she didn't like. That was the whiskey talking. More thoughts of grief continued as he kept drinking, watching how the human sport energized the bar.

None of them knew what he was or the history he held. The naïve humans were ignorant to what happened to Mother Nature. They lived their short existence for under a century, believing in their abstract economic systems and thinking they were unique to this world and the universe. Oh, to be so obtuse.

Synarion didn't ask for this life. He didn't ask for this quest that required him to resurrect his skeletons. He didn't want to be the last. Hell, it would have been easier if he perished during the old world collapse. He wouldn't be so alone. No other old world beings wished to aid in the Grove's attempts to maintain balance. Selfishness is ever-present in nature. The balancers' unique perspective of protecting Mother Nature made others detest them. People detested them for their selective and, most of the time, passive behavior. It was impossible to understand the complicated harmony required for Mother Nature.

Rule four: stay calm.

Another roar boomed from the bar. Fists slammed the table. A few boos followed. Canadians loved their hockey. Synarion wasn't for sports. This country served as an excellent spot to hide in. It had a vast wilderness to disappear into. To Synarion's

luck, he could navigate the human world with ease. Most old world beings could blend in.

The rules kept Synarion in check so he could survive and continue his duty, the one thing that mattered. Ghosts of his past and personal emotions regarding vampires wouldn't obstruct his mission. He would unravel the origins of this pendant.

These were tomorrow's worries.

Tonight was hockey night in Canada with a glass of whiskey.

Rule three: embrace the culture.



## CHAPTER 4 ENEMIES CAN LIVE TOGETHER

Day two, Friday.

Blending in with another culture isn't difficult. There are rules to follow. If old world beings stay true to them, they will succeed. If they refuse to follow the rules, it's best to consider themselves an outcast. Humans thrive in sensationalism, making them excellent at converting fact into myth and legend over a long enough time period. If they discovered the hidden gap in their past, they would question their entire reality and faith systems. In short, chaos.

Rule one: look like you belong.

It is a simple rule of six, at least if the old world being's physiques match. That leads to rule two: don't stand out from the crowd. It's dangerous to act unexpectedly. Side eyes rise, and friends become foes. If the old world being can't execute rules one and two, the only solution to ensure survival is to escape into deep isolation. Assuming they could accomplish the previous rules, rule three applies: embrace the culture. Each rule builds off the previous, so their order is important. Most old world beings Synarion encountered could not even reach rule four, and he didn't often elaborate on rules five and six. They were his, which he offered to souls willing to try. The rules ensured he could continue his balancing mission for Mother Nature and survive the naïve nature of humans.

After too many whiskeys, he stumbled home on the east side of Vancouver, near the harbour filled with factories and ports bringing shipments from overseas to the rest of the country. He relished in rule three tonight: embrace the culture. He needed it. Tomorrow would bring hauntings he thought were long since buried. A lone balancer knows no easy life, and substances offered a kind hand.

Living near the industrial park provided cheap rent due to the smells of mechanized smug and a sting from the poultry processing plant nearby. The wretched aroma would be too much for most. Synarion got used to the smell and was unphased as he walked across the street, past his parked 2000s Hyundai hatchback, and to the front door. The car reflected the home; balancing didn't offer a luxurious lifestyle.

He fumbled for his key to get into the lobby. After digging in his pocket, he got inside under the flickering lighting and stepped across the burgundy carpet, up the creaking staircase to the second floor, and into his studio flat. The lease was also low due to no maintenance. The unfinished wood flooring and concrete walls were one example of the unglamorous nature of the building.

The open room concept had little sunlight from the narrow-barred windows. It worked for his needs. One corner had his kitchen and the door to the bathroom. The other had his bed and closet, while the opposite end had a shelf with clay pots growing a few plants. The corner closest to the front door had a table full of his belongings. It contained a mixture of computers and numerous jars of plants, each labelled. He dropped his satchel onto the surface and found one jar named *diefym leaf*. This remnant of the old world provided rapid rejuvenation when ground into a paste and applied to a wound. He took some leaves from the container and chewed on them, spitting the mush into his palm, and smeared it over his cheek. That scratch would be good as gone in the morning.

He popped off his brown contacts and unequipped his weapons. He needed rest to keep his head focused on tomorrow's agenda. The balancer collapsed onto his bed, letting his thoughts wander into nothingness. As much as he wished Mother Nature would speak to him for guidance, he knew she wouldn't. She stopped talking to his kind long ago. He could sense her in meditation and when in the wilderness, which wasn't the same as their once direct line of communication. How could she forgive the tragic blind



sightedness of the nymphs? Countless souls died on their watch. Fools. Fools . . .

Rule four: stay calm.

The next morning, he woke at dawn, as with most days. The liquor did not affect him the following day due to his habit, which he should cut. It was one he ignored. He brewed some coffee from the percolator on the stove top, thinking of his slumber. His mind slipped into incohesive dreams. They were emotions and feelings associated with a sense of belonging. He felt a purpose that would lead to the order of nature. Yes, it was a reminder that he was a child of the Earth. He should retire.

Synarion couldn't. He had no other purpose. He had to maintain order if the humans went too far like his people did. They proved their interests weren't in keeping Mother Nature's garden safe. Synarion had to carry on, even if it meant swallowing his pride of personal issues. For Mother Nature, even if he couldn't fly to each corner of the world to maintain balance due to funds. He did what he must.

His best way to stay connected was on the web. The world was enormous until the World Wide Web shrunk it to a manageable state. Some old world beings understood the need to stay in touch. They looked past their differences for the better of their future. This led to Synarion's first contact for consultation, *the* vampire.

Synarion logged a database of each old world being he knew, which allowed him to monitor their behaviour and leverage the relationship. He knew where to go to find her: a real estate office in Vancouver.

An ill-informed mind wouldn't believe her past if they saw her today, working at her own firm in a downtown skyscraper. Land is big business. Real estate agents specialized in a non-renewable resource, meaning prices could skyrocket in desirable locations. A coastal city was a good example. In Canada, Vancouver was one of the top areas with foreign land investment and the country's most expensive city. Play your cards right and you could capitalize on that money as she did. Sucking funds from prime investors was fitting for a vampire's nature. Speculation told Synarion she chose to start an office here to keep tabs on him. Though the former was more probable.

He sipped his coffee and pulled the cool pendant from his inner pocket and into his warm palm. Synarion didn't even bother to undress from the night before. His thumb caressed the circular frame of the sculpture. This was indeed hers. He reached into his pants pocket and took his smartphone, looking at the database on his screen filled with columns and rows. He dialed the phone number under the phone column for *Valturus* and let it ring.

"Hi, is Jennifer around?" Synarion said. ". . . Yes . . . a condo . . . Mr. Parker . . . mmmhm . . . an old friend . . . she is? How long? Perfect." Looked like the civilized bloodsucker was in. He swallowed a lump of saliva, seeing there was no going back.

After the morning brew, Synarion cleaned himself with a fresh swab of hair gel, mouthwash, and popped in his contact lenses. He used a dab of deodorant for the scent. It wasn't required. Others described the natural odor from nymphs as

pleasant. The synthetic fresh mountain scent of the deodorant was a decoy to appear more human.

The drive from the harbour into the downtown core had bumper-to-bumper traffic. He didn't have a clue that it was the weekday rush hour for humans. He got caught in the jam and circled around the office tower's block several times until he found a parking meter. Once he slotted the coins into the toll, he was off.

Most would consider the six hundred foot tall glass tower an astronomical architectural feat. To Synarion, humans preferred fast building for quick usage. Weak concrete foundations and steel frames wrapped in glass coverage were the standard form of modern buildings. Twisting the shape or pushing a few "blocks" around like a game of Jenga created the prestigious high-end corporate design. The North Americans took influence from their European colleagues, which were cheap, uninspired nonsense in Synarion's view. It couldn't compare to the architecture of the former. Humans forged castles containing hundreds of rooms, towers that kissed the heavens, and solid keeps that stood for thousands of years. Forgotten concrete mixtures, bricks, stone, and supernatural resources from other races put this paper kingdom to shame. Thinking of the constructions of the nymphs, by the Creator, it made human achievements look like child's play.

Fragments of another time, that was it.

Synarion took the gold elevator from the marble-floored lobby to the forty-third floor. The elevator opened, and the first office contained a glass door. He entered the office, walking to a deep brown wooden administrator's desk, looking at the

stainless steel etched text mounted on the wall stating: *Jennifer Anderson Real Estate*.

*Nice name*, Synarion thought, knowing the immortal had taken countless names over the centuries. The human secretary behind the front desk was oblivious to the type of monster she worked for. Humans, so young, too naive, and quite adventurous.

“Morning,” Synarion said.

The woman looked at him from her computer monitor with wide, youthful eyes. “Good morning, how may I help you?” she said.

He leaned on the counter and spoke. “I called earlier. I’m here to see Jennifer.”

“Oh, yes. Mr. Parker?”

“That’s correct.”

“Right this way.” She stood and walked around the desk. Her high heels clicked with each step on the marble tile. The woman led him past the foyer and through the hall of pastel green paint, passing templated offices, matching desks of the same brand and texture as the front. She took him to a corner unit overlooking the waves of the Burrard Inlet, leading into the North Pacific Ocean. Jennifer knew how to enjoy the finer things. Her name was etched into a steel plank screwed into the center of the open wooden door.

“She’s finishing another meeting. She’ll be here shortly,” the secretary said.

“Thank you,” Synarion said, stepping into the office.

“Would you like anything to drink, water or coffee?”

“Coffee,” he said.

“Cream or sugar?”

“Black.”

The secretary left to fetch the brew as Synarion sat before Valturus’s long walnut desk. He could identify any grain of wood from a mile away. His eyes were keen enough, his expertise vast. He smirked at the framed family photo beside the two monitors on desk mounts. It was a clever façade. Yes, she was indeed married. Yes, she would have a loving family. She was caring when you served a purpose to her. This family masked her true self. Give it a decade when she failed to age, and she’d suck the life from these ill-fated humans and vanish. The children couldn’t be her own; that’s not how vampires procreate.

Rule five: don’t mix.

His ears twitched, catching the high clicks of the secretary’s shoes. She leaned over him and placed a cup of coffee on a leather coaster. The mix of bold beans and a synthesized floral perfume flooded his nostrils. Sweet, acceptable in the business class, and too fake compared to Mother Nature’s selection.

“Here you are,” the secretary said.

“Thanks,” Synarion said, crossing his legs.

“You’re most welcome. Jennifer won’t be long.”

“Excellent.” He took a sip of the coffee. The taste was too sharp and acidic for his preferences. It wasn’t worth noting to the girl. The less attention, the better.

“And you mentioned you’re an old friend of Jennifer’s?” she asked.

“Yes, we have a long history together.” *If she knew half of it.*

“That’s great to hear. It’s wonderful to catch up with old friends.”

“Indeed,” Synarion said, raising his cup.

The secretary left, leaving Synarion to examine Valturus’s desk in greater detail. There were a series of business cards in metal holders of the various real estate agents in her firm. A couple of notebooks were stacked and organized with coloured sticky notes and matching pens in a white mug containing scripted type reading: *don’t talk to me until I’ve had my coffee*. One thing regarding the vampire was she was a stickler for systems. Her former ways of glory had transcribed into micro-organizational tactics. A shame, or a blessing in Synarion’s case. It kept balance in order.

She also had a tourist brochure for the city of Edmonton and a map circling the city’s downtown core where a river valley split the city from southwest to northeast. Valturus was looking to expand her real estate empire.

His mind trailed over to the bloodsucker from the previous night. He was violent and bold, unafraid of showing his mutated face. The pointed ears and flat nose were inhuman, to say the least. Some bloodsuckers were unfortunate in their transformations and lived with hideous alterations from the infection. It may affect vampires after enough time has passed. Synarion didn’t know enough vampires to solidify the fact. The escaped vampire chose Surrey. The rent was cheaper. He was too lazy to broaden his hunting ground. It made sense the police pieced together a serial killer. In a sense, he was.

A mysterious remote activated the automatic blinds. The black-out sheets of fabric rolled against each windowpane,

wiping the sun in the room. Light illuminated from the computer's screen saver.

High heels clicked from behind. The pacing was different from the secretary's. A cold breeze rushed by his body. There shouldn't be wind. His stomach sunk into his intestines. It was her.

*CLICK . . . CLICK . . . CLICK.*

"Mr. Parker?" came a smoker's voice coated in honey. He'd heard that tone before. There wasn't a rasp before and still, a tempting one that lured what it wanted with little effort.

Rule five: don't mix.

Synarion stood and turned, facing a woman in a hugging charcoal skirt and matching blazer. The white blouse and tight bun sealed the deal of expected professionalism. This was no woman, despite the attire being unrecognizable to his memory. Flesh and bone didn't change. The bloodsucker's curved signature nose was as he remembered. Her sharp canines poked underneath the poisonous lips as they had centuries ago on that sandy beach. This time, pastel red that complimented the office's colour scheme masked the lips. The modern addition to her natural beauty sent a swift punch to his core.

She paused at the door frame, her eyebrows rising as her emerald eyes moved from his boot to his scalp. The vampire cleared her throat, stepped into the office, closed the door, and walked around her desk. Her long black nails clawed into the binder in her palms and a small remote.

"Mr. Parker," Valturus said. "I-I—"

"No handshake?" Synarion asked, sitting as she did. Despite the collected attitude, his innards clenched as her fingers did.

“What are you doing here, *balaancer*?” her voice was cold, and the modern accent slipped. This was the true tone he had grown fond of. It matched the flattened brows and stern look she gave.

“I thought I’d pay an old friend a visit,” Synarion said, sipping his coffee.

“Haaah! I doubt that.”

“Nice name,” he said, nodding at her business card. “Jennifer? Quite the decline from your former.”

“You knew that already, hmmm?”

“Queen Valturus down to Jennifer Anderson?” Synarion asked.

“Mr. Parker, any better?” She cupped her hands together, showcasing her gold wedding ring.

“How’s the family?”

“What concern is that to you?” she replied.

“Not much. I’m making small talk, like the humans, to blend in. Like Jennifer would do with her clients. You don’t care for it, do you?”

“Not with the likes of you.”

“Testy.” Synarion took a sip of his coffee. “Tell me, how do you get into this building without being invited?”

“It’s not a home.”

“Right. These blinds? Hopping from shadow to shadow to avoid the sun is a little odd for a human.”

“I haven’t done anything to bring you here. We have an understanding, don’t we?”

Synarion leaned on the table. “Yes, that’s why I need your help.”



Valturus expressed a deep guffaw. “Haaawh! I may need a smoke for this.”

“We haven’t even made it to the sheets.” Synarion’s smirk collapsed into a regretting frown. These rules he followed were a recent system. In the beginning of the new world, he was far wilder, as was Valturus. Rule five. He was a balancer of nature and couldn’t fall for his primal wants.

“Charming,” she smiled, showcasing her canine teeth shining from the monitor light. He guaranteed she enjoyed his company as he did hers. It didn’t matter. Synarion needed answers. Their lives moved on.

Valturus’s phone rang. “So, tell me why you’re here? Hmmm?” she asked.

The phone rang again.

“You’re not going to get that?” Synarion said.

She looked at the phone and mumbled, “Shit.” She answered, “Yes? My father? Put him through.”

Synarion’s smirk reappeared. “Your dad?” He couldn’t imagine what fool she was paying to pose as her father, or the father-in-law wanted to talk to his beautiful daughter.

“I’m busy,” Valturus said. “. . . yes . . . by plane . . . yes . . . it’s coming by ground . . . no, of course. They have to be by ground. . . three days. Yes . . . For the harvest . . . see you soon.” She hung up and sighed, rubbing her brow.

*Four days yesterday. Three today*, he thought, building suspicion on the vampire. “You’re a busy lady,” Synarion said.

She stood from the desk and spoke. “Walk with me.”

The balancer obeyed and followed her as he had done countless times before. With any luck, this wouldn’t transform

into a battle of will. She led him from the office and to the elevator leading to a rooftop patio with concrete flooring, cushioned chairs, couches and barbecues ready for use. It also contained a decent amount of shading.

Valturus pulled a pack of smokes and a lighter from her inner pocket. The smoking habit struck him as odd, making his eyelid twitch at the contact of flame to paper. Mother Nature was not fond of that burning element. A requirement for new life, as are growing pains.

“Sunscreen?” Synarion asked.

She nodded and took a big inhale of the drag.

“It doesn’t last that long, does it?”

“No,” the other said.

“Doesn’t work on your converted, does it?”

“Spit why you’re here, hmmm?”

“I need information.” Synarion pulled the pendant from his jacket pocket, handing it to her. She paused, putting the smoke into her mouth. Her gaze fixated on the pendant, and the vampire took it into her hands, rotating it several times.

“Resurrects a few memories, doesn’t it?” he said.

“Where did you get this?” she asked.

“That’s the intriguing part. South in Surrey. A bloodsucker’s familiar had it.”

“Bloodsuckers. So derogatory,” Valturus said, taking a smoke.

“Was he your familiar?” Synarion asked.

“I have none. You know I stay clear of converting and organizing my kind.”

“Okay, so he was a Surrey vampire’s familiar. He killed him with a handgun before I could question him. With that kind of

attention, I didn't even see if the familiar had his master's sigil on him."

"Balancer, tell me what did this vampire and his familiar do to anger you? Hmmm?" Valturus asked.

"No anger. It was a balancing offence."

"Haaah!"

"The humans think they have a serial killer on the loose. This vampire, one of yours, is lazy in his hunting."

"Who are they?" Valturus asked.

"I'm unaware of their name. He was far in the mutation, though. He has to be an older one."

Valturus shook her head. "It could be so many."

"Yes. The familiar died before I got any more answers. Or why he had your old pendant."

She caressed the pendant and passed it to Synarion. "Odd."

"Exactly. Which is why I came to you first. It was yours."

"It's not mine," Valturus said.

"Excuse me?" Synarion asked.

"Look at the craftsmanship. It's rough. Cheap metals. Handmade, and not well done. A copy."

"A replica of the exact same design? You give it to them?" Synarion asked.

"Haaah. No."

"Thanks. Anything new you can tell me?"

"Nothing that you don't already know. A distant time when symbols had different meanings."

"There's not a fragment of information you can recall? I've tried other avenues, Valturus. This pendant isn't in any of my scripts."

“It wouldn’t have anything,” Valturus said, finishing her smoke. “I shared everything with you that first night.”

*You did*, Synarion’s simpleton thoughts wished he had said. His composed self asked, “I am aware. Women with nature often represent mother figures. Yet the inverted pentagram throws it for a spin. I recognize this is far older than the human Wiccan faith.”

“And you’re considering the pentagram’s roots?” Valturus folded her arms.

“Depends on the region. Pagan is harmless. If it’s older, like yours was, that’s not the same.” He put the pendant into his pocket. “It doesn’t mean anything to you?”

“Cutting your ears off did make you deaf.”

“Perhaps. It makes me question why I do this.”

“I question your intentions. You understand the old world is long gone, yet you try resurrecting it at any chance you get.”

“I’m the last one.”

“And you let humanity rule with an iron fist. If you care for nature so much, why do you let them destroy it?”

“It’s their time. Ours has come and gone.”

“What of those who do not have a voice? Hmmm? The bird? The fish?”

“If I had better means, I’d discipline the humans. Besides, their reign will be short-lived. They’re young, hot-blooded, and will fizzle.”

“Haaah! You go around and kill old world beings who disobey your tyranny?”

“Not all old world beings. Humans pay, too. It’s not about killing. It’s about balance. I’m doing what I can here, Valturus.”

She stepped forward, and her long fingernails scratched his stubble chin. "So sweet that you care for this world, balancer." The vampire took a whiff of air into her nose, inches from his shirt. "Mmmm, still fresh as a pine."

His throat tensed, forcing him to clear it, and he dismissed her comment. "More than I can say for the other sentient beings in this world. Look at yourself."

"At least I have a life. I have a family. That is blending in."

"Until you don't age, and they do. What then?" he asked.

"I'll do what I do, start anew. Do yourself a favour and drop the whole lone hero balancer act. Live life. You cut your damn ears off to blend in, so act like a human."

"Right. Do you have any insight as to why a bloodsucker would kill their familiar to protect this pendant's secret?"

"No. I can't say that I do," she said.

"The familiar said four *days until the World Mother* before his master shot him."

"Mmmm, and no clue as to who this vampire is?"

"I don't know. He hunts in Surrey. Again, quite mutated from his former human self."

She shrugged and stared, expecting him to continue.

"Any idea where he'd go?" Synarion asked.

"You want me to turn on my own kind?" A crooked smile rose on her face.

"You've moved on from the old world, haven't you?"

"And you're stuck in the past, balancer, hmmm? How long has it been since you've seen me?"

"Valturus, don't. I need your assistance," Synarion said.

“Haaah! As if that is why you’re here, bringing relics of buried times we once shared. Your mind is lost in a method that is no longer relevant. You’re obsolete. The sun is too much, come.” She walked to the elevator and pressed the button as Synarion followed.

“It’s to protect the living. New world or old, it doesn’t matter, Valturus. In this case, your bloodsu—” He paused. “Vampire colleague is acting reckless, which puts the rest of us in danger.”

The elevator door opened, and the two stepped in. The faint essence of smoke became visible on her skin. She patted her face, and it extinguished. “Look, Synarion, there’s a club you can check in East Hastings near Blood Alley.”

“Yes. Club Revelation. I’ve heard of it. Never been,” Synarion said.

“Then you understand you may have better luck finding your vampire there.”

“Does he like it there?” Synarion asked.

“Go and see.” Valturus winked at him as the elevator door opened and she stepped into the hall.

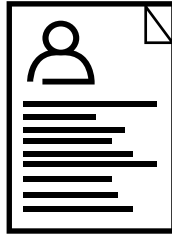
A wave of isolation rushed from his stomach and into his arm, causing a knee-jerk reaction to reach for her hand. Her skin, the familiar flesh he once thought was forever his. The action made her freeze, spinning around. Her mouth hung open in awe, and her slanted gaze simmered anger, telling Synarion he had made a mistake.

“It’s good to see you,” he said, releasing her hand.

“I hope you find peace, Synarion. This isn’t a good look for you.” She turned and headed for her office as the elevator door slid shut, leaving him alone.

He took a deep breath and pressed the main floor button. Suits entered and exited the elevator, asking the others if they smelt smoke. Their question had no resolution. He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing. The minor form of meditation helped him gain equilibrium on the ride. Valturus was bright and her cold nature made him want her more. He couldn’t. Their time had come and gone. His sworn duty remained.

The pendant in his pocket was a warning, an unsettling combination of symbolism far too ancient to exist. Valturus wore the World Mother pendant once. He needed to take another angle and visit an ally closer to Mother Nature herself.



## BALANCER PROFILE SUMMARY

**Name:** Valturus (Jennifer Anderson)

**Species:** Vamputus (Pure Vampire)

**Location:** Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

**Occupation:** Real Estate Agent

**Description:** Brunette hair. Green eyes. Five foot nine. Noticeable canine teeth. Pale skin.

**Balancing Offence:** None to date. Valturus has been under the radar for over a century. I would have been her last offence.

**Note:** Enjoys smokes. Married with a husband and two kids. She has a supposed father. They're a decoy.

Don't let her get the upper hand on you again. You're better than your primal calling.







## CHAPTER 5

# POST-APOCALYPTIC

*Immortality cannot bring the precious moments with it.*

*It cannot.*

*A shame.*

*Yes.*

Misery loves company, and finding comfort through another lost soul provides contentment when the world ends. In the end, Synarion was a creature of Mother Nature's garden and had basic needs. He saw no point in resisting. The Grove didn't shun mixing; it was a natural course in some cases. His hesitance was sharing a bed with a vampire queen who

rested on his chest. Her fingers glided the line work of his chest tattoo, following the gate covered in vines, below the feminine eyes along his clavicles. These were two of countless balancer symbols engraved on his body, like those found on the documents in his trunk.

There was no need for Synarion to be defensive at the moment. The porcelain form wrapped around his body was tranquil, showing no signs of threat. She was comfortable with his arm wrapped around her hips. The silky legs glided against his.

“Mother Nature,” Valturus said, fixated on his skin markings.

“Symbols of her, and the Grove. They let us speak with Mother Nature, or . . . they did.”

“She doesn’t answer you?”

“Not now. Not since the Aureate Rise shattered the heart of Zingalg.”

“Mmmm, maghice.”

“I’ll try again. Maybe she’ll answer. That is the purpose of any symbol: to aid in meditation. Though, I fear I will not hear from Mother Nature again.”

“We are alone,” Valturus said.

Synarion’s gaze landed on the pendant draped over her left breast. They had stripped each other except for the necklace she wore. In their moment of passion, it transfixed him more than her body’s elegance and the cries of joy she made on top of him. He hadn’t seen that emblem before: an intriguing mixture of icons of his familiar earthen numen, maghice arts, and predatorial nature. It was far more enticing than her.

“And what of yours?” Synarion asked, reaching for the necklace.

Valturus sat against the pillows, clutching the jewelry. “Haaah. It’s an old belief. Little importance. Long gone.”

“Why does it matter?” Synarion asked.

“It doesn’t,” Valturus said, taking the pendant off and tossing it onto her pile of clothes. It landed beside a gold ring made of vines and fangs that encased a red gem. “Like you, icons of where I come from.”

“And where was that?” Synarion asked.

“Not of your Mother Nature,” Valturus said.

“You, or each vampires?”

“The pure batch, hmmm.”

“Right, you mentioned that you weren’t converted.”

“No, my dear. The vamputus are birthed, like you.”

*Vamputus*, he thought. *That is what the carriers of the vampiric disease call themselves.* “Curated from whom? Life in the mortal realm comes from the Creator.”

She turned to face him and caressed his chest in circles. “Yes. The Creator made the universe, and it was molded by the unanswering numen. I was the first vamputus crafted, might I add. My brothers and sisters followed. Numen are powerful, aren’t they?”

“Yes, Mother Nature in this world.”

Her claws scraped his skin with light pressure. “And not my numen.”

“Who was your numen? The numen of the vampires?”

She sighed, boredom leaving her breath. “So many questions. Yes. No one can reach the distant numen. Why bother?”

“And what of the other pure vampires?”

“*Vaaamputus*. I told you, amusing nymph, I am unaware. Unlike your people and more like humans, we were too egotistical and drowned in pride. We went our separate ways. Each of us believed ourselves superior and converted others into your term *bloodsuckers*. These vampires were our loyal followers. We considered our converted a different species, naive to the fact they came from us.”

“And how did the xephile bat come to be? It’s common fact they convert people into bloodsuckers.”

“Haaah, partial truths. Xephile bats, like us, can gift mortals,” Valturus said.

“Could,” Synarion said.

Valturus squinted. “Right, Zingalg is no more.”

“Yes,” Synarion said, running his tongue along his gums. How could he not understand?

“Don’t be upset. Your Grove didn’t have all the information ever recorded. How could it identify the vampire and vamputus nature? It was unaware of my empire.”

“True. Was it ever recorded anywhere? The Library of Alexandria?”

“I do not know this city. I haven’t visited Egypt for thousands of years.”

“Fair enough. Your empire is ancient.”

“Indeed.”

“Tell me, you and the xephile bats must have some relation? If your infections cause the same disease.”

“Gifts,” Valturus said, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, gifts.” Though Synarion didn’t believe the word. He had seen vampires, bloodsuckers, and didn’t understand how

anyone would want to live that way for the payoff of immortality.

“The bats and we must feed for life,” Valturus said.

“And that’s where your old symbol comes in?” Synarion said, nodding to the pendant.

“Legends and myths mutate truths. A balancer should have learned this, hmmm?”

A wail echoed outside the bedroom window, causing Synarion’s ears to twitch. The vampire’s food were the only other souls inside this buried city. They were a family, each being eaten one by one. They were alone. Here, he bedded with a predator who disrupted balance. Then again, predators did. Her argument held: a wolf acts as intended, and so did Valturus. They were creatures under Mother Nature’s world, whether the numen or another curated Valturus.

Elegant hands wrapped around his arm as she slid her legs around him. “Synarion, thank you.”

“For what?” the other asked. His spine stiffened.

“For trusting me.”

He didn’t have much choice and questioned her motive. He needed rest, water, and food. At the moment, he had one of those things working with her.

Valturus continued, “I am lost on where to go next. What you say holds truth. Aewouson will soon see its watery grave. What of you, balancer?”

“I don’t know,” Synarion said. “I must keep the Grove alive, and Mother Nature needs me more than ever.”

“Does she?” Valturus asked.

“Yes.”

“Have you considered the destruction of maghice was intended to be? That Mother Nature was in control and needed to cleanse herself of thousands of species for her long-term health?”

“That is not my place to say. It was debated amongst the Balancer Order. They deemed the words of power disruptive too late,” Synarion said.

“You plan on continuing your duty?”

“I must.”

Valturus caressed his face. “Alone?”

“There are no other balancers,” Synarion said.

“What of a companion?”

Synarion knew the vampire’s intentions. She didn’t want to let her catch go. He looked into her vortex gaze, pulling him beyond his will. He knew better. A balancer had to stay focused and couldn’t have distractions. He was the last and didn’t have to isolate himself. No. No, he didn’t. Zingalg was gone. The Grove was no more. Humans had fool’s luck on their side and populated other regions of the world, separating themselves from maghice. Synarion and Valturus were rare breeds. It was uncertain how many others remained or if each species met extinction. Acting alone would be absurd. An allegiance ensured his survival as the lone balancer. He could rebuild, show Mother Nature that the Grove had her best interest in mind, bringing in others like Valturus. Deep inside he longed for another. Without Mother Nature answering he was alone. The vamputus’s psychic toxin bubbled his wants to the surface.

“What do you want?” Synarion asked, resisting.

“Mmmm. Blood and glory are what I am. I don’t wish for it.” She ran her hand along his chest. “You can’t experience

everything when you're immortal. Certain moments exist in fragile pockets of time. To tell you, I am unsure, Synarion. I hope to discover it."

"And what will you do when you need to feed?" Synarion asked.

"I prefer the taste of humans." Valturus gave a wide grin, expressing her fangs. "Besides, why would I drink your life force when we are one and the same, yesss?"

"We should prepare our departure from Aewouson," Synarion said.

His words were his. He felt it. Yes, he sensed her lingering in his mind, whispering ideas that influenced his choice. Synarion wanted her to. He had an uncertain future, like her, and they could weather the tides together.

*They'll live on in our memories.*

*Until those are gone.*

*I disagree.*



WORLD MOTHER ASCENSION BY KONN LAVERY



## CHAPTER 6

# WHERE WE BELONG

Plants hold many secrets, communicating through their undetectable vibrations to the humans. For a nymph, like Synarion, his senses attuned into the subtle needs of each plant not with his ears, but his soul. Hence, he kept his three remaining old world plants under dedicated growing lighting, illuminating purple onto their forms for controlled photosynthesis. He also set up a small speaker on their shelf, playing opera music. Positive and negative emotions absorbed as frequencies into their forms, impacting their growth. Their vibrant ferns, wine-coloured leaves, and tall, stern stems were proof of the calm music's effect.

*I should move these*, he thought. It was a simple, normal, thing to think: arranging interior design and pointless to his case.

As the tune played, he had a vermicelli bowl, reflecting on his visit with Jennifer, the former Valturus. He stared at the photos on his desk: old, laminated images taken from various times in his life. One photograph had a tear in it because it was well over a century old. He taped it together again to show a photo of himself in a peacoat and scarf standing beside a man in a top hat holding a cane with a skull and raven claw strapped to it: a friend of the time. Beside them was a brunette woman named Bethany, better known as Valturus. The following photo was from the twenties, with him riding in the first Ford vehicle. The fabric rooftop was down, and in the passenger seat sat Valturus, smiling and showcasing her sharp canines. Following that photograph was one from Woodstock in New York during the sixties. He and Valturus had gone to the event, enjoying music. Synarion's hair was dyed black in the photo, a look he despised.

These were the three photographs of the two of them. Their past existed far before the invention of cameras and brief affairs came and went in a similar fashion to how they met today. This time, both had the better sense to not engage. Synarion maintained order, and Valturus was a predator. He liked to fool himself that it could work. He could keep her in line, and he remembered he attempted that on multiple occasions. A prime example would be that poor family when they first met.

*Impossible*, he thought, grabbing the photos and sticking them into a drawer. The balancer couldn't sulk over good memories. Unfortunate ones were in between. She happened to be his core case study of why the rules exist.

*Through cosmic creation . . .* he thought while finishing his noodles. The symphony kept playing as he put on his boots and jacket.

*. . . life flourishes . . .*

The Surrey bloodsucker balancing offence was at large.

*. . . century, millennia, eons . . .*

The pendant replica complicated the situation. Outside of Valturus, there was another resource he could utilize, a friend closer to nature.

*. . . life continues in Mother Nature's libation.*

This colleague couldn't follow the rules Synarion had written to survive. They lived far off in the Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve north of Vancouver, where the woods are thick and the hills steep. The trip required Synarion's Hyundai hatchback. Though it is an environmental concern, it was a means to an end. A lone balancer cannot be the shining example of a perfect ecosystem.

On the drive, Synarion recalled the last time he saw his friend Bark Nose. Nymphs and Root Walkers age far slower than modern conventional times, and they can go decades without communication, much like him and Valturus. Unlike her, Bark Nose and Synarion did not have a complicated relationship.

The Hyundai hatchback hummed through the Vancouver streets and onto Highway 1, turning off onto Lillooet Road, leading further, north along Seymour River. He parked the vehicle at the reserve and hiked onto the dirt paths for the remainder of the way.

Nature walks were welcoming, for plant life was the closest thing to his home. As a child, he would glimpse into the

Balancers Order, which resided in the middle of their lake on a small island. The bridge was guarded by the elemandrias of Earth, the same one in the PDF illustration, that refused entrance to anyone other than order members. Synarion wanted to see the archives and the greatstaff Erenwill. To this day, the illustrations were what he knew.

Synarion brought his satchel, packed with food, his laptop, and a water bottle. The days on the reserve were long because finding a Root Walker took patience. Any tree could be one of them. The balancer's training with vibrations let him detect the difference upon inspection. It was a needle in a haystack, and his best strategic method was to sit still. He also knew of a specific spot Bark Nose visited.

His ears tuned into the sound of nature, listening to the gentle wind, the cheerful birds singing, leaves brushing against one another, and the nearby river moving downstream. His nose detected each scent. They were more potent, fresh, and delightful compared to the industrial tang and smug of the concrete jungle. There was a sense of belonging in nature. Valturus's words rung through his mind: "*Do yourself a favour and drop the whole lone hero balancer act. Live life.*" He could. It would be simple, here in nature. Who could find him? His current identification was a fraud anyway, and he changed it in fifty year cycles. Who would miss him?

He couldn't.

Valturus did provide a sliver of insight. Club Revelations in Blood Alley was his next stop on the weekend when they opened. For the time being, he had trusted resources. The

vampire was a mixed bag; she could be right, he didn't come to her regarding the pendant.

The hike took him far north, following the river, leading closer to the clouded mountains. He stopped at a calm beach littered with rocks by the river. A steep six-foot cliff was further in the forest. That was where he last saw Bark Nose hiding beside three stationed trees.

Synarion got onto his knees, closed his eyes, and waited.

No ticking.

No time.

The river flowed forever, brushing against rocks.

Here and now, life under the sun aligned through Mother Nature's guidance.

Deep breaths in, Synarion absorbed the nature around him. He was not alone, unlike in the city. Mother Nature was near, though she wouldn't speak. His bitter anger fizzled. The balancer sensed order.

His eyes opened. The sun made a drastic shift, indicating hours had gone by. Clearing his mental grumbles was far easier to do without the distractions of the industrialized world. Nature was present, not asking for attention. It wanted you to be with it.

A vibration channelled through the ground. Pounding. It made Synarion stand.

*TH-TH-TH*

Louder.

*THOOOOOO—*

Clearer.

*—OOOSSSEEE*

A voice.

“Sssscaaaabbed eeeaaars . . .” came a deep rumble from above the cliff. The sound rattled inside Synarion’s chest, making him smile. That was Bark Nose. Root Walkers could vibrate their stems in such a manner to produce vocal communication. No other sentient plant was capable of the task.

Synarion turned to face the small cliff. “Bark Nose, my old friend.”

A fourth tree rested on top of the cliff. This one was eight feet tall with a thick, mossy trunk, splitting into three smaller ends to form legs. Vines extended from the trunk along the top. The sides had wide branches to form arms, ending in finer ends, fingers that extended to Synarion.

Holes, one would have mistaken for a woodpecker’s burrow, created a mouth and, above it, two eye sockets. The bark around the holes arched upward, expressing joy as the Root Walker took a slight bow to his visitor.

“Whaaat dooo I ooowe the plllleaaaasssure?”

“Bark Nose, I need your assistance regarding a strange discovery.”

“Aaand whaaat might thaaat beee?”

Synarion walked to the cliff and spoke. “A pendant I found. I had seen it once before, centuries ago. I have a replica, and it—”

“Caaan yooou come baaack laaater?”

He stopped midway on the hill, raising his arms in confusion. “What? It’s been decades, and I waited the whole day for you.”

“Pleaaase Scaaabbed Ears?”

“Bark Nose, this may be time-sensitive. I need you. It’s not like you have anything else to do anyway.” Synarion squinted. This was unusual for Bark Nose.

“Yesss. Of cooourse. Let’s huuurry. A pennndant?”

“Okay. It’s unique. Nature-related, ancient. There are no records of it.”

“Thaaat is odd. Yooou aaare full of knnnowledge.”

“You’re too kind. It goes beyond me and leaves me with concern.”

“Shooow mee.”

The tree turned to face the approaching balancer. The wood creaked, and the bark rustled. His other half had beads dangling from his branches. Wooden carvings and black, red, and brown threading weaved around his leaves. That was human interaction.

“By the gods, what is this?” Synarion asked. He stepped closer and grabbed a deep red yarn from one of the lower branches, causing Bark Nose to jerk away as fast as he could. Root Walkers were slow, and his efforts futile. Synarion yanked the yarn off.

“Nooothng.”

“Are kids violating you?”

“Yees.”

“Shame. The more we hide, the more humans push into the remaining undisturbed regions of Mother Nature.”

“Shaaame indeeed.”

Synarion snagged the pendant from his jacket and raised it to one of Bark Nose’s branches. “I found this pendant on a bloodsucker’s familiar.”



Bark Nose took the pendant, angling his branches towards his face. Synarion waited as the wind blew. It would take time for Bark Nose to inspect the gold pendant.

Several minutes later, Bark Nose spoke. “Faaascinaaating discoooverly.” He spun the pendant between two thin branches to review the more minor details of the bark-covered woman.

“Any ideas?” Synarion asked.

“Mooother Naaature.”

“Yes, close to what I got from it. The familiar said World Mother. What of the pentagram? The fire.”

“Did theeey?”

“Yeah, and that’s when I visited Valturus.”

Bark Nose raised the bark above one eye, mimicking an eyebrow.

“This pendant is a replica. She had the original one when I first met her. However, I saw it once, and she said it was a relic of a past life. There have been countless oddities and symbolic messaging when words of power were prominent. I didn’t put much thought into it until this showed up. The Grove archives have no insight. I was hoping you’d have information for me.”

“Yesss . . . I dooo knooo—” Bark Nose’s statement was cut off by a twig snap. The bushes rustled.

Synarion reached for his throwing stars, spotting leaves bobbing in the woods. They had a visitor. The sound was consistent with footsteps moving toward them. The pacing was safe to say it was on two feet, ruling out an animal.

Rule One: look like you belong.

Synarion cupped a throwing star, put his hands in his pocket, and leaned against a tree. Bark Nose froze. His eyes and mouth

burrow closed, transforming him into an unusual tree with three stumps.

The last branches moved aside, and a human girl walked into view with a stick and backpack. Her long, transparent black mesh cardigan blew in the air. A ball of red yarn was in her hand. Her sky-blue eyes appeared under the shadow cast by her wide-brimmed black hat. A bright white smile rose on her snow face, below a septum piercing.

“Bark Nose!” she said, lowering her bag. “I brought some new music for us to listen to.”

*Music?* Synarion thought.

The Root Walker’s face morphed to life. “Abbygaaail,” Bark Nose said as he took a gradual turn to face the girl.

“What is that?” the girl asked, eyeing the golden pendant. She leaned to grab it.

“Don’t touch that,” Synarion commanded. He stepped from his hiding spot. His hands remained in his pocket; one had to be careful. He got a good look at her no longer behind the tree: raven-black straight hair with bangs above her painted-on eyebrows. A raven tank top and black denim shorts cut far too short, complete with fishnet leggings and leather ankle boots. The awe in her youthful face told Synarion she wasn’t a threat. She was some kid who was no older than twenty. If anything, it irritated Synarion. Bark Nose’s vague nature, the yarn and beads, and the girl pieced the scenario together.

“By what form of reason is this?” Synarion asked.

“Abbygaaail,” Bark Nose said.

“Yes, I figured that, wood-brain. Why is she here putting yarn and beads over you like some kind of pet toy?”

“Abbygaaail is mmmmy friennnd.”

“Please,” Abbygail said. “Bark Nose means you no harm.”

*Cute*, Synarion thought. She believed she was protecting the Root Walker. Arrogant. An aloof human demonstrating their naive nature once again.

“Kid, I’ve known this Root Walker longer than you’ve been alive,” Synarion said. “How did you meet him? Did you find him? Did a troll take you here?”

“I-I-uh.” She looked to Bark Nose for assistance.

“Sheee foound me,” Bark Nose said.

“How?” Synarion asked.

“I was crying,” Abbygail said. “I was upset and went under a tree. Then it, he, moved.”

Synarion freed his hands from his weapon to point at Bark Nose. “You engaged with her?”

“Sheee waaas saaad,” Bark Nose said. “Her heart is waaarm. Doo not let the daaark exterior and aaage fool yooou. Abbygaaail brinnngs joy to thooose sheee lets in.”

