



The Stone Child

A story of the Nightmare World

by Matthew R. Francis

Part I

Mik-Lam died three suncycles before coming of age. Many years later, when ey finally told eir story, so many other stories about what happened had been told that eir own narrative had to compete with other frankly less fantastical versions. But Mik-Lam was there. Ey died, and lived to tell the story.

On the hot afternoon before eir death, Mik-Lam was taking a turn in the paltar's field. Ey grew up in Paltar Omtayl in the Eastern Paltarayn, on the lower slopes of the volcanic pillars of the Spines. Omtayl was a largely unremarkable paltar, distinguished mostly for having a Healer. Mik-Lam's father Kamdel was one of the Elders; eir mother Enko-Tam was a weaver; eir two older brothers were already married and living in their wives' paltarayn, as was the custom.

That hot afternoon, the squash wasn't ready to harvest and the corn-leaves were just beginning to yellow, so Mik-Lam didn't have much to do except keep watch. Even that wasn't much of a chore: the larger animal pests would wait until the vegetables were riper and the grain was ready to harvest. With eir mother sick and eir father distracted by work and worry, Mik-Lam's mind was on other things than keeping watch when the Stone Child arrived.

As a result, it was among the corn-stems when Mik-Lam noticed it. Ey had let eir borrowed spear fall to the ground, since it had never been needed before, but now ey scrambled to pick it up.

"Who are you?" ey demanded, though ey really wanted to ask, "*What* are you?"

Because it wasn't an animal. It wasn't a tighi either, though it was basically tighi-shaped. It was half Mik-Lam's height with a child's proportions. Instead of skin or fur, its unclothed body and limbs appeared to be covered with stone-like scales, irregular overlapping pieces of dark gray shale. Its feet were out of sight among the plants, but its hands had no fingers, just scaly gray paddles. The thing's head was ovoid, much taller than it was wide and the same color as the body. The head was completely smooth and scaleless in contrast with the body, with which it merged necklessly. The thing had no orifices of any sort: no eyes, ears, mouth, nose, or genitals.

Though it didn't speak or move, Mik-Lam felt it watching em, eyelessly. Despite its small size and lack of visible claws or teeth or anything weaponish about its anatomy, it radiated dangerousness and hostility.

Mik-Lam scrambled to raise eir borrowed spear to point at the thing and shouted the alarm call. The thing stayed where it was, still exuding menace, and Mik-Lam kept eir eyes locked on it. After a very short time, ey heard other members of the paltar scrambling behind em. Ey flickered eir vision as two Hunters drew up.

"What's wrong?" one asked.

But in that split-second distraction, the thing had vanished.



A paltar isn't just a village: it's an extended family, a home, part of a tighi's identity. Mik-Lam's paltar knew em as well as anyone could, and they knew — post-adolescent distractibility aside — Mik-Lam was reliable and not prone to making things up. For that reason, the others didn't immediately dismiss eir story. One of the Hunters went back to the village with em to find eir father the Elder, leaving the second Hunter to keep watch in case the gray thing returned.

Mik-Lam's father, Elder Kamdel, called the other Elders together in council, along with the paltar's Healer, a man named Kan-Lo. They gathered in the Elders' meeting-house, which was barely large enough for all of them. Even so, Mik-Lam had to stand uncomfortably against the wall, while everyone else sat on low stools.

"I examined Mik-Lam, and ey're not feverish or injured," Healer Kan-Lo said to the Elders.

"Could ey have fallen asleep?" said Elder Ghinka.

"I think my child is capable of distinguishing a dream from reality," said Elder Kamdel, sharply.

"I don't imply any insult," Ghinka said. "After all, Mik-Lam is the most helpful child in the entire paltar. I only meant to say that if this was a vision, it might not be as alarming as an unknown creature would be. Eir Coming of Age is very soon, and we all know that's a time for visions."

Mik-Lam suppressed an eye-roll at being called a child, even though it was technically true for another three suncycles.