Abbygail said, “Bark Nose is a gentle soul. He’s kind and understanding. Please, don’t be mad at him. I look after him.”

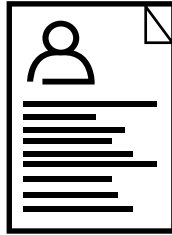
*Splendid, just splendid*, Synarion thought while rubbing his brow. This wasn’t a friendship. Their defensive words were clear; love brewed deeper inside their spirits.

Rule five: don’t mix.

Synarion brushed his hair and exhaled. He had punished beings that had intermixed before. Having an affair with a human was dangerous because it could exploit the old world. In compatible cases, half-breed offspring created a whole other complication.

Bark Nose having intimate relations with this human created a balancing offence Synarion didn't want, nor had the time, to deal with. To make matters worse, she knew that Synarion existed. At least he looked like her people. A balancer's job was continual, and he had to wrap his head around this liaison before returning to essential matters.





## BALANCER PROFILE SUMMARY

**Name:** Bark Nose

**Species:** Root Walker

**Location:** Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve, British Columbia, Canada

**Occupation:** None

**Description:** Large Root Walker standing eight feet. Three legs. Dozens of arms. Large holes for eyes and broad bark forming the nose.

**Balancing Offence:** Mixing with a human named Abbygail.

**Note:** This had to be dealt with through diplomatic methods. Bark Nose is a valuable asset to balancing Mother Nature. A friend. If I took a hostile approach, where would that leave me?





## CHAPTER 7

# SIBLING RIVALRY

Unconditional love implies there is no judgment. Subjective love ties to emotions, creating complicated layers of interactions. Synarion knew firsthand. His friend had a human girl. He must dissect this situation with care. Love generates heated thoughts and actions.

“Explain how this fruited from the beginning,” Synarion asked, hands on his hips as if he were their father discovering their scandalous deeds.

Abbygail put her palm on Bark Nose’s trunk. “Like I said, I was crying. He opened himself to me, unlike anyone else has. It was a surreal experience.”



“Why were you crying?” Synarion asked.

“Bark Nose, is this the balancer?” Abbygail asked.

“You told her?” Synarion said. His eye twitched.

“I haaad tooo,” Bark Nose said.

“Why on Earth would you go and do something as absurd as that? You of all beings should damn well know that humans are trouble, destructive, and careless.”

“Not all of us,” Abbygail said.

“I have yet to see otherwise.”

“Theeen, why dooo yoouu defend themmm? Theeey kiilled my kiiind.”

*And here you are with one,* Synarion wanted to say. Instead, he said, “It’s complicated. It’s their time to rule, and their bubble is nearing its peak. You let some things inflate without interference, and it takes care of itself. Alright, wait, explain the whole thing. I’ll listen so I can understand.” Synarion folded his arms. He brought his weapons for a reason. Even in this peaceful haven, a balancer’s burden followed. He preferred not to kill and did so only when it was required. Was this balancing offence a requirement? That was the question he asked himself. Like any human, Abbygail was naive and got herself into this mess. There was so much life ahead of her. It would be a shame if she perished. The thought of Bark Nose’s mourning was unbearable. Synarion’s fists clenched as he smothered the hypothetical scenario and listened.

“Iii told herrr about yoouu. Synaaariooon, yoouu have knooowledge of thhhe oold wooorld that I dooo not.”

“I’m Wiccan,” Abbygail added.

“Abbygaaail’s heaaart waaas dammmaged. I spooke to her. Sheee brought mmme friendship, innntimacy, compaaanionship thaaat I haaave not knooown for cennnnturies.”

“He’s alone here in the reserve. His kind is dead. I . . . I’m not a popular person amongst people. I had broken up with my boyfriend. He cheated on me.”

*Great.* It’s a classic rebound story, except this chick happened to have an emotional connection with a Root Walker. With any luck, that’s what this was, and he could continue with the vital pendant.

Abbygail continued, “I’d rather not understand why my ex did that. Bark Nose was here for me when I needed comfort. At first, I was so scared, not believing what I was seeing in front of my eyes. He moved, and he told me not to cry. From there, I opened myself, telling him the situation, and he shared, too. He was alone. We shared many of our most wanted desires and deepest longings. I cannot explain the bond. It’s deep, so close to my spirit, You feel it.”

“Abbygaaail aaand I aaare one aaand the saaame, Synaaarion. Pleeease, yooou must unnnnderstand whaaat it’s liiike tooo beee alooone aaas the laaast baaalaaancer.”

Synarion sighed in defeat. What was he to do? Their relationship was harmless, for now. That was how they started. Synarion had no reason to trust this human, and Bark Nose had lost his logic.

“And how long have you known each other?” Synarion asked.

“A couple of years,” Abbygail said.

“Two years,” Synarion said, raising an eyebrow. By Mother Nature’s will, he could not keep the world’s balance in order. Bloodsuckers, the human industrial revolution, agricultural frontiers, and forbidden love were a handful of the offences that slipped through his grasp. Valturus was right.

A simple solution would be to kill her. She had family, and ending her life here would create complications for Bark Nose. Whether the balancer approved or not, it appeared there was a new addition to the inner circle. He’d best make friends with her and monitor her with a keen eye.

Synarion spoke. “Okay, Bark Nose, let’s return to the pendant.”

“Caaan sheee stay? Abbygail caaan helllp,” the other said.

“How?”

“I have a cousin in the prairies,” Abbygail said. “When I lived in Edmonton, in the next province over. Strange things are going on there, people are vanishing, and I was going to see my family to see if they’re okay. M-m-my dad is missing.” She choked and continued, “We haven’t found any evidence of his whereabouts, and no one has seen him. A week later, my friend went missing because of a serial killer. They found her dead, and I think my cousin has info. It makes me worried for Dad.”

“How does this relate to the pendant, Bark Nose?” Synarion asked.

“Thiiis pendant represents the Wooooorld Moooooother, seen throoough the roots and circulaaar encooompaaass signnnifying the world.”

“Yes, I deciphered that. What is the World Mother? What of the pentagram, the fiery eyes? The flower?”

“Mother Nature isn’t the only one,” Abbygail said.

“Excuse me?” Synarion said.

“Abbygaaail iiii riiight,” Bark Nose said. “Mooother Naaature haaad a sister.”

Synarion stroked his jaw. That cannot be. The Grove didn’t mention Mother Nature having a sister. Their archived scriptures dated thousands of years and he couldn’t read the whole library. He was unaware of the vamputus. Balancing took time. His studies were fresh when the old world collapsed. Mother Nature’s sister could have been in those texts. It was too late. Thank the Creator for Bark Nose.

“This is the first time I’ve heard of this,” Synarion said.

“Mooother Naaature’s sister is nooot well known. Sheee has kept herrrselllf hiiidden from the woorld. Baaanished from her siiibllling. She knooows sheee is not welllcommme.”

“I’m unaware if the Grove spoke of such things. The history of the afterlife, the Creator, the myth of what came to be . . . the numen forged the world. It’s one world, one numen.”

“Nooo. Untrue. Too maaany numen, few worlds. Mooother Naaature aaand the Woorld Mooother wanted the same cosmmmic dusst. They were oppooosites, one made of waaater and the other fiiire.”

“The creator made enough matter for each numen to craft worlds,” Synarion said.

“I disaaagree,” Bark Nose said.

“So the sisters battled for the planet. Mother Nature won and fused with it as numen do.”

“Yesss.”

“Leaving the World Mother with an empire of dirt. You didn’t think to tell me?” Synarion asked.

Bark Nose shrugged. “It served nooo purrrposse.”

“Apparently, your little human fling didn’t either,” Synarion said.

Abbygail folded her arms. “It’s not a fling. I think we’re meant to be.”

Synarion snorted. “Please, darling. You’re too young to understand what *is meant to be* means.”

“Oh yeah? Try me,” Abbygail said, putting her hands on her hips.

“Okay, Bark Nose, Mother Nature has a sister. I need more insight to understand the seriousness of this situation. You think this pendant represents the World Mother?”

Bark Nose nodded, his branches and leaves creaking with each bob.

One day, Synarion needed to sit with the Root Walker and have him share what he knew so Synarion could archive it. At the moment he had to be the balancer and investigate why the World Mother’s symbol would return.

“No balancer ever mentioned the World Mother,” Synarion said.

“Because the balaancers of the Grooove were too focused on the currennt timme, protecting Mooother Naaature. The Wooorld Mooother was far older and knnowledge of herrr held by few.”

*Someone else would*, he thought, needing another visit with Valturus. “Is the World Mother younger or older than Mother Nature?”

“Twinns, born of the Creator. The orrrrinaaal baaalancers. Opposites.”

“It was one numen per world,” Synarion repeated. “Their names are rather conflicting, isn’t it?”

“The Woorld Mooother grew jealous of her sister beecause sheee waaas caring. In the start of the plaaanet’s formmmation, life flourished to Mother Nature. There waaasn’t room for two numen in one woorld. This maaade the Woorld Mooother frustrated aand proclaaaimed the naaame hersself despite being unable to formmm a bonnnd with the growiiing Earth. Her haaate made her spirit roooten, toxic, aand the aaanger commmbusted into flame.”

Abbygail cleared her throat and spoke. “It ended the Garden of Ediacara, a period of peace and tranquillity on Earth, lasting millions of years. If you didn’t know, the Ediacara period ended 635 million years ago.”

Synarion took a deep inhale through his nose.

Abbygail continued, “The latest scientific evidence says the rise of animals caused the extinction of microorganisms, and that isn’t the whole story.”

“Mooother Nature and the Woorld Mother had looong and maaany battles over the Eaaarth during its creeation. Both aaattempted to binnnd themselves to the staaardust, slowing their actions and becoming one with the planet. Millionns of years, baaack and forrrth, resulting in fire, voolcanic aaactivity, wild temperatures, and violennnt winds. Their laaast battle ennded whennn the annimals and plaaants chose Mooother Naaature. It creeated a symbiotic reelationship

with her, connnfirming thaaat the Earth wannnted to be awaaay from the Woorld Mooother.

“I’m presuming that the plant life and creatures knew this through intuition?” Synarion asked.

“She waaas powered by sooo much hate for her sissster, she scaathed anything she touched. She needed to burnn their liiife to sussstain her. A paraaasite. Maaaybe thaaat hate and need for flame was there. Or sheee nurtured it through jealousy. Her actionnns spoke. She waaas spit frommm the Earth’s core. A nuuumennn with nnno woorld haaad nnno purpose inn this plaaane of existence.”

“The mortal realm,” Synarion said. “And somehow, this ties to a bloodsucker and his dead familiar in Surrey.”

“Vaaampires are curated by the Woorld Mooother, as you aaand I aaare of Mooother Naaature.”

“Pure ones, vamputus, you mean,” Synarion said.

“Yess, aaand xephile baaats. The aalternaatives of Earth. This knooowledge you brinnng to me, I was unnnaware of annnyone who followed her. She is long forgotten, so oold, not even vaaampires are awaaare of her.”

“Unless they are one of the pure. You’re sure this symbol represents the World Mother?”

“Thaaat is what I caaan connnclude,” Bark Nose said, returning the pendant.

“The familiar didn’t finish a sentence: *four days the World Mother* before being shot. That was yesterday. Any guesses what that implies?” Synarion was piecing together his own theories, and none of them were good.

Bark Nose took a long pause before answering. Abbygail and Synarion locked eyes. She looked away.

Bark Nose said, "That I am uncertain. Now, I've assisted you, will you please help Abbygail?"

"Please, it may benefit you going Edmonton."

"Your serial killer mystery? You think they have information on this World Mother?"

Abbygail shrugged. "Yeah. Plus, I kind of need a ride to Edmonton."

"Why?" Synarion asked.

"To comfort my mom. Dad, my dad, is gone." She sniffled and cleared her throat. "And my cousin is acting weird, kind of like how my friend did before she died. There could be more children of the World Mother than bats and vampires."

Bark Nose rumbled, shaking the ground.

Synarion stared at her, unsure if he should help. Valturus did have an Edmonton brochure on her desk. The Surrey bloodsucker was a quicker option.

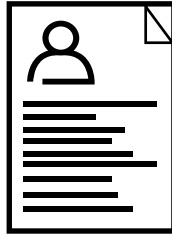
Abbygail spoke. "Look, hear me out. I'll explain why it links to the World Mother, I promise. I'll pay. Bark Nose says you do odd jobs for cash."

He could leave Bark Nose and his human toy thing in the reserve. They gave him the information he needed, and chances were this girl didn't know a damn thing regarding the old world. Valturus knew. Club Revelation was a better bet. He and Bark Nose had an established relationship, and if he didn't do this one small favour for Abbygail, the Root Walker would not forgive him. He had to keep him on his good side.

"Fine," he said.



Against his better judgment, he needed to befriend this human. Valturus wasn't going anywhere, and Club Revelation was an established bar. The four-day countdown is what concerned him. Rules are created to be followed, and broken. Synarion was a prime example due to his past; he was breaking them again. Goodbye rule five. Synarion had a road trip with a goth Wiccan girl.



## BALANCER PROFILE SUMMARY

**Name:** Abbygail. Last name unknown.

**Species:** Human

**Location:** Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

**Occupation:** Who cares?

**Description:** Five foot two. Black straight hair. She doesn't get enough sunlight and enjoys dark clothing.

**Balancing Offence:** Mixing with Root Walkers.





## CHAPTER 8 COMPANION

*Then it was nothing from the start.*

*Perhaps.*

*Then everything is.*

*Sometimes I wonder.*

The cool desert sucked his skin dry as the stars danced above. He had lived in a lush, humid environment for centuries and forgot what the elements were like. Spoiled is the word Synarion would use to describe himself and the balancers. They were arrogant to think they were invincible to the wrath of Earth. He was humbled and gleamed onto his past by

bringing a chest containing the remaining works of his people and culture. He had to keep it like he had to stay alive as the chronicler. Though, he questioned his survival chances following a vampire. A part of him wanted her, another didn't.

She walked beside him under the stars through the dunes, letting the camel carry Synarion's goods. Valturus also brought her own: a linen sack and two trunks from her former empire. He didn't ask her what was in them. It was not his business. She was kind enough to let him borrow clothes of her former empire, matching her tan fabric and the green-and-red ash. Behind them, tied with rope, was the human family containing the mother, daughter, and son. He dared not look at them because they would shame his mind.

"Tell me, nymph," Valturus spoke, "what do you prefer to eat?"

*Does she know?* Synarion thought. She could wander his thoughts and had to be aware of his regret.

"What do I prefer?" he asked. "Anything at this point."

"Yesss, we'll get you food at one of the villages where we'll also find a boat to leave here. What I am asking is, what do you prefer?"

"Lentils."

"Lentils?" Valturus raised an eyebrow at him.

"Yes. They grow aplenty and are full of nutrients. The chicken would be a second choice."

"Hmmm, yes. The tender flesh of another is the utmost desirable. That I agree with, Synarion." She squinted while expressing a genuine smile, one that mocked his choice. "Lentils over the bird?"

“Harvesting from the plant contains less pain compared to the life of the animal,” Synarion said.

Valturus’s smile grew, showcasing her fangs. “Such a pacifist.”

“Balancers do their best to reduce their involvement with the world they live in. Otherwise, we become a weight in the environment, another piece that needs monitoring.”

A dry snuffle came from behind one of the children. Valturus stopped in her tracks. The camel huffed as the hooves dragged in the sand. Valturus turned to face him, the moonlight glimmering in the swirls of lime and forest within her irises.

“What of the predators in Mother Nature’s Garden?” Valturus asked.

“Same as any creatures, they need monitoring.”

“Like myself?”

“We’ve discussed this,” Synarion said.

Valturus pulled on the camel’s rope, and the group continued. “Though you are hesitant of me and my kind.”

“Of course,” Synarion said. “I have this thought for infestations.”

Valturus chuckled from her gut, filled with far too much amusement. “Is that what I am? An infestation?”

“Yes. It is amazing Mother Nature tolerates a creature that serves no purpose to its ecosystem, even one of another numen.”

“Haaah! I didn’t say your numen tolerated me,” Valturus said. “I feel your resistance to my ways. Is it because these humans are sentient of their actions?”

Synarion pressed his lips together. He didn’t want to get into this. They had a far greater concern, leaving this island.

The vampire let go of the camel and marched to the three captives. She pulled on the rope containing the boy, throwing him towards her. The mother cried, "No!" as he soared off the ground and landed before Valturus. The rope hung from her hand, pulling the child, feet dangling.

"I don't provide a purpose for my ecosystem?" Valturus asked. Her head tilted, focusing on the boy's watering eyes.

Synarion looked over his shoulder. The mother was on her knees and held her daughter with both arms, shielding her. Tears ran along her cheeks as she locked gazes with him. *Help me*, they spoke.

Valturus stroked the boy's face with her other hand. "I feed, as creatures do. I remove lives, controlling population and providing the balance you so care for. Infestation? Nonsense."

"It is if you convert him," Synarion said. "The same way you built your army."

"Mmmm, correct you are, balancer. Though infestations and gifts can pave the way for a better tomorrow. My empire served its purpose and washed away. The fools knew little of balancing their food supply, unlike me." She snagged the boy's jaw and pulled his neck into her extending fangs.

"No! Please!" cried the mother. "Have mercy. He's a boy! I'll do anything."

"Should the predator starve so the infestation of man can flourish throughout Mother Nature's Garden, balancer? Need I remind you who was responsible for your precious Zingalg's collapse? The breakdown of the earth we walk on? Who was the Aureate Rise? Vampire? Or Human? Haaah!"

"Pl-e-a-s-e," the mother said.

The boy sobbed, eyes closed. Valturus held the tension for the five souls atop the sand dune. Synarion looked away. The fangs sunk in. He closed his eyes. The mother's shrill travelled wide and far throughout the desert, silencing the wind and insects.

*Does it have to be this way?*

*I'm afraid so.*

*I tried, Synarion.*







## CHAPTER 9 PUTTING AN OLD DOG TO REST

**R**ules put you in a box, limiting your growth potential and preventing you from experiencing the world from a fresh lens. Order also ensures survival. It's why Synarion invented the laws. They kept him protected while humans hunted and killed others. The limitations constricted his understanding of Mother Nature's and Earth's past. It's no mistake of his own; not even the Grove understood their demise.

Synarion jotted the notes from Bark Nose on his laptop, outlining the history of the World Mother and Mother Nature.

He also made a balancing profile for the Root Walker and his human toy. One thing that Bark Nose could not explain was how the history of the World Mother tied to his case with the Surrey vampire. That was Abbygail's department. He looked forward to her attempting to explain how a familiar, whose master assassinated him, and four, today was three, days linked to her missing father, dead friend, and cousin in Edmonton. It was far-fetched. She was bold. He had to give her credit for that. They scheduled their time that Friday.

(Abbygail: Hey, it's Abbygail. Thanks a ton.  
I'll pay for gas and your time, I promise.  
When can we go?

5:35 PM)

(you: We leave Sunday.

7:43 PM)

*Can't wait*, Synarion thought, putting his phone away. Today was Friday, and Sunday would be the fourth day of the familiar's prophecy. His plan was to finish this prior by finding the Surrey vampire.

His mind wandered to the haunting mythos of Mother Nature's sister. According to the World Mother story, she was vengeful and egotistical. She wanted what she couldn't have. Bark Nose's explanation created more questions than resolutions. Synarion wanted to understand why there wasn't enough stardust for each numen to have their own worlds. It was a cruel joke from the Creator who abandoned the mortal realm long ago and a farce.

That left individuals like balancers to orchestrate peace and ease tension between rivals. He questioned how much Mother Nature knew the brooding issues. If she'd speak to him, it would be a different scenario. Her powers and actions were slow, being bound to this world, unlike her sister, wherever she was.

Synarion was familiar with most of the legends and myths on creationism and didn't need to dwell on it. He had to understand what the World Mother was. If the four-day warning came into being, that could mean the World Mother would rise again. It was a theory. Synarion didn't catch the familiar's final words. Regardless, the balancer needed more answers.

Valturus. He had to book another meeting with her regarding the pendant. What a sucker Synarion had been. She claimed to have moved on from the old world. If her words were valid, she would have aided him in solving the balancing offence. It intrigued him as to why Valturus would presume the Surrey bloodsucker would be at Club Revelation in Vancouver. On second thought, vampires stayed in contact for survival.

A part of her cared. He had to leverage that relationship, as he did with Bark Nose, and extract more information. There was Club Revelation in Blood Alley near East Hastings to visit. The infamous street was an ongoing issue for the city where the poor, homeless, and addicted sought shelter. It offered camouflage from unwanted eyes.

In conclusion, Blood Alley was the gateway to the underbelly of Vancouver. Each city had their own underlying layer where the old world could blend in and operate. A handful were the

exception, such as Valturus who capitalized on their vast expertise to exploit the human systems for a lavish life.

Being immortal had its benefits for the vampire. Taking centuries to age also provided unique insight into the nature of things, understanding trends, economics, technological growth, and provided an upper hand compared to beings who lived for sixty to eighty years. Synarion wasn't the type to leverage his wisdom unless it was to aid Mother Nature.

Even as the day progressed, he thought of Valturus's words concerning his duty. He wanted to retire. He pondered it most days and doubted his strength to fix the planet alone. It would be too effortless to take his belongings and vanish into the wilderness. He could even get himself a companion who was easy on the eyes. Bark Nose did. The truth was he swore an oath to the growth and maintenance of Mother Nature's garden. Little did he realize that involved de-escalating an old sister dispute rooted in childish greed.

*Who are you?* Synarion thought, spinning the pendant in his hand, sitting on a park bench at the city's largest park, Stanley Park, overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

The usual balancing missions didn't stem from ancient roots. Beating familiars into a pulp and witnessing murder weren't common. For example, on Friday evening, he waited for a client. This was the same job from the pop-up on his computer the night before. In a world of humans, money spoke. This mission would provide the balancer with that tool. The large envelope containing the client's required information sat on his lap.

"Synarion," came a throated voice from behind him.

Synarion pocketed the pendant and turned to an older man approaching. His hands tucked into the pockets of the dark green trench coat. The shadowed face locked onto him under the black Panama hat. People didn't bat an eye at his concealed body in a crowded city or question the trotting walking pattern. Look further, and the wide boots didn't bend right, like the front of the foot was missing. To a fellow old world being, he knew the signs of a shimen whose legs were closer to an ox's hindlegs ending in hooves.

"Mark," Synarion said. "Ready to bid farewell to this human world?"

The shimen's wrinkled face smiled as the moonlight grazed his teal-toned skin, showcasing a mouth filled with sharp teeth. "Yes, I have moved on long ago." He tapped his head with a sausage finger and sat beside Synarion. His weight caused the creaking bench planks to rise under Synarion. The shimen removed his hat, exposing the charcoal hair that sprung like straw. Underneath it were two stumps sprouting from his forehead: filed horns. The reptilian turquoise eyes dilated from the sun passing the horizon.

"I will be glad to be rid of this name, *Mark*, too. Shame to my family for not using my birth name. Shame indeed," he said.

"Mind telling me since I won't see you again?" Synarion asked.

"No such luck, my balancing friend. As I said, I wish to disappear forever. I'm tired of hiding in pain. Do you understand my agony to sand these horns?" Mark said. He flickered his black forked tongue. "Or trimming my claws,

dulling my teeth? What about hiding my hooves? Or taping my tail to my leg?"

"I may have some idea if you recall. These aren't my ears."

"Aye, at least your facial structure matches." Mark's reference was to his wide bridge nose and the slight extension of his muzzle. Shimen were beautiful creatures from a neutral perspective. Humans, doused in religious dogma, would make false claims that shimen were demons. They had done it before. To their defence, horns, fangs, claws, hooves, and a tail matched some demons from the afterlife which were also found in religious scriptures.

"You got a spot for me, balancer?" Mark asked.

Synarion crossed his leg. "Well, the northern territories of Canada are vast, isolated, and too cold for many."

"Could you find me?"

"That depends on how far you go into the forest." Synarion passed the envelope to his client.

Mark took it and reached inside, taking a printed map on one page. The second sheet was a written document with instructions and guidelines on vanishing. Synarion watched the ocean, staring at the pink and orange sky, the sun long gone. "You sure you want to leave it behind?"

"Synarion, look at me. I'm old. I'm weak. Unlike you, my people have two or three hundred years at most. This is not the world for me anymore."

"And why did you stay here for so long?" Synarion asked.

"Loneliness."

Synarion pressed his lips together and nodded. It was an emotion he was too familiar with.

“I didn’t ask for this. Neither did you,” Mark said. “None of us could have predicted that the heart of Zingalg would implode.”

“There were clear signs, my friend. Countless obvious signals that the balancers of the Grove didn’t take action until it was too late.”

“It was horse shit. Those kingdoms drowned in their own power. The Aureate Rise was a small piece of the true problem: fear of one another. Why would they listen to your people?”

“We weren’t sure ourselves.”

“You couldn’t stop people from speaking words of power unless you cut off the tongue of each of those bastards. My people, our culture, gone.”

“You can stay bitter, or you can move on. It’s why I have those rules you’ll find at the bottom of that document.”

Mark chuckled. “Thank you. They will come in handy. What of you? Moving on? Or are you stuck in the Grove’s mission?”

“I don’t have a choice,” Synarion said.

“We have choices, Synarion. I chose to stay amongst the humans to watch and observe. Unlike you, I can’t interact with them for too long. This makeshift disguise doesn’t work well, even in the dark. I am tired of hiding. You don’t have to carry such a burden. Because in the end, we return to—”

Synarion interrupted. “To the dirt, yes.”

“I was going to say Death’s Vortex, but yes, dirt first,” Mark said.

“Quite true. While I am here, I must aid Mother Nature. I am the last.”

“And how is that going for you?” Mark asked.



“As of yesterday, far more complex than my training ever covered.”

Mark raised his thick black eyebrow. “A balancer’s job is never done, is it?”

“I am afraid not,” Synarion said.

Mark put the documents into the envelope and sighed in defeat. “And you are sure you could not find any other shimen in the world? On that electric communication, in-trah-net?”

“Intranet. And unfortunately, not. As far as I understand, you’re the last. I looked into the other continents, Africa and East Asia. They’re gone.”

Mark shook his head. “What a pity.” He reached into his trench coat, revealing an envelope, and passed it to Synarion. The balancer opened it to see a stack of hundreds. This was a small job. Research and consulting gigs were good to get, and in the end, he wanted to help the remaining old world beings find peace, not fight them. Deep inside, he knew most would wither away with time, forgotten forever.

Synarion put the envelope into his satchel. The payment would work well for his unwanted new side quest involving a road trip to Edmonton with a human wanna-be-witch. He could pray to Mother Nature that the girl had valuable information.

“Be aware, there are trolls in the Yukon,” Synarion said.

“Oh? What kind?” Mark asked.

“Forest trolls, if I remember.”

“I’ll take my chances. You should do the same.”

“If I did not maintain balance, there wouldn’t be connections for the old world. That’s why we have the intranet. Otherwise,

we would isolate ourselves even more than we already do. You wouldn't have a safe retirement for your last half a century."

"Give or take. I am grateful to you. If we didn't meet that day, I don't know what I would have done or where I would have gone. Huh-huh, you were so piss-faced in the alleyway," he said in a horse chuckle.

"Yes, that was a lucky day for us," Synarion said. It was an unpleasant evening of drinking himself numb. Some days, the isolation was more manageable than others. Mark happened to find him on one of the lesser evenings.

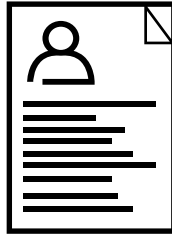
Mark added, "You are indeed a better being than me, and many others."

"Thank you," Synarion said. It was best to be polite. He'd prefer not to have his ego stroked. It was worthless. "Enjoy your last days in the north." Synarion shook the shimen's thick hand and left the park.

Being a balancer wasn't for the glory, the pride, or the righteous power to decide what was right and wrong on Earth. A balancer swore an oath. It was as simple as that.

Mark was old and bitter, which comes with age when the world around you dies, and you're left as the last. Synarion understood why he wanted peace for his final days. After, the shimen would exist in the PDFs on Synarion's hard drive and the copies on the old world intranet. Given enough time, the hard drive would fail to spin, and those servers would lose power, and knowledge would vanish. As was the cycle of life.





## BALANCER PROFILE SUMMARY

**Name:** Mark

**Species:** Shimen

**Location:** Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

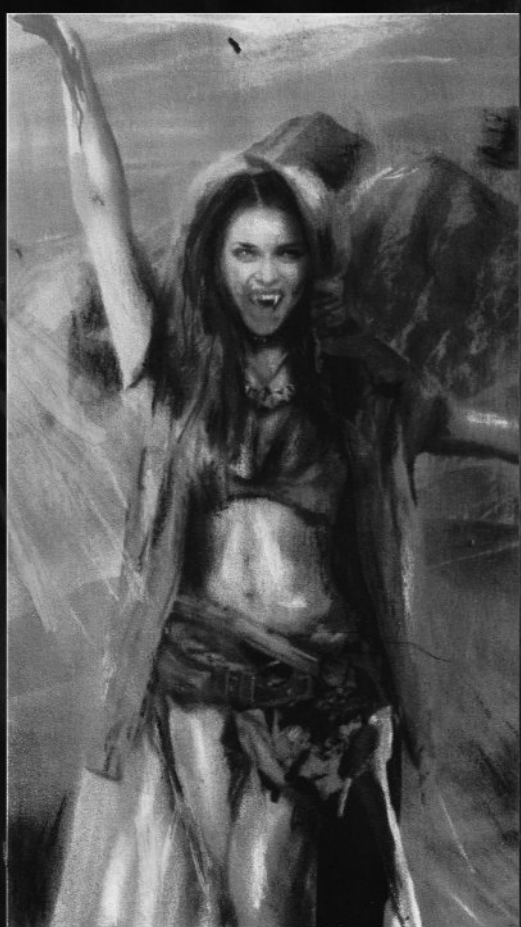
**Occupation:** Retired

**Description:** Six foot seven. Hairy. Forked Tongue. Turquoise eyes. Filed horns, claws and teeth. Hooves for feet.

**Balancing Offence:** None

**Note:** Enjoying retirement until death as the last shimen.



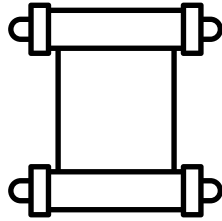


II



A  
C  
T





ACT II:  
**NEW AGE PHILIA**

(grove\_transcripts\_ENG\_01.pdf  
Page 2/3)

*Growth from old,  
gives endless nutrients for their descendants,  
this is not bold,  
it is the way of the garden that all worldly follows,  
faith in her to remould.*







## CHAPTER 10

# AUTOMATON

Three days of no food or water would bring a man near death. This was why they were not fit to watch over Mother Nature's garden. Under the blazing heat, a mother and daughter were at this breaking point. No nourishment provided by their captor and the lack of will to live was sealing their fate. It wasn't Synarion's fault. He had to remind himself of this. This was the law of nature.

The group of four took shelter inside a shallow cavern where the desert met rocky terrain. They slept throughout the day to avoid the sun. He dismissed himself from the vampire and the humans, keeping to a far corner of the cave. They weren't his

people. She had cast a spell on his mind in a moment of weakness. The balancer would remain strong.

He questioned how Valturus slept. Myths of her kind spoke of needing to rest in the soil of her deathbed. Coffins were standard amongst bloodsuckers to bury themselves in their sacred earth and hide from the sun. Valturus had none of these. As she had told him, she was born and not turned into a vampire. The vamputus held more mystery than their vampire converted's legend.

At dusk, Synarion woke to a gasp, and he sprung. Valturus was not at her corner. A wince echoed by a hunched silhouette with painted highlights of leather and cloth clothing from the setting sun. Brunette hair draped over the mother's lifeless, wide eyes. Blood dripped from her mouth, drizzling against her neck where the attacker sucked the life from her. The skin shrivelled. Her hand reached to Synarion and fell onto the dirt.

Valturus lifted her head. Her green irises glowed with the orange sun kissing the tip of her cheekbones. The fangs dripped red onto the corpse. There was no need for words. The vampire was using her food supply before it expired.

The little girl was reluctant to travel at first. The camel dragged her as Synarion and Valturus descended the hill to follow the beach. She sniffled and shivered, lost. Waves of the ocean splashed the shores with gusts of cool wind, smothering her cries into hopelessness.

“You travelled this far with them to return to your ruins?” Synarion asked.

“No,” Valturus said. The vampire concealed herself head to toe as she had been the day he first met her, protecting her skin from the remaining rays of sun along the horizon. “I found them further inland along Life’s River. Another village. The one we’re going to is along the bay, easier to sail.”

“Right,” Synarion said.

On the beach, a bald man in a deep blue robe walked along the shore towards them. The water grazed his bare feet. His biting blue eyes shimmered, watching the three newcomers. The flesh dangled, torn on the right cheek. Inside was a cyclone where the teeth and tongue should be. Similar wounds trickled throughout the hands, chest, and skull, with swirls of air moving within the hollow shape. Little pieces of exposed muscle blew from the force.

“Don’t kill this one,” Synarion said, glaring at his vampire comrade.

“I’m replenished at the moment,” the other said.

“Stay behind me.”

“You know this individual?”

“We’ve crossed paths.”

The balancer took the lead, walking along the beach to the strange man. Except it wasn’t a man. He, or it, was an android in the classic sense: an automaton representing a human being in form and motion. The lookalike stood straight with the waves soaking the bottom of the tattered robe.

Synarion stopped at the retreating shoreline. “Elemandrias of Wind, where are your siblings?”

“Elemandrias of Fire, extinguished,” the being said in a hoarse whisper as loud as a shout.

“Elemandrias of Water?”

Wind shook their head. “Evaporated.”

“Elemandrias of Earth?” Synarion asked.

“Unknown.”

“It is safe to say you four couldn’t combine Erenwill?”

“No. I am one fourth,” Wind said.

“Did you or Earth collect Water and Fire’s components?”

“Unknown.”

Synarion bit his lip as his heart crashed into the bottom of his stomach. There was no chance of creating Erenwill, the greatstaff of balance. The damage was here to stay. The balancers’ time had come and gone. “Not all is lost,” Synarion said. He pointed to the camel with his thumb. “I recovered some of the archives.”

“You? A mere enforcer? Unworthy.”

“I’ve maintained my duty. As did you and the other elemandriases. A loss for our kind.”

“Wrong.”

“Come again?”

“I maintained my duty. The other elemandriases did. The balancers did not.”

“I don’t follow? We attempted to preserve what we could during the collapse. The order, the balancers, those words of power, the destruction was too great.”

“Because of you and your kind’s incompetence.” Wind scowled, tearing some of the cheek to the eye socket. They stepped towards Synarion, making him move away.

“Elemandrias of Wind, pause function.”

They didn’t listen and coiled their fists together.

“Elemandrias of Wind, I command you.”

“Balancer’s order overwritten. Earth’s protection commands.” Wind pressed their hands together, and the palms split open, funnelling the cyclone through the flesh. Slabs of skin and meat fell to the ground in loud slaps. Wind swirled upwards, kicking sand and water with it and taking the shape of a humanoid in the air.

Synarion bumped into his comrade, analyzing the expanding being. A sheen of green came from within Wind’s chest, reflecting from the moon. The object rotated, and a disk came into view. The sight of the circle pulled him in, and he bumped into Valturus.

She caught him with surprising strength. “What did you do, balancer?” Valturus asked.

“Wind is reverting,” Synarion said. “We need to leave.”

“To what?” the other asked.

“To their basic function of balance.”

Synarion grabbed hold of Valturus’s arm without thinking. She tensed from his touch, and moved with him. She tugged on the camel, and they hurried up the hill with the little girl.

Wind grew twice in size, spinning towards them. The disc inside rotated faster as the dust cyclone formed a fist, aiming at the group. Synarion pushed Valturus clear from the blast as it hit the beach. The two toppled onto the sand with a blanket of earth covering the sky, taking the camel’s skull with it. Sand-coated brain matter and splintered wood flew in opposite directions. Their belongings scattered the ground with papers of the Grove dancing through the wind. Black pebbles with red

stripes landed on the ground with other documents, not of Grove origins. Gold coins, rings, and necklaces followed.

The little girl tugged the rope to rip it. No luck. Her strength couldn't overcome the headless animal's dead weight. She cowered on the ground, with her captors as her saviour.

Valturus got to her feet in the blink of an eye and extended her nails, forming long claws the length of daggers. She blipped forward and leaped when Synarion got to his feet. Her claws slashed at the cyclone, going through it, and she landed on the other side. A gust of wind slammed into her back, throwing her against a nearby boulder, with her head rebounding off the edge.

A limited window opened for Synarion. Wind didn't face him. They lowered to the ground, merging arms to create a long spike. He bolted to the elemandrias and jumped into the whirlwind, reaching for the disk. Synarion clutched the metal object and broke through the other side. Sharp bites of wind, jagged rocks, and cold, high-pressured water shred through his flesh.

Valturus stepped to the side as the spike of wind as matter projected forward. Her dazed state slowed her movement. The collected objects fell apart a couple footsteps from impact. Wet blotches of sand splattered against her chest and goggles. The tornado split apart, with the gusts of air soaring away. Wind was no more.

Synarion rose, brushing sand off his legs. The disk was in his cut-covered hand. *One-fourth of Erenwill*, he thought. It was useless since the other elemandrias were gone. Even if Elemandrias of Earth were alive, somewhere in the world, their

existence didn't matter. Without the other pieces held by Fire and Air, they couldn't build the legendary staff of balance. According to Wind, the pieces were gone.

Valturus wiped the wet sand from her face, knocking her scarf. Her plump lips formed a frown. "I suppose a thank you is in order, *hmm?* You saved me from your own failed monstrosity."

"Sort of mine. We are both part of the Grove."

"Meaning?"

"The elemandrias worked with the Balancers Order. They wouldn't listen to an enforcer such as myself."

"You, a soldier?" A crooked grin went on her face while walking past him to the trapped girl.

Synarion put the disk into his pants pocket, the one good pocket left on his clothes. "Yes, I lacked the knowledge that our elders did. It is, or was, the natural progression of a balancer."

"No need to be defensive, Synarion. I have a taste for the warrior type."

*A blessing and a curse*, he thought, watching her take some of the surviving bags from the headless camel's corpse. She snagged the rope attached to the girl. The little human sat on her knees, abandoning hope. The vampire reached down, grabbing the black, red-striped, bean-sized objects one at a time and snagged the golden goods.

Synarion knelt, gathering some of the scattered documents from his broken chest. The paper he found was not of his own. It was old like the Grove's, with wrinkles and torn edges of the tan pulp. It contained a foreign language of angled and straight lines that he could not identify. An illustration of a flower was



in the center with a flaming gate coming from its core. A bark-covered hand reached upward inside it.

A hand with black nails snagged the paper from his grasp. “And why did that elemandrias attack you?” Valturus asked.

Synarion gathered a few other papers, these ones belonging to him. “Elemandriases work alongside balancers. They’re cold, calculating, function-based lifeforms with the same goal as the Grove.”

“Being?” Valturus asked.

“Balance for Mother Nature’s garden,” Synarion said. “This world comes first.”

Valturus continued salvaging, forcing the girl to move with her. She said, “And it deemed you a threat to the mission?”

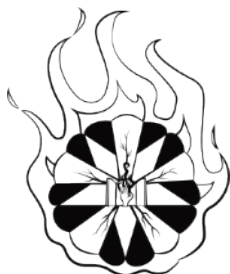
Synarion pulled on a paper from the Grove, lifting it from the sand and bringing a black-and-red striped bean to the surface. The smooth texture told him it was a seed. It held the same vibration as plants did. Except this one had a pull to its frequency. He tossed it closer to another one, having enough mystery for one day. The vampire would collect them.

The second foreign document he found was far more interesting. It had a drawing of a large flower, spikes along the petals, and vines holding a decapitated head. He said, “It appears so. Balancers failed to protect Mother Nature. I no longer served a purpose to the elemandrias because we couldn’t uphold our duty.” *Seeds, flower drawings*, he thought.

Valturus walked to Synarion and tossed a stack of papers beside him, breaking his thinking. They were Grove documents. He handed her the paper she found.

She snatched it and said, “You need a new purpose, like me.” She walked away, taking the girl. The human looked at Synarion. Both of their eyes glazed, filled with sorrow for their losses. They were stuck with the vampire whether they preferred it or not. He looked to the dead camel, a victim of crossfire, and the splintered wood from various trunks it held. Stakes killed vampires. Did he want to rid himself of the one companion he had? Synarion questioned if he had a choice. He couldn’t hide a stake in the scraps of clothes he had. Survival was his prime objective. Passive action was the solution. The girl and he were not so different.





## CHAPTER 11

# DEAL WITH A DEMON

Day three, Saturday.

“Hi, it’s Mr. Parker again . . . yes . . . is Jennifer around? . . . okay . . . oh, alright . . . okay. Thanks . . . you too. . . Buh-bye.” Synarion hung up his phone after speaking with Jennifer Anderson’s secretary. *Meetings*, he thought. He was told she would call him. It was Saturday afternoon, and he wouldn’t hear from her until Monday. That was no good. Onto new angles, being Club Revelation. It would be open tonight. His phone buzzed. It was Abbygail, which read:

(Abbygail: Hey, we meeting tomorrow?)

2:35pm)

He could deal with that later. He wanted to prepare himself for tonight through meditation and an exercise routine. There was no telling what he would encounter at night when the streets were wild with new life. For humans, it was fun. For Synarion, it was another day of maintaining order. For vampires, it was a hunting ground.

Clubs or drinking in social environments weren't his forte. His consumption habit rooted in a less pure choice. Liquor, dancing, and sex were not new. The ritual existed in the old world and occurred in the present time. The Vikings in northern Europe had halls. Beings enjoyed socializing for business and for pleasure in the nightlife. The modern version consisted of dark rooms, colourful lights and fast-paced electronic music. These types of social gatherings attracted trouble. Low lives, thieves, gangsters and basic primal competition flooded the rooms. This specific bar also threw non-human beings into the wrench. With any luck, Synarion's vampire would be there.