"Visions are a matter for a Prophet or Dreammaster," said Healer Kan-Lo. "But if it wasn't a vision, it's still probably a matter for a Prophet. That creature ey describe doesn't sound like anything I've heard of."

"Me either," Kamdel said. "Prophet Pandel-Kyn lives in Paltar Memdoth, which isn't far from here. We could send for him."

"Mm," Kan-Lo murmured. Mik-Lam wondered what the problem was. However, the Elders didn't pay him any attention.

"We can't spare anyone to go until the rest of the Hunters are back from the upper slopes," said Elder Ghinka. "They should be back tomorrow or the day after. In the meantime, what should we tell everyone?"

"Just to keep vigilant, I think," said Elder Kun-Plo, who was so old his voice was a mere whisper. "All we have to say is that young Mik-Lam saw an unusual creature, and to watch for it, in case it's looking for trouble."

"I like that," said Kamdel. "It's the truth, without giving anyone a reason to worry before

we know more. Mik-Lam, can you keep the details secret for now?"

Mik-Lam stirred emself. "Of course, father," ey said.



But who would Mik-Lam tell anyway? Eir closest friend Ilyam was nearly a year older, and had already gone through the Coming of Age ceremony. In his adult role, Ilyam was a Trader, which took him out of the paltar a lot; he was gone now. But even if he had been around, custom in the Paltarayn didn't really allow close friendships between adults and children, even when those friendships were formed when both parties were young. Sure, when Mik-Lam became an adult in three suncycles, they could reconnect and become friends again, if life allowed. However, Ilyam was likely to marry within a few years, which meant joining his spouse's paltar. While women tended to remain in their birth paltar their whole lives, men and many holmayn left upon marriage and joined their spouses' paltarayn, rarely returning. Childhood friendships struggled to survive the transition to adulthood.

As Mik-Lam tended the paltar's mushroom-bed under the rock overhang just past the village edge, ey glumly reflected that three suncycles might as well be three years, since ey needed to talk to someone about the gray thing right *now*. The Elders were... Elders. Eir father would listen, probably, but he didn't have much imagination. Eir mother's illness was a long decline, which meant she slept most of the time and turned her thoughts inward. The only tighi she spoke to much anymore was the Healer.

But that thought led to another: Kan-Lo was an adult, but he was someone with special knowledge. He wasn't an Elder, and he wasn't an immediate family member (though Mik-Lam wasn't exactly sure how the two of them were related, in the complex calculus of cousinhood that defined paltar life). They weren't precisely close friends, but Mik-Lam had helped Kan-Lo out with small tasks before; he was a kind and sympathetic person, unlikely to be dismissive of the concerns of the young, however outlandish. So, after finishing eir chores, tending eir mother and helping her eat the evening meal, then participating in the Night Chant, Mik-Lam went to the Healer's house and called gently.

"Come in," said Kan-Lo. The Healer was pacing as he crushed some fragrant leaves in a small bowl, but he smiled at Mik-Lam. He was exceptionally tall and thin for a tighi, to the point where his ears nearly brushed the roof of his hut if he stood up straight. "I'm guessing you want to talk about that gray creature."

"Yes," said Mik-Lam. Ey fell silent for a moment. Kan-Lo finished his preparations and started the crushed leaves burning. "The way the thing appeared out of nowhere and disappeared as quickly made it feel like ... like a nightmare, but I was awake. It felt real, but ... not actually real, all at the same time."

"I think I understand what you mean, though it's nothing I've personally experienced," the Healer said. "And if I'm right — and you didn't hallucinate the thing — then this really is a

job for a Prophet. That's assuming you weren't dozing on your feet, which I think you're self-aware enough to know if you had been or not. What you're describing sounds like something from the Nightmare World."

"While I'm awake?" Mik-Lam said. "Is that...is that possible? I thought Nightmare creatures were invisible in the Waking World." Ey were not yet initiated into the mysteries of life in the Paltarayn, but ey still knew some things about the cycles of Nightmare and Waking Worlds, stretching back through time into the eternal past.

"Again, a Prophet can tell you more than I can," the Healer said. "All I know is sometimes Nightmare creatures can get into the Waking World, not just into our minds while we're sleeping. Prophet Ghedel is the one you need to talk to. He's studied the Nightmare World more intensively than any Prophet in living memory. The drawbacks are that he's very old, and his paltar is the better part of a day's walk away. I doubt he'd be able to come here. He might be able to send his apprentice, though, who is married to my cousin Kay-Lan."

"My father suggested Prophet Pandel-Kyn," said Mik-Lam, cautiously, remembering Kan-Lo's lukewarm response earlier.

Instead of answering immediately, the Healer put another bowl pierced with holes over the bowl of burning leaves. The smoke streamed through the holes and filled the hut with a sweet fragrance. "He is knowledgeable," he said finally. "But I trust Prophet Ghedel more. Please don't ask my reasons."

Mik-Lam thought ey could guess, though. Kan-Lo had been raised as a girl, but had declared he was a man at his Coming of Age. Traditionally Paltar-law allowed such things, but it was rare and one faction disapproved of it on principle. That faction insisted that the world was based on binaries and stability: the twin red and yellow suns in the sky dancing their eternal suncycles; the Waking and Nightmare Worlds cycle back and forth into the dim past. Mik-Lam emself had brushed against this hostility, having come out as holma even before Coming of Age. Eir parents had provided no difficulty, but others — including a few other children — were unkind in an oblique way. If Prophet Pandel-Kyn was in the binarists' camp...well, Mik-Lam was more inclined to care about the Healer ey knew than the Prophet ey had never met.

"But it's a moot point," said Healer Kan-Lo. "We aren't calling for a Prophet just yet, and we may not have to. Maybe that thing, whatever it is, won't come back."

Mik-Lam opened eir mouth to reply, but a sudden outburst interrupted em.

"Healer! Please come quickly!" someone was shouting from the other side of the paltar. "One of the Hunters is hurt badly!"

Kan-Lo immediately—but calmly—stood and picked up a large leather satchel. Mik-Lam scrambled out of his way, but as the Healer was just about to leave, he looked at em thoughtfully and said, "Do you want to come along? I might need another set of hands."

Mik-Lam nodded and followed.



The Hunter named Ko-Il met them as they crossed the village.

“We were heading back toward Omtayl village when we snared a big buck ubtin,” Ko-Il said, panting with exertion and fear. “But it got loose from the net and charged. Frumin got unlucky. The buck’s horn caught him on the leg and cut him open. We got him bandaged up as well as we could and carried him, but I think it’s too late to save him.”

Kan-Lo nodded gravely, but Mik-Lam could see he was worried. “How long has he been bleeding?”

“It’s hard to know, Healer,” said Hunter Ko-Yl. “I’m sorry. We slowed the bleeding, but we couldn’t stop it. If we hadn’t bandaged him, he’d have bled to death very fast.”

Even Mik-Lam could guess what that meant: the ubtin’s horn had torn the big artery in Hunter Frumin’s leg.

“You did the best you could,” said the Healer. “I’m not sure I would have done anything different under the circumstances.”

The hunting party was just outside Omtayl-village, gathered around Hunter Frumin. The other three Hunters had rebandaged him and laid him on the ground, with his head and legs supported. But even in the dark, Mik-Lam could see dark blood on Frumin’s clothes and the ground. The Hunter was alive, but only just: he was unconscious, his breath shallow and labored, his teeth bared in pain.

Healer Kan-Lo knelt beside the Frumin’s body and opened his satchel. He drew out fresh bandages, handing them to the other Hunters, along with a rattle made of a dried gourd and short length of bone, which he handed to Mik-Lam.

“Count in your mind and shake the rattle every time you reach the fifth number in the sequence,” the Healer said, and began chanting, a wordless drone that wavered between four notes. As he chanted to the accompaniment of Mik-Lam’s rattle-shake, the Healer unbandaged the wound and passed his hands over it, gesturing for the Hunters to tie the fresh bandages on.