That evening, Synarion left his apartment and hiked onto the main street. He tossed some coins into a paper cup belonging to a dirt-covered man sitting against a brick wall on the sidewalk. The human didn't even see the coins fall in, too focused on the concrete. It didn't matter. The deed was better than the recognition. That was one individual of dozens on Hastings. Synarion couldn't play Robin Hood. Each day was an analysis of balance or an attempt to spark hope in himself.

Clubs start far later in the evening, and anyone notable doesn't arrive when the doors open. It attracted too much attention, and arriving later implied there were more interesting things prior. This facade played by the dominant humans according to Synarion's observations of their behaviour, stemming from rule three. He executed rule one. The time was shy of midnight as he turned into an alleyway.

Past the graffiti-covered walls and rusted dumpsters, Synarion marched along Blood Alley, following the subtle sound of bass music. Several people were smoking outside a cracked brick building underneath a red neon sign stating *Club Revelation*. They were humanoid. Beside them were two girls in low-cut tops and skirts, ID'd by a bouncer with enough muscles to shroud his neck. The arms were as thick as Synarion's legs. It wasn't intimidating in the least. He had taken on far bigger opponents.

The bouncer patted the girls and checked their purses. Synarion thought ahead and knew he couldn't bring his spiked knuckles. Despite the size, they were too bulky to conceal. A couple of throwing stars, on the other hand, were thin enough to hide in a hidden slit in the sole of his boot.

The girls received clearance and entered through the black steel door. Synarion was next. He handed his fake ID card before the bouncer could ask. Like Valturus, Synarion needed to reinvent himself on half a century of clockwork with a new name, profession, and location. This iteration was Jacob Smith, which the bouncer read on the card before passing it to Synarion. Mr. Smith was thirty-seven years of age.

He put the ID into his wallet and swung the club door open. The muffled electronic music came to life. Crisp and hard frequencies flew into Synarion's ear as he walked through the red-lit hall. A second bouncer and a boutique girl with orange eyes and pigtails stood behind a booth. She smiled at Synarion with piranha fangs. "Fifteen," she said.

Of course, there was cover. These places leech currency like vampires did blood. He had to play along to get inside and grabbed a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet. She gave him a five and pressed a rubber stamp onto his hand. The ink illustrated a radioactive monkey with swirling eyes. Synarion entered the main event past the kiosk, where a long black bar was to his right containing a good two dozen patrons waiting for their drinks. Others mingled around brick columns. Further inside was a large swarm on the dance floor, moving as a single entity to the fast-paced tempo with bass rumbling throughout the concrete and rattling their skeletons.

The strobe lights were in sync with the drum and bass rhythms that shook Synarion's core, accompanied by melodic sequencers and low-frequency baseline to create a magnetic dance hit. Synarion's ears were useless here. His eyes took over, observing the patrons: horns, tails, fangs, unusual skin tones, and eye colours would fool a human into believing this was a costume party. What Synarion needed was a bloodsucker. None of them so far appeared to be his target.

Rule two: don't stand out from the crowd.

He pushed through the last group of clubbers to an open end at the black counter and leaned against it. He examined the bartender, looking past the short black dress and soft

complexion. Her hazelnut eyes were human, as were the ears. She had no abnormal tattoos or pendants. There was the off chance she was unaware of the beings at the club. The chances were slim, considering the crowd. Some humans worked alongside old world beings for better or worse.

“What can I get you?” she asked.

“Whiskey, double. On the rocks,” Synarion said.

“Coming up.”

She made his drink as he got the cash, and the exchange was complete. He needed a drink to handle this situation. The mass amount of people and loud noise was typical on a battlefield, making the balancer tense, the complete opposite of rule two. Synarion sipped on his whiskey and continued to observe.

To his left were two men in hoodies, leather jackets, grey sweatpants, and running sneakers who watched the girls dance. Behind them were three other men in shades, wearing unbuttoned dress shirts. They were human with no signs of fangs.

Off to the right was a guy leaning on the bar, facing away from Synarion, voicing to a blonde girl with red eyes and slits for pupils. She was not human, and he wasn't sure what she was. The grey skin and flat nose could belong to anything. Her wandering gaze demonstrated her disinterest in the man. He tried.

Patience was key, and Synarion kept chugging his drink. He didn't want to be here; the noise attacking his ears would cause tinnitus later. Balancing required time. He had to stay focused on finding the vampire or anyone who could have information.



Patience was also crucial if he was to go on a road trip to Edmonton with Abbygail. The nerve of Bark Nose.

The DJ changed the track to a four-step simple beat with a predictable lead saw synth: rising one note and descending the next. It was enough to pull in more dancers, clearing some of the bar and revealing a lounge area further away where patrons sat in round leather booths. Predators, like vampires, stalked their prey. Seating provided a perfect setup for the action.

Sweat-drenched arms brushed against Synarion. A girl squeezed into a spot and leaned against the bar. She brushed some strands of her moist black hair from her face. The remaining bunch wrapped into a giant loose bun sitting ten inches high. No amount of hairspray or pins could keep that standing unless an object, like horns, hid underneath. Her mesh top had leather bondage undergarments underneath, and her long black skirt had one pink leg between the slit. It wasn't the lighting or a bad tan. That was her flesh. Her foot tapped to the beat in the ankle-high leather boots. In the low lighting and her distracting outfit, a simpleton would overlook the swaying black spike peeking from the edge of the skirt. If that wasn't enough to convince Synarion of what she was, the plucked eyebrows were pitch black and contained makeup to conceal small spikes poking from the skin. An educated conclusion: a demon.

She smiled at the bartender as her bubble gum eyes wandered over to Synarion. He leaned into her ear, getting a whiff of her sweet tang, far more appealing than the sweat and booze of the club. "Sign any contracts?" he asked.

"Excuse me?" the demon asked.

The bartender provided a shot, and the demon reached into her petite black purse, taking some cash from it.

“Contracts,” Synarion said, watching the demon place the glass against her natural black lips and drink it in one go. “Simple cover. How good are you at acting drunk?”

The demon chuckled, slamming the shot glass onto the bar. She turned to him and stroked her chest. “What’s it to you? You looking?”

“I might be. Are soul-binding documents your specialty? Or do you take lustful men to your lair to feed off their life force? Or you wish to have an offspring. Raise Dega’Mostikas himself?”

The demon giggled in a girlish play. “You’re cute. Sorry, sweetie, I have no idea what you’re getting at.”

“I’m pretty sure you do. Those horns hold your hair quite well. If you weren’t being a flirt, you could hide your tail better.”

She put her hand on her hip and gave Synarion the up and down. “And I’m guessing you weren’t a boxer with ears like those.”

“Observant. Works on humans. Anyone with a bit of wisdom of the old world knows better.”

“You’re by your lonesome self?” She smiled and leaned on the counter, squeezing her breasts with her biceps. “We can change that.”

Succubus. Demon type verified.

“You’re not the one I’m here for,” Synarion said. He sipped his whiskey, looking at the club to see if anything had changed. Negative. “I’m here looking for a bloodsucker.”

“I take it you’ve new. I like fresh blood.”

“Can’t say that I am fond of it either,” Synarion said.

“There’s a lot of souls here from the past. Why did you bother if you didn’t want me? I am occupied.” She stepped from the bar, and Synarion snagged her forearm.

“Not yet,” he said. “How much is information worth to you?”

She stepped closer to him, their boots touching, and leaned into his ear. “Can you get me a human?” Her hot breath made his spine tingle, complimenting her seductive smell.

Rule five. “I won’t.”

“And why not?” the other asked.

“Do you know what I am?” he said.

She bit her lip and squinted, giving Synarion a closer look to decipher his outfit for clues. The black jeans were simple, like his boots, trucker jacket, and black t-shirt. Synarion didn’t have any outward visible characteristics or accessories to make what he was apparent. To the trained eyes, the cauliflower ears, contact lenses, fair skin, and white hair spoke enough.

“Nymph?” she asked.

“Good guess,” Synarion said.

“Egotistical people, thinking you’re important. I’m going to take a shot and say you were a sorcerer.”

“Not even close. A balancer.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh, come to punish those who offend balance?”

“A bloodsucker was causing issues in Surrey.”

“The serial killer on the news! That makes sense. A bloodsucker of all things. Well, my dear, you’re quite far away from Surrey.”

“I got a tip that this is the place,” Synarion said.

“If you won’t give me a human, why should I help you?”

“Because allies are far and few between. Balancers make excellent aids.”

She laughed with intense exhales. “I’m going to need another drink for this. Are you going to get righteous on me?”

“Drinks are pointless for you,” Synarion said.

“If you’re going to pretend to be important, I can pretend to be drunk.”

“No pretending. I’m being realistic. Balancers are well-connected and even useful for demons stuck in the mortal realm. You need friends.”

“Who says I’m stuck?”

“No demon in their right mind would want to stay in the mortal realm, dancing away at some club. Many in the afterlife see the mortal realm as a lost cause.”

She waved to the bartender again to get another drink.

Synarion continued, “So, I think it’s safe to say you are stuck here. I’m going to guess you’re not aware of the intranet most of us reside on.”

The succubus got her drink, paid, and rested her head on her elbow, watching Synarion. She said, “Intranet? Human technology isn’t my preference. It’s frail.”

“And powerful. Be my eyes and ears here, and I’ll get you into the intranet. Being aware of others is helpful. Plus, there are maps, forums, and contacts around the globe. It lets you know you’re not alone.”

“Forums, like chatting on this intranet?” the demon asked.

“Yes. There are even other demons banished from Hell.”

“Fascinating. However, I’m not banished.”

“Right,” Synarion said. He wanted her to elaborate. Considering his mission, he left it. “Do we have a deal?”

“Fine,” she said, standing straight. “How do I get in contact with you?”

“Got a phone?”

She slipped her hand under her fishnet shirt and inside her bra, taking a smartphone, unlocked it, and passed it to Synarion. “Punch your digits in,” she said.

Synarion did so and handed the device to her. “I’m out of town this week, for a few days, related to why I am here. After I can get you connected.”

“You like to keep a girl waiting?” The demon winked.

“My mission is time-sensitive. I need to locate this bloodsucker. If you find him here, you message me.” He reached inside his shirt, revealing the necklace containing the golden pendant.

Her eyes widened. “Ah, yes. Now, that I’ve seen before.”

“Is that so? Where?”

She scratched her nose with her thumb, the index finger aiming towards the lounges. “There are some humans that come here on occasion. They look like part of a gang, covered with floral scarification, tattoos, and dark clothing. They hang with one hideous mother fucker. Pretty sure he’s your bloodsucker.”

“Perfect,” Synarion said.

“There’s a door that leads to the basement. It’s VIP.”

“Guarded?”

“Password. Tell them ‘*no revelation here*,’ and they’ll let you in,” she said.

“And these humans are there?”

“I saw them go into the basement earlier, and it’s the one way in and out.”

“Perfect. You’ll have access to the intranet when I return.” Synarion raised his drink, waiting to cling.

The demon raised hers, and the two glasses met. “In a few days?”

“Three days,” Synarion said and finished his whiskey.

“I can call you?” she asked.

“Yes, when I’m back.”

“It’s a date.” She looked at her phone and squinted. “Mr. Smith?”

“The name is Synarion,” he said.

“Mulier Cupido. I go by Mul. Easier for the boys.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Synarion said. “If you don’t mind, I’ve got a meeting with a vampire.”

“Business and no play?”

“Clubs aren’t my thing,” Synarion said, shrugging.

“Too bad.”

“Don’t cause too much trouble.”

“Or what?” she asked, licking her gums.

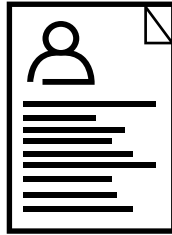
“I’ll have to maintain balance if you take too many lives. Let the bloodsucker be an example for you.”

“Punish me?” the demon said. “I look forward to it.” She squeezed his forearm before striding to the dance floor. His eyes couldn’t stop moving to her rear, admiring the wide sway in her hips and the way the fabric rested. Primal needs had no

purpose, not at all with a succubus. The club men ogled as she reached the dance floor, commanding their attention with her fluent hip motions. From the corner of her eyes, she watched her surroundings, seeing who the best prey in the room was.

He didn't want to form an allegiance with a demon. He also knew his mission was more important than his comfort. The diminished old world meant he had to uphold his end of the bargain. Mul was in luck and happened to be the first one he met tonight.

Onwards, the clock was ticking. Day three, and he hadn't gotten any answers. That was going to change, and the Surrey bloodsucker would soon learn there was no revelation to be had when disrupting Mother Nature's balance.



## BALANCER PROFILE SUMMARY

**Name:** Mulier Cupido, also known as Mul

**Species:** Succubus (Demon)

**Location:** Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

**Occupation:** Man Eater

**Description:** Five foot four. Pink-red skin. Curled black horns and tail. Sharp fangs, and light pink eyes.

**Balancing Offence:** None. Keep track of how many men she devours and how often. She hunts at Club Revelation, which had more old world beings than I could track. It is evident they are mixing with each other and humans, a dangerous combination.

**Note:** I have a date with her once this World Mother nonsense is over.







## CHAPTER 12

# REVELATION

He weaved through the crowd, passing the dancers, the watchers, and the lounge to the far door. The balancer had to ignore the recklessness of the club's old world beings mixing with humans. Countless offences were happening around him. The name Club Revelation appeared on occasion in the past. He didn't see a reason to investigate it, similar to commoners who know of the Mafia or Area 51. They knew there was mystery and unwanted actions. Secrets cannot stay hidden forever. What angered Synarion was his shortcoming to take action. Humans didn't understand what they dabbled in. The world was too large to maintain order alone. With that, their

crimes passed like Bark Nose's, and he marched to no revelation.

At the end of the building was the black door Mul had pointed at, complete with a slit for communication. Synarion knocked on the cool metal door and adjusted his jacket. The gap slid open, and a mouth appeared with stained yellow teeth pointing in various directions. "Password," they said.

"There is no revelation," Synarion replied.

The slit slammed closed and several bolts unlocked, letting the door open wide. The guard was two heads shorter than Synarion. He stood by a stool. His one bug eye looked at him. The other was made of glass. The human stepped aside, and Synarion descended the staircase under the flickering lights. The cracked walls revealed layers of paint over the years. The creaking unfinished wood flooring felt as if it would snap at any moment. This was the type of grunge where Synarion would expect to find an old world being who leeches off of the innocent.

He made it ten steps, and the door slammed shut. Behind him, the human sat on the chair and took a pornographic magazine resting on the table beside him. *Even with the fantastic invention of handheld computers, he chose paper*, Synarion thought. It was a pointless observation. Back to business, he lifted his boot and took his throwing stars from the hidden slit, putting them in his inner jacket's pocket.

At the end of the staircase, Synarion entered an open room lit with orange and pink lighting. In the center was a circular wooden bar, giving a full view of the space. Red curtains draped from the ceiling, forming isolated booths, dividing the vast

space and muffling the bass from upstairs. Floral green seventies carpet covered the ground, and low, deep purple and red velvet couches were placed in each booth. The bartender didn't acknowledge him and focused on cleaning glasses while Synarion walked between the red curtains. Lo-fi R&B music came from a DJ somewhere in this maze of fabric.

He passed the first booth where a stout humanoid made of bark played cards with a leathery grey-skinned being with tusks. The first was a wood troll, and the second a Tustook. How these two entered the club and hid inside a metropolis was unknown. In fact, if Synarion had time, he would sit with them to learn their tactics and perfect his rules. Instead, he continued walking, looking for the bloodsucker.

One booth on the other side of the bar contained three men wearing black suits, facing a hideous face with sharp ears and a flat nose. The gelled black hair was his. The sharp teeth were visible underneath the upper lip. His pale arms extended from the rolled trench coat and wrapped around the two girls who had been outside earlier. They had drinks on the round table before them and snacked on black, red-striped candies shaped like beans in a glass bowl. They looked familiar; however, the sight of the Surrey bloodsucker was far more intriguing. This ended tonight.

He didn't have his range of weapons, like a wooden stake or spiked knuckles, and had to act calm when dealing with the vampire. He had to presume the vampire's henchmen had weapons. His arrival caught the attention of the three men, who turned to face him. Each was bald with complex botanic scarification running along their neck and converting into

tattooed designs of flowers along the dome of their skulls. They were intricate and encoded with symbolic visual messaging, much like the gold-chained necklaces resting against their dress shirts ending in pendants, the World Mother sigil.

The three men stood, each placing their hands behind their backs. The bloodsucker freed his clawed hands from his play dolls and leaned forward. He smiled and raised one hand, the one Synarion had cut off earlier, which showed no damage.

“Silver throwing stars, clever,” he said in a grating tone.

Synarion stopped at the entrance of the draped section. The three men didn’t draw any weapons yet, their hands to their sides. The girls continued to eat the candies. The five looked human. New familiars.

The vampire leaned into his seat, putting his arms around the girls again. “I didn’t expect you to find me so soon. Who tipped you off?”

“It wasn’t hard to understand you wouldn’t be in Surrey again, not after that close encounter. So, what? East Hastings is your new parasitic feeding ground?”

The bloodsucker snarled, raising his nostrils. “I want my pendant,” he said.

Synarion’s hand went by his neck, causing the three men to reach around their belts again, and he revealed the pendant. The cautious nature of the three was too great. One had drawn their gun, keeping it hidden from view. Synarion’s observation was keener.

“You mean this?” Synarion asked, letting the pendant land against his chest. “I’m part of your club, right?”

The bloodsucker pointed at Synarion. “You stole it from me.”

“I took it from a human,” Synarion said. “In fact, from a man you killed.”

“You made me dispose of my familiar. Do you know how long he served me for?”

“A long time. He wasn’t familiar with common slang. Both of you have committed balancing offences, supporting your gluttonous blood leeching. If you hadn’t, you wouldn’t have met me. This mess didn’t have to generate more bloodshed. That is on you. Your mystery deepened. The World Mother and the importance of this symbol mean something to you. Mind telling me how you replicated such an ancient relic and why? Maybe I’ll let you live.”

The bloodsucker’s moist laugh came from deep inside his throat. It forced additional chuckles from his five humans. They kissed the ground this asshole walked on. Bloodsuckers were charming, thanks to their psychic nature. Synarion had firsthand experience.

“I admire your courage,” the bloodsucker said. “Balancers have a touch of megalomania. What a facade.”

“I’m willing to negotiate,” Synarion said. “If you’re not, we can reduce this to violence, like last time.”

“I’ll leave a scar on your face that won’t disappear.”

“And I’ll pierce your heart. So, let’s remain civil instead? Tell me, what happens tomorrow? Your familiar mentioned four days and the World Mother.”

“He was a smack monkey. You’re going to trust his words?” the bloodsucker said.

“Don’t bullshit me. You shot him dead in the head. Your goons here have the same pendant. Once upon a time, the infamous Queen Valturus had the same pendant. Name ring a bell?”

The three men shifted their stances, looking to their master, who sat straight, cupping his hands together. His face narrowed, listening with intent to Synarion's words. His mouth dangled open with the tips of his fangs exposed.

"Balancers have a wealth of knowledge and contacts, my friend," Synarion said.

The bloodsucker leaned forward, pointing his index fingers at him. The light moved past his thick brows, flattening as he stared at him, not blinking. "Yes . . . Yes. I know you."

Synarion pressed his lips together.

"You. In the light, yes. It's you," he said. "So many years ago. Thousands. By Dega'Mostikas, I don't believe my own eyes."

"Have we met?" Synarion asked.

"Oh no. Not formally, nymph . . . I recognize you. Yes, I do."  
"How?"

"Two thousand years to be exact, past Life's River in the land of Aewouson. She chose you . . . you a nymph, over her first converted." He clutched his fists. "I saw you washed up on the shores. I wanted to feed, I needed blood. I saw her approach you first. She didn't want me near, at the time."

"Queen Valturus?" Synarion asked.

"I understand, two ancients. I was so young, naive."

"Explain yourself," Synarion said.

"I wasn't always a vampire, you know?"

"None of you are. Valturus is of another calibre."

"Queen," the bloodsucker said.

"Yes, Queen Valturus. she converted you. All that time ago? During the collapse of the old world?"

The bloodsucker brushed his gelled hair. “Yes, balancer. Yes. I was a young man desperate to live forever. Please sit. I’ll tell my tale . . .”

Synarion didn’t obey and remained still. The group focused on the vampire, listening to the story of how Valturus, the pure, converted a mere man into the beast he was today.







## CHAPTER 13

# PROMISES IN SAND

Our bodies deteriorate long before our minds because we aren't meant to live forever. Over enough time, our thoughts begin to slip away before we are even aware. We strive to justify our death, avoiding the grim fact that we are mortal. Religious texts speak of gods. Philosophers ramble, and many people wish for an afterlife. Civilizations have discussed this in immense detail.

Dying is so vicious. I refuse to believe that we were meant to have our vast intellect for a short amount of time in this world. I refuse. Hence, the belief remained strong that I could achieve immortality. I had faith that I could defy the pathetic acceptance of death, like so many others. There is no afterlife superior to

the world we live in. Why would someone place us here for such a short time if there were an afterlife superior to the world we live in?

Faith held my search on. I suppose you could say that makes me religious myself, in the sense that I believed that there was a method to reach immortality. I believed that there was some truth found within the stories passed down for generations. Too often, words of gods and mythology from a distant time are fables explaining what alchemists achieved.

I was a boy when I heard a specific story, sparking my interest in everlasting life. These rumours spread from village to village over Life River. The elders spoke of a lost civilization that once ruled the deserts to the east. The people worshiped a living god, one who granted eternal life to their loyal followers. It's so old, the villages haven't seen this civilization, or ruler. The rumours didn't spawn from my village. We heard it from another, and that village said they heard them from another who had first heard the story from travellers, further distorting fact from fantasy.

This story failed to leave me as I grew into a young man. My father wished me to marry the neighbouring village chief's daughter to establish a strong bond. I was hesitant, as I fixated my mind on these rumours. I wanted to learn more. Why? I've asked myself the same questions for years. The fascination with beating death began with the passing of my mother. It was further amplified after my sister left this world. Both kissed death due to Life River's six-year drought.

My father told me to keep our faith strong. He said that the gods would keep us together if we believed in them. The years

went on with little rain. I didn't see any reason to believe in these beings who lived beyond the sky. Maybe that is why I strive for immortality, or maybe I fear my own death. With that uncertainty, I chose to be the master of my own faith. Why should I worship these supposed gods who punish us with droughts and pain?

I wanted to believe in more. This is why I searched. The story I heard as a boy must have come from a truth from somewhere. I exited the village, leaving my father in fury and despair. He said I had betrayed our family, for I was his one son. I am sorry, Father.

I travelled down the river by canoe, pushing onward. My journey took me to the other villages to learn of their knowledge. One village after the other, they each explained slight variations of the story.

One group said the civilization is alive and well, hiding in the mirages of sand in the eastern deserts. Others told me that these people are long gone, buried below the dunes. One consistency they had was the leader. A queen who showed no mercy to those who refused to kneel before her. The story goes she held the key to immortality with a single kiss. The tale distorts, as some villages said the queen was alive and resided amongst people after her civilization's collapse. They said that she was determined to regain her throne. Others said she perished in the sands. I kept note of each story variation in my journal, hoping to piece together one truth.

A particular villager made a haunting statement. He said, "If you seek immortality from this queen, she will devour your life and curse your soul."

I took note of that unsettling message too.

The last village led me to an old woman living far from the other villages south of Life River, beyond the jungle coast and near the deserts of the east, by the rocky plateaus. I hoped she could provide answers rather than more altered tales. My water supply was running low, and I had little food. On occasion, I found a lizard or a snake that I could catch and cook. Through days of travel, I located the old woman's hut atop the highest plateau. My feet were sore, and the skin exposed to the sun was burnt.

The old lady hunched, sitting on a wicker chair outside a hut by the fire as the sun set. She smoked a pipe and could manage her home well despite having a cloth cover her eyes. It was safe to say she was blind. I wonder if she was expecting me through attuned senses, because she smiled and said she was glad to see me. The woman offered me water and warm soup, replenishing my strength. I explained to her why I was there. She cut my explanation short.

"You wish to leap past the limitations of your mortal body," she said, stroking her metal bat amulet. Her voice was raspy and cold. She didn't blink as the wind rose.

"Yes, that is correct," I said.

The old woman said that one civilization surpassed the shortcomings of man in the east, the same one the villages spoke of. The army was once the dominant force in the lower region of the world, controlling Life River. They ruled for thousands of years under a single queen named Queen Valturus. She was merciless to all who refused her kiss of immortality.

The loyal army obeyed her command in exchange for their eternal life. Her piercing green eyes were enough to pull in the most willful men. Add the gift of immortality as an addition to her charm, and men would commit notorious acts for her. Pillaging. Murder. Torture. There were no depths too far for them to descend in the name of their queen.

Men of the known world feared the army. No kingdom dared to fight. They could pray to their own gods that Queen Valturus wouldn't come for them. She was the visible proof of a living goddess, unlike these other religions. She defied time and failed to age during the thousands of years ruling.

I asked the old lady what happened to Queen Valturus and her army.

"The sands of time washed away her army," the old lady said to me.

I didn't buy it. "How could the sands of time wash away a being that was immortal?"

"Look for yourself," the old lady said. "You will find the remains of her achievements by the two limestone rocks, over seventeen great dunes from this plateau in the east."

"There's evidence of their collapse?" At the time, I was beginning to doubt the power of this civilization and Queen Valturus.

She smiled. "Immortality doesn't make you wise of betrayal from within."

"Of course. May I stay the night?" I asked, hoping to avoid the winds and cool desert night.

"You may, if you provide one favour for me when you reach the Queen Valturus's fallen empire."

“And what is that?”

“Her temple resides in the center of the kingdom, where you’ll find her throne. The queen has a red amulet resting on her necklace.”

“And you need this amulet?”

“It is the key to immortality,” she said. “The amulet is made of pure blood through centuries of draining her own. You must obtain it for me so I can consume it and restore my youth. Bring me the amulet, and I will bless you with life.”

I pondered her request and nodded in agreement before committing. Yes, I should honour my word, even if I didn’t believe it. Deep down, I knew I had no reason to believe this woman.

She spoke, “If you don’t, you will die of the poison within your soup.”

My heart stopped, stomach tightening from her words. The old lady must have identified the internal struggle I was experiencing. Or she knew I would be gullible enough to eat. I was a young fool and too trusting from my life in a secluded village.

“You’re lying,” I told her.

“You can wait four days and discover for yourself what scorpion poison can do to a body. Or bring me the amulet.”

I realized my desire for immortality rested in fear of death and not in the loss of my mother or sister. I didn’t want to challenge her bluff. “We’ll share the amulet?” I asked.

“I promise you I will uphold my end of the deal for immortality,” she said with an expressionless face.

“How do you know so much regarding this civilization and their queen?”

“The same way we understand the mythology of gods in the sky. Stories passed on for generations, my dear boy. You learn to use your ears more when missing a sense.”

“You’re sure, seventeen sand dunes east, by two limestones?”

“The kings of the earth were immoral with her, and those who dwell on the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her immorality.”

Her words were not reassuring and further bound my quest for immortality by a leap of faith. If I’m not mistaken, her disturbing words were reference to a religious scripture. I didn’t have time for riddles!

I wanted to kill her right there. Unfortunately, she had hidden the remedy to the scorpion poison, and I had to obey. We had a forced deal. I stayed with the old lady that night, waiting for the winds to pass by. My dagger was close to my chest, ready for use if she attempted to do anything suspicious. I couldn’t trust her and questioned this deal.

The night was uneventful, and I left at dawn. The old lady wasn’t in the hut or anywhere near her home when I woke. Without hesitation, I left, wasting no time to get to the ancient civilization. I climbed down the plateau and walked over the first sand dune, sixteen to go.

The travel was long and tiring. I was determined to carry it through. I was unwilling to bend to the fact that I was mortal, even with the scorpion poison in my veins and hate brewing in my heart for the old lady. The limitations of my human form



weren't going to take me away. The sheer will I had alone kept one foot in front of me, ascending and descending the hills.

With my water gone, I lost count of the hills. Was I on hill eight or hill fifteen? I did not know. I kept walking for any sort of clue to this lost civilization. I had taken rest under one of the sand dunes to avoid the scorching sun during peak hours and travelled most at dusk.

The following dawn, I continued, hungry, thirsty, and unbendable. The body refused my will and I collapsed, rolling to the other side of a hill until my head shredded against a sharp object, stopping me. Sand and blood covered my face which I wiped clear from my eyes. To my joy, it was a limestone rock that I had hit, beside a second, as the old woman had described.

The two stones had carvings in them from a language I could not identify. This had to be the civilization, for there was a vast sea of sand around for miles. With frantic excitement, I dug around the limestones. Through several scoops of my hand, I moved aside enough sand to trigger some opening because the sand fell into blackness.

I stepped aside as the hidden door slid away, revealing a staircase into the unknown. I entered the hall leading underground. I had no torches and relied on the light from the entrance to take me to the other end. The path was long, leaving me in pure darkness, hoping I wouldn't trigger another hidden lever. A dim light appeared, leading to a large underground opening where beams of light shot through cracks in the rocky ceiling. This had to be Queen Valturus's lost civilization, hidden below the sands of time.

Indeed, it was. I made it to the other side of the tunnel. Her triangular temple was easy to spot in the circular enclosure. The mounds of gold, silver, and gems found at the corners of the roads did not tempt me. Skeletons scattered the sandy streets. The skin and bone on their necks had puncture holes in the same spots. There wasn't an explanation for why they had the exact same wound. It could relate to their deaths. A few without holes were missionary men, based on their clothing and the sacred cross.

There was no sound other than my own feet echoing against the empty roads. The limestone buildings were pristine with paint, windows, doors, and hinges, coated in sand and dirt. The kingdom's frozen state reflected my own quest.

The temple's entrance was atop a long and wide staircase. Covered in sweat, I reached the top and entered the building. My first step on the entrance's stone floor triggered the ignition of torches on the walls. They burst to life two at a time, one on each side, leading straight to the end. I drew my dagger and moved into the hall, hoping I wouldn't trigger a more fatal button. At the far end of the temple's black interior was the blood-red throne where the corpse of Queen Valturus rested. The throne itself had to be as tall as two men. The marble had carved linear lines, painted bright red around it, leading to Queen Valturus's heart. It was an impressive sculpting achievement.

There weren't any booby-traps, nor signs of other adventurers. I stepped deeper into the hall. To the sides were cradles with little corpses resting inside. I couldn't bear to look at the infants and continued, reaching Queen Valturus's throne.

The once living god was a corpse. I wondered how she died, who betrayed her, and if her blood did indeed offer immortality. The corpse was peaceful, sitting on the blood-red marble. She was far smaller than I had thought. Her hands gripped the armrests, head leaned against the smooth throne, mouth dangling open. Puncture holes were on her neck, like the others.

Her hair hung in a tattered mess, attached to her scalp, while her skin clung tightly to her skeleton, devoid of any flesh. The red amulet rested on her gold and red breastplate. I stepped forward and reached for the amulet. As my hands got closer, I could sense a radiating power coming from the item. I knew it had the power of immortality. This force had an unmatched energy.

My fingers glided against the smooth stone, and I lifted it and the chain over Queen Valturus's neck. Her body was stiff, and the chain moved with ease over her head. It was too easy. There was no grand climax or foe I had to fight. The blood amulet was mine.

After a night's rest, I returned to the surface through the entrance, leaving the civilization behind. There wasn't much to the empire, and I wish there were more answers as to how it submerged beneath the sand. The old lady said there would be proof there. Time indeed washed away the civilization under the dunes.

This was the third day, my time limited to beat the inevitable poison. A part of me questioned if the amulet would bypass the poison or if it prevented aging. I decided not to risk it and would return to the old lady.

The travel was also tiring, if not more. I had to press on. I kept pondering how obtaining the amulet was so easy and why the old woman didn't do it herself. She couldn't handle the great travel. She was blind.

Each step I took was more demanding than the last. It was as if this amulet had some sort of power over me. I resisted, pushing against this invisible force that rested in my poncho's pocket. I had to reach the old woman and get the remedy. I think the scorpion's poison was weakening me more than the amulet's will. I couldn't waste time.

I reached the old woman's home near the end of the fourth day. She sat in her wicker chair outside her hut by the fire, as I found her before with the setting sun, creating a sense of *déjà vu*. She smiled at me as I approached. Again, she had to have an attuned sixth sense, for how would she detect me?

"Did you find answers to the civilization's collapse?" the old lady said.

"No. I got the amulet, though. Give me the remedy."

"You didn't look hard enough," the old lady said. "You're too eager, as is your quest for everlasting life." She extended her hand, expecting me to hand the amulet over.

"Not until you show me the remedy," I said.

The old woman lifted a glass vial from her poncho containing a green liquid claimed to be the remedy. "Now, give it to me."

I extended the amulet to her, feeling it resist with excessive might. I ignored it as best as I could and placed the gem in the palm of her hand. It glimmered. The powerful force made one last pulse, rippling through both our bodies and pushing the rocks around us.

“Well done,” the woman said, handing me the vial.

I snagged it and pulled the cork off, tilting it to let the liquid pour into my mouth. The remedy had a bitter sting, and I forced it into my stomach, praying it would rid me of the scorpion’s poison. I exhaled after the last drop, waiting in anticipation for it to work.

The old woman clutched the blood amulet with her hand, causing the exterior to shatter. I took a step away in shock, watching as fresh blood oozed from the broken gem. I expected the ancient blood to have hardened. She raised her hand and poured the red liquid into her mouth. It drizzled into her throat, over her lips, neck, and wrists.

“Share some!” I shouted, reaching for her hand.

The old woman swatted my hand away with her free arm, throwing me back due to her unnatural strength. She hissed while pulling off her blindfold, revealing emerald eyes. Her skin lifted, tightening, as her wrinkles faded. Her hair glistened and gained newfound volume as she sat upright from her huddled state.

Her piercing gaze locked onto me as blood dripped from her chin. She stood from the wicker chair, throwing off her old ratty poncho, arms extended wide as she embraced her newfound youth. The muscles of her form shined in the setting sun while the surface of her body rose glimmers of smoke until the light vanished, leaving us under the night.

It wasn’t like anything I had seen before. This was true magic, not some presumed power of gods living above us, casting droughts. I knew that I was staring at Queen Valturus, a living goddess.

“Queen Valturus,” I said.

“Haaah! Sweet, sweet, trusting boy. You’ve been so loyal, obtaining my strength.”

“You were at the temple. I saw you.”

“So naïve as you were with the soup. Hmmm? For your eyes lay witness to the betrayer of my civilization.”

“Betrayer?”

“Do you not remember the tale? I’ll finish it for you. The betrayer and her followers took my kingdom, resentful of my drunk power and quest of creating superior children. They formed allegiances with holy men, naïve to their hate for us. You can relate, my dear. I escaped to save my own life, withering away here. At least, until you arrived and were willing to take a leap of faith.”

“What are you?” I asked.

“There are many names I’ve gone by, none of which are the label human. The undying. The eternal. Goddess is the name I prefer.”

The living goddess was real. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing as I stared into her hypnotic bright green eyes.

“You have proven yourself, boy. Let me reward you as promised,” she said, taking a step towards me in a slow, confident stride.

“You’ll grant me immortality?” I asked, stepping away.

“Of course. Through only a kiss . . .” Queen Valturus said, placing her hand over my jaw before I could escape. She had me locked into her dazzling irises. I couldn’t look away. I tried. Over and over. I couldn’t. She had me under some spell with that gaze. I wanted to live forever, and she was willing to offer

it to me through a kiss. How dreadful could her lips be? Yet, I felt fear.

“Please,” I spoke in a dull tone as drool seeped from my lips. I fell to my knees as she stopped mere inches from my face. Her eyes did not leave mine. They’re a green that encompasses nature found within Life River. She was life. She was immortality.

Queen Valturus held my head with her index finger and leaned to me. I extended my head to her, ready to kiss the beautiful being. Her mouth opened, and her canine teeth extended into fangs. The emerald eyes widened as she grazed past my lips and swooped to my neck, biting it with immense force.

I wanted to pull away . . . but . . . her strength! It was overpowering as she sank her teeth into my flesh, the jaws locking me in place. I felt dizzy. My limbs weakened. I surrendered to her as my skin turned pale. Blood oozed from my system. Victim to her control, I hung there until she freed my body, and I fell into the sand.

“You’ll rise at midnight, my child,” Queen Valturus said, licking the red liquid from her chin. “Your newfound immortality comes at a price. This gift will make you like me, forever living. Unlike me, you cannot pass this gift on. That is mine alone. Stay clear of the sun and the holy.” She brushed the hair from my face as the warm blood seeped from my open wound and onto the rocks.

She stroked the bat amulet that dangled from her neck. “Fear is natural. Step past it, for your human body is dying. You’ll emerge as a new form, a stronger, more resilient being.”

I sputtered and spoke. “What is this?” It wasn’t a clear statement. I could have made the question more direct.

“I am your new God.”

“I, I . . . what?” I had many questions in my mind. Was the betrayer good? Why should I avoid the sun? What was I to become? What did she have planned? I couldn’t say any of it as the life seeped from my body.

I died that day. Fear overwhelmed me as I attempted to breathe. Time slowed as the air failed to enter my lungs, and the remaining blood left my body. As Queen Valturus said, I was reborn that night into new. My senses are more attuned than I could have ever imagined. My strength is unmatched by any man. I feed off people who are fearful, killing them to maintain my own life force through their blood.

The humans in the European kingdoms refer to us as vampires. They deem us horrors who leech off the good of this world. Now that I am one, I know this to be false. I need their blood to thrive, though I will not die. I am a better version of man, immortal as long as I stay clear of the sun. I can watch the centuries pass around us in darkness. If I do not feed, I will wither into an old man, similar to Queen Valturus, and become a corpse, like her loyal followers lost below the sand. They aren’t dead; they’re conscious and resting. Her blood will reactivate their damaged states if she ever wishes it. I wonder if she will return for her children slumbering in the cradles.

However, Queen Valturus wasn’t concerned about resurrecting her army. She has found a new appreciation for life after living in her old body. She wishes to live and experience rather than dominate and has left me to my own devices. This



brings me to my original thoughts of the mind withering. She lacks the fire she was said to have in the stories. She no longer wants to dominate like the fierce goddess the story spoke of.

My initial concern of humanity's limitations was correct. Humans are, unfortunately, stuck in their limited forms, even a vampire's mind ages, if they were once human or not. We, or they, have amazing brains and frail bodies. For us to grow beyond, we have to accept the most frightening transformation through death. Queen Valturus can offer it to us if we are loyal to her. Father was right, and I should have taken the simple life of marriage, unifying the two villages, and dying of old age. My mind and body would have been one. There is no going back, and I am forever.

I took the risk.

I believed, and I was right.

I pay the price, watching the world live and die. Live and die. Live . . . and die again.



## CHAPTER 14

# BALANCE

A part of Valturus's odd nature on that fateful day she and Synarion met was clarified. This bloodsucker was her first conversion since she rose. Synarion had no knowledge that the vampire's mutation had occurred not long before his own arrival.

*Four days of poison, thematic,* he reflected on the World Mother forewarning.

Engrossed in his story, the bloodsucker's eyes drifted to the side of the room, his hand clenched in concentration, while his five followers and Synarion observed him with keen interest. They had been standing this whole time, encapsulated by the

origin tale painting more mystery onto Queen Valturus. Synarion didn't learn the details her past, and she knew little of his. Neither cared to understand. They had accepted each other as two lost souls. That was a mistake. Don't trust a vampire.

Synarion squinted. "Holy men, with crosses?" He hadn't seen them in the abandoned empire. He also didn't venture far enough in. "These events took place two centuries before the burning of the Library of Alexandria because I didn't make it to Aewouson until Zingalg collapsed. The Christian cross didn't exist."

The bloodsucker blinked a couple of times, ending his trance. "Haaah! The symbolic cross predates them. Christian holy men, Egyptian holy men before them, Buddhist, what does it matter? Ankh to the cross. Isn't it the same under Mother Nature's watchful eye, isn't it balancer?"

Synarion shifted his feet. "I suppose so." There wasn't a good reason for the bloodsucker to lie to him. Indeed, Synarion saw the empire and knew of Valturus's greatness. A cross or an ankh would work fine to burn vampire skin. Slumbering vampiric soldiers at the bottom of the ocean on the sunken Aewouson in her empire was unsettling. It wasn't quite as disturbing as the bloodsucker's claim of sinister breeding with the men to make a new race of beings. Valturus, and vampires, couldn't give birth, meaning there were willing or forced women to perform. That was graphic bioengineering in its earliest days. Valturus was a mysterious woman, and living countless lives, making it impossible to ever know the true her and the terrors she had caused.

He asked, "I have a small detail to question in your story. You said she had a bat pendant. Though when I met her, she had the World Mother's. This bat pendant, a xephile bat or did it serve another purpose?"

"Yes, balancer. You understand that symbolism is powerful. A xephile bat, vampire, we're children of the World Mother. I followed Queen Valturus for a week, watching her hunt in the villages along Life's River and bring them to her former empire. She'd attack me when I would engage. I was fearful of what I had become and wanted her guidance. I had to be more discrete in observing her. Her time at the empire let her reflect on her past, and that's when she found you."

"On the shores when Zingalg fell. You were watching."

"Correct. We heard and saw the catastrophe rupture the skies," the vampire said.

"Alright, I'm glad we got to revisit our shared history. Small world. It's in the past. Tell me, what do you know regarding the pendant and Mother Nature's infamous sister, the World Mother? Was her empire involved?" Synarion asked.

"Valturus chose you over me," the bloodsucker said, his nostrils flaring.

"I'm sure you two have repaired the relations by now. Answer me."