The chant seemed to take Frumin’s pain away: his breath became less ragged, and his closed eyes no longer twitched. Mik-Lam felt the power from Kan-Lo’s chant, some of which seemed to come from emself, though ey didn’t understand why or how. The blood flow from Frumin’s leg slowed to a halt.

“That’s as much as I can do,” Kan-Lo said, sitting back on eir heels, breathing as hard as if ey had been sprinting. “Let’s take him back to my hut — carefully as we can now! — and gather as many of his family as we can.”

Mik-Lam flattened eir ears and closed eir eyes. What little hope ey had held was gone. Frumin had lost too much blood, and even if the Healer could stop the bleeding, nobody could

restore what was already lost. All Kan-Lo could do was make his transition from the Waking World to the Next World as peaceful as could be. But the Hunter's family around him would be a blessing to him, even if he wasn't aware of them.

The Hunters rigged a better sling than they had made before, and carried Frumin the final distance into Omtayl village. Meanwhile, Mik-Lam ran ahead to wake up Frumin's wife, Natl-Han, begin the process of gathering the family, and poke up the fire in front of the Healer's house. By the time Frumin's litter arrived, a small group stood around Kan-Lo's fire in grim silence. Frumin was laid on the ground, his feet toward the fire. Natl-Han lay beside him flat on her face, covering her ears with her hands.

The Healer began his chant again, directing everyone to join in. Mik-Lam resumed shaking the rattle, and as before, ey felt the magic flowing out into the wounded Hunter.

But before the third shake, ey shouted and dropped the rattle. The gray thing, the child-sized featureless monster from the paltar's field, had suddenly joined the group, looking down on Hunter Frumin with its eyeless face. Before any of them could do or say anything more, the thing raised a paddle-like hand. Mik-Lam froze in mid-cry. Healer Kan-Lo's chant was cut off in the middle of a phrase; the Hunters and gathered family stood like carvings. All they could do was breathe...and watch.

The gray thing folded its arms against its body, where they merged and disappeared. Where its head joined to the body, a darker line became visible: a split, an opening. The thing's entire head unfolded outward, and the inside of the formerly ovoid head opened into a flat wide gray mushroom cap, a narrow stalk connecting it to the body and black gill-ridges below. With an audible huff, the thing released a fine cloud of green-purple spores from those gills. Most of the spores settled on Hunter Frumin's body, but Mik-Lam was unable to stop emself from inhaling some in eir half-paralyzed state.

Ey choked and felt eir lungs closing. But just before ey suffocated, ey suddenly found emself standing in an open space in broad daylight, in front of a huge rock wall covered in paintings. The central petroglyph was like an abstracted version of the gray creature, but drawn to be three times Mik-Lam's height. Its paddle-hand was raised as though in benediction, mushroom-head fully extended.

Mik-Lam looked around, and found ey were in a huge crowd: everyone from eir paltar, but thousands of others too. Eir parents stood nearby, but also eir dead grandparents, which ey realized without any sense of shock. As in a dream, ey just knew things: that the thousands with him were everyone who lived and ever had lived in Paltar Omtayl, back through the generations since Kamtigh led their ancestors out of the Nightmare World into the Waking World. They all lived, and would never die again. All of them knelt at once and raised hands to the image of the gray thing on the rock wall.

But their eyes were wrong. Looking at them, Mik-Lam saw they were all unblinking, their

eyes wrinkled and desiccated, staring like dead and mummified things. Ey shouted in horror and that broke the vision.

Ey found emself abruptly back in the village with Kan-Lo and the others, coughing up filthy wads of the spores onto the ground. The gray creature was gone. Mik-Lam looked at the Healer, who shook his head like he had been awakened from a deep sleep.

“What just happened?” said Hunter Ko-Yl. “What was that thing?”

“That was the gray being you saw earlier?” Kan-Lo said to Mik-Lam, who nodded. To the confused Hunters, the Healer said, “We’ll explain later. First I need to figure out what it did to Hunter Frumin.”