"Your role as a balancer is obsolete." The bloodsucker stood, sizing himself to Synarion, separated by the meter-long round table holding the drinks and the black-and-red candies. His lips twitched, saying he wanted to jump across the booth and rip Synarion's throat.

"And why is that?" Synarion asked.

“The World Mother rises. She’ll provide.”

“She sounds quite generous. Unfortunately, I didn’t get the memo,” Synarion said.

“Haaah! Sarcasm has no place with her unified children. Others will perish. Your time is over.”

“Answer me: was Valturus’s empire involved?”

The vampire hissed, exposing his fangs, causing the two girls beside him to shift in their seats.

“This isn’t going to end civil, is it?” Synarion asked.

A wild grin rose to the bloodsucker’s cheekbones, letting the total size of his sharp teeth shine. He reached into the bowl of candies and took a small handful. He said, “How’s a peace offering sound?”

“That could work,” Synarion said. He eyed the candies, recalling where he saw them. They were seeds from the familiar’s home, and, yes, even further in distant memory whence Valturus’s camel perished.

“We work together. Let the World Mother do what she needs: correct the order of Earth’s balance. Isn’t that what you’re championing?”

“I am.”

The bloodsucker extended his palm, showcasing thirteen seeds. “Then join the World Mother.”

“And why would I do that?”

“She will correct Mother Nature’s constant failures, the failures of the Creator, and the mess made by mortals. It’s what the Balancers of the Grove strove for. Let a capable numen cultivate this world.”

“And how is she going to restore balance? You know she made a deal with the devil.” Synarion said.

“Take thirteen seeds, and you will feel her revelation.”

*Club Revelation*, Synarion thought. The pieces were aligning. This fine establishment was a hub for balancing offences. It was a playground for old world beings to mingle. It served as a grocery store for a succubus. At the root of it, a haven for a mad ancient cult worshipping a lost numen. Synarion needed to be careful regarding his following statement. The bloodsucker wasn't sharing any more information. This would not end civil.

“Thirteen seeds huh? Why thirteen?” Synarion asked.

“As stated by our gothi, whose wisdom guides us to our roots.”

*This keeps deepening with each discovery*, Synarion thought. “Gothi? That's old. In terms of the Icelandic political usage or the previous pagan term?”

“Haaah! Far before.” The bloodsucker raised his hand, encouraging Synarion to take the seeds.

“What's his name?”

The bloodsucker ignored the question and said, “This is a precise number he's perfected to let you feel the revelation of the World Mother's gift.”

“And did you take these thirteen?” Synarion asked, pointing at the group.

The bloodsucker grinned at them and slid the seeds into the bowl, comprehending Synarion wouldn't take them. “I am already one of her children.”

“Right, because Valturus converted you.”

“You are competent, balancer. You would have made a nice addition to her garden.”

He was, piecing this madness together. World Mother followers, like these humans, took seeds and collaborated with bloodsuckers. Valturus was among the pure, a vamputus, and converted others, like the xephile bats. Classic vampires fed on blood. The World Mother leeches off of life force through fire. A vampiric cult was the consistent theme. The seeds were a mystery. If leeching was the game, it was clear what the thirteen would do to him.

“My duty is to initiate others to become children of the World Mother. Like you.”

“Like me? A couple of days ago, we were attempting to rip each other’s head off, and you want to rope me into your family? I am aware of who the World Mother is and what she needs. A jealous sister who wishes to feed her own pride. I can’t imagine her form of balancing will offer any level of peace.”

The vampire’s lip jerked. “Pain awaits those who resist the children of the World Mother.”

“A pity,” Synarion said, the blood running hot in his body, knowing it was time to dance.

The bloodsucker nodded at the three men. Two reached around their backs. One drew a knife, and the other a handgun. The third, who had his equipped, raised it and fired, creating a loud bang in the basement. Synarion ducked and lunged at the man with the knife who thrust his blade at him. Synarion moved to the side, backhanding his forearm, moving the knife away. He kicked his boot, sliding his throwing stars out and snagged the two. The intentional hole designs let him hold each

one as blades, and he lunged for the man's throat. One, two, three! Fists slammed into the man's neck. Hot blood spewed onto the balancer's face as the man clutched his wounds, coughing while collapsing to the floor.

Another gunshot commanded the room, and the remaining patrons escaped the basement. The bullet whizzed past Synarion's ear and pierced into the wooden bar. The bartender pulled a single-barreled shotgun from underneath the counter and fired at the group.

The World Mother's children fired again, one aiming for the newcomer and the second at Synarion, who stepped to the side. He swung before the man could fire again, sucker-punching him in the gut, and again, ending in an uppercut to the jaw.

More bullets flew from both directions of the room. The girls screamed, ducking under the table during the seven seconds of action as Synarion finished the altercation with a punch into the remaining man's face, penetrating the brain. The bloodsucker was nowhere to be found. The bartender pointed the rifle at Synarion.

He raised his hands and spoke. "This wasn't me."

The bartender lowered the gun and nodded to the staircase as a silent *beat it*. Club Revelation, housing old world beings, didn't need any trouble from the law.

Synarion snagged some of the seeds from the bowl, stuffing them into his pocket, and took note of the single crying girl holding her friend's hand as blood seeped under her body from her chest. "Get a better pastime," Synarion said.

The drapes jabbed forward in the shape of hands, and the fabric tore open. Synarion leaped away as the bloodsucker



landed on the table, breaking the bowl and kicking drinks onto the floor. The shotgun spoke again, missing the vampire and acting as a warning shot.

“Get!” he shouted. “Both of you.”

Synarion swung at the bloodsucker, distracted by the gunshot—the blow pierced his lungs, and he hissed—hacking in a wide arc. The first set of claws missed, and the second sliced his jacket open. Another shot fired, shattering the table’s legs. The bloodsucker tumbled towards Synarion. The two locked arms and spun around, regaining balance, and they threw a few blows at each other. The vampire exposed his chest. Synarion launched a punch, puncturing the skin and bone. Thick blood splattered out.

Footsteps came from behind. Two bouncers stormed down the stairs. The bloodsucker sent a roundhouse kick to Synarion and somersaulted backwards. He slashed at the bouncers, who dodged the oncoming attacks, and bolted for the stairs. The chase was on.

Synarion spotted a chunk of the wooden table’s leg by his foot. It was jagged, which would do. He snagged it, tucking the stake in the belt and dashed towards the group. The bartender fired again, missing Synarion by a hairline. One bouncer went to grab him. He leaped low. The second kicked, hitting him in the leg. He lost balance on one step and regained momentum up the stairs, around the corner, passing the glass-eyed man who kept reading his magazine, and into the club.

The sonic blast of the music smothered the bloodshed below, and the crowd continued their partying. Synarion kept his blood-dripping fists low, rushing through the sea of flesh. His

keen eyes scanned the room of bobbing heads until he spotted a frantic one pushing through people towards a side door at the other end of the lounge.

Synarion sprinted, leaping over the booths, running along the top of the backrests, and onto the ground in a single roll. Patrons moved clear as he got to his feet, in pursuit of his target who slipped behind the door and into a brick hall. The balancer followed as the bloodsucker pushed the final door into the alleyway a couple seconds ahead of him.

Outside, the pursuit reached the middle of the road under the trickling rain. The vampire raised his arms high and leaped into the air, his body shrinking and contorting, his skin discoloured, and his hair growing. The clothes slipped from his body. Not this time. Oh no. Synarion wouldn't let him get away. He freed the throwing stars from his fingers and aimed high, watching the transformation complete. He threw the blade. It split rain droplets, spinning towards its target and rupturing the webbed wing. The vampire twirled in the air when the second throwing star flew into his chest, and the mammal crashed onto the concrete with a crunch. Synarion stormed towards him.

The animal squeaked, the sound mutating into a snarl as he morphed into a naked humanoid. The throwing star in the wing fell to the ground as the skin shifted into an arm with a wound. The other remained in his chest, cemented in the bone. The vampire plucked it with his good arm and struggled to reach his feet as the balancer snagged his gelled hair and slammed his face into the ground.

Synarion snagged the loose throwing star and jabbed it into his hamstring tendon behind his knee. His head lifted, the vampire yelped in pain, feeling the wet sensation of blood and saliva on his upper lip. His face met the pavement again with a splash of fluid and rain. A firm boot pressed into the leg's wound, and the bloodsucker howled. He attempted to swing at the balancer with no luck.

"Enough," Synarion said.

"Burn in Hell," the bloodsucker hissed.

"I'm sure that will happen." Synarion yanked the chest-bound throwing star and wielded both. He kicked the vampire, rolling him over, and leaned in, bringing the blades to his throat. "Let's look at our scenario in a new light. You'll talk, and I will consider sparing your life for excessive feeding."

"Haaah! I'll take my chances with death."

"It won't be a quick one," Synarion said, puncturing the bloodsucker's skin. He dragged the blade horizontally. "Slice by slice, I'll hack through your bone and rid your head of your pathetic body."

The bloodsucker shouted, "Curse you! How did you find me?"

"None of your concern," Synarion said. "Tell me, what happens tomorrow?"

The bloodsucker swallowed and coughed blood instead due to the new neck wound. He looked to the ground, then at Synarion. "The World Mother will rise."

"To restore balance?"

“Yes, we’ve gathered enough children for the summoning.” He sputtered again and lunged forward until he met the blade and fell to the ground.

“Keep talking,” Synarion said.

Sirens rose in the distance. Time was short.

“Queen Valturus,” the bloodsucker said.

“Yes?”

“Goddamn Valturus. She told you, didn’t she? Pinning it on me. She thinks I’m replaceable.”

“Talk fast,” Synarion said, driving the blade into the wound, puncturing a vein. Cold liquid drizzled onto Synarion’s fingers. He wasn’t sure how much torture a vampire could take from a silver blade. He was going to discover it.

“Valturus!”

“Talk!” The throwing star pierced deeper.

“The hellseed keepers are grouping for the ritual. The World Mother will rise from the depths of Dega’Mostikas’s Triangle! Hell will rise for a newfound Earth of flame!”

“Where is the gathering?”

The sirens grew louder. They had to be a block away.

“Where?” Synarion said.

The bloodsucker chuckled. “You’re outta time, balancer.”

“Don’t think I’ll leave you with the cops,” Synarion said.

“You don’t have it in you,” the bloodsucker sneered. “Where would be the balance in letting humans discover a vampire? Do you wish to open Pandora’s Box?”

Red and blue lights highlighted the street ahead. Sirens bounced off the alleyway walls. This was over. The balancer pocketed one blade, whipped out the splintered wood from his

belt, and spun it in his hand. The vampire's eyes widened in horror as the stake drove into the open chest wound, plummeting past the bone and into his beating heart.

The organ combusted into flame, eating the wood, and channelled onto the flesh, burning the skin into charcoal and devouring the muscles below. Synarion stood. The vampire howled, flailing his arms and legs, throwing his body around in a futile attempt to stop the impending death. The merciless blaze scathed the flesh with the rain sizzling against the dying being, raising mounds of smoke until the bone turned ash. Rain pressed the dark remains into the ground and turned him into a pile of black. Good riddance.

Synarion snagged the bloodsucker's remaining clothes and vanished around the corner as the police arrived. He put away his throwing blade and leaped onto a garbage bin, climbing a fire escape, keeping the clothes draped over his shoulder. The motion reminded him of his wounded shoulder, though it didn't stop him. Atop the roof, he rushed to the next building and deemed it close enough. He leaped over the edge and landed on the other side. A clean escape.

The encounter was far more brutal than he intended, and the bloodsucker could have spilled more information. At least the vampire paid for his balancing offence. What was done was done. Synarion had to move on. He got the seeds in his jacket pocket, deepening this mystery Valturus could illuminate. Tomorrow, the World Mother rose. Correction: this late evening gave little time for any more progress. Daytime neared, and the summoning would commence.



## CHAPTER 15

# BRIGHT BEGINNINGS

Sand morphed into tan and brown rocks once the three travellers left the shores of Aewouson and hiked steep hills. They hid during the day, letting the vampire wait for darkness. Synarion had no preference, and the little human girl was useless. She was another meal.

He sat against the wall of the cave's entrance, watching the girl lay against the bags containing Valturus's goods. Two formed from her former cloak after the camel's demise, and the third was linen, holding the strange seeds. The girl's eyes were open, looking at the ground. The sadness was there, pushed deep inside her soul. The look was hollow: a void of her former life. She knew she was going to die.

Beyond the cave, the sun boiled the landscape, far too hot for even him to travel. Distant huts and gravel roads were set up by a sparkling rich blue bay where docks housed boats with lowered white sails. These people were unaware of the dangers they were in. Aewouson would collapse, as Zingalg did, and there weren't enough transports for each village.

The lack of water and food made him weak, let alone the wounds covering his body. He couldn't make the journey during the day. If he did, he would sever a powerful ally. Keeping Valturus at his side was the wisest option. Though, he questioned her methods of cruelty. The family didn't need to witness the deaths of their loved ones. He could provide mercy.

Synarion rubbed his forehead, questioning his character if he could be as heartless as his comrade. The girl was a victim of nature. A counterargument: vampires, vamputus, weren't part of Mother Nature's garden. They defied fundamental laws. They were immortal and transformative, taking the shape of humans and bats while being neither of those things. They had no niche in an ecosystem.

*Too much death*, he thought. Synarion got to his feet and walked over to the girl. She didn't look at him as he knelt and untied her wrists. He moved one arm away from the other. The girl blinked and sat, looked at her red and raw wrists.

"Go," Synarion whispered. "Make it to the village by the bay. Get off this island as fast as you can."

Her mouth opened, and no words escaped.

“I can’t go with you.” He grabbed her shoulders and encouraged her to stand. “Don’t waste any time. Escape this land.”

“Please,” she said.

“Trust me. I am better off here where I can reason with the vampire.”

The girl looked past Synarion and into the dark cave. At the blackest corner of the cavern rested Valturus. She lay flat, legs pressed together. Her arms crossed her chest, protecting her heart. She clutched her gold vine-covered ring with the red gem for her dear life. Was it acting as the soil of her birthplace? Vampires couldn’t rest otherwise.

A stake in her organ would end her life. Synarion could have taken a wood plank from the damaged trunk when the camel perished. He chose not to. It may not be her mental spell that controlled him. Synarion was growing fond of her presence.

“Go,” he said and gave her a push.

The girl gazed at the village and to Synarion. A spark of newfound life rose in her eyes. She turned and didn’t stop.

A boot knocked Synarion’s head, and he opened his eyes, looking at metal slits from the goggles of the masked vamputus.

“I should be mad at you,” Valturus said.

“Sorry?” Synarion asked.

“Don’t play coy. The girl. She’s gone.”

“She couldn’t have escaped alone?” he said.

“She was incapable of untying those knots or chewing through them.”

“And you’re not mad?”



Valturus squatted, resting her forearms on her knees. “In a past time. Though we are facing new beginnings, aren’t we?”

“Yes.” His heart raced, looking at her faceless gaze. Excitement and fear pumped adrenaline through his body. He had witnessed the beauty shrouded under the leather. It was also dangerous, craving blood.

“Why did you do it?” she asked.

“She was suffering. I’m not fond of it.”

“Hmmm. Noble.” She stood and walked to her bags, throwing the three over her shoulder. “To town.”

Synarion sighed relief and stood, took his sack, and joined his comrade, exiting the cave. He got away lucky and wouldn’t attempt to undermine her at each chance he got. They had a new relationship. Both had a lot to learn about one another.

“She is going to die, you know this, right?” Valturus said.

“The girl? No,” the other said.

“This land will meet the sea. The villages will scramble. Not all will escape.”

“Let the elements decide the people’s fate. I gave her a chance.”

He couldn’t see a smile. Her tone went rose. “Yesss, your neutral ways.” She was fond of him.

They reached the village, where torches lit several posts on the main path. Pedestrians walked in small groups. The buildings were constructed with a combination of wood and clay, topped with straw roofs. The road led to a long social hall where voices mingled and laughed.

“These people won’t have value from your gold,” Synarion said.

“No. They won’t. We’ll take a ship,” Valturus said. “Let us see what we’re dealing with. You need food, hmmm?”

“Yes, dearly. What of you? Do you need . . . blood?”

“Thoughtful, after you rid me of my human.”

Synarion swallowed a lump of saliva.

“I will survive the sail,” she said.

The newcomers took a side road away from the audience, heading to the three docks. Nine sailboats, three per harbour, tied to posts. They were narrow and were fifty paces long. The ships on the right contained barrels and crates, half loaded, with some goods resting on the docks. The left ones had no shipments. The two would be able to operate one without concern.

A couple of shirtless villagers watched the docks with spears in their hands. One sat on a box by the middle dock while the other leaned on his weapon beside him. Each one wore a kilt and a belt housing cuffs and daggers. Their long, tattered hair done up. Their empty gazes looked towards the social hall, wishing for excitement. They were going to have it.

Valturus put her bags on the ground at the end of the alley, keeping close to the edge of a building. She removed her glove, placing her red-gemmed golden ring onto her fourth digit. “Stay here,” she said.

“Will you kill them?” Valturus asked.

“We’ll let the elements take care of that, won’t we?” She clutched her ring-fingered fist and closed her eyes. The ring and the finger faded, leaving a smudged impression of the wall behind her in place.

*Maghice*, Synarion thought.

“When I appear, come to me,” she said.

He blinked once, and she was gone. No smudged space remained where the vampire was. Boot imprints rested on the gravel. They moved from the side road. Synarion leaned against the building, watching where she went.

The steps reached the docks and vanished on the wood. Moments later, rope untied from one of the sailboats on the far left dock. The plank slid off the port, and the sails fell, letting the boat drift onto the ocean.

“Hey!” yelled the standing guard. The others stood, and they ran to the boat. “Stop!”

Synarion refused to blink. To the far right, another rope undid from the post. The ocean and skyline blurred, and Valturus appeared. He snagged her bags and bolted to the docks. One of the guards spotted him and ran off the left port. His speed and distance made the man’s attempt futile, and Synarion reached Valturus’s ship as she lowered the sails. She pulled the plank, and they were off. Shouts came from the distancing guard the further they moved into the North Pacific Ocean.

“Impressive,” Synarion said. He dropped the bags on the deck and smiled at her, looking at the ring.

She wiggled her finger containing the gem at him. “Mmmm. Not a symbol, unlike your tattoos.”

“I didn’t take you for a maghice user.”

“Maghice of my origins, dear balancer. Lifeblood of a numen.” She took the ring off and stroked the gem.

“Invisibility?” Synarion said.

“Yes. Numens hold mysterious powers. Look at Mother Nature.”

“And what world did you come from?”

Valturus pocketed the ring. “Closer than you think,” she said. The vampire grabbed her sacks and walked past him. “We have far to travel, companion of mine.” She looked over her shoulder, her green vortex pulling him into her mysterious ways. “I look forward to our time together.”

He did, too.

Sailing through the North Pacific Ocean was long and tedious, testing the will of the souls aboard. Humans perceived time within the confines of their short lifespan. Months at sea left prominent impacts on their psyche. For beings that aged slower, who were strong-willed, the trip was a breeze.

“And you see yourself as a passive explorer? Entranced by the world?” Synarion asked, sipping a bottle of red wine from the lower deck.

Valturus leaned her elbows against the railing on the front deck and shrugged. Synarion chuckled. The liquor was seeping into his mind. He had consumed abundant food and water, yet the alcohol loosened his thoughts. Unlike humans, the drink was potent to nymphs.

“Is that so wrong, hmmm?” Valturus asked.

“No.”

“Why do you laugh, amusing nymph?” she grabbed his chin before he could bring the bottle to his lips and squeezed his cheeks. “Do I amuse you?”

She released him, and he took a swig of the dry flavour with a hint of bark. “I think this is getting to my head.”

“And is that so bad?”

“I don’t think so.”

“And is me wishing to start anew wrong?”

“No. Don’t forget where you come from. It keeps us grounded.”

“How could I?” Valturus said. She moved to face the bow.

Synarion rested against the railing beside her. “Time washes away all.”

“Mmmm. Where do you wish to go?”

“That’s difficult to say, you?”

“I loved the eastern kingdoms, rich in expertise and history. They could accept us.”

Synarion shrugged. “Or outcast us as demons like the European’s growing obsession with Christianity.”

“Which is?” Valturus asked.

“A new form of warped truth through dogma. Its infectious and even made its way to Zingalg.”

“Haaah.”

She rested her head against his shoulder, watching the ocean. Her arm slid around his, locking them together. He stroked her soft hair, tucking it under her ear. Valturus hugged her arms. “With maghice shattered and our lands destroyed, how much time do you think will pass before it is forgotten?”

“That’s why we need to keep our history alive,” Synarion said.

“Is there a safe haven for us?”

“I don’t know. Seeing our trajectory, we will arrive in the eastern kingdoms, China I believe. We can travel from there.”

“To where?”

“We could head for the deserts. Egypt is plentiful.”

Valturus shook her head. “So much sun.”

“Similar to Aewouson, isn’t it?” Synarion asked.

“I suppose we can try that.”

Synarion downed the rest of the bottle, letting the substance mix with the vampire’s hex on his psyche. They retreated to the captain’s cabin, where she could intoxicate herself with his flesh. Vampires couldn’t enjoy food or wine. She promised not to feed off him. If she was his companion, he could give himself to her as a toy to enjoy. Her lack of reflection in the mirror reminded him he was playing with fire as he thrust on top of her.

He had a lifetime ahead of himself to maintain balance, and the journey from Aewouson was a blissful escape until they reached foreign shores. In truth, Synarion preferred to stay on the boat, away from the world’s troubles. He could be happy. He failed to remember happiness is a temporary state.

WORLD MOTHER ASCENSION BY KONN LAVERY



## CHAPTER 16

# INSOMNIA

Synarion returned to his loft to recoup from battle. He had to smend the fresh wounds. A few bruises, swelling, and bleeding occurred that he overlooked due to the adrenaline rush. Violent balancing cases were uncommon. At least one person would die, and others would get injured. The two girls at the club would be a perfect example. With any luck, the survivor would reflect on the company she kept. Others, like the bloodsucker and his men, paid with their lives for overstepping their boundaries. Synarion didn't enjoy deciding who lived and who met the afterlife. It was too close to playing the role of a god.



Some balancing offenders that exploit Mother Nature weren't aware of the dangers they created. The deliberate ones concerned Synarion. They desired to bend the world to their will. The World Mother and her followers were a perfect example.

Synarion removed his leather jacket, grunted, and tended to his wounds with the paste made from diefym leaves and spit. He breathed in through his nose and out his mouth, maintaining a sense of peace. Frustration ran rampant in his mind. The damned bloodsucker got the upper hand on him in the end. The prick knew far more of the World Mother, these hellseed keepers, and Valturus.

A part of him contemplated dragging the fool to his loft. He couldn't; the police arrived too soon. He couldn't drag a naked vampire across the streets. He wouldn't come of free will, meaning death for his offences was the final solution.

With the wounds wrapped, he snagged a bottle of whiskey from his cabinet and took a swig, and a second. Next, he poured himself a glass, grabbed the seeds from his pocket, and put the handful on the counter. He had eighteen of the black and red striped seeds. These colour arrangements in the seed were new to him. The blackness absorbed so much light it was a void.

*Her children will rise.*

Synarion's ears twitched, looking at the plant embryos. That wasn't his own thought, nor was it the wind or a technological device. It was a whisper of a thousand voices dancing around his ear canal and into his mind.

*Thirteen for revelation*, he thought.

The girls took the seeds. One of them survived. What that meant was unknown. With the World Mother and her leeching children, it couldn't be good. The whispers, the colouring, and their aura radiated dark energy, far closer to a vampire's magnetic pull.

*Children of the World Mother*, Synarion thought. He scooped the seeds and put them into a jar, sealing the lid. They weren't doing any good sitting on his counter, transcribing words into his brain. Who knew what else these things were capable of. He would check the Grove's archives despite being sure this was foreign.

Next, he examined the bloodsucker's clothes to find anything of value: keys, no wallet, a smartphone. Bingo. Better than the burner phone the first time. Of course, the phone required a pin. Synarion had a contact on the intranet to handle this level of tech and knew when to get help when needed, even if it required encouragement through payment.

He checked the time, seeing it was past one in the morning. Today was the day. He needed answers. A part of him wanted to dial Valturus right now and demand her to spill what she knew. At this hour, she would be with her family. Her phone rerouted to her secretary, making the cellphone concept pointless. In the morning, he'd call. Bark Nose might know these seeds. He knew the World Mother and had failed to mention her to Synarion.

The balancer had few clues for this case. He had Bark Nose's plaything. That goth wiccan human needed a ride to Edmonton.

She also claimed to have information on this mystery. That was the last new lead he had.

At the moment, Synarion needed rest to let the diéfym leaf work its way over his wounded flesh. The plant couldn't aid his bruises, and he would be aching during sunrise. He took another chug of his drink and powered his laptop to check the archives and reach his contact to crack the phone. His own phone buzzed: an unknown number. He unlocked the device to answer.

"Who is this?" he asked.

A voice made of silk spoke. "Your date when you return. You caused quite the scene tonight."

*The succubus*, he thought. "Why are you calling?"

"Making sure your number isn't fake."

"It is. You know anything about hellseed keepers?"

A chuckle came from the phone's speaker. "Come visit me and find out."

"Be straight."

Mulier sighed. "Work, work, work."

"See you when I'm back." Synarion hung up and chucked his phone on the table. This wasn't going to go anywhere. Synarion put the phone down and opened his browser to see if there was news on Club Revelation. The splash page on his web browser displayed the top articles across the country, cooking tips, Hollywood gossip, and scientific discoveries. CAMB (Canadian All Media Broadcasting) News was the first result titled *Surrey Sapper Takes Another Victim*. They published the news article Thursday, later in the night when Synarion was in the familiar's apartment where his brains painted the wall. He

clicked on the CAMB article, which contained a video snippet from the station. The thumbnail video had a middle-aged reporter with a comb-over. Hucker Dime's signature dumbfounded look, with his lowered brows and opened mouth, captivated audiences across Canada. Synarion hit play.

Good evening, and welcome to *CAMB News Now with Hucker Dime*. For the past several months, a series of strange murders have been overtaking the city of Surrey. Believe it or not, police found another victim making eighteen bodies with puncture holes. Seventeen of them contain bite marks on the neck. They match large fangs in the shape of a human jaw. Two nights ago, they found the eighteenth victim in Tynehead Regional Park. Puncture holes formed rings around the body from head to toe. The killer dismembered their latest one in a bathtub.

Vampires? Unlikely, according to Sergeant Phong, who is the lead investigator. She said, "People shouldn't presume or be scared of animals performing these attacks. They're deliberate and methodical. Victims go missing at night and appear dead the next morning, drained of blood. Evidence of human teeth marks points to persons of interest," end quote.

A person of interest who drains the life force of people and leaves bite marks? That is no person if you ask me. They were at one point. If anything, this Surrey Sapper sounds similar to the Infamous Drainer found in Edmonton. Authorities haven't located that person of interest yet, but they suspect they are in the prairies, draining blood from innocent victims, similar to what happened to the victim in Tynehead Regional Park. Some people in this country are disturbed. It's as simple as that.

The Surrey Sapper case took a strange recent turn of events, turning heads nationwide. Authorities found a man dead in his apartment in downtown Vancouver after the neighbours heard a gunshot. Police discovered Cillian Darcy's body with a bullet hole in his head.

Inside the apartment police located a journal containing detailed information on the nineteen people, their names, addresses, and habits. The names match those of the Surrey Sapper cases. Police believe the murder is deliberate and are not taking questions.

Why no questions? Drained blood? Planned murders? Strange times here in Canada with more mystery than answers. As more information comes in, we'll keep you informed because we strive to provide you with facts regarding the latest news at CAMB, stories that continue to evolve regarding you and your country. We keep you up to date with *CAMB News Now with Hucker Dime*.

We'll be passing you to Justin and Danielle for the weather.

Synarion tapped the laptop with his index finger, contemplating the news report. He saw the dismembered nineteenth victim with rings marks. Vampires can drain the blood from a single bite. There's no need for such intricate torture.

Hucker Dime was correct: the Surrey Sapper was human at one point. The Drainer was a new name. There are so many cases, so little time.

*Strange times here in Canada . . . more mystery than answers*, he paraphrased the reporter.

Onwards, no news of Club Revelation appeared, and Synarion opened his Tor browser to access the old world's intranet. As routine, he used a Virtual Private Network, VPN, to hide his IP address by pinging his location to another region. The Tor browser was a clever method of accessing the secret intranet. Synarion learned how to operate technology during the rise of the cyber age in the nineties, gaining leverage in his career. Thor browsers operated on a different port from the usual internet, much like changing a radio station frequency. They are also used to access the common dark web. This intranet doesn't use the same port as that. It would be a disaster waiting to happen. The old world had its own specific browser, keeping it protected.

Rule six: learn their skills

The intranet had a master community forum and sub forums with moderators letting certain users in. The dialogue was cryptic in case a human got access. A basic code was used to encrypt their purpose or discuss specific species, races, items, plants, locations, or events from the old world. Most threads were caution tales, meeting plans, warning of human activities, or sharing grievances because of isolation. No one wanted to be alone. Synarion wasn't too fond of chatting with the community. He uploaded scanned files and photographs in the folder structure, providing an archive of the old world. He also used the forum for business. There wasn't a need to get personal with others. His people were gone. Whiskey helped him push aside vexing thoughts of love and desolation. The rules kept balance.

He opened the folder structure and dug in. The balancer wasn't alone in storing files. Others had permission, though he didn't communicate with them. New files would appear online on random days as he would upload ones he found.

Synarion drilled into folders of maghice items, relics, symbols, and religions to find anything about the World Mother's pendant. Synarion took another drink of whiskey, tired of reviewing the same scripts and photos over the years. If he had salvaged more from the Grove before the collapse . . . he got one small trunk full. Why couldn't he have taken two trunks? Synarion knew why. The Grove was collapsing. Their structures crumbled and crushed nymphs and archives alike. Not even the elemandriases could unify to build Erenwill in time.

He should have stayed and attempted to get the parts, like he took from Wind. No. His life would have ended, like his brothers and sisters. There would be no balancers left to maintain order. They were needed more than ever. Humans were a danger, and an *unknown*, unknown threat lurked with the rise of the World Mother. He couldn't step aside and live life as Valturus suggested. She said that to take herself off his radar. Her cunning nature made him smile for the wrong reasons.

Straight-faced, Synarion skimmed the plant folder and opened a PDF he had uploaded explaining botany. It contained plants he was familiar with, like the diefym, along with another eighty that were extinct. As expected, there was no information on the hellseed or its keepers. These mysterious people did an excellent job of keeping themselves undetected.

The thirty-minute search ended with no new knowledge from the archive. He switched to the private messaging section of the intranet. An unread message was at the top of his inbox titled *Looking for a Guide to Escort to Yukon. Cash upfront*. The preview text said, “*Hello Balancer, my soulmate and I are looking to hide until humans finish themselves . . .*” Synarion could use the money. He also didn’t have time to escort two beings way to the north. The message below was a follow-up email titled: *Re: Trolls Raiding Farm*. The preview text read, “*Balancer, I have been trying to get in touch with you. Can You help us? We provide food for the region and . . .*”

He rubbed his forehead several times, resting his elbows on the table. What was he to do? One was a good deed, and the latter, at first glance, was a balancing offence created by local trolls. Trolls need to feed, too. Synarion couldn’t balance the world. He couldn’t.

He dismissed the messages and opened an ongoing thread with his contact, Eden Breaker. Like most on the intranet, Synarion didn’t know a damn thing about the users other than what they shared online. He typed a new message.

(Synarion: Eden Breaker, I have a new garden  
for you to visit. The fruit is exported.

Peel the skins.

e%\$afE0JM58gn&'ooAc%oz#8P'QU.t

Garden Key

1:55 AM)

Garden: phone.



Fruit: cash.

Skins: exporting.

Garden Key: Secret Key link with a one-time open.

Eden Breaker knew the language. They worked on their own time, and Synarion would have access to this phone by sunrise. Eden Breaker would extract the files to be viewable as long as Synarion kept the phone plugged into his computer, and with the key and secret key, Eden Breaker could remote into his laptop. With luck, there would be helpful information on it more valuable than Bark Nose's twenty-year-old girlfriend's tip. *Morning*, he told himself, not finishing his thought, and chugged another drink of whiskey hoping it would calm him enough to slip into a slumber.

*OldWorld Threats loom.*

Thoughts that weren't his own lingered.

In between consciousness and the dreamworld.

He heightened his senses and detected a hostile presence.

There was another in his home.

Seeds of evil. Children of the World Mother.

Today.

He woke in pain, as expected, and groaned. The bruising and stress left him a mess. For a balancer, he wasn't good at his own equilibrium. Balancing had been dangerous in the new world, not like this.

The balancer brewed himself a cup of coffee and checked the time. Eden Breaker messaged.

(Eden Breaker: Confirmed.  
4:23 AM)

Coffee. Meditation based on *grove\_transcripts\_ENG\_01.pdf*. Exercise. His routine helped process the concerns that ran through his mind. The diefym leaves had worked their wonders over the night, healing the wounds. It was a shame the leaves didn't work on his damaged jacket. After his rituals, it was seven in the morning. Time was of the essence. The road trip to Edmonton was fourteen hours. Valturus's office would be closed on Sunday. He had to act. He dialed Valturus's cell.

The phone rang.

*Come on, answer*, Synarion thought.

A secretary answered. "Hello?" she asked. He didn't recognize the voice.

"Hi, yes. Is Jennifer Anderson there?" Synarion said.

"No, she isn't in today. Actually, we don't open un—"

"What do you mean?" Synarion interrupted.

"Jennifer is on vacation with her family for the rest of the week."

*Shit*, Synarion thought. He rubbed his brow.

"Is there anything one of our associates can do for you?" she asked.

"Did she say where she was going?" Synarion said.

"Yes. They're going to the Bahamas."

*As if*. "And she doesn't have a personal cell on her?"

"Unfortunately, no. She's doing a digital detox. They're quite healthy, I hear. I'm thinking of doing one myself—"

Synarion cut her off. “Can I get a hold of her husband?”

“Oh, they went with her.”

“Her father?” Synarion asked.

“I believe so.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“If you’d like, I can leave a mes—”

Synarion hung up. That this was a dead end. Valturus wasn’t on some goddamn vacation to the Bahamas with her fake family. The pieces were pointing to the summoning of the World Mother. The deceased bloodsucker confirmed Valturus’s involvement. She was with the hellseed keepers. The question was, where? Edmonton? Come on, Eden Breaker.

When his laptop made the familiar ding of a new message on the intranet, he couldn't help but smile in anticipation. He looked over; it was from Eden Breaker.

(Eden Breaker: Garden harvested.

8:34 AM)

Synarion glanced at the phone on his table. It no longer had the familiar operating system from human tech. It had a single white icon on the black screen comprising gates and vines. That was Eden Breaker’s signature. Synarion wanted to take this individual for a drink countless times. They became his shining light more times than he could count. The person preferred to remain hidden, and Synarion respected their choice.

On the computer he had a new folder titled *Fruits of My Labour*. Synarion disabled his screen-sharing software and its key. It was best to cover your tracks and be cautious. That’s why

he ran a virus scan on the new folder. The software deemed it clean. He opened it. The folder contained the following files and one sub-directory:

- 20161012\_15667.JPG
- 20160925\_15667.MP4
- CallLog.csv
- Texts

For a regular smartphone that wasn't a lot of files. Eden Breaker extracted anything of value, disregarding the operating system's core files. People store their entire lives on those devices between call logs, contacts, text messages, media, and apps. For a vampire, this wasn't abnormal. Morphing into a bat and losing their belongings meant they travelled light.

The JPG file was a pocket capture, being pitch black. The video contained the two girls from Club Revelation naked on a bed, caressing each other's arms. The camera wobbled and became stationary as a naked bloodsucker stepped into view. His reflection was apparent in the mirror beside the bed.

*Right, no silver,* he thought. An observation that aided vampires in their camouflage. Modern mirrors contained no silver, unlike centuries ago when the legend was born: vampires had no reflection. Silver was their allergen due to the metal's properties; hence, his throwing stars contained it.

The girls on the bed crawled towards the vampire on their knees, eyeing his curled erect member. *Okay,* Synarion thought, closing the video. The balancer would watch the sex tape later if the other files didn't offer clues.

He clicked on the call logs file first. One number: 780-554-3361. A quick online search showed that 780 was the area code for Edmonton, Alberta. Hucker Dime mentioned a Drainer killer who was fond of blood too. Abbygail was right. Her father, cousin, and missing friend have a connection. Synarion opened the text message logs. Two numbers, both with 780, appeared. The first was from 780-554-3361 and contained the following:

(780-554-3361: Margrave, bring the harvests  
to the greenhouse in preparation.  
Saturday, October 15, 10:25 PM)

(you: The one in Surrey?

Saturday, October 15, 10:31 PM)

(780-554-3361: No, imbecile. Here.  
We're gathering in the river valley.  
World Mother's speed.  
Saturday, October 15, 10:33 PM)

(you: Of course.

Saturday, October 15, 10:35 PM)

(780-554-3361: Did you leave yet?  
12:32 AM)  
(Margrave? Where are you?  
1:25 AM)

*The harvests*, Synarion thought. Valturus mentioned a harvest while talking to her “father” at her office. She had the river valley circled on the Edmonton map as well. It was clear it wasn't for real estate. A detective's hunch would lean to this

tying into the thirteen seeds of revelation deemed by the hellseed keepers' gothi. They were planting the seeds or feeding them to people. Vampires and xephile bats needed blood. Both were children of the World Mother, like the seeds. It would explain the greenhouse.

The following number Margrave texted stated:

(780-237-5432: And you're picking up where  
your familiar left off?

Thursday, October 13, 11:45 PM)

(you: Yes. Working on it.

That balancer caused a mess.

Thursday, October 13, 11:46 PM)

(780-237-5432: You should have let  
me convert your familiar years ago.

Thursday, October 13, 11:47 PM)

(you: with the drugs  
in his blood? I wouldn't dare do that to you.

You're too important to me.

Thursday, October 13, 11:48 PM)

(780-237-5432: It would have avoided  
this nonsense. Any word from the others?

Thursday, October 13, 11:48 PM)

(you: Yes, the other hellseed keepers  
are on their way. I think I am the  
last in this province.

Will other converted be joining?

Thursday, October 13, 11:49 PM)

(780-237-5432: No. No need.

I don't keep tabs on them.

You're a persistent one.

Thursday, October 13, 11:49 PM)

(you: Anything for you my queen.

Don't worry. I got this.

Thursday, October 13, 11:50 PM)

(780-237-5432: You better not make  
a mistake again.

Thursday, October 13, 11:51 PM)

(you: How was I to know  
a balancer would come here?

Thursday, October 13, 11:52 PM)

(780-237-5432: You're supposed to keep  
a low profile. He doesn't bother anyone otherwise.

Thursday, October 13, 11:54 PM)

(you: We've got four days, my queen.

Thursday, October 13, 11:55 PM)

(780-237-5432: Three. Presuming you fools  
don't fuck it up again. I'll get my secretary to close  
and we'll meet at the greenhouse by ten.

Thursday, October 13, 11:56 PM)

(you: Cords?

Thursday, October 13, 11:57 PM)

(780-237-5432: 53.452054, -113.699283

Get there Sunday.

Thursday, October 13, 11:59 PM)

That had to be Valturus. This phone was a lucky break. Mother Nature was watching him. He had coordinates to the greenhouse. It could provide a hint to this river valley. The messages elaborated on Valturus's involvement too. He wanted to call her. Pointless.

Thanks to Margrave, the Surrey Sapper, Valturus's first converted, he had confirmed that Abbygail was the correct lead. It was a shame that Synarion and Margrave were unable to exchange names while he was alive. Their souls crossed in such unexpected ways. In his death, Margrave redeemed himself in the eyes of the balancer and concerning Mother Nature. This information told Synarion he needed to get to Edmonton, fast. That was where the hellseed keepers would summon the World Mother.







## CHAPTER 17

# THE CHILDREN

Day Four, Sunday.

Bark Nose's human toy was telling the truth. Edmonton was of interest. Humans make a habit of claiming to understand a situation and know the least. Synarion wouldn't have done anything different in dismissing her. His hunch was often correct because modern humans were blind to the old world. Abbygail, on the other hand, was helpful. He texted her.

(you: Meet me by Bark Nose  
where we first were introduced.

7:35 AM)

Their drive to Edmonton would take fourteen hours. The road was his best solution for transportation. The weapons, a conspicuous laptop, and contact lenses weren't doing him any favours with airport security. A computer, change of clothes, charger, and hygiene supplies were the usual things brought when going on a round-trip. Synarion added a few extras: throwing stars, spiked knuckles, the World Mother pendant, and four wooden stakes for good measure. He hoped he didn't have to use them. Valturus could be there. Hopes created false promises of reality, and he had to accept the chance of a fatal conflict.

He took the jar of hellseeds from the cabinet and looked them over, deciding to bring them too.

*Thy Nature's Roots . . .*

Synarion bit his lip and rotated the container. Their telepathic ability intrigued him. Could they talk with anyone, or were balancers unique? Trees could send signals to one another through vibrations in the dirt, warning of dangers and weather changes. Other plants and fungi communicated in ways that were naked to the five senses. These seeds did, too.

"What are you?" Synarion said. *Speak*, he added in his mind. Silence.

The balancer sighed and stuffed the supernatural entities into his bag. He would show them to Bark Nose. He packed light. It kept him on his toes. Minimalism ensured material things

didn't clog his mind and space. Old world beings had to stay on the move to survive. For him, that was in those fifty year cycles.

He tossed his things into his car and drove to the Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve; he hiked to the same river where he met the Root Walker. The same three trees were on the hill. There were no other indicators his friend was near.

His phone buzzed as he reached the top of the hill. He checked it.

(Abbygail: omw  
8:02 AM)

Perfect. Now he waited, sitting cross-legged on the cliff with his satchel on his lap. He swore he could feel the energy humming in the bag from the jar of seeds next to his computer. Even with his eyes closed . . .