When Kan-Lo examined Frumin, the spores were gone—dispersed or absorbed or breathed in. But the injured Hunter was breathing normally, and appeared to be in a deep sleep. “He’s stopped bleeding too,” Kan-Lo said.

“That thing...healed him?” said Ko-Yl.

“Maybe,” said the Healer, doubt in his voice.



Nobody got much sleep that night, other than Mik-Lam’s sick mother (who slept most of the time now anyway) and Hunter Frumin, whose sleep was uncannily deep. Mik-Lam emself kept vigil with Frumin’s wife Natl-Han, the Hunters, and Healer Kan-Lo, eir mind a muddle of anxiety and confusion. Elder Kamdel arrived shortly after the departure of the gray creature, lingering just long enough to hear the story of what happened before going to consult with the other Elders in the council hut. Mik-Lam didn’t tell him, or anyone else, about eir vision, and no one else mentioned any visions of their own.

Mostly, though, ey kept looking into the darkness toward the paltar’s fields, watching for the return of the gray thing. Not that ey had any thoughts of what ey would do if it did return. After all, it had effortlessly paralyzed a whole group of Hunters. What good would a spear do?

The night wore on. Frumin didn’t wake up.

Mik-Lam dozed fitfully on eir feet, snapping awake when eir head slipped. The others around the Healer’s fire were similarly suspended between sleep and wakefulness, occasionally repeating to each other the story of what had happened, as though to remind themselves it wasn’t a nightmare.

A Nightmare. Mik-Lam wondered again if that was what the gray thing was. All ey knew about Nightmare World came from legends of heroes, who fought the Nightmares to save the Paltarayn, and of course the foundational mythology, which told of how the worlds cycle between Waking and Dreaming, but how we visit the Nightmare World of the past in our sleep or in visions. Ey knew the names of some Nightmares, but not what this thing was.

The night wore on. Frumin didn’t wake up.



The first light of the Redsun threw the shadow of the Eastern Mesa over the Paltarayn, painting the sky bloody and stirring Paltar Omtayl to some semblance of its morning routines. Mik-Lam guiltily went home to prepare breakfast for eir mother, who woke up just long enough to eat. Ey didn't tell her about last night's events, if she could even listen well enough to understand.

Once Mik-Lam was sure she was asleep again, ey returned to the Healer's hut, where Frumin slept on. Kan-Lo himself had gone inside, so Mik-Lam followed. The Healer was brewing something fragrant, but smiled wanly.

"Is there any change?" Mik-Lam asked quietly.

Kan-Lo shook his head. "Not that I can tell. He's alive, though, and he's not bleeding to death anymore. Whatever that thing did, it's at least keeping him from dying."

Mik-Lam took a deep breath and said, "Can I tell you something?"

"Of course," said Kan-Lo. "What is it?"

"I ... saw a vision when the gray thing paralyzed us," Mik-Lam said. "Did you? Did anyone else?"

"I didn't," said Kan-Lo. "If the Hunters did, they haven't told me yet. But please tell me what was in your vision."

Mik-Lam described it quickly, eir story punctuated with anxious glances at the door, as though eir father could burst in at any moment. "I don't know exactly what it means, but I feel like it's a warning. The gray thing isn't a friend, even if it saved Hunter Frumin's life."

Kan-Lo frowned. "I'm a Healer, not a Prophet," he said. "But like you, I don't trust this gray creature. Our Hunters are terrified. I don't think anyone who saw that thing would believe it's benevolent, whatever it did for Frumin."

"What about the Elders?" Mik-Lam asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine," said Kan-Lo. "They haven't taken me into their confidence. However, I know a messenger left sometime in the middle of the night. I'm sure that means they sent for Prophet Pandel-Kyn. And whatever my personal feelings about him — and his about me — I hope he knows what this thing is, and what to do about it."

Mik-Lam nodded, but with ears flat against eir head. Ey returned home and finished cleaning up the remnants of breakfast, then banked the hut's fire. Eir father was still with the other Elders, which was unusual and troubling. Then again, everything was unusual and troubling.