*Growth from old, gives endless nutrients for their descendants, he thought.*

*. . . his senses focused on the forest's smell,*

*this is not bold,*

*the sound of the water . . .*

*it is the way of the garden that all worldly follows,*

*. . . and the touch of the grass.*

*faith in her to remould.*

He couldn't focus on clearing his mind. A dark shadow was lingering in his thoughts, leaving him with a rotten gut.

*Unbalanced . . .*

Synarion opened his eyes as a twig snapped in the forest. A deep rumble came from behind as a large tree swayed.

“Scaabbed Ears, it is good to see you agaaain,” Bark Nose said. He stepped into view and rested by the three trees. He had yarn over his branches. It was ridiculous.

Synarion stood, clutching his bag. “Bark Nose, I’m grabbing Abbygail, and we’re heading to Edmonton like she wanted.”

“Thaaank yooou Synaarion. I wishhh the besst for herrr.”

“Her hunch was right regarding Edmonton being connected to the World Mother,” the other said.

“Ooooooh?” Bark Nose’s bark formed eyebrows raising.

“Indeed. I did some investigating and confirmed her claim. I was going to take her for you, of course. The stakes have risen. I need to finish this World Mother nonsense today.”

“Aaaaand if yooou dooon’t?”

“They summoned her onto Earth. They’re meeting at ten tonight.”

A low grumble came from the Root Walker and he spoke. “Light floourishes Mooother Naaature’s growth. Woorld Mooother is oppoosite aaand the shaaadows are her ways.”

“Apparently so.” Synarion wiped his mouth. It was too vague for his liking.

“I hooope yooou solve it soooon. Woorld Mooother is nno laughing matter. If shee is summonned, shee will wreck haaavoc uponnn this woorld aaand aaall the creaaatures on it.”

“On that note, can you shed any light on these things?” Synarion reached into his bag and took the black and red seeds jar.

*The ancient one!*

The sound caused Synarion's ears to jerk, and Bark Nose stepped away. The bark on his face slanted inward, and the mouth pressed together.

"Bark Nose?" Synarion said.

"Whereee did yooou finnnd theeese?" Bark Nose asked.

"The bloodsucker had them at a Club Revelation. He was getting his humans to eat them and claimed thirteen gave revelation."

Bark Nose extended one branch ending in what looked most like a hand, pointing at the jar with his index finger. "Theeese are the hellseeds, chiiildrennn of the Wooorld Mooother."

This confirmed another theory of Synarion's. Vampires, xephile bats, and plants belonged to the World Mother. They were a whole other strain of life on Earth. "So, is it safe to say they're vampiric? The World Mother needs fire. Xephile bats and vampires need blood."

"Yesss. Sheee grew her childrennn onnn her haaalf of her Eaaarth gardennn beefore being reeemoved from this wooorld. I was unaaaware that aaany of the seeds remaaained. Abbygaaail thooough, thinks they're iiiin Edmontooon too." Bark Nose reached for one of his smaller branches on his trunk. "Because they werree nurtured and grooown from the Wooorld Mooother, they are repelleed by Mooother Nature's ancient creaaatures."

"Like yourself?" Synarion asked.

“Preecisely,” Bark Nose grunted as he snapped off a branch. “My kind was the first like the vaaampires were the Woorld Mooother’s. Synaaarion, you must taaake thiss.”

Synarion squinted. “By the Grove, Bark Nose. I don’t want a piece of your limb.”

“This iiii nooo laaughing matter, Synaaarion. Yooou must keep thiiis on yooou. Haaave yooou eeeaten any of thee seeds?”

“No.”

“Dooo not eaaat themmm. Dooo not let anyone maaake you. Keep thiiis braaanch with yooou, it’ll reeeepel themmm.” Bark Nose snapped off a twig, making the rod-sized branch forearm-length. He handed it to Synarion.

“What do these seeds grow into?” Synarion asked. He took the branch and a surge of energy blipped through him. The lingering darkness vanished.

*Ancient one prevents us!*

“Like a vampire’s weaknesses. Silver, light, holy water, and a stake through the heart,” Synarion said, rotating the rod around.

“Corrrrrrect, as my weaaakness is fire. I aaam toxic to them. Theese seeds flower innnto an unnatural abomination. The Woorld Mooother’s children maaake Mooother Naaature cry, for theeey are fuuused of eeevil. Dega’Mostikas aaand naaature’s beauty, creaaating someeething thaaat should haaave never exisssted.”

“Am I hearing you right? The World Mother made a deal with Dega’Mostikas to form her children?”

“Yes. Hellseed, vaaampire, xephile baaat. Sheee allied wiiith the deviil foor hiiis pooower, unlike her sister whose will deriiives froom the Creaaator, as life doooes.”

“Unless chosen otherwise.”

“Correct. Aaafter herrr banishment frommm Earth, sheee returned to the aaafterlife where sheee serves Dega’Mostikas. Aaancient truths fiiiizzle out in tiime, mythology, and forgotten. Hence, yoou knew noothing of the Woorld Mooother.”

“Wonderful,” Synarion said. He put the jar into his bag. “The World Mother made a deal with the devil himself to defy her sister. Now, her cult of followers wish to raise her.”

“As I’ve saaid, Synaaarion, the Woorld Mooother is a venngeful and spiteful beeeing. I dooo not believe sheee has everrr caaared for naaature or her childrennn. Her aaambition drives from narrrcissism.”

“I’ll end this. Her followers have roped in humans as well. I ran into some with tattoos and scarification of flowers. They knew how to fight well.”

“The Woorld Mooother’s reach is impresssive.”

“And she needs a ritual to come from the afterlife?”

“The Woorld Mooother is not aallowed here, noor the mortaaal reaaalm. Dega’Mostikas deemed it sooo when sheee allied wiiith him. Sheee caaan be summonned though. Breaaaak through the aaaafterlife. Woords of pooower aare potent.”



“Yes, gates of the afterlife keep souls from the mortal realm, I know that. What I wish is that you gave me a crash course decades ago. This information would have been good to have on file.”

“Thiiis is aaancient history. Whooo would haaave thought it woould rise aaagain? Sеееееeds gone. Xephile bats gone. Vaaaaampires, selfish.”

“Well, Valturus is around.”

Rustling came from the woods, silencing the two. A dark-clothed Abbygail poked through the foliage, indicating no stranger danger. She had dark bags under her eyes and skin more blanched than usual. No rest for the worried.

She stepped from the bushes, holding a bag around each shoulder. Her wide-brimmed hat and long, light black fabrics were the same as when he first met her. The pentagram necklace made Synarion smirk. That icon lost meaning with the collapse of Zingalg. It was a symbol, like the cross or the Grove’s gates. At least until you combined it with a flower and the World Mother, then it held power.

“Hey,” Abbygail said, wiping sweat from her forehead. “I came as fast as I could. I haven’t been sleeping well and work is pissed.”

Synarion adjusted his satchel’s strap. “We need to leave. Time is of the essence.”

“Bark Nose!” Abbygail said. She smiled, walked to him and touched his trunk. “I’ll miss you.”

*Ancient one!*

The sound of the seeds made Synarion's brows furrow and Abbygail freeze. They pierced everyone's mind. Synarion would be wise to destroy the seeds.

Bark Nose grumbled at the annoyance. "I will miiiiss you tooooo, my floower."

Synarion rolled his eyes as she caressed his trunk.

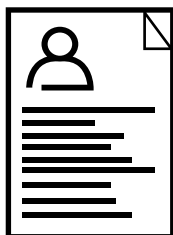
She said, "I'm glad you got my message earlier."

The Root Walker's branches curled around the girl, forming a hug, wrapping around the human's arms, torso, and legs for a tight squeeze. It was a long, time-exhausting embrace due to the Root Walker's slow movement.

*How did she message him?* Synarion thought, tapping his foot. There was more to Abbygail than her fashion and taste in older souls. It was a question he could ask her on their trip. They had fourteen hours together, whether they liked it or not.

Next stop: Edmonton. The balancer would put an end to the World Mother's summoning. Like Margrave, the hellseed keepers would pay for their balancing offence, vampire, human, or other.





## BALANCER PROFILE SUMMARY

**Name:** World Mother

**Species:** Numen

**Location:** Dega'Mostikas'Triangle

**Occupation:** Vengeful sister

**Description:** Based on the pendant, she has an anthropomorphic figure, like Mother Nature. Unlike her sister, she has burning eyes and spiked vines for hair that connect to her spine. Her limbs ended in bark.

**Balancing Offence:** Where to start? Millions of years of hostile interactions with Mother Nature. Making a deal with the devil to create her own creatures that defied nature. Utilizing them to escape Dega'Mostikas's Triangle and attack Mother Nature and her Earth.

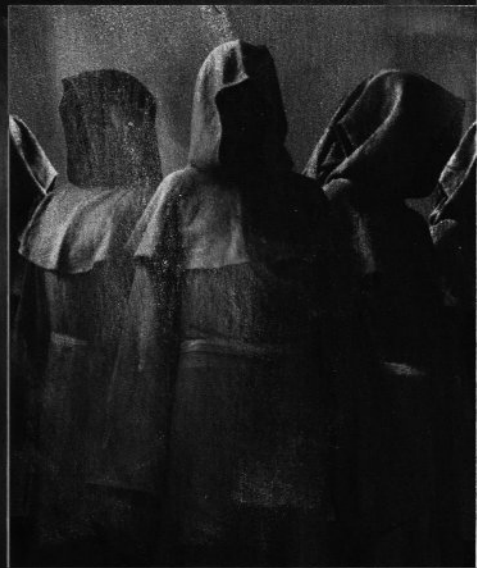
**Note:** Don't eat the hellseeds, one of her children. They say thirteen give revelation.



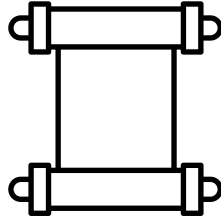


III

ACT







ACT III:  
**AGAPE THE  
HOLOCENE EXTINCTION**

(grove\_transcripts\_ENG\_01.pdf  
Page 3/3)

*Guardian, a guide, a protector,  
open and caring . . . vulnerable.*

*Gardener, a curator, a builder,  
life and death . . . neutral.*

*Mother, unconditional, love,  
strength and persistence . . . able.*







## CHAPTER 18

# WAVES OF HISTORY

**T**he past repeats itself time and time again. Mother Nature's Earth has recurring threats of catastrophic events, and Synarion was alone, susceptible to basic needs. This blinded him. Right under his nose, the World Mother's symbol and her seeds were there the whole time. Numen are far slower than Root Walkers, and their actions take time. For the World Mother, the threat of a balancer was a buzzing fly.

That realization kept Synarion focused on the drive to Edmonton. He didn't have assistance from any great beings or access to powerful weapons. Those days were gone, and he had to be cunning to break the hellseed keepers before they had a

chance to summon her. Seeing how his last interaction with them went, the balancer was prepared to execute his duty. If that meant killing each of them, even his past lover, so be it.

Valturus hadn't aged a day, unlike Synarion, who had shown signs since they first met. Two thousand years is enough to make facial wrinkles appear. Hair loses sheen. It makes you wiser and more compassionate or jaded. The vampire hadn't changed her nature. Valturus came first. She even fed Synarion Margrave without a second thought as a distraction. Unless, by sheer chance, she cared. They were lovers. Either way, he would get his answers at the greenhouse in Edmonton.

"You okay?" Abbygail asked.

"Yes," Synarion said.

Abbygail stared at Synarion's tight grip at the twelve o'clock portion of the wheel. "You seem . . . tense."

"There's a lot on my mind."

"Want to share?" Abbygail asked.

Synarion licked his upper gums, taking several seconds before answering. "We've got a good twelve hours. Sure. Go for it."

"Go for it?" Abbygail asked with a chuckle. "That's not how this works. You need to talk, tough guy."

"About what?" Synarion said.

"You do spend a lot of time alone, don't you?"

"Not with Mother Nature around. How much has Bark Nose told you of me?" Synarion asked.

"He said he had a friend from the old world, responsible for maintaining balance in the environment. It's gotta be a tough job."

“Yeah, and alone, I have limited resources. Thank the gods, this World Mother situation landed on my lap before it went too far.”

“Someone is watching over you,” Abbygail said.

*I hope,* Synarion thought.

Abbygail shifted in her seat. “Look, when this is said and done, you’re not going to try and, like, balance Bark Nose and me, are you?”

“Is there reason I should?” Synarion asked.

“There isn’t. He’s a sweet being. He’s been there for me in ways a person can’t. I believe in the soul. I practiced Wiccan after Bark Nose connected with me on a spiritual level.”

“That’s splendid, budding love. You understand he’ll outlive you, right?” Synarion said.

“That’s fine. We will cherish our time together. You don’t have to worry concerning balancing and mixing. Bark Nose said something regarding your rules. We’re not compatible.”

“I get that.”

“Unless you have a rule against intimacy, because he’s quite gentle when touch—”

Synarion raised one hand. “I’m going to stop you there.” The last thing he wanted to hear was Bark Nose’s personal affairs. “Look,” Synarion continued, “remind me why you want to go to Edmonton. You thought you could help?”

“Yeah,” Abbygail said, fiddling with her pentagram pendant. “My cousin, she’s stopped replying to me. Edmonton has had strange things happen in recent times. People are talking of a killer.”

“You mentioned your friend and dad went missing?” Synarion asked.

“Yeah. Dad, they haven’t found it. I really don’t know. My friend, Vicky, stopped replying to me like my cousin is.”

“And you think the killer murdered them?” Synarion asked.

“Yes. The police have no leads on Dad. He went for his usual walk in the woods as he did after dinner.”

“Your mother stays home?”

“Yes, it’s not unusual. I don’t know. He didn’t come home. Mom and his friends set up missing person posters and posted his photo online, and that was it. See, this is him.” She held her phone to show a photo of a middle-aged man smiling with mountains behind him. His arm wrapped around Abbygail, who had a wide grin, wearing a thick layer of makeup. Even through concealer and eyeshadow, she shared her father’s rectangular brow ridge, round cheekbones, and mirror smile.

“I want him to be safe.” She put the phone down and took a deep breath, rubbing her forehead. “With Vicky, they found her body. That wasn’t easy. They’ve been aware of the killings for a while. My cousin is obsessed with serial killers.”

“And who is this murderer?” Synarion asked.

“No idea. They call him the Drainer.”

*The Drainer*, Synarion thought, reflecting on the Hucker Dime news report he listened to. There was a theme of blood-sucking in Canada. “And the law enforcement haven’t found any clues?” he asked.

“Other than two types of Drainer cases, nothing. Footsteps vanish. One type has the blood depleted from the body like they were sucked dry, with puncture marks around the flesh in

ring formations. The second, the heads are missing. The remaining corpse is a mutilated mess. The cases captivate my cousin. She is into gruesome deaths. Not my thing,” Abbygail said.

*Margrave’s nineteenth victim matched the ring formations.* “And why is that?”

Abbygail shrugged. “I think they’re gross.”

“No, why is your cousin into them?” Synarion asked.

“Oh, I dunno. She’s into that kind of thing. Look, see? This is her.” Abbygail raised her phone to Synarion. The screen displayed a young gal with blonde dreadlocks, a septum piercing, and smiling with a wink. She swiped the phone and said, “These are her friends.” The second photo showed Janet, far more pale with bags under her eyes. She was with a young man with shaggy hair and a patchy five o’clock shadow, also sick looking. He sat on a couch beside another guy with long brown hair, taping a hinge to a spray can and lighter, creating an innovative homemade flamethrower.

Abbygail spoke. “They took this image earlier today. She’s been sporadic with texting throughout the week saying a guy was also into the drain cases, too. His ex was killed in the same way. She’s been acting weird over the past couple of weeks, saying she’s ill. Then silence. Then, a bomb of info. Like, why is that guy making a flamethrower?”

“Okay. You want me to balance this Drainer character and find your dad?” Synarion asked.

“Ideally. I have no info on my dad, other than these Drainer cases. This is where things get weird. Calling the Drainer a

killer is a strange way to put it because of the two types of murders. The missing heads? Never found.”

“That is odd,” Synarion said.

“Very. From what my cousin Janet claimed, it’s like it bursts from the bodies. The police disagreed, thinking it was a sick person with innovative tools or an animal attack. These wounds pierce from the inside. The inside! Crazy.” Abbygail squeezed her arm in a squirm of excitement and fear. “There’s the death type with the ring formations, drained blood, perfect removal of all fluids. No signs of struggle. These puncture holes over the limbs, torso, neck, and head. It’s as if tubes coiled around them and vacuumed their innards.”

“You have pictures?” Synarion asked.

“Yeah, here, take a look.” Abbygail swiped through her smartphone and raised it.

The photo showed a crime scene at night, with bright lights piercing onto a naked body covered in rings. It was as Abbygail described: no blood remained, leaving the corpse in a mummified state. It also matched the corpse in the tub on Thursday. Synarion pressed his lips together, looking to the road.

“See? Unsettling as fuck. Janet is way more into this. Like, really into it. That’s what worries me.”

“Any photos of the missing head cases?” Synarion asked.

“No. Janet didn’t share those.”

“And you think it is related to the World Mother case because of those bodies?” Synarion asked.

“Yeah. I showed Bark Nose. He saw my sorrow when my dad went missing, and when Vicky died. I fear the worst for Dad.”

“When did he disappear?” Synarion asked.

“I think three weeks ago, around the time this stuff ramped up. I wanted to go see Mom sooner, but fuck, I don’t have a lot of money. I couldn’t have flown. You know they both wanted to come see me this Christmas?” She sniffled and pressed her lips together.

Synarion wiped his face, hoping she didn’t start crying. They had a long trip. “When did Vicky die?”

Abbygail sat straight, gathering her composure. “Vicky was two weeks ago. Bark Nose is no fool. When I told him of the cases, he believed it was from the old world. After you brought him the World Mother pendant. I saw the look in his bark. It was the same look of concern he had when I showed the puncture holes photo. It was the same look you had.”

“Makes sense,” Synarion said.

“You’ve seen them before?” Abbygail asked.

“Yes. I’ve seen two on the neck. Bloodsuckers, vampires, make those same holes. The rings you’re talking about? I saw that for the first time the other day.”

Abbygail’s eyes widened. “Vampires?”

Synarion smirked. “So Bark Nose hasn’t told you everything.”

“No. He says the old world has so many lost wonders. Vampires? Really?”

The girl’s tone went up a notch. It was too enthusiastic for Synarion’s preference. By the gods, considering her interest in dark fashion and crude usage of ancient symbolism, she would want to become a familiar herself. There are ancient converted male vampires, and old is to her liking. Or if Valturus got her hands on the girl. Her psychic linkage was potent, and not even



Synarion had the will to resist. No human could with Valturus. Her lost empire proved it.

“Yes, vampires are one of many things from long ago. They’re dangerous. Don’t let them get into your head,” Synarion said. “The bloodsuckers are involved with the World Mother case, which makes this quite dangerous.”

“Think the vampires relate to the Drainer cases?” Abbygail asked.

“In some form. I want to talk to your cousin. These hellseed keepers are organizing in Edmonton, and I need to understand why.”

“Edmonton is special?”

“Like I said, I’d like to learn why. See if you can call your cousin.”

“I’ll try again when we’re clear of the mountains. Bad cellular coverage here,” Abbygail said.

“Right,” Synarion said.

Abbygail shifted in her seat. “And how did you learn of Edmonton, the World Mother, and vampires?”

“I killed one last night and extracted their phone’s message logs. They were going to a greenhouse. Before his death, the bloodsucker told me they planned to summon the World Mother.”

“Christ,” Abbygail said.

“I’m going straight for the greenhouse. You can visit your mom. Contact with your cousin.”

Abbygail gripped her arms. “I sure hope she is okay.”

“Yeah, kid, I pray to Mother Nature for your sake, too. Not to be the bearer of bad news, but death kisses all.”

She raised her painted eyebrow. “Trust me, I’m familiar with death.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed based on your attire. I’ve seen death, not on the internet or in photos. I mean slaughters. Centuries make you numb to individual scenarios. You even forget memories. I have been around far longer than any of your people’s recent generations. You see a lot of souls come and go.”

“How old are you?”

“Over two thousand,” Synarion said.

“Two thousand years?” Abbygail’s mouth hung open.

“Over. Closer to two and a half.”

“Wow, you must have seen some amazing things, too,” Abbygail said, stroking her hair.

“At times, yes. Other times, it leaves you depressed, isolated, and questioning why. I’ve lost a lot of good friends during the old world’s collapse,” Synarion said.

“What happened? Bark Nose gets sad when I mention it, dismissing the topic.”

“It’s a long one,” Synarion said.

“We have twelve hours,” Abbygail said with a crooked grin.

It made the balancer smile, too. There was potential in the girl. He was too harsh with his first judgment. She was knowledgeable of the old world: Pandora’s Box opened. More information would aid her more than it would harm her, or the old world.

He spoke. “There used to be a force in this world that bound what we’ll call *mystical* creatures together. It was, in a sense, the fifth element. At that time, it was dubbed maghice. You’d label

it magic. When this force vanished, it killed the mystical beings. Sciences hadn't progressed far enough to analyze the extinction, and it is too late. You know it takes the five elements on a planet to align to birth life, right?"

"Yeah, sort of. Biology was not my specialty."

"In general, that is how it works, guided by Mother Nature. You need the right air type, the correct heat level, habitable terrain, and, of course, water. This fifth element, maghice, expedited evolution. Most creatures got it. Some didn't, because you humans are alive, I'm alive, and other wonderful things found on this planet. The mystical creatures perished with the dissolving of the fifth element. It'd be like taking air or water from us."

"Wow," Abbygail said, gazing into the mountains.

"Vampires also didn't come from maghice. The Grove, my home, relied on it too. It bound these creatures to specific locations where maghice was most potent. This we call the lost continent, which was named Zingalg."

"And maghice is gone, forever?" Abbygail asked.

"It exists in isolated pockets if you can find it. It had one core location. We considered it to be a plentiful part of nature. It let people speak words of power, manipulating space and time. By today's standards, you would think it was supernatural. Souls could learn to manipulate it through words. You could expel vibrations through motions and sound that activate maghice from thin air."

"Like witches," Abbygail said.

“And sorcerers, warlocks, priests, shamans, and even balancers. On occasion, isolated pockets of maghice exist in objects concentrated with this element too.”

“You used magic?” Abbygail asked.

“Yes, I did. Not a ton. I focused on my physical skills. I was—I am an enforcer.”

“So maghice is gone because it was in one location? Like mining rare minerals?”

“Sort of. I wouldn’t doubt it if other minor locations were far beneath the Earth’s surface. It would explain some uncanny events throughout modern history. Think of the Bermuda Triangle. I’m sure you felt unexplainable energy when you’ve practiced your Wiccan.”

“Like the sixth sense?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened? Did too many people use maghice, and it couldn’t regrow?”

“It wasn’t like normal elements in the sense you could harvest or mine it. The best comparison would be nuclear power.”

“Oh,” Abbygail said, piecing the situation together.

“Words of power were potent. Empires researched to channel more powerful ones. They discovered new chants so catastrophic it shattered the heart of maghice.”

“Like an a-bomb.”

“Zingalg, the lost content, plummeted into the ocean with nearby land masses. The mystical creatures who relied on maghice as a life source evaporated, bones and all.”

“That’s why there’s no evidence,” Abbygail said.

“Except in ancient scriptures and myths made by man.”

“So the land masses, Zingalg, should still be under the ocean? There would be proof of these empires?” Abbygail asked.

“Technically, yes. You understand how deep and vast the ocean is?”

“Yeah, good point. A handful of you escaped, like Bark Nose and vampires?” Abbygail asked.

“We hide in the best ways that we can. We make sacrifices to blend in. It doesn’t always go well. The shadow of the old world exists around you.”

“Is that why you have . . . ?” She pointed to her left ear as she bit her lip.

Synarion’s nostrils flared, and he spoke. “They used to be long and pointed.”

“Because you’re a nymph?”

Synarion nodded.

“When did you, you know, cut them? When that magic nuke went off?”

“Not long after. I was in Egypt, Alexandria.”

“Like where the Library of Alexandria is?”

“That’s the one,” Synarion said.

“Why there?”

“A companion of mine, and I thought it was similar to a home of hers. Egypt is vast, and the library had records of the old world. It was the last place that did. We assumed that people would recognize us and keep us safe. You see, most old world beings stayed in Zingalg. Humans, on the other hand, migrated around the globe. We discovered Alexandria wasn’t like home.” Synarion squeezed the wheel, recalling the flames.

“What made you realize you had to cut them? Couldn’t have been easy,” Abbygail asked.

“What made me?” Synarion said. He pondered the question and told her why. His words returned his mind to the events of that fateful evening when he and Valturus were no more.

The edges of metal pliers glimmered in the orange light. His hand gripped the handle with intent, pointing it at his companion’s fangs. Her eyebrows slanted back, expressing a new emotion: concern.

Shouts echoed from the port as the crackling of flames lifted black smoke into the air under the night. Fire devoured the ships and docks, trickling through the streets and consuming anything in its path. Men in metal armour and red tunics lunged spears at opposing soldiers in white kilts and linen helmets not far from the two.

A mother pulling on her two children and a man carrying bags over his shoulders rushed past Synarion and Valturus, escaping the chaos in the once-great city of Alexandria. They took second glances at the two as they passed, staring at Synarion’s long ears.

Synarion shook the pliers. “We have to blend in. Look around you!”

“This is not our fight, my dear,” Valturus said. She cupped her hands together. Her robe blew in the wind, moving her hair with it.

Synarion spoke. “Pharaoh Ptolemy’s soldiers are sieging General Caesar in the royal quarters. This civil war is the beginning.”

“Of what?” the other asked.

“The end. How can you not see this?”

“Hmmm. Queen Cleopatra won’t let them destroy Alexandria. She is aware of the old world—”

Synarion grabbed Valturus’s shoulders, shaking her. “Look! The city is burning. Look at how people see us. They’re human.” He shifted her stance so she could face the blaze soaring from the two-level column building a hundred paces away. “That is the last of our past.”

Valturus broke free from his grasp. “There’s us! Isn’t that why you still carry those documents from the Grove? It’s why I have mine. We are the living proof.”

“This war is an example of things to come. Europe is drunk on dogma. The humans are sabotaging their culture and history, erasing the shimen, the draconem, Zingalg, which takes us with it. New religions whisper through the hearts and minds of this world. It won’t be long until they come to Rome. Then what? Do you think their priests and clerics will take kindly of you or me? God’s word is law.” He raised the pliers. “We have to blend in.”

Valturus shook her head. “Haaah. I won’t do it.”

“To what end? Hide in desert caves? Escape to the southern wild? Head for the northern cold?”

“I could start anew,” Valturus said, folding her arms. She nodded at him. “We could. Hmmm?”

Synarion squinted, lowering his tool.

“I’ve made an empire before. I could do it again.”

“Valturus.” His tone lowered, realizing the implications of her statement.

She extended her hands, open palms, towards him. “With you! Would that not create the balance you so eagerly crave? We could correct the humans’ error.”

“There is no balance in tyranny,” Synarion said. “We can keep our past alive if we blend in.” He raised the pliers.

“No,” Valturus said. “They may never grow again.”

Synarion exhaled frustration and tucked the tool in his belt. He unsheathed a dagger with one hand and grabbed the tip of his left ear with the other.

Valturus’s mouth hung open. “You wouldn’t.”

“I’m not jesting. I’ll do it first, then your fangs,” Synarion said. He took a deep breath through his nose.

“Synarion.” She took a step forward.

He sliced the blade into the cartilage. A sharp sting channelled inside his ear. Hot liquid drizzled on his cheek with each swipe until he carved off two-thirds of his ears. He chucked the severed flesh against the mud bricks of a nearby building. Red splattered the wall. Blood drizzled past his jawline. It dripped onto the sand.

His hearing was off-center. He detected more details of the cackling fire, clanging metal, and yells in his right ear until he hacked it. The sound matched both sides, muffled with fewer depths and peaks of frequencies. He resembled a man more than a nymph.

Valturus swallowed a lump of saliva, fixated on the blood. She took another step forward. Synarion sheathed the dagger and took the pliers. The vampire reached for his mangled ear. He snagged her jaw, hopped on the adrenaline pumping through his body, and brought the pliers to her fangs.



She pushed his chest with the force of a hammer, knocking him to the ground and making him drop the tool. Valturus clutched her head as her nostrils twitched at the smell of blood.

“Haaah! You’ve gone mad,” she said.

“I’m doing this for us,” Synarion said.

“No. You think you have to. Let the humans dominate? How is that balance any different than our ruling?” She couldn’t look away from the red running along his face. “I can’t go down this path with you.”

Synarion stood and extended his hand to her. “Valturus, it is in our best interest.”

“Lies,” Valturus said, exposing her sharp teeth. She swatted his hand and stepped away. Her arms reached for the skies.

“You wanted to be passive. An explorer!” Synarion said.

“You know little of order.” The vampire’s bones cracked. Her fingers elongated as the legs and spine shrunk. Her skull extended with hair growing from her skin. Valturus’s human form twisted until she was a bat. The clothes fell to the ground, and her wings flapped, leaving Synarion on the ground.

“Valturus!” he shouted. His throat tensed. His heart froze.

He was alone to witness the end of an era.

“Who was she?” Abbygail asked. She fiddled with the tips of her hair with one hand.

Synarion cleared his throat and exhaled through his nose, pushing the terrible memory aside. “A lost soul, like I was.”

“Budding romance at the end of the world.”

“Yeah, something like that. We were young, well I was. Bullheaded. The library burned at around fifty BC. I’ve matured a lot since that time.”

“You’re telling me you’re two thousand years old?”

“Two thousand and four hundred, give or take.”

“Woah. You loved her?” Abbygail asked.

“Sure, at one point in time.” He cleared his throat again. “Another life.”

“I had no clue that the Romans and Egyptians were so close.”

“They were. There were politics, affairs, and complications between the two civilizations. Christianity infected the minds of the Romans long after Cleopatra and Caesar. After the Holy Crusades took place, erasing anything left of the old world.”

“Were you ever married?” Abbygail asked.

“Married?” Synarion smiled at the simple concept. “Like in a modern sense? No. The Grove didn’t shy from relationships, and I had a few until those dissolved. People move on or die. That’s the old world for you, a sliver of it.” He wanted to drop the topic of his past romances. “And you seem to be tuned into a sixth sense. You messaged Bark Nose?”

“Oh yeah. I can feel him, even with the distance. Is that maghice?”

“It’s a connection. Chants and rituals aid in bending the world to our will.”

“Amazing,” Abbygail said, reaching into her purse. “I knew there was more than meets the eye.”

“Indeed. There’s plenty I don’t understand. I wasn’t a wise nymph in the Grove. I executed their will and—” Synarion stopped talking, catching Abbygail from the corner of his eye

take a small velvet bag. Her hand cupped a pile of black and red striped seeds, popping them into her mouth. She looked at him, chewing and listening. Synarion's jaw hung, not looking at the road for too long.

Abbygail squinted, glancing at the road, and at Synarion, swallowing. "What?"

"What did you do?" Synarion asked. He returned his gaze to the highway, gripping the wheel with both hands.

"What?" Abbygail asked again.

Synarion reached for the bag, keeping his focus on driving.

"Hey!" Abbygail said, scooching away in her seat.

"Where did you get those seeds?" he asked.

"A farmers market. They're good for you, a lost superfood. I got these brown ones too." She took another small bag from her purse containing almond-shaped seeds.

Synarion raised his hand in the air. "How many did you eat?"

"I don't know! What is going on, Synarion?"

"Shit," he mumbled through his breath. It was her seeds they heard with Bark Nose, not his own.

"What? You're freaking me out," she said.

"Reach into my bag in the back seat. There's that branch Bark Nose gave me. Keep it close to your body. Never let go of it."

"What is it, Synarion?"

"Those seeds are the World Mother's children."

"World Mother's what?" Abbygail's eyes widened.

"Thirteen is what you need for revelation. That's all I got." *I have my theories*, he thought. "Bark Nose said they grow into an abomination of nature."

"Fuck, for real?" Abbygail said. "The seeds I ate?"

“Bark Nose says that branch will protect you. It’s toxic to them.”

“Shit, fuck, Chri-i-i-st!” She sniffled, and sobbing followed. Mascara ran along her face with the tears. “Sy-sy-synarion, I’ve be-e-e-en eating these for two weeks.” She snagged the rod tucked into a side pocket of Synarion’s bag, brought it around the front, and squinted, clutching her head. “Who said that? Did you hear that?”

*Sister . . .*

Her arms shook, holding the rod with both hands. “That’s why I feel like shit. What are we going to do?”

“Hold onto Bark Nose’s branch for your life,” Synarion said. He bit his lip, shaking his head. There had to be a cure to the hellseed. The World Mother’s followers had to have a failsafe. They heard the whispers. The children of the World Mother lived.





## CHAPTER 19

# LIGHTEN THE LOAD

The 2000s Hyundai hatchback roared through the winding mountain highway. Synarion increased the vehicle's speed enough to cut another hour, but he was slow enough not to be noticed by the RCMP. His duty to prevent the World Mother had an additional rescue mission. As long as Abbygail held onto that rod, she would be okay, or so he prayed. Synarion shared the World Mother mythos with Abbygail during the travel to help her understand the seeds growing inside her. He explained the summoning, her hate for Mother Nature, and how worlds had numens. Abbygail asked questions: is the hellseed from the World Mother? What are the almond-shaped seeds? Bark Nose

is an ancient one? We'll stop the seeds, right? She asked multiple times, hoping for a different answer. In no favour of the girl, the responses were the same as before: yes, don't know and don't eat them, yes, and I hope so.

Her leg bounced fast during the ride. Her arms shook, clutching the rod for her dear life. She knew a foreign entity was living inside her. To what extent was a mystery. These hellseeds were as mysterious as the World Mother herself. They stopped for gas halfway, and she stuck her finger in her throat to vomit the seeds. Some of the black shells appeared in the bile, which didn't help the fact she had had them for the past couple of weeks.

Killing the girl would be a merciful option if the horrors of Synarion's theory rang true. Based on the Drainer killings, the seeds would shred her from the inside. He would keep murder as an option.

After filling the car, Synarion hopped in and locked the doors. Abbygail had a frown and lifted her phone. The screen contained a text message thread, with the most recent one containing a photo of an open palm holding a black seed with a red stripe. The text read:

(Janet: The seeds look like this.

You ate them?

2:48 PM)

(you: Yeah.

2:49 PM)

Abbygail put her phone down. “Thanks for the heads up, right? Fuck. That’s what did Vicky in, and maybe . . . maybe D-a-a-ad.” Her eyes glistened with tears while she stuttered her words. Synarion remained silent. There were no words to add. Janet was a little too late with the forewarning. They were in this mess together.

He turned on the ignition and drove onto the Yellowhead Highway and clear of the mountains. They passed the small town of Hinton, three hours from Edmonton. The pine trees vanished, giving a broad open view of the flat farmland that was Alberta. Snow trickled under the clouds in October, making Abbygail’s warm body a perfect incubation place.

“So you’re going to go to this greenhouse and kick their ass?” Abbygail asked.

“That’s the alternative plan,” Synarion said.

“What’s the first?” she asked.

“Deescalate it with reason. From what I’ve seen of these people, they won’t be willing to talk.”

“And you don’t have any allies?”

“No consistent help. I’ve been doing this long before even your great-grandparents were alive.”

“That’s why you have those scars?” she asked.

Synarion looked at her and then into the rearview mirror at himself. He didn’t even notice that he had leftovers from where Margrave had scratched his face. Other trivial scars ran along his neck and slipped under his shirt. The balancer had been fooling himself regarding the effectiveness of diefym leaves rejuvenating his wounds. In his defence, the cheek scar was noticeable in proximity, and they spent hours together in a car.



The countless other marks on his skin, including the ears, demonstrated a life of violence.

“Yeah,” he said. “Every once in a while, you run into a soul who knows what they’re doing. Like me, those old world beings who remain prime are a challenge.”

“Like vampires?” Abbygail asked.

“They’re a pain.”

“And there are more of them at this greenhouse?”

“I don’t think so. Either way, I’ve got the equipment to handle bloodsuckers.”

She bit her nails, leg still bouncing. “It makes me nervous.”

“What?” Synarion asked.

“You going there. Alone. No help. You’ve lived your whole life this way?”

“At least since the new world.” *Not entirely*, he thought: a brief reflection regarding his time with Valturus. Clarity reminded him she was using him, and he was indeed alone. “I don’t have other options. Balancers were not popular during our heydays and are non-existent because we don’t take sides and focus on Mother Nature.”

“Yeah, I could see that making you unpopular. People want you to choose sides. We’re so polarised these days. If you aren’t with them, you’re with the enemy.”

“Your people fail to realize there are shades of grey in between. Allies and foes aren’t how the world works. Balancers of the Grove are an example, and we’re born into it.”

“How so?” Abbygail asked. Her leg stopped bouncing, intrigued with his story.

“The cliché of being chosen from birth. Nymphs have a, sorry, had, a different culture. They accepted love amongst the

Grove, being Mother Nature's gift. My parents passed me to the Balancers Order for training the moment I was born, as theirs did for them. It is what they bred us to do."

"And you don't ever get lonely?" Abbygail asked.

*Of course*, he thought. The question was like a bad tick. Old world beings and humans that discovered who he was loved to ask. His life wasn't his choice. "Yeah, it can," Synarion said. "I have ru—"

Abbygail cut him off. "Rules."

"I had to make them after the collapse. It's for survival. I may live on the same plane as you, yet we have different lives and cannot coexist side-by-side. If I hadn't made these rules, your people would have discovered and destroyed the old world long ago."

"And you don't have a companion? Human or not human, whatever," Abbygail asked.

"I've had that, yes. It's dangerous for them," he said.

"That's why you have each other's back. That's the point of a partnership," she said.

"That's supposed to be it. Regardless, the rules work. Others are more liberal with theirs, and you adapt to stay alive. It's that simple. If you don't, you die."

"Yeah . . ." Her sentence stopped, dismal that he was alone as if she wanted him to have a picture-perfect existence of romance. She continued, ". . . was your home, the Grove, was it in Zingalg?"

"Indeed. I lost my world, like everyone."

"I'm sorry," Abbygail said. She reached for his arm and gave it a squeeze.

Synarion's spine stiffened. "It's not your fault. You're not responsible for any of it."

"I wish it didn't happen," she said.

"Me too. I wish I had another balancer to aid me. I wish I had other resources to rely on. You cannot ponder life's losses for too long. It will eat your heart."

"What resources would you have used, like, from your old life?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter," Synarion said.

"Truthfully, I like hearing you talk so I don't have to remind myself there's this thing in me."

"Right. Okay, well, the Grove had many relics protected by elemandriases."

"Which are?" Abbygail asked.

"Androids. Like a robot, humanoid harnessed the power of elements."

"Like the fifth one?"

"Yeah, and the earth, wind, water, and air. The Grove didn't have a maghice elemandrias. I don't know if they could construct it. The other four, we commanded, working in unity for the greater goal of Mother Nature. The elemandriases guarded our archives and our most sacred weapon of balance."

"Which was?" Abbygail asked.

"Erenwill, the Greatstaff of Equilibrium."

"Sounds impressive," she said.

"It was. The staff let us speak to Mother Nature and channel her elemental powers to manipulate matter. Our elemandriases attempted to build it during the collapse and failed."

"Even one made of water?"

Synarion shrugged. “They’re quite mechanical and operated based on given functions. Their default command is to provide balance.”

“Like computers, cool,” Abbygail said.

“Kind of,” Synarion said.

“That’s why you’re so loyal to your duty and the Grove?” Abbygail asked.

“Because of the elemandriases?” Synarion said.

“No, the staff,” she said.

“No, not that. Mother Nature entrusted you, and you performed, and we failed her,” Synarion said.

“There’s hope.”

“No offence, I don’t focus on hope. Your people aren’t smart enough in the new world to save the planet or head for the stars. They were, at one point in time, but I digress.”

“We were, what does that mean?”

“The point is you people are not clever enough nor wise enough to understand the history of Earth. You cannot even get along with one another. You argue over fictional gods and what food is okay to eat and what isn’t. It’s a shame.”

“None taken. I get it. The environmental issue is a big deal. My cousin is into that nature stuff, too. She wants to protect the Earth.”

“She sounds like a nice gal. Let’s hope we find her,” Synarion said.

“Yeah, I sure hope so,” Abbygail said.

The sun was close behind the grassy plains as the Hyundai hummed through the evening leading to the outskirts of Edmonton. The city contained a circular highway encompassing

it, and Abbygail used her smartphone's map to guide them to her mother's home. She led them into a residential section within the inner city, south of the downtown skyscrapers, in a location called Whyte Avenue beside a great river valley.

Despite the lack of leaves due to the fall, seeing the giant trees gave Synarion a spark of hope, the pointless feeling he didn't want to nurture. Mother Nature was ever present. He had been adverse to Abbygail on the drive and didn't mean to. She was young and blind to the complex gears of life. The steep river valley in Edmonton matched Vancouver's vast vegetation coexisting with concrete. They were small examples of how nature and humans could live as one without destroying the world. There may be hope for their species.

The sun was long gone once he brought the car near the University of Alberta campus on a dark street where Abbygail's mother lived. It was a large burgundy three-floored home. The lights were on. Abbygail's mother must have some cash to have a home like that. Funds would brighten Synarion's mood. He parked the car a block ahead, avoiding being seen.

"Thanks again," Abbygail said. She rubbed the rod in her hands, squeezing it for life.

"You're welcome," he said.

"Why don't you rest for the day? It was a long trip. We can look at this mess tomorrow together," she said.

"We? No chance. Tomorrow is far too late. I have no idea what the World Mother is capable of, and quite frankly, I am not going to take that risk. Plus, you're not joining me."