Just as Mik-Lam was considering checking on Hunter Frumin again, ey heard a commotion from the direction of the village fire. Ey hurried to see what was going on, and found the whole group of Elders, along with Healer Kan-Lo and a short, stocky stranger wearing a large headdress with a crest. A few of the Hunters were in attendance too.

“So this thing is visible to everyone?” asked the stranger, who had to be Prophet Pandel-Kyn. “It’s not an ordinary Nightmare, then. That leaves us with only a few possibilities of what it could be. It might be a krek.”

Mik-Lam, who had come up to the edge of the group as unobtrusively as possible, shuddered. A krek was a tighi who made a bargain with the Nightmares: giving up their name and other essential things in exchange for uncanny abilities. Some kreKayn could fly or change shape. They were very rare, though. While some of the superstitious blamed kreKayn for everything from sickness to rockslides to general bad luck, Mik-Lam had never heard of a real krek in eir lifetime, or the lifetime of eir parents.

“If it is, it’s been transformed more than any krek I’ve heard of in the legends,” said Kan-Lo.

The Prophet ignored him, pulling the headdress off and addressing the Elders. “But based on what you say it looks like, I think it’s a Nightmare World creature known as the Stone Child. I don’t know much about it beyond the name and its general description: that it’s no bigger than a child and appears to be made of stone, which agrees with your stories. I know that’s not much to go on, but if you can see it that tells me several very important things. First, though it’s a creature of the Nightmare World, it must not be a Nightmare itself. That means it probably was originally a tighi. Second, the Stone Child was last seen in the Paltarayn at least four generations ago, so it lives a very long time. So if I’m right about all this, somehow a tighi has learned to transform into something that can live a long time — and heal someone on the verge of death.”

“You say ‘heal’, but Hunter Frumin hasn’t woken up,” the Healer said, impatiently. “We can’t get him to swallow food or water. Preserving him is not the same thing as restoring him, and I worry he’s still badly hurt.”

“With all due respect, Healer, let the Prophet speak,” said Elder Kamdel. He turned to Pandel-Kyn. “Could we summon the Stone Child and talk to it?”

Mik-Lam shouted in alarm, and ey weren’t the only one.

“Elder, why?” said Hunter Ko-Il. “Just last night, you agreed that we needed to summon the Prophet to get rid of the thing, not invite it into the paltar.”

“I agree,” said Kan-Lo. “Elder, if you had seen it, felt what it was like to be paralyzed and helpless, you wouldn’t think this was a good idea.”

“And you are out of order, Healer,” said Kamdel angrily. “Are you jealous of the Stone Child? That it could heal Hunter Frumin where you failed?”

“What? No!” said Kan-Lo. “Elder, I protest! This is unfair. I know the limits of my skills, of any Healer’s skills. Sometimes Uttigh calls, summoning someone to the Next World, and there’s nothing we can do. That’s not failure on the part of Healers. We can mourn, we can ask why some tighayn die young while others live to old age. But no Healer believes our job is to

save everyone's life under all circumstances."

"You would put it that way, since you're a failure of a Healer," said Kamdel. "You can't save anyone. This Stone Child can save everyone. It..." He stopped, but Mik-Lam jerked eir head up with sudden revelation.

"Oh, so that's it!" Kan-Lo said, evidently having the same thought. "Did the Stone Child visit you? Did it promise you something?"

"What if it did?" said the Elder. "The Prophet here is better suited to interpret what the Stone Child told us than you are."

"Us?" the Healer demanded.

"Yes, the Stone Child — if that's what it is — appeared to the whole conclave of Elders," said Elder Ghinka. "But we need to consult with the Prophet before coming to any conclusions, Elder Kamdel. You've never had any complaints about our Healer before, and neither have the rest of us."

Mik-Lam looked back and forth between eir father and Kan-Lo, then stepped forward and said, "I also had a vision from the gray thing." Ey began describing it, but eir father cut em off.