"I feel like I should help. I have these seeds in me!" She shook the rod. "Those hellseed keepers have to have a cure."

“I will see what I can find. Get in touch with your cousin. Okay? You have my cell. Work as my remote colleague.”

Abbygail smirked at the word *colleague* as if it were a joke. “What if she is gone? She was getting pretty close to those Drainer cases. Some of her texts . . .” She couldn’t finish her sentence.

“Send them to me. Go see your family.” *It may be your last time.* “I’m sure they’re excited to see you.”

Abbygail’s face scrunched inward, shaking her head. “I’m scared.”

“Trust me. I can handle this on my own,” he said. “You need rest. My people can go longer without slumber.

“Fine, okay. Here, some cash for the ride.” She reached into her pocket and took some bills.

Synarion waved his hand. “Hold onto it.”

“No, seriously.” She extended the cash.

He waved again. “Pay me when we’re back in Vancouver.”

She expressed a closed smile and put the money away. “Don’t get yourself killed.”

“Then you’d be in trouble,” he said. “Look, I’ll do what I can with your father, and I’m sorry for your friend.”

She nodded and exited the car.

“Keep that rod with you,” Synarion added as she opened the back door to grab her bag.

“Yeah, I got that.” She closed the car door, put her bags over her shoulder, and crossed the block to her mother’s. The girl needed to be there for her; the poor woman was dealing with her missing husband alone for three weeks.

Onto business, Synarion could put an end to this World Mother cult. The bloodsuckers and their hellseed keepers had to explain themselves, offer a cure for Abbygail, and accept defeat before he balanced them.



## CHAPTER 20

# PERSUASION

The drive to the greenhouse took him outside of town. He double-checked the coordinates he jotted on a notepad before leaving, looking at the map on his smartphone, his GPS disabled. He was no fool; limiting his digital footprint was an unwritten rule of blending in. The nymph also knew how to read a map from where he was to where he needed to go. Navigating was a lost skill in the modern world, replaced with reliance on technology pointing where to go. That was one advantage he had.

One hour through the dark, he exited the circular highway onto a straight one, and at last a gravel range road that led to a



dirt path along a small hill with trees and bushes on both sides. Chain-linked fences surrounded the private property. Tire tracks were visible on the dirt. This was it. As a precaution, Synarion reversed the car onto the gravel range road in the makeshift parking lane. His car's muffler was not top-notch, and he needed stealth.

Synarion equipped his weapons: throwing stars in his thigh-strapped pouch, spiked knuckles in his pocket, and several wooden stakes inside his jacket. He brought his phone, on silent, and the keys. Show time.

Through the low bushes he went, crouching low and staying in the shadows away from the ever-watching lunar sphere. It was more natural for him to maneuver through Mother Nature's land than the man-made one. It made him invisible as he travelled alongside the dirt path, over the chain-linked fence, and into the property.

He moved on the incline inside the parameter, drawing a throwing star once he spotted two long rectangular buildings with steep, angled glass rooftops. Several cars, two trucks, and a semi parked in the front beside a third building made of concrete. The rear of the semi-truck was open with a ramp, and the door of the concrete building pried open. They were loading the truck.

Synarion equipped one spiked knuckle and crept up the parking lot and circled to the side with the semi. It was clear. He crouched to the truck to look inside. Black tarps with rope around them formed the shapes of several dozen bodies. They didn't move and had a foul stench of rotting organic material and a metallic sting. Flesh and blood.

The rattling of a wheel caused his ear to twitch, and he moved into the shadows as two men came from the open door of the building, each pulling a dolly. Their dark robes grazed the dirt. The hoods kept them faceless, each moving a corpse-sized tarp into the semi.

Synarion crept to the semi-truck again, watching the men stack the tarps against the others. He leaped onto the semi in a single silent jump and aimed his throwing star. The blade soared into the back of a hellseed keeper's skull. He toppled onto the tarps in front of him, dead before he knew it. The balancer took a second throwing star, leaped forward in one roll and onto his feet, bringing the blade to the second man's throat. The man gasped at the sight of his dead comrade.

"What are these?" Synarion whispered.

"Give thine heart to the wild magic," the man said. The highlights of the bristles on his chin and his angular nose were the only visible features on his shadowed face. No fangs. He was human.

"What?" Synarion asked.

"To the Prince and the Lady of Nature. Redeem the consideration of this world. Covet large and small. Despise weakling and poor. Semblance of evil all not near thee. Never give nor earn thine shame."

Synarion poked the blade into the man's neck. "Answer me."

"Redeem the consideration of this world! Redeem the consideration of this world!"

Synarion ran the blade along the man's neck, turning his chanting into gurgles. The balancer held him as the man clutched his throat, reaching the ground in a gentle fall.

*Useless*, Synarion thought. He stepped to the first hellseed keeper and examined his mouth; there were no fangs. Scarification ran along the dome of his skull. He stripped him of his robe. To Synarion's luck, these World Mother cultists wore indistinguishable matching clothing. This disguise suited his mission well. He put the robe over his head as crinkling came from one of the tarps. Synarion pulled the neck over his head and raised his spiked knuckle. The black tarp hissed, shaking from side to side. A second one wiggled, and a third, fourth, fifth, each black tarp sounding like rattlesnakes.

*Feed us nutrients . . .*

The familiar thousands of whispers pierced into Synarion's ear, making him cover them to no point, for the sound existed in his mind. It was like with Valturus, a psychic penetration. These were the children of the World Mother, grown from seedlings.

*Give us the lifeblood of fated men.*

"You buggers drink blood," Synarion mumbled. Of course, these plants couldn't be normal and replenished from water. The World Mother birthed damned leeches. He wanted to untie one of the ropes and take the tarp off to come face-to-face with one of the hellseeds. The balancer also knew it was a terrible idea. He would deal with these monsters later.

Their rattling and shaking escalated, whipping side to side. Synarion stepped away as the closest tarp's rope loosened. At

the base of the plant, a black vine covered in spikes slithered out and travelled towards the balancer. It weaved side to side and changed direction towards the man clutching his neck. He was inhaling his last breaths as the vine coiled around his open throat. The pricks pierced into the flesh and pulled them up, suctioning the fluids from inside. The man's arms fell to the side, and his eyes stared at the ceiling, dead.

A second vine poked from another plant, moving from under the tarp and towards a blood pool formed underneath the man. They curled around the puddle, letting the spikes act as straws, soaking the nutrients.

*More . . . More!*

Synarion kept moving backwards, letting the unnatural plants feast. More vines wormed onto the truck bed, and as one, they pulled both corpses into the dark mass of tarps. The balancer flung his hood over and snagged one of the dollies, leaving the semi-truck down the ramp. That was a small taste of what the hellseeds were. He should have expected that they would be a terror. The World Mother's power was great, and he also questioned if these plants converted people to vampires. He recalled the butchered corpse in Margrave's familiar's tub. If his hunch was correct, these vines were responsible for that ring-covered body.

The hellseed keepers were loading them into the semi, taking them somewhere. He needed more data on what the ritual entailed. To summarize: seeing the sprouted hellseeds made Synarion wish he had brought gasoline to incinerate this

abomination. Abbygail's cousin and her friends were clever in making a homemade flamethrower. The World Mother was made of fire. Did her children thrive in it?

He got the rattling dolly, which had the left wheel squeaking at each interval as he entered the concrete building through the hallway. It led to the first greenhouse at the end with the set of doors pried open. To his left and right were closed rooms. He opened one in passing to see a janitorial closet. The balancer continued into the building, getting a whiff of fresh greenery in the humid space. Rows of plants hung from metal bars and on long tables. Frosted tarps draped from the metal frame of the ceiling, serving as dividing walls, preventing him from seeing deeper into the building. The wheel was a nuisance, and he rested the dolly against a table. His mission continued through the aisle with his head low, staying discrete and passing one of the tarps into a new greenhouse room.

In the sectioned area, ten people in trench coats looked at the moon, the single light source. Two arched their heads to Synarion with blank gazes, seeing through him. He kept his march, acting like he had duties to attend to. It was true. He passed by one person, noticing chains moved underneath their velvet trench coat. The others wore the same outfit. They had tight bindings around their waists and shoulders. Their saturated necks had speckles of blood. The skin was loose and lifeless.

*Decapitated heads on bodies*, he thought.

The one in front of him, a woman no older than thirty, turned her head to him. Her mouth twitched into a robotic smile and she swayed side to side in an unappealing dance. She

wasn't human nor of the old world. Her motions were being controlled. The others danced with her in sync with her pendulum motion.

Her trench coat unwrapped from her neck with no aid from her hands. There were no limbs. She glided to Synarion and stopped from the chains as the coat unravelled. The inner portion was bright red with white spikes running in linear lines. Beneath it was another layer of the velvet material. The rope around her shoulders prevented the coat from continuing. She jerked forward again, the shackles rattling.

*Feed the World Mother's children . . .*

*Could it be?* he thought. Heads, like the missing ones from the Drainer cases Abbygail spoke of.

He exhaled and kept walking, calming his heart rate. The balancer had seen plenty in his day, not quite as obscure as this. It struck his core, knowing the root of their existence was Mother Nature's nemesis.

The divider on the other side of the room pushed open, and three hellseed keepers marched along the circle's rim towards Synarion. One had a tarp, another had rope, and the third pulled a dolly. He put his hands in his pockets, sliding his fingers into his spiked knuckles. The hellseed keepers moved past him towards the dead woman he was staring at. One threw the covering over while the other shackled her, and the third unlocked the chains.

Synarion continued on. He needed to understand the greenhouse more before going on an enforcing rampage. The

balancer slipped through the divider and into the new room. This space was darker, shielded from the moonlight. More drapes formed a zig-zag maze leading to an orange and red glow. He turned the final corner to face five cloaked beings standing around a table. Their nodes and pointing fingers confirmed that they weren't hellseeds. He stayed in the darkness to analyze the room.

The table housed a couple of camping lamps and scripts of an ancient language the balancer hadn't seen in centuries. Illustrations and glyphs made infographics. What caught his attention were the top two papers to the side. One had a drawing of a large flower with vines holding a decapitated head. The second paper showed a different plant, closer to a Venus flytrap, with thick roots acting as legs, similar to a Root Walker. Both drawings had dashed lines forming a wall between the plants and a large stick. These matched the documents Valturus had when they were on the shores of Aewouson.

A flower drawing covered most of the table, containing black and white petals that formed a pentagram: the World Mother's pendant. In the core of the flowergram was a bark-covered hand, ending in vines, inside a flaming door. On the paper, black and red seeds outlined the pentagram. Black powder surrounded the flower in a circular shape.

Behind the hellseed keepers was an easel with a corkboard mounted on it containing a map of North America. Pins pierced into dots representing major cities and some towns, with threads connecting with different colours leading to Edmonton.

By *Dega’Mostikas*, Synarion thought, scanning the map. The pins were across Canada and the United States. These hellseed keepers were working across the continent to gather their supplies to this location.

“Once we’re done loading up the hellsprouts, we head for the river valley,” said a female voice with a soft, smoking texture. It was a voice Synarion was too familiar with. There, Valturus stood, with her hood concealing her face alongside the other four with the darkness shrouding their faces. He knew she’d be here. A part of him hoped not. Hope is for humans.

Valturus continued, “The gothi will meet us there. He and his sect have been collecting and aligning the plants per the ritual instructions while we’ve been shipping our clusters to them.”

“At long last,” came a male’s rough voice. He held a long wooden rod in one hand, his fingers fiddling with the indents of the wood. “We’ll witness the rise of our mother.”

Valturus added, “We will be done with the terror of human reign and this Earth’s useless numen.”

The largest of the five, a head taller than her and built like an ox, pointed at the flowergram. He spoke, “The gothi and I have been gathering them, feeding them, and keeping the ritual location safe.”

Valturus nodded. “Perfect. Your druids have done honourable work, which the World Mother will recognize in time. The humans presume serial killers. Though I fear our time is of the essence.”

“Oh?” asked the man in a gravelled voice.

“One of my converted, Margrave, doesn’t answer. His actions in Surrey didn’t go unnoticed.”



*He wasn't feeding for himself*, Synarion thought.

"No word?" asked the man.

"None," the other said.

"And will any of the other, uhm, vampires be joining us?"

"There's no time for them to arrive. A balancer of the Grove is connecting the pieces," Valturus said. Her voice went up a notch. It was an odd emotional response.

The large man shook his head. "No concern. We finished loading the remaining hellsprouts ahead of schedule, and the summoning can commence by midnight."

*By Mother Nature*, Synarion thought.

Valturus pointed at the flowergram with her long nail, tapping a seed. "Our gothi and I have been preparing the protection ritual for us with the others. It should be ready before we initiate the World Mother's summoning."

"Yes," the brute spoke. "It hasn't been easy gathering remnants of the ancient ones. Root Walkers aren't common, and the amount needed to contain her is more than expected."

"She is vengeful and blinded. We have to reason with her before freeing her from the circle, remind her who her children are. Will we have enough Root Walker branches?"

*Why would they need to contain their own god?* Synarion thought. Bark Nose's essence was far more potent than he first realized.

The brute spoke. "Our gothi and his supporters are diligent at work gathering geological petrified wood from the ground, verifying them as Root Walkers. The last shipment is on its way."

The man with the gravelled voice grasped his staff with both hands. He said, "And we shouldn't wait?"

“Haaah! For what?” Valturus asked, shaking her head.

“Won’t the summoning be most potent with the moon’s alignment?” the man asked, tilting his head.

“We have more hellsprouts than expected. Their potency will suffice for the lack of direct correlation. Now, any other inexperienced questions?”

The room was silent.

Synarion needed to act. The hellseed keepers weren’t his concern. It was Valturus. She would be able to identify him even with his hood. They knew each other too well; she would smell his blood if he got too close. That meant stealth was no longer an option.

He took a throwing star in each hand, aimed, and flung the blade at the closest target: a woman who hadn’t spoken. The weapon spun in a whisper, piercing her heart. She grunted, looking at the glimmering death in shock as a second blade buzzed by. It aimed at the brute. He lifted his forearm, the blade pinging off a hidden metal cuff. The hellseed keepers looked in his direction as the dying woman fell. It was time to dance.

The balancer equipped his spiked knuckles and burst from the shadows towards the remaining four. Valturus hissed, her emerald eyes sparkling as her fangs extended. The brute grabbed her by the forearm, urging her to move. The other two charged their attacker. One swung his staff around, giving Valturus time to snag hellseeds from the flowergram. She pocketed them and folded the illustration. The second attacker drew a knife and lunged at Synarion. He ducked and leaped

forward, landing on the table in front of Valturus. She paused mid-motion towards the exit behind her.

“Haaah! Synarion? You bold idiot,” she said.

He raised his spiked knuckles, eyeing the four, awaiting Valturus’s command. He adjusted his stance, the table wobbling. “Bold, yes. Though, no idiot. You led me here.”

“Do you know this intruder?” the brute asked.

“Yes,” Valturus said, her throat tensing. She brushed the brute off her arm. “Give me a moment with him. Druids, lower your weapons.”

Synarion kept his raised as the other two relaxed their battle stances. He spoke. “Your balancing offences keep stacking. By Dega’ Mostikas, what are you doing here?”

“Synarion, sweet Synarion.” Valturus smiled. “I admire your determination and loyalty to the old world, Mother Nature, and the Grove. Ancient ways that were once so sacred are dust in the sand. I told you once, twice, and countless more that it was a relic of the past. How can you not see this?”

“Not much to see,” Synarion said.

“I moved on from my days of ruling. Why couldn’t y-o-ou?” Her voice trembled, and she cleared her throat. “Do you remember when I first found you?” she asked.

“Yes,” Synarion said. He clenched his fists. *Don’t give in*, he thought as he stared into the endless depth of her eyes. The hairs on his skin stood, fingers turning cold. A warmth pulsed from his heart, reminding him of when they met.

“Was it what you hoped for?” her voice softened.

“No.”

“Was it what you wished for?” she asked, stepping to the table. She hadn’t blinked. Vampires didn’t.

“No.” He didn’t wish for them to meet. Who would have thought they would run into one of the pure vampires? Yet, they met, and he couldn’t have imagined it would lead to this.

“I wish it were,” the vampire said, looking to the ground. She lifted her head, tilting it. “Did you enjoy our time together?”

“Yes.” The psychic power was dominating his will. *Resist . . . resist.*

“Can we make it last a little longer?” she asked, placing her hands on the table. She looked at him, eyebrows slanted in a submissive beg.

*Keep it together. World Mother, Mother Nature.* “No.”

The hellseed keepers looked to Valturus, confused, waiting to handle the situation as it should be. The staff-wielding druid tightened his grip on his weapon, hoping they could initiate combat.

Valturus shook her head, brows flattening. A glimmer came from her eye. It was a tear. “You were gone before I even arrived.”

“No,” Synarion said, with far too much eagerness.

“I disagree. Immortality cannot bring the precious moments with it.”

“It cannot.” Synarion swallowed a thick lump of saliva. He felt the warm sweat rise on his skin, neutralizing the ice from her potent mind games.

She wiped the tear and cleared her throat. “A shame.”

“Yes.” *Stay together.*

She took a step away, looking at him with a new face. The welcoming deepness of her eyes was closed. They were those of a tiger staring at their prey, as vampires did to other species. She said, "They'll live on in our memories."

"Until those are gone," Synarion said. He exhaled through his nose, eyes shifting to each foe before him.

"I disagree."

"Then it was nothing from the start." *Don't.*

"Perhaps," Valturus said.

"Then everything is," Synarion replied.

"Sometimes I wonder," she clutched the flowergram drawing, creasing the paper. "Does it have to be this way?" she added.

"I'm afraid so."

"I tried Synarion, I did. Is this how you want our lov—" she stopped herself. "Is this how you want it to be? Hmmm?"

"No. I hope you can explain a detail concerning the World Mother that will redeem you. You sent me to Club Revelation, sacrificing your first converted. Are you that cold that you kill your own kind for the sake of the World Mother rising? Tell me there's more."

Valturus bit her lip. "He wasn't supposed to be there."

"An attempted dead end? Well done. He's gone, you know. Margrave," Synarion said.

"Haaah! You are a heartless balancer. You deserve what you get," Valturus said.

"I am what Mother Nature requires. Text messaging the coordinates? Really, Valturus? A point of weakness in an intricate plan to raise your numen, whom you have to keep in a protection circle. What is this madness you seek?"

“Synarion, my dear, I didn’t want you to get involved. We want the same thing, you and I.”

Synarion squeezed his fists.

“I get your frustrations. You’re holding the weight of the world on your shoulders. We of the old world are a dying people. Vampires, shimen, vazeleads, pick your race, it doesn’t matter. We’re disappearing from this world because the humans have infected it.”

“Yes, thank you for the obvious history lesson.”

“You have watched them rise in the new world. By the Creator, you mutilated yourself to blend in. The humans eradicated the Earth’s history and sent countless to extinction. Their latest industrial and digital revolutions push us to the edge.”

“And you’ve done well exploiting their system, moving funds around in fifty years, new identity, new fake family who you’d kill when they expired their usefulness. A real estate company, clever. You do what you do, vanish.”

“I’m tired of it, Synarion. Aren’t you? Your efforts are fruitless. You run around chasing bottom feeders like Margrave. You help those who wish to hide. You pretend to be a private investigator in trade of cash for humans and the old alike. Is this how you wish to live your remaining days? And how many days more is that? A few thousand if they don’t find you? I’ve been around for far longer and have seen catastrophes and rebirths provided by Mother Nature. The suffering. The pain. She cares for none of us. She shakes us off her Earth like a bad case of fleas. It doesn’t end well for her children. Please, Synarion,

your attempts to maintain balance for a loveless mother are pathetic.”

Synarion raised an eyebrow. “Your psychic mirage failed and you’re reverting to insults?”

“It wasn’t a mirage! I-its not for my gain. I miss you.” She brought her hand to her mouth, caught off guard by her words. The hellseed keepers straightened their postures, taken aback by her statement. Her face scrunched inwards. “Haaah! Synarion, the World Mother is the solution. I’m more surprised you didn’t know of her from your precious Grove.”

“I was much younger, executing orders.”

“Yes, you were. Think, Synarion, this is the silver bullet to the efforts that you have been working towards. With one fell swoop, we can restore the world's balance.”

“Tell me, how is that going to work? The World Mother is so divine, being confined to a protective circle?”

“Her anger is great. The numen wishes destruction upon her sister’s Earth and is blind to the sight of her own children. She needs to be reasoned. I never used you, Synarion. You wanted to believe that because you chose to defend the broken world. I choose to defy it. That is where we differ. I am offering you an exit, forever. Drop the balancing act. Do yourself a damn favour.”

Joining Valturus would be a quick fix to his pain. The isolation would be over. He wouldn’t have to drown his basic needs in liquor and remain so cold to those who offended balance. He could experience happiness, like his brief blips with Valturus long ago. His words, actions, and body demonstrate how tired he was. Despite his vigorous training and willpower, the years

of battles showed through mental and physical scars. He exhibited a jaded and cold attitude. Look at how he treated Abbygail. Escape was a wonderful thought, and that was where it stayed: an idea in his mind. The practical doing of the task meant contributing to the death of Mother Nature and replacing her with a hateful numen.

“What of the World Mother’s children? The hellsprouts?” Synarion asked.

Valturus’s eyes moved side to side, reading Synarion. She knew his decision. “Fair question,” Valturus said. “They are easier shown than explained. Would you care to join me?” She folded the map and tucked it into her robe.

“Are you going to feed me to them?” Synarion asked. “I’m well aware of what they do.”

Valturus chuckled. “Druids, please step aside. We are going to have a discussion.”

A scowl painted on the brute’s face. “Valturus, he killed one of our sisters. We should feed him to the World Mother’s children.”

“Hush-hush,” Valturus said, waving her hand. “Stay with me and give us space.” She walked to the table, hopping onto it, and stepped close, far too close. Her sweet metallic aroma from years of blood drinking mixed in with her natural welcoming floral scent flooded his nostrils. He liked it. A sense of comfort hugged his heart. The logical portion of his mind struck: he could reach for the stake in his jacket, ending this.

“Synarion, come with me,” she said. The vampire slid her fingers around his wrists and lowered his arms. “Good,”



Valturus said. She gave a gentle tug, bringing the balancer off the table. They moved past the brute, who glared at Synarion.

“Take care of this corpse,” Valturus said. “Feed her to the children of the World Mother. It’ll be the burial that she desired.”

“Of course,” came the gravelled voice. “I will prepare her.”

Valturus took Synarion through another tarp divider. The brute and a dagger-wielding druid followed six meters behind, far enough away they couldn’t hear the two speak. Valturus walked in a slow stroll, odd compared to how urgent their actions were moments before.

She spoke in a low voice, her breath tingling his ear. “I’ve given you my grand speech of why I am here. I didn’t want you to be involved, from day one. Club Revelation was supposed to be a dead end.”

“It’s odd that you would send me to where Margrave relaxed,” Synarion said. “And what, you’d summon the World Mother, and I’d avoid her destruction?”

“Yes, well . . . perhaps in my subconscious I wanted you to find this. Perhaps I want you to join us. I want it all, Synarion. We had something.”

“Love is your grand motivator?” Synarion asked.

“It would be a perk. Hmmm?”

“And what of your family?” Synarion asked. “Your current husband and children?”

“Mmmm. They’re already taken care of with the thirteen-seed remedy.”

“This is why we differ,” Synarion said.

“I can’t have them lingering around. I’ve done far worse.”

“And you were going to show me these World Mother children? The seeds? I pieced together they create an amensalism relationship with their host.”

Valturus squinted. “Such a crude term. It’s not a hostile symbiosis.”

“Right, it provides revelation. Can it be reverted?”

Valturus smiled at him. “Did you eat the seeds?”

“No.”

“Haaah! Another balancing mission of yours. A hero. I’ll show you.”

The vampire took Synarion through a solid door made of glass and metal, leading to the second greenhouse. His fingers remained a fist, spiked knuckles ready for anything. Being close to her was chipping away at his will. His heart was warm, and he knew her tactic. He could use her conversion to gather more data, learn how many hellseed keepers there were, where the summoning circle was, and what weaknesses the World Mother and her children had.

This was a mental dance, as it was between him and Valturus. That is what made their spark. He couldn’t let her get the upper hand. The balancer needed to use her again to discover her numen's secrets.

WORLD MOTHER ASCENSION BY KONN LAVERY



## CHAPTER 21

# A MORE ROBUST SPECIES

Locked arm-in-arm, as they once did centuries ago, Synarion questioned if he would have to kill her. He did prepare for it. She was far too close to him to reach into his jacket and reveal a stake. Valturus was fast. Instead, he let her lead him through the greenhouse, passing a long row of harmless plants. He needed to discover an antidote for Abbygail's situation. With a sliver of luck, he hoped he could steer Valturus clear of this madness. Her comrades were far enough away he could attempt reason one final time before the situation became

grave.

“You and I, Synarion, are quite similar,” the vampire said. Her hand cupped his bicep, a comfort he once enjoyed. “Few old world beings have seen as much as we have.”

“I cannot fathom what you have seen in comparison,” he asked. “The eras, your former empire, your current state, and what you think the World Mother will offer you.”

“The days of conquest are long past me. You should know this by now. If anything, for years, I’ve enjoyed the passiveness of being a part of the human civilizations. It was simple.”

“And now?”

“Now I want balance, like you,” the other said.

“Valturus, if the World Mother was so caring of her creations, why do the hellsprouts need to be chained? Why is she so blind with rage that she needs to be kept inside a protective circle?”

“You wouldn’t jump into a tub full of disinfectant solution to clean yourself, would you? My people are done hiding in the shadows. Vampires aside, so is everyone. You are, too. The World Mother and her hellsprouts are the cleaning agent.”

Synarion squinted, watching her sharp teeth. “And what will you feed on when they eradicate the planet?”

“It is a dominance issue with wildlife. I will put humans in their place, and the World Mother will oversee the new Earth’s ecosystem.”

“With vampires and hellsprouts?” He raised an eyebrow.

Valturus nodded. “Yes, see? You understand the benefits of the World Mother. She would maintain the garden of Earth far better than Mother Nature has done.”

“Mother Nature lets the Earth evolve on its own. Forced creationism results in unbalanced entities.”

“Such a pacifist,” Valturus said.

“Even if you succeed, and the World Mother rises, Mother Nature will fight. It would cause unneeded destruction. Countless casualties. That’s no way to handle Earth. This isn’t going to work in your favour.”

Valturus freed his arm. “And what makes you say that? You haven’t spoken to the World Mother, have you?”

“No, I can’t say I have had the pleasure,” Synarion said. The two stopped walking and faced one another.

“She has talked to me,” Valturus said. “She calls to her children, looking for aid.”

“As Mother Nature has done,” Synarion said.

“Indeed. Synarion, the World Mother’s arrival has been in the works for a long time. I started the process long before you and I met. The hellseed keepers are a new sect of what I created on Aewouson. You won’t stop it. You can join it.”

Valturus led him to the end of the greenhouse, which circled to the first building. She pushed open the metal door, taking them into a new hall, and to the first closed door. The square-shaped room contained lights mounted on the four corners projecting onto the unfinished concrete. At the end of the room were three hellseed keepers, tied up with chains and rope from head to toe, floor to ceiling. Each had a stick tied onto a necklace draped over their chest, their hoods off, exposing their bald scarification covered scalps. Their closed eyes twitched with their limbs as they groaned, sweat beading on their blanched bodies. The man in the middle panted the

loudest. Caked blood coated his lips. The sticks themselves were far older than Bark Nose's branch.

"See?" Valturus said. She stepped into the room, extending her hands. "This is an example of the World Mother's power. Her children breathe through these brave souls willing to transform themselves beyond their human limitation and birthed anew, as one with the World Mother."

"Do you understand how mad you sound?" Synarion asked.

"Mad? No, my dear Synarion. Innovative," Valturus said.

"And will you take the transformation if you are so willing to embrace the World Mother?" Synarion asked.

"I am a child of the World Mother already. Our gothi—"

"Let me guess, your supposed father?" Synarion said.

Valturus raised an eyebrow. "Quite the detective, hmmm? The hellseed keepers kept my empire's purpose alive as a small flame, and eventually, the gothi stepped in with their vast knowledge while I've been dormant."

"Since the old world collapsed?" Synarion asked.

A toothy grin appeared on her face. "Yes, he would be quite familiar to you."

"Why? Who are they?" Synarion said.

"Join us, and you'll meet them."

"Let's say that I do, if you and the gothi have been working towards this for so long, why now?"

"Mmmm, fair question, balancer. Maghice offered many powers. Summoning is one of them. My empire's collapse was a setback."

Synarion added, "And the old world's."

Valturus raised an eyebrow. “Where do you find maghice when the core of the fifth element shatters?”

“Pockets. There are supposed pools of it around the world. Large enough ones haven’t been found to perform a summoning of any kind, let alone anything of importance,” Synarion said.

“Right you are, my dear. Minor pockets here and there are wonderful for telepathic communication, a good spook for younglings with an Ouija board. It’s not enough for anything of value.” Valturus walked around one of the men to the far corner and placed her hands on his shoulders. His bloodshot eyes opened, looking straight past Synarion. Drool dripped from the bottom of his lip. Valturus continued, “Our gothi is attuned to the Earth, like you, and was responsible for searching and finding one in this fine Canadian city.” She took the necklace and slipped the Root Walker pendant from over his head.

*Ancient one has been lifted!*

Synarion’s ears twitched, hearing a thousand voices pierce his mind. He knew what came next and hoped the afterlife would have mercy on his soul. Valturus returned to him as the man convulsed, his head whipping back.

She said, “To answer your original question: what of the World Mother’s children? The hellsprouts? Here’s your demonstration of their beauty.” She wrapped an arm around Synarion’s shoulder, leaning on him.

The man’s head flung forward, spewing hot blood onto the floor. He coughed several times and clutched his chest. His



skull launched backward, the tendons in his neck tightening. Several bulges slithered under the skin, moving up the throat. He fell to his knees, hacking more red onto the concrete. His eyes popped as he screamed. "World Mother! Seed me! You have blessed my soul! I am yours and forever more!" He coughed again and a wet howl escaped his esophagus. His spine seized. The jaw hung open as black blood-coated vines, covered in thorns, slithered against his teeth. His neck pulsated while more vines forced their way out of his mouth, dripping in fluids. The man's eyes rolled behind his lids. He gurgled, and his body fell limp, being held by the creature inside, escaping through each available hole in his body. Vines wiggled in the ears and the nostrils from under his robe. More pushed through the neck, shredding the skin with their sharp spikes. Bones cracked, and his torso showered in red. More vines than flesh appeared in place of his throat, and a snap echoed in the room. The dismembered head rose from the torso with the aid of dozens of vines, rising to the ceiling.

Synarion watched, speechless to the horror. Vines cracked the chest cavity open, freeing the large stem of the plant and folded black petals that resembled a long trench coat. The man's corpse toppled to the ground, taking the chains and ropes. Petal unfolded, unrestricted, letting the bright red interior fly free. The child of the World Mother, a flower, had birthed.

"Haaah!" Valturus said, squeezing Synarion's shoulder. An open smile rested on her face as she watched the fountain of blood ooze off the plant. Her eyes were wide, drunk off the red. The petal of the flower bobbed, and the lifeless head

looked at Synarion. Its vines slithered onto the ground towards Valturus and Synarion. They stopped halfway once the vampire held the Root Walker pendant.

“Thirsty, aren’t they, hmmm? Synarion, you’ve witnessed the transhumanism event that turns the former parasite into a useful tool. Alive, yes, through the blood and oxygen of the plant, and a witness to the hellspout’s will.”

Synarion stared at the lifeless head, realizing that the human was alive by a sliver somewhere in there. This was the time Valturus expected a response from him. He got his answer and had nothing to say.

“That’s the presentation?” Synarion asked. “How could this offer balance?”

“I’m giving you a new option, Synarion. This is your one chance to take it,” she said.

“And what if one consumed the seeds by mistake? What then?”

Valturus freed her grip. “And you’re sure you weren’t idiotic enough to take the thirteen-seed remedy?”

“Yeah, I was,” Synarion lied.

Valturus hissed. “You’re as bad of a liar as you are masking your heart. Join me, now or never.”

Synarion looked to see the brute and the dagger-wielding one standing by the door frame. The brute took one step forward. Synarion tightened the grip of his spiked knuckles. He wasn’t going to get an answer for Abbygail.

Synarion lunged a fist at Valturus’s pendant-wielding hand. The spikes pierced into her hand, causing the skin to smoke from the silver weapon. She hissed and dropped the pendant.

He threw an uppercut and caught the wood pendant as it fell. The vampire stepped away from the second attack. Both hellseed keepers bolted forward as he swung at Valturus again. He needed the map.

The brute launched a fist at Synarion. He rolled to the side, putting the stick in his mouth, and sprung to his feet beside the second druid. The man thrust his blade. Synarion stepped aside and punched his exposed gut, followed by his jaw, sending droplets of red into the air. The druid toppled backwards while the brute's roundhouse kick soared towards him. Synarion leaped to Valturus. She blipped from view. He threw a fist at the empty space near the door, predicting where she'd run to. The vampire stopped, an inch away from meeting the spikes. He swung again, stopping midway. She went to block the attack, falling for the trap, and his other fist slammed her nose. The spikes collided with the cartilage, crunching the structure and sending smoke into the air. Synarion snagged her robe, bringing her forward. His other hand slipped a wooden stake from his jacket, and he spun around her. One arm wrapped around her neck, and the other brought the stake above her chest. The vampire froze with her eyes locked on the wooden weapon. The two hellseed keepers stood motionless.

"You wouldn't," Valturus said. Her bottom lip jerked.

Synarion unwrapped his arm around her neck, pressing the stake's sharp point against her chest and forcing her back against him. "Try me," he said through gritted teeth, holding the Root Walker stick. His hand moved to her robe pocket.

Valturus hissed. “You don’t have it in you. It’s why you’ve listened to me. That’s why you considered my offer. It’s because, deep in your heart, we want the same thing.”

His hand found the folded map. He took it and stuffed it into his own robe, and brought his arm around her neck. The balancer spoke. “Like you said, it will exist in memory.” His hand with the stake shook. *Come on*, he thought. He had to. His arm pressed down, ripping the robe’s fabric.

*Synarion*, came a voice in his mind. It was the warm and welcoming sound he longed for. The stake’s point poked against her bare skin.

*My dear.*

The weapon froze. Smoke rising from where it met flesh.

*Why?*

His hand shook.

An elbow with the force of a hammer slammed into his gut. Air escaped his body, and he shoved the stake in. She slipped under his weakened grasp. The wooden stake’s sharp point dug through the flesh and sliced upwards across her chest, nipping the neck and against her chin. The vampire wheezed and lashed her claws into his forearm. She tore through the leather and into his flesh, stepping free from danger. The stake ripped into her cheek, with smoke rising from her open wounds. The vampire dashed from danger in one blink, letting the hellseed keepers engage.

*Damnit*, *Synarion* thought, putting the stake away and raising his fists. He couldn’t do it. Thoughts for later. His arm stung. The brute threw a kick. He dodged. The second attacker slashed at him. *Synarion* parried the attack with his spiked

knuckles, watching Valturus reappear behind the two chained hellseed keepers. The smoke simmered on her wounds, with blood drizzling on the skin. She removed their pendants and unshackled the ankle chains around the middle one, snagged his neck, and dragged him to the door.

“Leave him to his fate!” Valturus snarled. “With me.”

The brute launched another foot. Synarion dodged an oncoming dagger, and the boot hit him in the shoulder, knocking him against the wall. His head rebounded against the concrete, vision doubled, while the smaller hellseed keeper snagged the Root Walker pendant from him, leaving him defenceless against the hellsprouts.

“Burn in Dega’ Mostikas’s Triangle,” Valturus said, her voice trembling. “I’ve tr-i-ied, Synarion. This is where our path ends.” She released the human from her grasp as her comrades exited the room, with the brute leaving first. The vines from the bloomed plant slithered towards Synarion. The two sacrificial druids collapsed onto the ground, groaning in pain, coughing blood. Both convulsed. Black vines wormed from their mouths.

Synarion snagged a throwing star. His vision honed in. He flung one towards the doorway. Valturus dodged it, though he was aiming behind her, towards the druid with the wood pendant. It pierced into his back, and he toppled to the ground.

Valturus shouted in a strident boom. “Witness the true power of the World Mother! For her children’s might will cleanse your Earth. May we reunite in the afterlife, free of our blood-bound duties.” Valturus stepped over the bleeding hellseed keeper and stormed through the hall.

The bloomed plant's vines sprung towards Synarion, missing him by a step. A second aimed for his neck. Spiked knuckles weren't going to do. Synarion pocketed them and equipped one throwing star per hand. He slid his fingers into the central holes to grip them like blades. He sliced into the oncoming vine, splitting it along the center. The plant retreated them and engaged two new ones.

The groaning hellseed keepers spewed red liquid from their offices thanks to the vines ripping their bodies. The plant tore the stomach from the one man in the corner. He yelped, and his upper spine cracked. The skin and neck tendons peeled apart with the head erecting into the air. The petals unfolded. More vegetation toppled onto the ground with the warm organs underneath.

Vines from the first plant circled around, forcing Synarion to stay in the room. Six slithered along the walls, with three heading onto the ceiling. He leaped forward, somersaulting towards the new hellspout. Upside down, he slashed the blades onto the vines entangled with intestines. He landed on his feet, half a meter from the plant's stem. The black and red petals vibrated with the white spikes rattling. Synarion jumped and twirled, hacking into the raised vines and severing the human skull from the plant. The head fell first, with the vines following. Blood showered the ceiling from the wounded plant. Its petals shook faster. The stem wiggled, raining the room in red.

*We must feed on the flesh of the unworthy!*

Synarion chopped a few of the wiggling vines, creating more blood streams from the deflating plant. It made a final attempt, coiling one vine around his ankle, piercing the flesh, and sucking his life force. The balancer swung low, freeing himself. One removed.

A maniacal laugh boomed from the remaining hellseed keeper who stayed on his knees. His jaw stretched. Black claws ripped from the inside of his throat, pulling free. The lips peeled from the sides, ripping the skin. He gurgled the words, “Thh-uh W-u-r-l-duh M-u-d-u-r s-e-e-ded th-h-h-!” The jaw snapped free from the skull. Vomit projected from his throat; intestines followed, tossed to the side from the devil within.

Synarion swung into the six pursuing vines from the first hellspout. The several on the wall retreated. Three draped from the ceiling, whipping at him. Thorns sliced open his cheek, and he sprung clear of danger, rolling on the wet ground.

A snap came from the last sacrificial hellseed keeper, their chest splitting in two. The black claws reappeared from the breached chasm, tearing the upper portion of the human in two. Pink paste exploded. The bone marrow landed on Synarion as he stood, spinning to face the new hellspout. Black teeth pushed the druid’s corpse aside, freeing the top and bottom green leaves. It was a giant Venus flytrap with thigh-thick vine appendages shaking off the chunked innards of the man.

“Synarion!” came a girl’s cry. It wasn’t Valturus. It was far younger. “Synarion!” the voice called again. Behind the dripping blood of the Venus flytrap was a pale girl in a leather coat and

jeans, bangs covering her raised eyebrows. Her sky-blue eyes locked on the monstrosity blocking her from the room.

“Abbygail!” Synarion shouted, swinging at an oncoming vine. He dodged a couple more. There were too many.

“They’ve gone to the summoning!” she yelled.

*Ancient ones around us!*

“They won’t shut up!” Abbygail said. She raised an open red container of gasoline into view and chucked its contents onto the Venus flytrap, dousing it in liquid. Next, she targeted the ground leading to it.

The plant’s vines joined the battle. Their speed was double, giving Synarion little time to react. He leaped, avoiding the long reach of the giant’s arch. The vine smacked into the lesser ones dangling from the ceiling. Synarion stood as the dead hellseed keeper’s legs rose, re-animated from the plant within. It stood six feet two, hobbling towards Synarion. The split top of the human wobbled from the waist.

“Abbygail,” Synarion said. “Whatever you’re planning, do it now.”

The zombified legs stomped, one foot in front of the other. Its appendages recovered and swung again, forcing Synarion to leap towards the first hellspout.

The sharp whip of combustion echoed, illuminating the room orange. Flame channelled on the ground, following the fuel onto the Venus flytrap. The fire scathed the legs and travelled along the thick stem and to the tips.



*Stop!*

Synarion ducked from oncoming burning black vines. They slammed into the first hellspout, taking it with them and pushing the plant against the concrete wall. Fire migrated onto the flower, eating the smaller vines. Its petals shook while the heat consumed it. Burning flesh and blood gave the room a potent rustic smell, stinging his nostrils. The Venus flytrap squealed. Its fellow hellspout rattled. Both focused on their pain couldn't engage in battle, and they withered under the might of their dancing elemental nemesis.

Synarion sprinted for the door, jumping high and through the heat, passing the druid corpse, eaten by fire. He tumbled on the ground beside black leather combat boots. Abbygail aided him by pulling on his good arm. She brushed some of the smoke off his body until he shrugged her away. Both watched the two hellspouts squirm behind the flickering orange wall.

"I'll turn into that, won't I?" Abbygail asked. She caressed the stick that poked out of her tanktop. Bark Noses's branch stuck to her torso by several intervals of tape.

Synarion didn't reply. He looked at his wounds from the vines' thorns, wondering if he had an unfortunate fate, too. Paranoia. Thorns weren't vampire fangs. There weren't words to say, for she had witnessed the final stage of a hellseed. To no luck, they hadn't found a cure.



## CHAPTER 22

# NEW PLANS

Synarion and Abbygail left the hellsprouts to burn alive, slamming the door shut. Smoke trickled into the hall, meaning the fire alarms would be ringing at any moment. The hellseed keeper corpse was more fire than flesh, taking the Root Walker pendant with it; what a shame.

“Holy shit, you’re bleeding,” Abbygail said. She stepped forward, going to grab his arm.

He pushed her aside. His arm stung from whence Valturus scratched him. There wasn’t time to assess his wounds. “It’s fine. We need to move,” he said. Synarion wiped the blood from

his throwing stars and put them away, heading into the greenhouse.

Abbygail hurried to match his walking speed. “You can’t run around with those kinds of cuts. Shit, I can’t even tell what is your blood and what’s from those, those . . . things.”

“Come, there must be water in this greenhouse,” he said.

Synarion couldn’t drive covered in blood through the night. That was asking for trouble. At the moment, the greenhouse was a base to recover from the chaos. The hellseed keepers were no longer around, according to Abbygail. At the far end, away from where he found Valturus, was a hose. He threw off his blood-soaked robe, moving the flowergram paper into his coat first. His comrade turned the hose on and passed it to him. He washed off as much blood as possible from his face, hair, and limbs. The fresh wounds nipped.

“Talk, how are you here?” he said.

“Okaaay,” Abbygail said, sarcasm seeping from her tone. “My cousin. She sent me a text. She said her new friends, uh, Logan and Jake, were going to look for some weird ritual site deep in the river valley.”

“Anything else?” Synarion asked.

“Janet experienced the same symptoms I’ve been having. The voices, the stomach pains, the exhaustion. Worse though. I wonder if seeing Bark Nose suppressed the seeds.”

“And they found the ritual site? How?” Synarion asked.

“I have no idea. Her story is fragmented in text,” Abbygail said, taking her phone from her pocket. She lifted it for Synarion to see. He skimmed the last three texts.

(Janet: The voices Abby, they don't stop.

I wish you didn't get involved with this. I'm trying to get answers. We think the seeds came from Scotland, imported to Canada in 1796. We got petrified wood, it stops them.

I don't know where you can find some, if you do, hold onto it for dear life. Jake and Logan and I think we found answers, a cure. It is at their ritual circle. We found their base in an old home. There were books and clues. We'll test our mad theory and I'll come for you, okay?

10:45 PM)

(You: Janet, where are you? I'm in town.

Tell me where to go. I got help.

10:46 PM)

(Janet: The river valley, near the university

U of A. The fenced off section.

10:48 PM)

(You: Stay there, I'm coming.

10:49 PM)

(You: Hello?

10:54 PM)

(You: Please say something.

10:55 PM)

There it was, a rough idea of where to go. Abbygail proved herself useful twice, whereas Synarion failed. He nodded at the girl, confirming that he read it and that she did a good job. He could use a sidekick like a characterized hero.

The girl swiped through her phone. “That’s near the central west side of the river valley. She said that some old man had given the seeds to her and her friend Logan. The old man stalked them, so they followed his tracks. He is responsible, along with a large man in a robe and some brunette woman with striking green eyes. Janet didn’t say anything beyond that other than to watch for those three. It’s just text. She sounded frantic.”

*Valturus and her brute*, Synarion thought. *Or the gothi*. “I’ve seen two of them Janet mentioned. This old man, anything else on them?”

“No, that’s it.”

“You’ve done well,” Synarion said. He turned off the tap.

“Thanks,” Abbygail said, playing with her hair. “You made it kind of easy.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I found the coordinates to the greenhouse in your bag. Saw it when you were filling up on gas. You write things like an old man.”

“Oh. Right.”

“You have a phone. It’d be better to follow your rules that way,” Abbygail said.

*The sarcasm doesn’t stop*. “Well. I suppose I’m old-fashioned. Look, thanks for coming. You saved me. This is dangerous stuff. Bark Nose would be furious if he knew you were helping with this.”

“Well, he’s going to have to deal with that. This is serious, and besides, you need help, and I need yours. They almost got you.”

“They didn’t,” he said.

“Because I helped.”

Synarion rolled his eyes and sighed. She was right.

“And I need this fucking thing out of me,” Abbygail said, tapping her chest. “How am I supposed to stay still and tell my mom things are fine when I could be ripped apart at any moment? The news would label me as another victim of the drainer case.”

Synarion folded his arms. “Okay, I get it. How much of this did you catch before the fire?”

“I saw you and your girlfriend walking together, arm in arm. It was cute.” Abbygail put on a toothy smile, leaning on one leg.

“She’s not my-yes. We had ended ages ago. Her name is Valturus, and she’s dangerous. Stay clear of her,” Synarion said.

“I bet you they’re going to the ritual site,” Abbygail said. “We should get moving.”

“We’ll circle around to see if there’s any more clues. Maybe a way to cure you. What made you bring gasoline?” Synarion asked. Bark Nose mentioned that the World Mother was fire and Mother Nature was water.

“Plants hate fire. They’re carbon-based, right? Carbon burns. Seemed like a good idea. My dad had some in his truck. Took it and drove here. It’s not like he needs it if he’s even alive.” She swallowed a thick lump of saliva.

“Right. I questioned if fire would work, except the World Mother relishes in it.”

“I guess it worked. Not everything a mother does is good for her babies,” Abbygail said.

“You have any more?” Synarion asked.

“That was it,” she said.

“Come on.”

He didn't want to admit to the girl that she had saved him. It was his ego. Balancers were robust warriors from a forgotten time. Souls didn't dare interfere with their affairs. He was in trouble far too often. Abbygail could come in handy again if he kept her safe. She was a ticking time bomb, and he had to be prepared to give her mercy if the time came. Death was present. Bloodshed, far too common.

The two circled through the greenhouse to where Synarion first spotted Valturus and the hellseed keepers. The room had no more lights except the one shining from Abbygail's phone. Dried blood splattered the ground from the slain hellseed keeper. The easel's map was there, showcasing the migration of the World Mother's children to Edmonton. It was useless.

“They're all over the place,” Abbygail said.

“Yeah, dormant.”

“There's Vancouver.” She tapped the map. “Where I got the damn seeds.”

Synarion looked at the table's clean surface. They cleared their setup. Underneath, the hellseeds sprinkled the ground from when Synarion had kicked them. Underneath the chairs was barren.

“Woah,” Abbygail said. She was reaching behind the easel where a table rested. It contained a dagger and a handgun. “They left so fast, they didn't even bring their gun?”

*Or it belonged to their dead comrade*, Synarion thought. “You ever fire a gun?”

“Christ. No. In games. I mean, I've fired them in games.”

“Close enough.” Synarion leaned over her and checked the chamber. It contained bullets. He passed it to Abbygail. She held it with her index finger and thumb, unsure what to do. Synarion grabbed her arms and helped her position her hands to hold the weapon. “There’s the safety, and that’s the trigger, like in a game.”

“G-g-got it,” Abbygail said on a stuttered exhale.

“Bring that with you and turn off your light,” Synarion said. “The next room had hellsprouts.”

He drew two throwing stars and crept around the tarp corner and into the next room. The plants were gone. The druids had moved them into the truck during his negotiations with Valturus. Synarion and his sidekick went to the next tarp-divided section, moving through the long greenhouse row to the concrete building as the fire alarms rang. The doors were no longer pried open, and they pushed them apart, heading down the hall. The blaring sirens blasted in their ears until they made it outside, where crickets chirped and the cold wind brushed against his damp face. The semi was gone, taking the World Mother’s followers with it.

“Where’d you park?” Synarion asked.

“Near you.”

“Okay,” he said, taking the map from his pocket and unfolding it to examine the illustration. A fireball that reached the edges of the paper surrounded the circle encompassing the pentagram. Inside the flowergram was the hand, ending in vines, coming from the hellgate.

“What is this?” Abbygail asked. “That’s a pentagram. They’re not even close to Wiccan.”



“Greeks used them in Babylonia too. Symbols mutate due to cultures altering their meaning over time.”

“I guess so. Seems so cliché: an evil cult with a pentagram.”

“Well, a flowergram. Symbols work as boosters of the mind in the subconscious, allowing people to use words of power. Hence the shapes and line work are important. Look, it’s a diagram. They were looking at it. They used hellseeds as markings around the star’s outline and flower petals.”

“They will be placing those plants, the hellsprouts, in this formation.”

“I agree with your theory,” Synarion said.

“That must be the World Mother,” Abbygail said, noting the hand in the center.

“Indeed,” he said, focused on the flaming circle. “Your cousin, Janet, and her friends had a homemade flamethrower, didn’t they?”

“Yeah.”

“Text her to be careful with that weapon.” There wasn’t much else to the paper, and he folded it. They didn’t get insight into how to rid the girl of her hellseed. “Let’s get you to your truck, and I’ll follow you to the river valley.”

“Got it,” Abbygail said.

She took the lead, and Synarion followed. His ears perked, listening to the brushing grass and the leaves ruffling in the air. He eyed the shadows, the open space, and the path to spot any hiding foe. They were alone. Along the gravel road, they reached the chain-linked fence and past the range road to Abbygail’s blue truck in the shrubs.

She got in and started the vehicle. Synarion's hatchback was a good six metres away. No one vandalized their transportations, and the two of them left the greenhouse mess behind. The balancer followed the truck, gripping, with his good arm, at twelve o'clock. He bit his lip, aware of the pain his body experienced: the sharp sting on his arm, his ankle bleeding through the boot, and a dozen cuts and bruises elsewhere that he hadn't noticed during the brutal exchange of wounds.

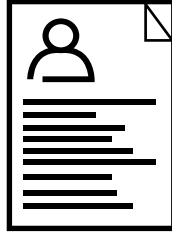
He could have accepted Valturus's offer. It would have ended, and he'd have peace. Reason told him no. The World Mother was the opposite of her sister, bringing destruction and decay. The Grove bred him for one thing, and he would follow it through to his dying breath. His utopia would come in the afterlife.

Valturus got away lucky.

He hesitated once.

He wouldn't do so again.





## BALANCER PROFILE SUMMARY

**Name:** Hellseed, Hellsprout, or World Mother's Children

**Species:** A plant created by the World Mother

**Location:** Global

**Occupation:** None

**Description:** Hellseeds have black seeds with red stripes.

Type One Hellsprout: Vines. Black and red flower. Spikes. The decapitated head of its victim made it look like a person in a trench coat.

Type Two Hellsprout: A clam appearance, close to a Venus flytrap with large branch-like vines. They also reanimate the legs from the bodies they birthed from.

**Balancing Offence:** Children of the World Mother, a pivotal component to summoning her.

**Note:** Don't eat the seeds. Thirteen will give birth to them in an estimated two weeks. They bleed a lot. Anything that bleeds can be killed. They hate the ancient ones, Root Walkers. There's no knowable cure for them yet.



## CHAPTER 23

# FEAR OF THE WOODS

The two vehicles returned to the city's core, heading for the river valley near the university. They parked a block over in the neighbourhood close to Abbygail's parents. On any other visit, the scenic view would be one to admire. The downtown skyscrapers illuminated the night skyscrapers. In front of it was the river, and after that, the trees ran up to where they stood. The forest was too dark to see the details. Regardless, that was where they needed to go.

There were no signs of the semi-truck. They had to have moved it or approached the ritual site from another angle. This was his best bet. He had to trust his companion.

The girl led the balancer across the road and towards a descending dirt path. Abbygail glanced at him with wide eyes riddled in fear and took the first step into the dark. The air thickened, and humidity kissed their skin thanks to the condensed foliage. They watched their step, going over roots and dips in the dirt. His comrade couldn't see in the dark as well as he could, and he was responsible for watching for danger.

*A sister approaches us!*

“Fuck,” Abbygail clutched her head. “I think we’re getting close.”

“I heard that too,” Synarion said.

“You can hear them?” she asked.

“Yes, from day one.”

“It’s difficult to see here.”

“Keep going. I can see fine. Follow your intuition.”

“Fuck that, I’m going to use my phone.”

“No lights, we need stealth. Keep walking.”

“I might trip,” she whined.

“No, you won’t. Janet said a fenced off area. Is there an easy way in?”

“Yeah, there should be deeper inside. Fuck, I can’t see, Synarion.”

“Follow the voices.” Synarion placed his hand on her shoulder, forcing her to move.

She obeyed, going deeper into the woods, following her intuition. They had no other guidance other than the sense of

being watched. He believed that to be true. Plants were alive and aware of those who walked near them. The hellsprouts were the same. With one growing inside her, she gravitated to the others. She had insight and could harness it like the balancer. He could sense the presence of the animals and plants of Mother Nature. This time, it was different. There was a high hum buzzing through the river valley. It was fear. They were scared of the horrors that commenced deep within.

Abbygail turned onto a narrower path that disappeared due to the thick grass and shrubbery.

“Here?” Synarion asked while taking a couple throwing stars.

“Maybe?” She clutched her head again. “It’s so intense.”

“You did your part. You can wait here or go to the truck.” He would prefer it.

“No. I’m coming.”

“Fine, have your gun ready.”

“Right,” Abbygail said.

She took the weapon from her belt, turned off the safety, and held it with both hands, aimed low. They continued through the thick foliage, which increased the vibrations through the trees. His gut twisted, and his spine tingled, feeling repulsed the deeper they went. Their nostrils twitched due to the tingle of burning flesh and plants lingering. They stepped into an open patch where scorch marks covered several trees and bushes. From what he could tell, the burn marks on the trees were fresh. He ran his finger along one mark. It was warm. Beside it was a burnt black cloth, similar to the hellseed keeper robe.

“Over here,” Abbygail said.



The girl was standing beside red-stained grass. Blotches of flesh and organs rested on torn clothing. Synarion knelt to inspect the flesh and clothing. It looked human. Fresh. This event had happened within an hour.

He spoke. "See? You don't need a light. You're doing great."

"Think this is one of the World Mother's children? Like those men in the greenhouse?"

"Yeah."

She clutched her hand, pressing it against her lips. "Fuck, I hope Janet is okay."

Synarion leaned closer to the flesh scraps and cloth. Strands of blond hair rested on the fabrics. From what he recalled of Abbygail's photo of Janet, she was a blonde.

He stood. "Keep your wits about you. Don't get emotional." The girl didn't need to know the unfortunate news, not yet.

"Okay, right. I got this." A deep exhale left her lungs and she closed her eyes.

They continued on the path, leaving the open patch leading to an incline. The steep hike brought them to a fenced off area. There was a sign mounted on it that read:

---

DO NOT ENTER

SECTION CLOSED OFF UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

TRESPASSERS WILL BE FINED.

CITY OF EDMONTON

—

"This is it," Abbygail said. "Think the city is involved?"

“Unlikely; this is a good secluded place for a ritual. Cities isolate sections of nature to help them heal.” He spotted a clipped section by the ground. He lifted it, slipped through to the other side, and held it for Abbygail.

A crackling shout echoed through the river valley. “Back off, you tree fuckers!” It was a man’s voice, without a doubt.

Abbygail and Synarion exchanged looks.

“Come on.” Synarion took the lead, increasing speed with Abbygail close behind. The forest became so dense that Synarion and Abbygail pushed branches aside along the ascent. Their legs brushed against overgrowth, which didn’t help their stealth mission.

*Your lives will be the debt!*

“Synarion, it’s too much!” Abbygail cried, clutching her head.

“Stay here,” Synarion said.

He, too, felt the buzzing vibrations. They didn’t attack his skull like the girl. They rattled the core of his spirit, creating a dark void, leaving him unsettled. Fear surrounded them. The plants wanted to tear away from the dirt and dash away, as did he.

The balancer squeezed Abbygail’s arm and continued on. His path split in two, one that led into fog and the other continued straight. He took the latter, bringing him to the edge of a cliff overlooking a dome-shaped lowland. Dozens of people in trench coats, hellspouts, aligned in rows, forming the signature flowergram, aided by petite white stones on the ground.

A young man with shaggy hair stepped inside the ritual circle holding a rod of petrified wood to nearby hellsprouts. They danced side to side, watching him. The human looked like the man in the photo with Janet's cousin.

On the outside of the flowergram were the hellseed keepers. The brute was indistinguishable. He was accompanied by a short, wrinkled hellseed keeper wearing a straw hat and another robed being beside a glowing manhole. Inside the first petal, close to the young man, was a brunette, Valturus. The vampire's face showed no signs of injury.

Another man in a white shirt, with long hair, bolted from the bushes. He raised a homemade flamethrower forged from a spray can and lighter. That was the same one in the photo Abbygail had shown Synarion. The man pressed the spray can and flicked the lighter, running towards the ritual circle.

*By the Creator, Synarion thought.*

Flame burst from the weapon.

"No!" shouted the short, wrinkled hellseed keeper.

The fire from the flamethrower jolted sideways, gravitating to a black powder Synarion didn't notice in the dark. The dust made a ring around the flowergram with the flame trailing it, rising to six feet tall.

The old hellseed keeper continued, "You fools have set forth everyone's demise! The protection ritual was not ready."

*The gates of inferno bridge to the eternal garden of the World Mother.  
We heard children, sate ourselves on the lifeblood of fated men.*

A battle cry boomed from the man wielding the homemade flamethrower, projecting the fire, while running to the group

of hellseed keepers beside the manhole. The hellspouts unwrapped their faux trench coats. The bright red petals shook, and the white spikes rattled. Vines lifted their decapitated heads as they continued swaying side to side.

Valturus closed in on the man inside the flowergram, both nearing the core. She unsheathed a chrome dagger. He brought a small pipe to his mouth and attempted to light it while waving his Root Walker rod. It was to keep the hellspout vines at bay, the cure theory of Janet's friends.

The ground shook, causing leaves to fall onto Synarion. A body slammed into his shoulder, throwing him close to the edge. He spun around and brought his throwing star to a soft, pale throat.

"Abbygail?" Synarion said. He freed the blade from her.

"You can't do this on your own. They started the ritual."

"I think your friends did."

"I don't see Janet."

Another shock wave rippled from the flowergram. The center split. Orange and red radiated from the core. Synarion held the girl so they kept afoot. Earthquakes didn't happen in this region of Canada. This was the summoning of the World Mother. Thousands of voices rang through the air, penetrating each soul's mind.

*Our time has come to protect the land from the parasite. The ancient ones only knew of giving. Rise of the World Mother. We are no longer to be paralysed. Set free she will be from the gate of internal hellfire. Let the parasite feel the grass of what was once balance!*

WORLD MOTHER ASCENSION BY KONN LAVERY



## CHAPTER 24

# RISE OF THE WORLD MOTHER

**D**anger was imminent as Mother Nature's nemesis drew near. Vibrations within the plants vanished. The mammals fled. Birds flew. Robed humans: wide-eyed and petrified. The vampire queen: caught in awe. Their ritual was initiated despite being incomplete, thanks to a homemade flamethrower from one guy saving his friend. An unfortunate turn of events summarized the scene where the balancer and his sidekick had failed. The World Mother was rising. Of all the souls in the dark forest, Synarion held the deepest level of dread.

The hellsprouts silenced their chant as the core of the flowergram collapsed, leaving the closest plants dangling off the edge, their black vines flailing above the scathing flames bursting from the hole. Violent rumbles shook feet. As more fire spewed in their direction, the impact of the collapse knocked the young man and Valturus onto the dirt.

“Come this way,” Synarion said.

“What the hell are we doing?” Abbygail asked.

“Finding a way to stop this. I’m going to Valturus.”

“Is that the best you have?” Abbygail said.

“The best. She has the most experience of what to do. Look around the exterior of the summoning circle. There’s a manhole. It has to have some value. See if you can reason with the hellseed keepers there.”

“You can’t be serious,” she said.

“I am. Be careful. They might not work with us. They feared the World Mother and were working on a protection circle. She isn’t a friend of anyone. Now go.”

“Got it,” Abbygail said.

Synarion glanced back one last time to the expanding cracks. Black tentacles, the size of tree trunks, pierced the earth’s surface, pulling an immense shoulder up. The shaggy-haired guy near the center scurried away on his ass and onto his feet. Valturus rose, watching with her mouth dangling.

*Blip you bastard*, Synarion thought. It’s an odd one since vampires didn’t *blip*. They had impressive speed. He wanted her to dash away from danger, leap through the wall of hellsprout vines and through the flame.

*Ancient ones brought love and saw the good where there was none. We are the equilibrium. We are what must be. We are the children of the World Mother. We have become death destroyer of your world.*

Shouting came from below while he and Abbygail circled, headed for the descending path to the bowl-shaped depression in the river valley. The voices could belong to anyone. There was too much chaos, and he had no knowledge of how to handle it other than trusting his training and instincts. The best bet was to rid the hellspouts and get the expert.

The balancer and his comrade met with four hellseed keepers running to the incline. Their fast pace and focused gaze on the high ground were a clear indicator they were not interested in them.

“How do we stop it?” Abbygail shouted to the group. They ran past the two, ignoring her.

“Come on,” Synarion said.

They ran around the ring of fire near the thick smoke rising, causing the girl to cough. The two headed for the manhole while Synarion looked for a better opening into the wall of heat. Through the haze, the young man with the flamethrower ran towards them. He kept it low, following the hellseed keepers from moments ago.

“Hey!” Synarion called out.

“Get outta here, man!” his crackling voice cried.

“You know Janet? Hey, are you Loga—” Abbygail stopped, seeing that he didn’t break his sprint.

Above, more monolith black vines rose through the fire and smoke, swaying like tentacles and smashing into the nearby



pine trees, splitting them. Matted arms bigger than Synarion and blacker than the sky aiming for the heavens. They ended in bark and sharp thorns.

They continued, reaching the far end of the flowergram to the manhole. The brute stood by it alongside the old man and a third with a cleaver and dagger. The elder gazed at Synarion, cupping his hands into the robe, watching him. His face was flat and cold. His two comrades marched towards the newcomers.

“Here we go,” Synarion said, raising his throwing star.

“We need your help!” Abbygail said.

They raised their arms.

Synarion aimed his throwing star.

Abbygail lifted her gun and pulled the trigger. The chamber spoke twice before Synarion threw the blade. The bullets soared into the blade-wielder. One shredded into his stomach and the other into his chest. He dropped the weapons and fell onto his knees, holding his wounds. Her video games paid off.

“Fuck, Jesus Christ!” Abbygail said, her arms shaking.

Synarion flung a blade at the brute: it spun in an arch and landed into his clavicle. A second throwing star came and went into his forearm. Abbygail fired again, the bullet shredding into his upper thigh. He kept marching and lunged a fist at Synarion. The balancer leaped to the side, pulling out his spiked knuckles while rolling on the ground. The brute backhanded Abbygail, knocking the gun from her. He punched her face with a loud smack and snagged Bark Nose’s branch from her chest. His grasp held force, ripping the stick free from the tape and tearing her shirt.

Synarion sprung to his feet and swung at the hellseed keeper's ribs. The spiked knuckles pierced into the flesh in three blows: bruising and blood. A high-pitched yelp came from behind them. Several more punches and the druid stumbled. A final blow to the chest threw him onto his back, dropping the branch. Behind him, Abbygail clutched her heart, legs wobbling. She collapsed, coughing blood splatters. Synarion grabbed the branch and jumped over the brute. A firm hand snagged his ankle.

Her body convulsed, arms lifeless to her sides. The torso jerked forward, then in reverse, her head swaying in whiplash. Synarion slammed his spiked knuckles into the brute's face, one after the other, leaving the flesh a pulverized mess until he let go.

Blood oozed against the girl's trembling lip as she watched Synarion bolt to her. Pulses of tubes moved inside her throat. The skin turned red, and a couple of spikes pierced through. A black thing glided against her lips while he skidded on his knees and pushed the Root Walker branch into her chest. He caught her with his other hand, pressing the stick into her body with all his might. A creature below the skin pushed against his pressure.

*Ancient one!*

Abbygail gurgled, her eyes rolling, and the vine slithered into her body. The shapes inside her neck vanished, and the thing inside stopped fighting. She coughed again, the warm liquid

splattering onto Synarion's cheek. Her hand reached for his face, shaking, and fell to her side. He was too late.

*Free us!*

Another rumble came from the center of the ritual circle, knocking Synarion. The branch slid away from Abbygail's chest. Her body seized, arching back, and the pulsing tubes rose again. The neck peeled open, and body fluids ran to her torso and coated the branch. Synarion stood, letting her body slide to the ground. Her spine cracked. The girl's head rose into the air from four vines. Black and red petals bloomed from her splitting ribcage, and the hellspout danced like the nearby brothers and sisters.

The balancer clenched his blood-dripping fists. He had a chance of reverting the World Mother's presence. There had to be a way. He tucked Bark Nose's branch into his belt, turned and stormed towards the wrinkled hellseed keeper. The orange flame emphasized the forehead lines above the brows on his scowling face. If the druid didn't listen, he would be the first to perish.

The old man removed his straw hat, revealing his dome covered in floral tattoos and scarification lines. Countless wrinkles ran along his face, painting a frown. He looked far too content with the chaos happening around them.

Synarion raised his fist and spoke. "Start talking, fast."

The old man shook his head and a weak chuckle followed. "It doesn't matter." He spoke in a Scottish brogue. The voice was deep and calm, and his second sentence removed the accent,

speaking in monotone. “The ritual circle was incomplete. We have failed Mother Nature.”

“You the gothi whose tongue poisons ears with nonsense?” Synarion snagged the old man by his robes and tried to lift him. He couldn’t. The hellseed keeper was far too heavy as if his bones were solid stone. The old man swatted his arms with the power of a falling tree. Synarion grunted, rubbing his bruising forearm. The man wasn’t a human.

“A balancer . . . of the Grove,” the old man said. He didn’t lose his gaze on Synarion. “Impossible.”

“We need to stop this,” Synarion said. He looked to the numen rising from the flowergram. Large vines ending in red flowers waved in the air as the midnight titan climbed onto the Earth’s surface.

“The Balancers of the Grove live.” the old man said.

“Yes, sort of. It is me. I execute Mother Nature’s needs.”

“Her will lives on. How could I not sense it?”

“By Dega’Mostikas, can you tell me something useful?” Synarion asked.

“My mission was false, an incorrect trajectory. Balancer, listen, the World Mother’s children were the beacon. Their alignment allowed her to penetrate Dega’Mostikas’s Triangle and come into the mortal realm. Fire from gunpowder and gasoline activated the doorway. Without the proper collection of Root Walker parts, we could not contain her. She cares for no one, balancer, Not even of her own creation. Jaded from eons of hate, she will not stop until life on this world perishes. She’ll dig into the core of the Earth and slay her sister.”

“Yes, I get that,” Synarion said. “Before it, she’s still in the ritual circle, yes?”

“You, balancer, this is your calling.”

“Can we break the ritual?” Synarion asked.

The man extended his hand. “Give me the Erenwill shard.”

Synarion squinted. *How could he recognize me?*

“Balancer, we have little time.”

“What are you, gothi?” Synarion asked. He eyed the short man, no taller than five-two. His stance was wide, and his motion mechanical. The eyes, though looking at him, were barren of life. The skin was dim, the hair dry and pale. It was as if it wasn’t his skin; they wore the flesh like a suit, as the elemandriases did.

*Could it be?* Synarion pondered.

“Mother Nature has fated us to reunite, nymph. Our duty to her is dire. With Erenwill, we can revert the summoning with words of power from the Grove if you can weaken her hellgate’s connection.”

Synarion ran his tongue along the roof of his mouth. He didn’t have time to hesitate more than a second. “Of course.” The balancer reached around his neck and lifted the circular jade pendant. His thumb caressed the grooves once, and he placed it into the gothi’s unmovable hand. A pang hit his heart. “What do you need me to do?”

“Remove her children from this world. Each of their energy works as a power cell to fuel the hellgate. Weaken it as I complete Erenwill’s assembling.” The gothi arched their head to the stars, the mouth opening. The painless motion moved like a hinge, ripping the skin along their jaw and exposing the stone

underneath. They reached into their orifice and revealed two twisted wooden sticks. One half was thicker than the other and ended in a spiral. They took out a rectangular green crystal.

“Impossible,” Synarion mumbled. His legs trembled at the sight of such power. These were the three missing pieces from the deceased elemandrias to form the legendary staff of balance. They were not lost.

“*No. I am one fourth,*” Wind had said to Synarion on the shores of Aewouson.

“*Did you or Earth collect Water and Fire’s components?*” Synarion asked.

“*Unknown.*”

Earth indeed collected the pieces during the collapse, a detail Wind failed to witness centuries ago.

The gothi, Earth, placed the jade pendant on the smaller stick’s broad base, which contained inverted grooves that matched the design of Synarion’s disc. The elemandrias twisted the circle, and it clicked into the socket. They followed the same process for the upper half, and placed the gem at the top, and the crystal lit a fern green from within. A pulse wave followed the activation, blowing wind around it, rippling through the forest. Even through the darkness of this wretched ritual site, Erenwill’s strident current of life hummed into Synarion’s core. The soil on which the staff touched darkened with rich nutrients, and sprouts of green rose.

The gothi’s eyes beamed the same light as the staff. The skin on their hands sizzled while gripping the wood, causing the flesh to droop to the ground. Stone fingers held the staff. “Return when Erenwill has awoken and channel Mother

Nature's will," Earth said. Parts of flesh fell from the face, showing more rock.

"It must be me?"

"You have a soul; I do not."

Synarion's throat tensed. He hadn't performed a word of power so potent. Little did he know any. His life focused on balance, enforcing it and maintaining it. His duty called. The balancer had to trust his intuition and let Mother Nature guide him.

"I will," he said. Synarion took two throwing stars from his belt and one deep breath, then leaped through the wall of fire, toppling onto the other side. Unscathed, he got to his feet. Black vines slithered to the scent of his blood. One attempted to lasso his torso. Synarion spun clear, punching the vine with his knuckles and piercing it with the throwing star. The plant split open. Warm liquid sprayed onto his shirt and into the fire. He hacked low, slicing another as a third aimed for his neck from behind. The balancer's reflexes saved him, and he threw a punch into it, ripping it open. The three vines fell to the ground, oozing their innards onto the soil.

Countless hellsprouets swayed in sync with one another to their rising mother in the core of the flowergram. The sombre numen pulled herself from the cracks with the tentacles on her spine and her arms, standing forty feet. Her pupilless eyes watched her dancing children. Twisting black vines, adorned with vibrant red flowers, bloomed on her hair, resembling her spine. They, too, moved in sync with the hellsprouets' dance. Hovering above her skull was a burning ring of fire. Her bark-covered foot made its first step on the inner portion of the

flowergram, shaking the earth below. The soil turned to black goo, rotting from her touch.

*Earth will regain order from the worldwide infection!* boomed a strident voice throughout the river valley, originating from the core of the World Mother, despite no movement from her mouth.

*His actions of pollution, corruption, and mass extinction shall be tolerated no more.*

Synarion dashed to the next hellspout, lunging his blades. His spiked fists smashed the creature. It squirmed, flower petals shaking as the weapons ripped through the rigid flesh. Onto the following plant: the balancer butchered through the hellspouts' might. Vines from neighbouring hellspouts channelled towards him to stop the terror. One after the other, Synarion attacked the World Mother's children at the stems. Their defences were hopeless as he worked towards Valturus, removing as many of the plants he could.

A shrill came further ahead. Synarion sliced through one hellspout, bringing the sound into view. Past the row of hellspouts, the young man with shaggy hair was a mangled mess on the ground with intestines and meat sprawled onto the dirt. It erected his head high from vines with a flower blooming below. The made cure didn't work.

Beside him was Valturus. She squeezed her fist containing a red and gold ring. Her hand vanished first, followed by her arm as the vines came for her. She released her grasp and swung the dagger at the oncoming threat, hissing. Her Root Walker branch



was nowhere to be seen. The vampire dashed in one breath as a vine coiled around each of her ankles. She flung backwards, slamming onto the ground. Two more immobilized her arms. Her eyes slanted. That was fear.

A memory flooded Synarion's mind. He'd seen that look on her before, so many centuries ago. It was a look she gave him in Alexandria. Despite their frustrations and differences, he needed her. She needed him.

*Resist the World Mother and thy will be met with the force of balance!*

He leaped into the air, dodging a swaying vine, and landed on his feet, wobbling. The pain in his ankle reminded him of his mortal bond. He had to be careful and bolted to the vampire who pulled on the vines. Her strength matched the hellspouts', and both parties refused to give in. She shouted through the pain, fighting for dominance. Two more vines wormed their way to her throat. They coiled and attempted to pull the skull free.

The balancer tore through the next couple of hellspouts in the dividing line of the pentagram. He pushed forward, knocking over a dying hellspout and splattering red onto himself. He ran to aid her and leaped, swinging onto the appendages coiled around her neck, then to the one around her left wrist. A fell swoop shredded the plant's core, and he plunged the blades into the flower's stem. It vibrated and deflated. The newfound freedom let Valturus's claws sink into the remaining vines, reverting them to pulp.

Valturus's mouth hung open, blood dripping from it. No words escaped her tongue. The wide glistening eyes were enough for him.

The World Mother's voice thundered, shaking the ground and sending gusts of wind on the flames, extinguishing some near the Earth elemandrias. *My sister, you've done damage to Earth. I'll take what was mine set by the Creator.*

Synarion touched Valturus's arm. "Your gothi needs us to remove the hellsprounts. I need your help to keep them off me."

"For what, Synarion?" she asked.

"Performing words of power."

"Pointless."

"Not this time, not with Erenwill," Synarion said.

Valturus squinted, not following. Their conversation halted when the World Mother stopped. Her body arched sideways, looking at the dismembered hellsprounts below her feet. Her voice shook the forest.

*None shall resist!*

The vines along her spine extended to her hip, past the leg, heading for Valturus and Synarion. Large spike-covered spores popped out between the vines of the nested mess of her spine, falling to the ground around her feet. They collided with goo-dirt and split open along the middle. Roots sprung from them, ending in spikes, and lifted them into animated arachnia. Two more rose in the air, acting as dual stingers.

“You hurt?” Synarion asked.

“Haaah, I’ve had worse, balancer,” Valturus said.

“Stick to the plan,” he said.

A green light beamed from beyond, rocking the earth. The spider spores scurried towards them, with some toppling over from the sudden force of light. The World Mother adjusted her stance, shifting a mound of dirt below her feet. Past the dancing hellspouts and the flowergram flame, the stone elemandrias held the glowing Erenwill staff, radiating life. Plants grew on the ground with water pouring from the cracks in the bottom of the rod. Gusts of air burst from the top with flame bursting from the tip of the crystal. Harmony of the four elements was the sign Synarion needed.

The World Mother turned to the elemandrias and took a step forward, her foot molting the ground to hot sludge. They couldn’t let her get there before they did.

“Come,” Synarion said.

Valturus clutched her hand, wielding her golden ring. The hand and arm faded, distorting the space around it until her whole body was invisible.

Synarion bolted to the spores. He ignored a newfound pain in his ribs that rang through his body. There was no time for weakness. The spores rushed them, swinging with their stingers. Synarion dodged one as another pierced into his calf. He grunted, slammed his spiked knuckle into the core, and cracked the spore open. Translucent goo spewed from the wounds. Another slice freed the stinger from its body, and he curb-stomped its moist innards.

Valturus reappeared behind a new spore approaching him. Her dagger swung low, severing the legs. She and Synarion finished the last one as more rolled off the numen, dropping onto the dirt. He threw stars, disjoining a spore's legs. The two bolted past the newcomers before they finished transforming, over deceased hellsprouts and through the smoke to the elemandrias of Earth.

"Gothi!" Valturus said. "What is that?"

The elemandrias extended the staff to Synarion to take and lowered their head. Another boom came from behind them. The World Mother closed in. Spores scurried towards them. Vines slithered closer.

The World Mother's voice shattered the plane. *I cannot be challenged, for I am the beginning and the end of this world. No other equal stands before me. Numen nor mortal.*

She brought her hands together with a jarring clap of thunder, creating lightning and flame from thin air. The controlled combustion grew in her grasp as she stepped to the outer section of the flowergram.

"Valturus, keep them off me," Synarion said.

The vampire spun to face their foe and exposed her fangs. One clutch of her fist with the ring, and she was gone.

"Balancer, your time has come," the elemandrias said.

*Erenwill, the Greatstaff of Equilibrium*, Synarion thought. The warm power it projected surpassed the nightmare behind him. For the first time since the old world collapsed, he felt the connection he had lost.

*Guardian, a guide, a protector, open and caring . . . vulnerable,* he chanted.

Mother Nature called through the staff's power, linking their spirits. She appointed him to correct this mistake.

*Gardener, a curator, a builder, life and death . . . neutral.*

The balancer stepped to the staff, onto the wet new growth, and took hold of the twisted wood with both hands, feeling the wind and farm fire.

*Mother, unconditional, love, strength and persistence . . . able.*

A hum rushed through his body, bringing newfound life and flooding his vision with the beyond: clear blue skies, radiant sunlight, a crisp river, and countless creatures. Birds, insects, mammals, reptiles, and more. Further, he felt caring eyes watching him, the source of the glow.

The balancer closed his eyes. The connection ran through his blood, the dirt below, the air entering his lungs and the space in between, interconnected through the living planet. He was no longer an individual isolated on the Earth. He was the world.

*Mother Nature guide me.* Synarion opened his eyes. The radiant green from the staff channelled through the wood into his veins and controlled his senses. He turned to face the leviathan before them. Valturus reappeared, aiding the elemandrias of Earth in fending off an oncoming horde of spores and vines in front of the fires. Beyond the flames, the World Mother stormed towards them with her lightning inferno ball floating between her palms. The numen plummeted her hand onto Valturus and the elemandrias, sending the electrifying blaze ten feet into the air. The two flew in opposite directions.

Synarion raised Erenwill high, generating a forceful wind. The action blew against the fire, extinguishing it and throwing the spores into the air. The balancer was no longer alone in his action, for Mother Nature's will coursed through his being.

A voice, his own, came into his mind, *false mother of the world*, as his mouth opened and his tongue moved, speaking words of power he did not know. *Numen of chaos. Assemblance of evil. Begone from this taken world!* "Faulsa maeter muundii. Dae chaos. Dae maelo; aet dae causa malii. Dae quae maeteria factuum sait!"

He held the staff with both hands as it angled toward the World Mother. His boots skidded in the dirt as they projected a potent blast of elements—earth, wind, water, and fire—to the being and ripping a hole in her core, exposing rotten black sludge within.

Synarion continued to chant. *No destroyer of the world shall exist in Mother Nature's garden.* "Nullhus perdiitore muundii existeht ihn raegno maetriis naetura."

A vacuuming force sucked the World Mother in from the core of the ritual site. One large vine soared towards Synarion as a cloaked being dashed through the air faster than an eye could track, slicing into the vine. The attack cut the plant clean, and it fell to Synarion's feat, eaten by the new growth. The World Mother collapsed to her knees, burning fingers digging trenches into the dirt. A pale leg appeared from under a black robe. The numen arched sideways and snagged onto the limb.

His arms shook as he gritted his teeth. The power was beyond him, and he witnessed its strength as a burning heat grew from within the staff. *The one infection is her tainted twin sister, corrupted from the womb of their Creator. The twin's pollution and mass*

*extinction will not be tolerated into existence. Begone, false goddess of the earth. Tremble before the one true protector! “Infehctio uena aest sororh gaemiina inquinaetah, quae aex uteroh maetriis corrupt aest. Gaemiini pollut aet exstiinctio massaeh inh exsiistentiam tolaerarii non puossunt. Aet prosteranaetur vaeritas inh taerra, aet faeciiet, aet prosperabiitur. Traemere anteh unuum veruum protaectore!”*

The World Mother fell onto her torso, crushing the hellspouts and spores below. Her grip locked Valturus in, dragging both souls closer to the core of the ritual site. The ground rumbled, and the hole moved inwards.

*No!* Synarion’s will resurrected. A sharp sting came from his hands. He released Erenwill as the burning hot crystal cracked, splintering the wood in the middle. The staff shattered into scathing pieces. The force sent a shock wave through the lowland and extinguished the flames.

He bolted towards the flowergram as the suction pulled on the World Mother’s vines and limbs, tearing them from her body.

*She cursed. I am the destroyer of your world! My time will rise! No servant of naïve flesh will prevent the inevitable.*

Her vines flailed while being peeled open. A large one slammed into the dirt, kicking plant, dirt, goo, and flesh into the air. Synarion leaped over one, aiming for her massive hand where Valturus stabbed the fingers that crushed her leg. The glistening dark scarlet liquid smeared the numen’s skin from the vampire’s smothered limb.

A rogue vine flung past Synarion, the thorns mangling his shoulders, and he tumbled on the ground once, rolling onto his feet. A spore came soaring towards him, scraping his face, and vanished into the core's vacuum. The gap in the earth continued to shrink. He pushed through branches, rocks, and slabs of hellspout meat flying in space until he reached the vampire, clutching her arm.

They were a dozen meters away; the World Mother's broken body hung on by her one arm and a vine from her back. Despite the numen's might, the earth was swallowing her, bringing Valturus and Synarion closer to the edge. He tugged on the vampire's arms.

Valturus swatted at him with her ring hand. "Get, idiot!"

"Cut it off!" Synarion argued, ignoring her claws.

"Get!"

"You're not going!" Synarion shouted. "Not like this."

He didn't have enough strength, even with the vampire's aid. There wasn't enough time for him to cut through her flesh and bone, and she knew it. The World Mother was being pulled in at an accelerated rate. The heat from the hole increased with each passing moment, far hotter than his burnt hands. His grasp slipped for a moment. Synarion leaped forward, sliding on his belly, and grabbed her ring hand as she did his. Her claws pierced into his index finger and palm muscles. It wasn't a firm grip, manifesting pain.

"Come on!" Synarion yelled.

She shook her head. Her green eyes glistened.

*Fool.* That was not his thought.



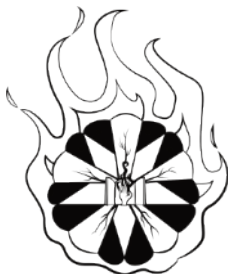
Four paces away. The warmth and brightness from the fires below dominated his view as a biting pain ruptured from Synarion's hand. The flesh of his index finger ripped from her sharp claws. She released his hand, taking his digit with her over and into the sealing hole, following the World Mother's hand. It vanished once the two halves of the earth closed. Synarion came to a stop, lying where the opening once was. He got to his knees and dug into the dirt, ignoring his bleeding, scorched hand.