"Yes yes, this is similar to what it showed us," Kamdel said impatiently. "It can preserve life and raise the dead. Isn't that worth listening to? Come see Hunter Frumin, Prophet, and tell us what you think."

Prophet Pandel-Kyn agreed, and the group moved to the Healer's hut, Mik-Lam trailing behind despondently. Kan-Lo joined em.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I think your father, and maybe the other Elders, may be influenced by the Stone Child, and I'm frightened to my core. But I obviously can't make the Prophet listen to me. I wonder if ..."

He didn't finish that thought, in part because they had arrived at Frumin's pallet. Pandel-Kyn was already kneeling over the Hunter's body, examining him. Natl-Han looked on uneasily.

"His wounds do seem to be healed," the Prophet said. "Maybe the best thing is to summon the Stone Child and see what it has to say. I can judge between the Elders' reactions and that of the Hunters and the Healer."

Mik-Lam watched the Prophet warily. He seemed excited underneath his superficial calmness, too eager. He has no intention of being an unbiased witness, ey thought.

"I should stay at least to try to make sure Hunter Frumin has an advocate for his health," Kan-Lo whispered to Mik-Lam. "But there's no reason for you to stay. You could get to safety, in case something happens."

Mik-Lam shook eir head. "I should be here if I'm the only one besides the Elders who got a vision from the Stone Child," ey said. But ey wondered if it was the right call. Ey were a tangle of emotions: fear of the gray thing, anger at the behavior of the Elders, confusion over

eir father's irrationality. Maybe ey *should* get away. It's not like anyone wanted em here. Ey crept into the lee of the Healer's hut.

While ey were in motion, Pandel-Kyn put on his Prophet-crest and began chanting something in a high ululating tone. The air around began to grow oppressive, the pressure rising rapidly like a brewing storm. Then abruptly as it began, the tension released and the Stone Child appeared out of nowhere, standing next to the unconscious body of Hunter Frumin. Natl-Han shouted in alarm and scrambled away, tripping over her own feet.

Mik-Lam pulled farther back, almost behind the hut, but ey could feel the Stone Child's eyeless gaze on em. Its mushroom head was closed as it had been the first time Mik-Lam saw it. It knew ey were there somehow, and its attention was focused on em. Why? Ey wanted to run off, but eir muscles didn't respond.

"Stone Child," said Elder Kamdel. "Can you speak to us?" His voice shook: Mik-Lam realized eir father was afraid in spite of his brave appearance.

The Stone Child said nothing, but raised one of its paddle-hands over Hunter Frumin. Natl-Han whimpered where she lay on the ground.

The Hunter choked and started suddenly, sitting up. "Water!" he said in a raspy voice. "Water!"

Healer Kan-Lo grabbed a waterskin and carefully handed it to him around the Stone Child. Frumin swallowed some, and began coughing miserably.

"You can't speak?" said Kamdel to the Stone Child. "Can you understand me at least?"

The Stone Child said nothing.

"My wife...she is very sick. She's dying. Can you save her? You showed us ... that possibility."

The Stone Child said nothing, but extended its mushroom head outward. Mik-Lam wished ey had a weapon. Ey were deathly afraid of this thing and wanted to attack it, to kill it, to drive it away from the paltar at the very least. Ey wished eir father wasn't trying to negotiate with it.

The Stone Child huffed out a swarm of spores, which drifted over the tighayn. Mik-Lam clapped his hands over his nose and mouth to keep from breathing them in, and he saw Kan-Lo doing the same thing. Kamdel and Pandel-Kyn, however, inhaled the spores. Their eyes seemed to glaze and they stood frozen where they stood for a few moments. Then as quickly as it had come, the gray thing vanished again, and the two frozen men stirred into motion.

"I see, it's not just jealousy," said Kamdel to Kan-Lo, voice shaking now with rage. He seized Hunter Ko-Il's skinning-knife. "You're conspiring against me, and turning my child against me too."