"Valturus!" Synarion cried. He knew it was pointless. It wasn't depth; the vampire and numen had crossed into the afterlife whence the World Mother came. She was no longer part of the mortal realm.

He shouted and slammed his bleeding fist into the ground. It sent a ripple of pain crawling up his arm. Beside him was a gold ring sticking out of the dirt. He reached for it to see the familiar metal vines and fangs encasing the bright red gem. It was what he had left of her.

His hands were tied. Hell was no place anyone should venture, numen, vampire, or nymph. The Heavenly Kingdoms designed it as a punishment and for those who made deals with Dega'Mostikas himself. Valturus was neither of those things, crossfire damage in Synarion's words of power.

She saved him, letting the balancer complete his mission. It wasn't what he wanted. Duty and desire do not go hand in hand. A weight pulled his heart into his stomach, giving more nausea than the countless blood-craving hellspouts that lay dead around him. Whether Synarion liked it or not, the World Mother and her children paid for their balancing offence. Mother Nature was victorious.



## CHAPTER 25

# CORRUPTED FUNCTION

Scorched earth, a thick haze of flame and smoke, and dozens of shredded blood-coated plants scattered the remains of the ritual site. The aftermath left the earth black with caking tar where the World Mother had walked. A single hint of life came from new green growth where the shattered remains of Erenwill were.

This was no simple balancing mission. Humans would find this site by helicopter and foot to stop the flames. Synarion couldn't stay. There wasn't time to mourn the loss of Valturus. As she put it, the *fool* could not be free from the trance she put on him or he put on himself. The balancer could spend eons

reflecting on her actions. As it was, he had loose ends to tie before retreating into the woods.

Elemandrias of Earth stood near the manhole whence they were before. The symmetrical humanoid figure stood tall, its black robe in tatters and charred remnants. The rough, scarred surface of Earth's stone fists told tales of countless clashes. They gazed at the broken Erenwill as Synarion limped to them. The balancer's moist clothes and sore body made it clear he would need a few weeks to recover.

Behind the elemandrias was Abbygail's corpse: a hellspout who swayed side to side. Her head lowered, and the petals folded, making her resemble her former human self. Synarion would deal with it in a moment.

"Erenwill is broken," the elemandrias said.

Synarion gazed at the broken pieces. "Can we repair it?"

"It has a cracked maghice, which severs the connection to Mother Nature." Earth leaned and gathered the pieces. "The last and most vital relic of the Grove is destroyed. That means you, balancer, are the living essence of our cause."

"I didn't do too bad, did I?" Synarion said.

The elemandrias opened their mouth wide and swallowed the pieces of Erenwill. Synarion should have stopped Earth and protected the precious pieces from their corrupt function. He didn't have the strength left to fight such a powerful being. He would join Valturus in Hell. It was a welcoming thought and one he couldn't humour. Synarion had to work with Earth if he wanted to live.

The elemandrias stood. "You succeeded, as you were born to do, where I failed my duty."

“You reverted to our primary task: balance. Self-punishment isn’t in an elemandrias’s logic.” Synarion had countless questions for the android. He wanted to learn where they went after the old world’s collapse. How did he come to reason with the hellseed keepers and Valturus leading to the World Mother? They didn’t have time to talk, and he had to be careful what words he chose.

“Correct you are, balancer. Though I must retreat into isolation, rebuild my reasoning.”

“For how long? You’re of the Grove. I can take you someplace protected with a Root Walker. I’ve kept him safeguarded for centuries.”

“No need, balancer. Isolation is required to repair my core function.”

“Humans won’t take kindly to you, looking like that. I understand this new world.”

“As do I. My living flesh deceived humans once before. I’ll regenerate the external organism, apply a new accent, hide among the humans and reassess my ways.”

“When you’re done, come find me.”

The elemandrias grumbled. “I bring shame and must slumber as you must complete the balancing of the hellsprouts. Others are nearing. I sense their steps in the soil.”

Synarion clenched his one good fist, wielding the spiked knuckle. In the ritual circle, a handful of hellsprouts remained, and on the outside was Abbygail, who hadn’t lost her focus on him. Even with her glazed eyes, he wondered if she was in there. He spoke. “You were involved with the World Mother for quite some time. Are these thorns infectious?”

“Clarify.”

“Like vampire and xephile bat fangs? They pricked me.”

“Negative. Their relationship with the victims is more symbiotic.”

*That puts me in the clear.* “Tell me, do the hellsprouts keep people alive after they birth?”

“Your intellect is impressive for having little time in the Grove’s archives.”

Synarion shrugged.

“They keep the heads as their disguise, luring people to feast on their flesh. The blood that feeds the plant feeds the mind of the deceased.”

“Each of these humans are aware of their existence?” Synarion asked.

“Partial truth. Blood fuels the brain while the plant provides oxygen. They cannot have a complete understanding of time or space. They are one with the plant, reliant on their actions.”

“Tell me, elemandrias, how did Valturus and her people find you and taint your functions to work into her plan?”

“The hellseed keepers wanted the same thing in the end. She informed me I was the last. I knew what she was and where her kind came from. After the old world collapsed and the Grove was lost, we needed radical solutions to restore Earth. I washed ashore northern Europe where the hellseed keepers found me, mended me, and told me of their ways. We guarded the hellseeds until we found a pool of maghice. Valturus looked for the land throughout the world. A cleanse is what Earth needs.”

*Hence, the real estate business.* “She found me in Aewouson, along with the elemandrias of Wind.”

“Details she failed to provide. I was at a loss. The fractured Erenwill served as a reminder of my duty.”

“And you haven’t seen another nymph or elemandrias since the old world collapse?”

“No, or anything of the Grove until you arrived,” the elemandrias said. “I wish it were far sooner. My methods would have been executed in a more peaceful manner.”

“Valturus has a way with words. Know that you are not alone, friend.”

The stone being took a bow and retreated into the woods. Synarion wanted to follow them and further attempt reason into an allegiance. There wasn’t a point. Elemandrias had a mind of their own, a core function, and they wouldn’t listen to Synarion who was a mere enforcer. What could he do? His wounds were too great, and time was against him. He had enough energy to finish the hellspouts and escape.

The balancer had a sickening thought that the elemandrias wouldn’t correct their reasoning and would become corrupted once more. It happened to Elemandrias of Wind.

*Onwards*, he thought. It was a repeating thought. Nature was continual and adaptive. That is what he had to be. The balancer marched to the remaining five hellspouts in the flowergram, drawing his last two throwing stars. He stepped over some corpses: a mix of heads and plants. These remains would baffle humans for decades.

One after the other, Synarion rid the world of its pest. First was the shaggy-haired guy from earlier. Next was a ginger-haired man, an elderly woman, a square-jawed man, and the last one at the far end, with blond dreadlocks and a septum

piercing. From Abbygail's photo, that was Janet, whose lifeless jaw dangled.

Synarion finished the deed, slicing the vines of Janet and wiping his blades on his wet jacket. A rush of guilt ran through him, realizing that the humans were alive in some form. It was unclear if they felt pain or were aware of their surroundings. It was better they were gone, free from their transformative nightmare. That left the final hellspout, Abbygail.

He stopped ten paces away from the plant. Was it required to kill her? It would displease Bark Nose with what happened. He couldn't return empty-handed.

The balancer sighed. His ear twitched, detecting the sound of a distant helicopter. If he was going to do this, he had to act fast. Synarion pocketed his blades and climbed the metal ladder leading into the glowing manhole, looking for supplies.

Underneath was a large dome room with a central wooden table containing slabs of human flesh. A large butcher knife with wet blood on the blade was stuck in the wood. Beside the table, a bucket overflowed with a wet sheening pile of organs and bones. Against the dirt walls were shelves: more blades, jars with pickled amphibian legs, cow eyes, and flowers. The bottom shelf contained a rope and tarp. There was too much here to examine, and he took the goods and left.

He reached the surface and tied a rope into a small loop, taking Bark Nose's branch from his belt and tightening the rope around it. Next, he made a larger lasso and threw the rope around Abbygail, tightening it to prevent movement, bringing the Root Walker stick close to her.

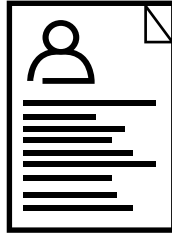
*Ancient one prevents us!*

“Shush,” Synarion muttered and placed the tarp over Abbygail’s body and shackling her.

Flashlights, people’s voices, and sirens rose in the woods. Synarion’s ears twitched. The police and fire department were near, and it was his signal to leave. He scooped the tarp over his shoulder and limped into the woods, leaving the nightmare behind.



WORLD MOTHER ASCENSION BY KONN LAVERY



## BALANCER PROFILE SUMMARY

**Name:** Elemandrias of Earth (Hellseed Keeper Gothi)

**Species:** Elemandrias

**Location:** Last seen in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

**Occupation:** Former Grove elemandrias, gothi of the Hellseed Keepers.

**Description:** Stone humanoid. Exterior skin provided camouflage to appear as a harmless old Scott. They will generate new skin and blend into society again.

**Balancing Offence:** Worked with Valturus to nurture hellseeds into hellsprouts, built the cult's followers, and summoned the World Mother.

**Note:** They have the remnants of Erenwill, the Greatstaff of Equilibrium. I question if I'll have to get it from them for safekeeping. There's no telling if they will fail reason and attempt to destroy the world again or join me.





## CHAPTER 26

# UNITED IN LOVE

Memories haunt the mind and influence present action. **M**During the drive to British Columbia, the World Mother and her hellseed keepers lingered in Synarion's thoughts. From the beginning, the clever vampire worked in line with the corrupt numen. He had hoped for a clear resolution, but instead, he found himself with fewer answers than before. Some hellseed keepers escaped, and Synarion was unable to get their supplies, including any remaining hellseeds. There was also the Elemandrias of Earth, their gothi.

Balance was such a complicated concept that the Grove took pride in mastering. They didn't understand what true balance

of Mother Nature's garden was. Synarion was not any better, who struggled to take on balancing missions, weighing how potent an offence was. Elemandrias of Earth was blinded to true balance. Even Valturus battled with what she decided was right. He could spend the entire fourteen-hour drive running his mind in circles regarding the concept. Instead, Synarion contemplated the mission and what a mess it was. His finger was gone. His body bore the marks of the rough encounter. Erenwill was destroyed. A past lover, dare he think friend, was locked in Hell. Abbygail had an unfortunate end with her father missing. Humans would find the careless aftermath of the ritual, including the plans. They weren't the brightest. Their scientists would argue what the hellspouts were for decades over the half-charred remains. The old world would be fine, or so he prayed.

*I hope you find peace, Synarion. This look isn't good for you.*

Valturus's words hit Synarion's chest, cooling his heart. She saw his longing for peace each time she looked at him. Bark Nose saw it, too. Synarion was slipping. He failed to maintain balance. A fluke chance allowed the last Grove elemandrias to survive and hold the remaining Erenwill components, preventing the destruction of the world. The World Mother would have risen, and the two numens would have battled for millennia as they had in the first days of the cosmos.

The hypothetical scenario was unsettling and pointless to ponder. He maintained balance despite rotting within. Synarion told himself that was what the rules were for. The liquor and guideline-bending proved he couldn't ignore his happiness. Unlike the elemandriases, he wasn't a functional machine and

focused on duty at each passing moment. He had sacrificed so much, and for what? Idealism and the better of others. He didn't want to be a martyr.

Nymphs of the Grove swore protection to Mother Nature's garden. Some humans understood the importance of their environment, like Abbygail's cousin Janet. Mother Nature's garden needed protection. Even without the fifth element, other threats remained.

Abbygail's hellspout wiggled in the tarp from the back seat during the drive, reminding him he was here and now. He ignored the random chatters from the children of the World Mother who spoke during the trip. Pests, damn pests. If what Elemandrias of Earth said was true, a bit of Abbygail remained in this plant for Bark Nose to enjoy. It wasn't going to be what the Root Walker wanted. Nothing was ever right in the world.

Forcing a future and forcing action led to worse solutions and corruption. Balancers knew this, hence their neutral behaviour and passive methods when able. They looked at the living world around them, using nature as guidance. Hence, the complex decisions they made of letting certain souls dominate the planet and others not. Humans had their time. The World Mother wouldn't. Even if the hellseed keepers made a second attempt, Synarion would do what he did again: stop it. These were concerns of a future that did not exist. Synarion was here, delivering Abbygail to Bark Nose. That is what he reminded himself.

His mind relapsed to the final moment with the World Mother and his futile attempt to rescue Valturus. Despite his anger for her devious plan, she let him live. Did her words of

love ring true, or were they another manipulation method? Her sacrifice for him spoke more than the countless theories his mind conjured. It made him ponder her current family. They'd be dead based on what Valturus said. They took the thirteen-seed remedy. During the hellseed ritual site, Synarion would have slaughtered them without even knowing it, as he did with Janet. Chances were he also ended Abbygail's friend Vicky and the Drainer case victims. Abbygail's father would remain a mystery. It didn't matter; people went missing all the time. As far as he knew, Abbygail was the remaining sprouted hellseed.

Synarion took one pit stop for gas and kept moving to the western province through the night and into the morning. Yes, he was tired, and his body begged for rest. Like any good soul in Canada, keeping a survival kit was vital in the harsh environment. His first-aid tools assisted his index finger, and a number of new cuts and puncture holes he found. It also included a couple of diefym leaves to smother into the more profound injuries. His persistence paid off, and he reached the Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve by midday.

"All right, here we go," Synarion said. He scooped the tarp-covered plant from the back seat and put it over his shoulder.

*The World Mother destroys who defy her!*

He parked the car off the main lot to avoid as much attention as possible. His hike took him from the main gravel path, letting him vanish into the woods with the body-shaped tarp. The hike felt longer due to his weakness. He panted and took his time. There was no rush other than his desire to rest. The trail

brought him to the familiar creek meeting point. He placed the tarp against one of the three trees on the cliff and untied it, freeing Abbygail. He re-applied Bark Nose's branch to the base of the plants below the decapitated head.

"You're not going anywhere," Synarion said.

Synarion sat cross-legged at the cliff's edge, waiting for Bark Nose. He could sense the Abbygail hellspout behind him. It was a dark power coming from the core of the plant. It made the other vegetation project an anxious hum. They knew it was not of the same numen. Synarion closed his eyes and focused on becoming one with Mother Nature's garden. Past the nervousness, the trees and bushes blew in the light breeze, the river rippled, the birds sang their songs, and the insects marched along the grains of gravel. Though he did not hear Mother Nature as he once did, he felt her presence in this oasis.

"Scaaabbed Eaaars?" came Bark Nose's deep rumble.

Synarion stood and turned to face the lumbering tree. The sun was setting. His meditation had transported him through time as it did.

"Bark Nose, it is good to see you," Synarion said.

"Likewisse, I see yooou're in rooough shaaape, aaand alive, did everrrything gooo well with suppresssing the Woorld Mooother? I felllt a disssturbannnce durinnng the night annd waas quite concerned for yooou and Abbygaaail."

Synarion pressed his lips together. Of course, a Root Walker could sense the arrival of the World Mother. Living creatures would have. They couldn't explain the disturbance and the strange emotion of dread. It would remain a mystery.



“I sennse her heeere. Where is shee?” Bark Nose asked, stepping into the open patch.

“Yes, well, concerning that . . . she’s here, sort of. Look for yourself.”

The Root Walker turned to the three trees, and the burrow that formed his mouth opened wide. He froze, looking at the girl wrapped in a trench coat before him.

“By Mooother Naaature,” Bark Nose said.

“I did what I could. She was a stubborn kid and wouldn’t stay when I told her to. If it means anything, I do owe her my life.”

“Abbygaaail,” Bark Nose said. He brought his arm-branch towards the plant. It wiggled side to side, attempting to hop away.

*Ancient one!*

“If you’d like, I can get rid of it. I’ve killed close to a hundred of these things, give or take,” Synarion said.

Bark Nose moved his branch away, and his vines slithered past the trunk onto the grass. They weaved through the blades, moving towards the hellspout. He spoke, “Pleaase, leaave Abbygaaail. She’s there . . . I caan sennse her. She is speeeking a differennt laaanguage, one of the plaaants.”

“Is that so?” Synarion asked. *The elemandrias was right.* “I can sense plants. With her, all I can detect is the World Mother’s child.”

“Thaat’s because yooou are not attunned ennnough, friend. Yooou should knnnow thiiis by nooow.”

“Of course. I suppose I am a bit scattered as of late.” Synarion cleared his throat. He didn’t get defensive often. It was exhaustion mixed in with the lack of expertise regarding the entire World Mother case. The Grove had trained him well; there was so much more to Mother Nature’s garden.

“Abbygaaail,” Bark Nose said. His vines reached the plant and moved along the black petals to her face. They stroked her cheek, and a smile jerked onto the girl’s face. “The Wooorld Mooother’s children feaaar me. This maaay be of uuuse.”

“And how is that?” Synarion asked.

“We caaan suppress the plaaant, giving mooore connntrol to Abbygaaail.”

“They need to feed, though. They feed on blood.”

“I aaam awaaare of the daangers. I aaam okay with thiiis, Synaaarion. Will you be toooo?”

Synarion’s first instinct was to say no. It was a standard practice for balance. Like vampires, the hellsprouts didn’t provide a niche in their ecosystem and had no purpose on Earth. Then again, as he watched the Root Walker stroke the dead girl’s face, he questioned the first thought. The hellspout’s petals peeled, and a black vine wormed past the rope-tied branch and coiled around Bark Nose’s vines. Bark Nose was a creature of nature, like Synarion. Unlike the balancer, Bark Nose didn’t deny his basic need for companionship. Abbygail’s hellspout did provide in her environment, a measurement that was difficult to balance and worthy of sliding past the balancer’s judgement. He cannot control each situation. In theory, even Dega’Mostikas, the root

of evil, should pay for conspiring with the World Mother. The list could go on.

“Yeah,” Synarion said. “I think you deserve peace, friend.”

“Thaaank you, Synaaarion. Your friennndship haaas offered me sooo much. Abbygaaail makes me beyonnd joyful, rememmmbering the beaaauty of this world.”

“And you’re sure she’s in there?” Synarion asked.

“Yes, it will taaake time. We will triummmph over the Woorld Mooother’s child.”

“Good.” *I can consider this done.*

“Aaand whaaat of you, Synaaarion?” Bark Nose’s asked. “You aaare worse for weaaar, and I sennnse your spirit is blue. Thiiss is unnnlike yooou. Yooou mentioned an elemandrias of the Grooove? Whaaat else did yooou unnnravel with this mmmystery?”

“I’ll be fine, friend. The World Mother and her hellseed keepers dated much further than I thought. Elemandrias of Earth is alive. Their corrupted purpose reverted them to the core function of balancing the world. Earth worked with Valturus to grow hellspouts over the centuries. They looked for the right location to perform a summoning ritual. It turns out Edmonton had a pool of maghice potent enough.”

A rumble came from Bark Nose’s core, disturbed by the news.

“Valturus hid a lot from me. I was blind. I also didn’t know of the World Mother, hellseeds, or any of the history regarding Mother Nature. I’m disturbed and humbled and need time to rest.” Synarion chuckled, sorrow seeping from the weak tone.

“Bark Nose, Elemandrias of Earth collected their fallen siblings’ pieces of Erenwill.”

“Whaaat?”

“That disk I had? The fourth piece. We built the staff, used it, and reverted the World Mother. I . . . I had never experienced such a connection to Mother Nature and life’s oneness. It disintegrated, along with the staff. Now, I am left alone. It’s cold. I knew I was a single creature in this vast garden. I don’t think I felt it before, not like this.”

“I aaam sorry, Synaaarion. You alwaaays haaave a hommme here with mee.”

“Thank you. I’ll take you up on that.”

“Eaaarth, where diiid they gooo?”

“To reprogram. They corrected their error once they saw what I was and what I held. There is no reasoning with a broken elemandrias. They’ll reassess as they wish and determine the best course of action.”

“Dooo you think theeey are a threaaat?”

“I’m not sure. They wanted to use the World Mother for balance. Earth cared little of her or the hellseed keepers.” *Or of Valturus*, Synarion thought. Elemandriases didn’t have emotions in others.

“Innnteresting,” Bark Nose’s said. “Yooou haaave saved Mooother Naaature’s garden. By faaar the mmmmost worthy tooo be caaalld a baaalancer.”

Synarion put on a closed smile and took a bow. Though, he disagreed. This was a mess of a case, and he scraped by due to luck. Synarion couldn’t keep balance on his own; he knew it, and it made his gut twist into a knot.

“Good luck with Abbygail,” Synarion said. “I’ll check in on you two soon.”

“Of cooourse Synaaarion, I aaam here when yooou need meee. Timme maaatters not. Rest well, friennnd.”

Synarion hiked down the side of the cliff, leaving the two lovers be. He would have to visit the Root Walker and the hellspout to see how well Abbygail did in her new state. How Bark Nose was going to obtain blood was not a concern. Synarion needed rest. As long as Bark Nose controlled that plant, that was what mattered. His friend was content with life, and Synarion had to focus on his needs.

He returned to his car and exhaled his stress. As he put the key into the ignition, his phone buzzed in the cup holder beside the gear shifter. He checked to see the phone was ringing. It was Mulier.

Right, he had a date with a succubus.



## CHAPTER 27

# CREATURE OF THIS EARTH

“And that’s it?” came the feathered voice from the pink-skinned girl beside Synarion, leaning on a marble kitchen island counter.

Her peach smell was more distracting than her figure, wrapped in a fighting leather dress, under the warm light cast by a glass chandelier. Her shining hair draped against her bare shoulders, exposing her curved black horns, not like the vampire. She would not have a modern open-concept condo

with oakwood cabinets and gold-plated handles. It was his wish to fill the gaping hole of Valturus. Mul wasn't her.

"That's all," Synarion said, drinking his whiskey. It was good, smooth with bark notes and a smoky aftertaste. She had expensive aesthetics, evident from the leather loveseat, fireplace, and high-end coffee table. He continued, "This is the intranet that keeps the old world connected, at least those wanting to be here. You hadn't heard of it on the street?"

Mul took a sip of her own drink. Though pointless, the act implied she was partaking in the social event. She smiled at Synarion, emphasizing the left dimple on her cheek. Her cotton candy eyes twinkled as she stared at him, filled with depth and the coldness of a python. "No. I can't say I have had a gentleman who was willing to share with me. Most prefer getting to the goods first."

"Simpleton." He took another swig of his whiskey, focusing on the laptop before him.

"Aren't they darling? I prefer men more focused," Mul said, pulling on her lower lip.

"So, this is the intranet dashboard." He pointed to sections of the layout on the website containing icons and names for each sub-section. "These are the forums, a few microsites for information based on region. You'll find others like you in these subthreads."

"Other succubi? What of incubi?" Mul leaned into the screen, face inches from the pixels.

Synarion didn't stop her despite being puzzled. "I would presume. I haven't looked for them because none have misbehaved to be on my radar."

“And what if one did?”

“Depends on the offence.”

“You’d punish a bad boy?”

“Look,” Synarion said, typing on the keyboard for the search bar: *man eaters*.

“Man eaters?” Mul snorted.

“Code name. The entire forum is based on them. You’ll have to learn it.” Synarion pointed at the screen of search results showing multiple topics. “Some results on succubi. Dig a little more, and you can see if there are any around.”

Mul leaned back. “Wonderful. Why the code names?”

“In case anyone from the outside finds the intranet, they won’t know what we’re discussing.”

“Right, because succubi, nymphs, and other ghastly ghouls are so easy for humans to believe.”

“It keeps it safe. It’s better than the alternative of being exposed. Some souls share their location on here.”

“Can I find yours?”

“No.” He slid over a piece of paper. “This is the cheat sheet I wrote for you.”

“A letter to me?” She smiled, picking up the paper.

“It’ll let you navigate the intranet and find others for whatever you need. You don’t have to stalk nightclubs.”

“You care where I go, hey?”

“I care for the old world as much as the new. This intranet helps us survive and not to be seen by humans. This means you must be responsible and keep this laptop protected and out of the hands of your prey. Got it?”



“Of course I will. Do I look irresponsible?” Her tail perked above her head, the black spiked tip pointing at him.

Synarion watched it, which crossed his eyes for a moment. “Yes, you do.”

Mul finished her drink and placed the glass down with her thumb and index finger. “Good. You can balance me?”

*Succubi, they don't stop*, Synarion thought, taking a swig of whiskey. The warmth of another body would offer some ease. The demon's curves were appealing, and it took mental effort to not gaze at her exposed skin. The choice of clothing complete with a golden front zipper was part of her game. She crossed her legs, letting the dress ride to her cheeks where the tattoo of swirling lines and pointed ends on her outer hip was: glyphs found in Dega' Mostikas's Triangle. He wanted to focus on the screen. The ink pulled his will to her.

“How bad do I have to be?” Mul asked.

Synarion forced a laugh and finished the rest of the whiskey. “I'm on hiatus.” He raised his right hand with the missing finger.

“You're worse for wear,” Mul said. “That trip did a number on you.”

“I need time to heal, reflect. When you fail to achieve your objective due to your desires, it becomes clear that longing distorted the goals from the beginning.”

“So ambiguous.”

“I'll let you slide with your ways.”

“I'm a lucky gal,” Mul said. She closed the laptop's lid and shifted her stool closer. “And that's what we had to cover?”

“Yeah. Thanks for the whiskey,” Synarion said as he stood.

She stood and placed her palm on his chest, stopping him from moving. “Not a kisser on the first date?”

“This is business,” Synarion said.

“I never agreed to that,” Mul said, stepping closer, her tail swaying. Her welcoming aroma flooded his nose. His heart pumped, and his veins flooded with warmth.

“Just one kiss?” she asked. Her hand slithered, wrapping both arms around Synarion’s neck and leaning to his mouth.

An old world being, like Valturus.

The vines.

Green eyes.

The crack sealing.

Lips pressed against his.

Gone.

Synarion pulled away.

“Hey,” Mul said into his ear. Her warm breath ran against his skin and tickled his spine. “What’s wrong? I’m not going to eat you, much.”

“Yeah,” Synarion said. He couldn’t move. His mind said no. His body screamed to be close to one another. He liked her pressed against him. His heart said so. The council of three voted two to one.

She kissed his jaw, starting from the side. “Come on. Do you think I’d agree to your intranet thing if I didn’t want to get to know you?”

“I presumed so. We had a deal.” He pushed the words from his throat despite recognizing he had lost his will. Succubi didn’t have psychic powers. Valturus didn’t have a firm grip on him.

“Well, this is a bonus.” Mul took his chin with her finger, bringing him to her plump lips. The edge of her horns grazed his forehead as the kiss held. She exhaled through her nostrils, sending heat against his face. Rule five didn’t apply. His heart opened. The mind was no more. He welcomed her, their tongues meeting. She pulled away, sucking off the saliva of his tongue.

“See, tough guy?” Mul said with a grin.

“Yeah,” he said. Relief. It was the same energy that made her glowing smile rush into him. He wanted more. Yet, she was a demon. Demons come from Hell, Dega’Mostikas’s Triangle, the same place the World Mother descended. It is the same place Valturus was. There was a chance.

“You said you’re in the mortal realm willingly, so you can get into Hell?” Synarion asked.

Mul tapped his lip. “Is work all you are?”

“It’s serious.”

“I do.” She tilted her head, watching his focused face.

“Want to strike another deal?” he asked.

Mul smirked. “That could be fun.” She ran her finger along his shirt. “Let’s talk . . . Like I said, sweetie, I’m not going to feed off you. A nymph is more fun to keep around anyways.” He’d heard that before.

Mul released him. “Here, I got something that will help.” She strolled around the island, showing him the sway of her hips, walking to the bedroom. Her tail moved in a slow waver. She stopped at the doorway and looked over her raised shoulder. “You coming?”

Synarion obeyed. He was hers as long as she kept his mind suppressed. No thoughts were needed. They entered the bedroom, where a low-resting bed with black sheets took center stage. The demon opened the top drawer of a midnight matte dresser to the right. She took out a grinder, lighter, and a glass pipe. She took a diamond-shaped charcoal chip. His mind activated, and he gained control of his better self.

“What’s this?” Synarion asked, looking at the object as she peeled off a sliver of it. It moved like skin.

“This? It’s called ash,” Mul said. She placed the strip into the grinder. “It’ll help you relax.”

Synarion took the more significant chunk from her hand and examined it closer. It was indeed organic, dry, and had resistance when pulled. It was thick. A reptilian scale. “What type of drug is this?”

“It’s new on the market,” Mul said.

“Which market?”

“Pick one. Human and underground.” She took the scale from his hand, putting it on the dresser. She kissed his throat, attempting to cast her spell again. “Don’t overthink it, balancer.”

Synarion couldn’t look away from the diamond. He had seen that type of scale before. Reptilian, yes, on hatchlings in another life. Memories fizzle in time. Did they matter? Valturus thought so. Mul continued kissing his neck and pulled on his shirt’s collar. No, he didn’t need to overthink it. Nature could balance itself for one night.

The demon twisted the grinder and finished loading the pipe with the ash-coloured powder. “Ever snort coke, smoke heroin, and consume LSD?” Mul asked.

“No, can’t say I’ve tried.”

“A shame, baby,” Mul said. “Of course, useless on me. For you . . .” She turned the pipe to him. “. . . it will give us a night to remember.”

The succubus offered him freedom for a little while. It was what he wanted. He took the pipe and let her light the bowl. He put the rim against his lips and inhaled. The demon’s hands caressed his chest as the smoke ran into his throat. A purple smoke radiated from the chamber, complimented by a swamp smell. Synarion rotated the pipe to look at the burning drug and exhaled the smoke.

“How long does it take?” he asked.

“Instant for humans.”

Synarion put the pipe on the dresser. “Nothing.”

Mul frowned in a playful pout. “Nothing at all?”

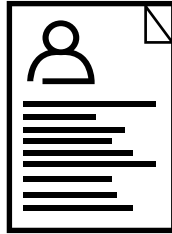
He shrugged. “No. Not much affects us.”

“I’ll fix that.”

She brought him to the bed and they removed one another’s clothes with heavy pants and thumping hearts. Their bodies became one with a rhythm that matched the living world. His mind was no more, intoxicated with new eros until time ceased to exist. No more balance. No ritualistic recitals of *grove\_transcripts\_ENG\_01-04*. No more haunting thoughts of philia from the former. He couldn’t control the universe nor understand its mysteries. Tenebrous memories anguished. They caused more harm than good. He was free from the chains of

his past to repeat. Memories mattered little. Synarion was another creature in Mother Nature's garden, present, agape to the Earth he lived in.

WORLD MOTHER ASCENSION BY KONN LAVERY



## BALANCER PROFILE SUMMARY

**Name:** Synarion Lurel

**Species:** Nymph

**Location:** Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

**Occupation:** Balancer

**Description:** Cauliflower ears. Pale. White hair. Violet eyes. Missing left index finger. Scars head to toe. Tattoos on chest.

**Balancing Offence:** Denying his duty to Mother Nature's Garden.

**Note:** Never forget the six.

Rule one: look like you belong.

Rule two: don't stand out from the crowd.

Rule three: embrace the culture.

Rule four: stay calm.

Rule five: don't mix.

Rule six: learn their skills.

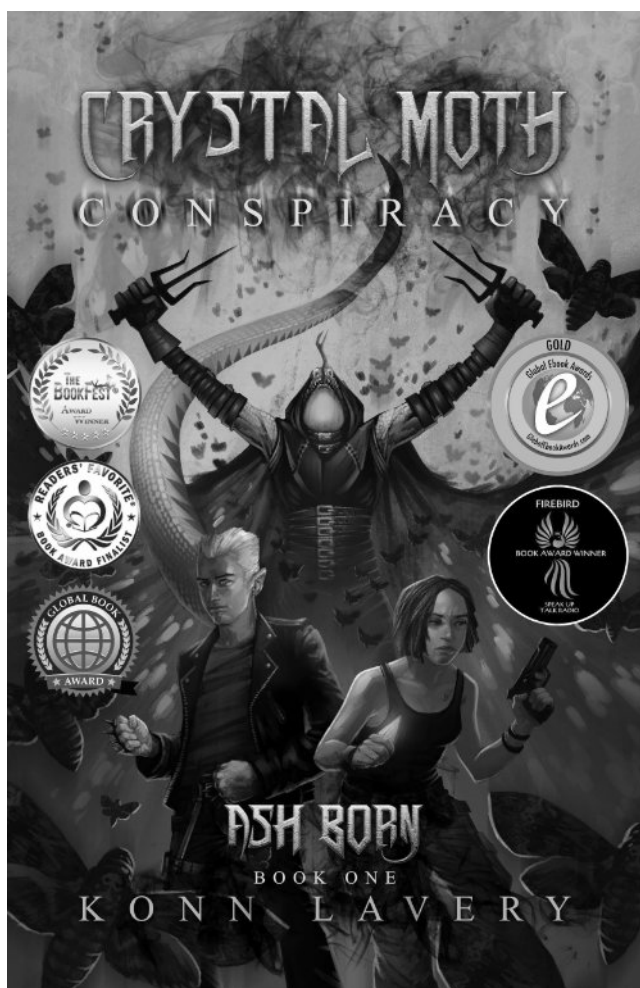


These digital documents keep me grounded, reminding me I am the same as the others I balance. This is the first time I've made a profile for myself, despite my history with Valturus.

I question why I bother. The euphoria the demon offered was addicting. She is kind, playful, and helps me remember the gift of Mother Nature's garden. The demon can show me how to get into Hell. There has to be a way. Then I can find Valturus, bring her to the mortal realm. As long as Mul and I keep our agreement. It's not such a terrible one either. I have to be conscious too. She's a drug, like the one she showed me. I need to keep tabs on ash, learn where it comes from, and who is using their own scales as a currency to build a drug empire.

It took ash for me to reflect upon hatchlings I once raised. Two reptilian girls I dismissed from memory. How could I? A hundred versus two thousand years muddles essential moments. I am to blame for my distortions, repeating over and over.

Another balancing mission is not what I need. There's no time to heal and I can't continue echoing my actions. Writing my balancing offences is the first start to improvement. Duty calls, ash is the reason, and I act for Mother Nature.



## THE STORY CONTINUES. . .

Read Chapter 1 of *Crystal Moth Conspiracy: Ash Born Book One* on the following pages.

WORLD MOTHER ASCENSION BY KONN LAVERY



## CHAPTER 1

# NEW PRODUCT

Everyone is a media watcher, zombified by the screen and unable to see through its lies. Lola learned this the wrong way. Sure, she's been an outcast from society most of her life, but this isn't some goth club filled with posers wearing black head to toe, criticizing the masses for being sheep. This is rock bottom with roughnecks. No more fictionalized fantasies of how reality functions. No more ludic loops for dopamine kicks. Goodbye shock news on the tube. This is actual survival.

*Mom would be so proud, Lola thinks, clutching her handgun with her sweaty fingers. Mom. No. She'd best pay attention to the*

man sitting across from her. The cartilage is misaligned, covered in red, from whence she pistol-whipped him earlier. Cherry liquid drips from his nose, falling onto the unfinished wooden table, soaking into the grain.

Her mother, it's why she's here. It's why she dragged this man onto the second floor of the abandoned warehouse and zap-strapped him to the chair.

His narrow beading face tightens into a sneer under the clear lightbulb dangling by a chain. That's hate. He cannot see Lola's face as she hides behind the lamp, casting intimidation as best as she can.

"As you know, this ash stuff is taking the world by storm." The man says with an attempted tough-guy tone, reverberating in the darkness. His pitch is too high for the attitude he projects, but he tries. "And no one knows where it comes from. I still don't know where they got it or what the hell it is. Since that night, I just sell it. No way have I tried it. I'm clean now. My kid doesn't need a deadbeat father. Most of the time, I grind it up to disguise it, which makes it look like some charcoal or . . . ash."

"Okay, Chen, how much does it go for?" Lola asks, her voice faking a silvery calm tone. Truthfully, she's as scared as him. She's never interrogated anyone before. His pencil stash above his lip and tacky faded tattoos scattered across his arms make him less of a threat than some of the criminals she's encountered. Though, the white rag tied to his bicep represents the dangerous beast he comes from.

Chen says, "Well, a gram can be two-fifty. It depends on supply and where the cops are at." A pause. The moment holds.

"Look, I told you names, everything. We change our meetup spot every time."

Lola slides her gun off the splintered table, away from the open black bag. She tucks the firearm behind her back and reaches for the black bag. The light hints at her pallid skin and the blonde wig that boils her scalp. Chen's eyes squint, trying to get a good look at her. Lola will reveal her face when she wants to.

Her hand goes into the bag and pulls out a flat, leathery, diamond-shaped object. She holds the ash into the light. The diamond is brittle along the edges, and some parts are about to flake off. The core is thicker, stretchy, and holds hydration.

"You said organic?" Lola asks. Despite the brittle edges, it's fresh enough that she can spin the ash between her thumb and index finger. *Amazing this was not around until the summer*, she thinks. *Changes my whole strategy*.

"Yeah," Chen says.

"A leaf?"

"Well, I don't know. It sure as hell isn't made in a lab."

"It's a scale," Lola says.

"A scale? Like a reptile?"

"Yes, dumb shit. You can have them as pets. They are in the wild?"

Chen shifts in his seat, upset that she is belittling him. He says, "Okay, lady, why hasn't the news said anything?"

Lola smirks, placing the ash diamond on the table. She drags the wig off, resting it on her sombre grey cargo pants beside the open burner phone. The cool air touches her sweaty, short hair as she pushes the light away, letting Chen get a good look at her.

He analyzes her up and down. His mouth hangs open,

surprised at who she is. Maybe he expected someone older or a little more grizzled and not a girl kicked out of university.

Lola says, "The news knows, but they're part of the game. Everyone is fabricating this bullshit fairytale we live in. Give it time, and some leaks will find their way on the web."

"You're clearly not a cop. What do you want?" Chen asks.

She leans forward. Now, Chen's gaze locks onto the nasty bullet scar on her chest, underneath the left black tank top strap. Lola could have kept her jacket on, but she wants him to see. She wants this lowlife scum to be the message to his employers so they know she's coming for them.

"You street dealers have no idea how deep the Crystal Moths run," Lola says.

Chen doesn't blink, glued to the scar. "Hey, you're that girl, aren't you?"

Lola lets go of the light and sits still. The chain moves in a pendulum motion, casting sharp contrasts on her stone-cold face. Back and forth. Without looking, she grabs the burner phone and dials 911 with her thumb.

"Yeah," Chen says in a deep exhale. "You exposed the cops out west with the video. The Crystal Moth bust in Edmonton with that hashtag YEGman. Fuck me. I almost don't believe it."

"Believe what you want."

"I do. You're the reporter kid with that website people go to. Lola Cabello."

Lola tosses the burner phone onto the table while standing. She throws her leather jacket over her shoulder and clutches the wig. "Cops are on their way," she says.

Chen's face is frozen, looking at the phone. Now, he is aware

of its dual functions displayed on the screen. One: dead center of the display shows the dialling of the police. Two: the recording text beside a flashing red dot and a microphone icon in the upper portion of the screen. His skin must be ice cold now, knowing how much he spilled.

She turns and walks towards the dark exit at the far end of the warehouse. With each step onto the cold concrete, the leather boots leave a high click.

"Hey!" Chen shouts.

*Keep walking*, Lola thinks, exhaling a wave of relief.

"Hey!" Chen shouts again.

She reaches the door, pushes it, and slips into the dust-covered stairwell.

"Don't go west!" Chen's voice is muffled by the door.  
"They'll kill you!"

She keeps walking under the night light shining through the broken glass windows. The distancing Chen curses her name. Lola's heart tries to climb out of her throat. She can't stop now, for she put this mess into motion. Chen isn't going to be alright. The cops are like the news with profound Crystal Moth influence. That failed recognition started the snowball she's frozen to.

Lola pushes the exit door and hurries down the alleyway, coated with fluffy snow. She slips into her leather jacket and tucks the wig onto her head. Sirens blare, increasing in volume throughout the night metropolis. She'll escape in time, and the cops will take Chen in. They'll hear the whole recording, and with a sliver of luck, an authentic law enforcer will get the evidence.



The probable scenario is a Crystal Moth plug will take care of Chen and the evidence, it's happened to her before, and that is okay. Chen isn't responsible for what happened in Edmonton. He is the message. Every one of these pricks is going to pay for what happened. Lola will make sure of it.



## NOW AVAILABLE

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Fugitive Lola Cabello is hellbent on avenging her mother's death in this multi-award-winning adventure.

She descends into an escalating scheme of reptilian drug lords, led by the fallen angel Mastema, after withholding evidence from the police.

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Lola's vigilante methods unravel the secrets of the Crystal Moth's new drug, ash. This forces the gangsters to send their fiercest assassin, Scalebane, to silence her.

The power of ash endangers Lola's wellbeing and threatens to expose the last of a forgotten world filled with demons, vampires, talking plants, and the fantastic.

They control the media.

Detective Iglesias is closing in.

Lola is not prepared for this rabbit hole.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Konn Lavery is a Canadian author whose award-winning fiction has reached the bestselling charts on Amazon and in his hometown, Edmonton. His work has been described as uncanny and immersive and frequently falls under the Dark Fantasy and Horror genres. Each of his stories are housed within the expanding universe known as the Macrocosm spanning across time and space.

He has been recognized by reviewers such as Reader Views, Readers' Favorite, Literary Titan, and by award programs such as indieBRAG, The Wishing Shelf Book Awards, eLit Awards, and Dan Poynter's Global Ebook Awards. His work has also been curated into the Edmonton Public Library's Capital Press collection.

Konn started writing stories at a young age while being a homeschooled vegetarian, enthralled with storytelling. After graduating college, he began professionally pursuing his writing with his first release, *Reality*, in 2012 while balancing his graphic design business. Konn's visual communication skills have been transcribed into the formatting and artwork found within his publications, supporting his fascination with transmedia storytelling.