The Healer seemed frozen in horror, watching the knife. Mik-Lam launched emself from behind the hut, sprinting to throw emself between eir father and Kan-Lo. Kamdel's arm thrust

forward at the same moment, and the dagger plunged into Mik-Lam's chest.

The pain was beyond imagining. Mik-Lam felt the blade scraping against a rib, tearing through the layers of muscle and into eir heart. As the knife punctured eir life and stilled heartbeat and breath, nothing was left in eir mind and world but pain and pain and pain and death

Part II

“Ey’re waking up,” said a distant voice.

Mik-Lam didn’t want to wake up. Waking up meant pain. Why did ey hurt so much? Who was groaning so loudly?

“Please, please be quiet so nobody hears us,” said a second voice. “We’re in danger.”

Oh, *I’m* the one groaning, Mik-Lam thought. I should wake up enough to stop that. Ey made an effort and opened eir eyes. The pain wasn’t as bad as it had been, but ey felt ... what was that? Something was lodged in eir chest. Every breath pushed against it, making em very aware of the obstacle. But eir heart was stopped: ey couldn’t feel eir own pulse. Ey struggled to sit up, but panic felt far away.

It was late afternoon, judging by the light, and the owners of the two voices he heard were leaning over em: Healer Kan-Lo and Natl-Han. Their ears were flat against their heads, their mouths drawn in worry.

“What is going on?” Mik-Lam said. “What ... what happened?”

“You should be dead, is what happened,” said Natl-Han. “Your....”

“You can be a little gentler than that, Natl-Han,” Kan-Lo interrupted. “Mik-Lam, your father was trying to stab me, but you got in his way. He stabbed you instead.”

Oh yes. That. My ... father stabbed me. Every one of eir muscles felt weak.

“I don’t think that will change your father’s mind that you’re conspiring with the Healer,” said Natl-Han.

“What was I supposed to do?” said Mik-Lam. Breathing deeply hurt. Ey tried to take a shallower breath. “He’s not in his right mind. I couldn’t let him commit murder.”

The murder-taboo is strong enough that nobody had committed murder in Paltar Omtayl in two generations. For an *Elder* to attempt to kill someone — the paltar’s Healer, no less — in cold blood was shocking beyond belief. Mik-Lam had enough trouble formulating that thought about an abstract Elder, but eir own father....

“I felt the knife go into my heart!” said Mik-Lam, suddenly remembering. The pain shot through em again, and ey had to close eir eyes and focus on not screaming.

“We’re up the same tree, young one,” said another voice. “We both should be dead, but we’re not.”

Mik-Lam gingerly turned eir head to see. Hunter Frumin was sitting propped up against a tree. His face was drawn and his eyes anxious.

“I’m as surprised as you are,” Frumin said. “I’m even more surprised I could get up and help carry you up here.”

“Yes, he shocked us all,” said Kan-Lo. “But I think we all needed to get out of there as fast as possible. I think Elder Kamdel would’ve killed all of us if he could. Sorry, Mik-Lam. You’re

right, I don't think he knew what he was doing. He wasn't behaving like himself."

"It's that gray thing," said Frumin. "I see it when I close my eyes. I hear Uttigh calling to me, inviting me to rest, but that gray thing is holding me back. But the truth is...I think I *am* dead in every way that matters. Look at this."

He drew his skinning knife and — to Mik-Lam's horror — slashed his forearm to the bone. The flesh seemed to part as easily and bloodlessly as corn porridge. Instead, the cut revealed raw unbleeding flesh that almost immediately began to knit itself back together. But the repair was in the form of pale fungal strands that emerged from the clean edges of the wound, which connected and filled the gap. Within a hundred breathless heartbeats, the cut completely disappeared, without even a scar remaining.

"It doesn't hurt," Frumin said, raising his head to meet the Healer's horrified eyes.

"Kamtigh and Uttigh and all the planets," Kan-Lo gasped. "The spores. The Stone Child infected you, and *that's* what's keeping your body alive."

Hunter Frumin nodded. "In truth I must have bled to death. I'm still breathing, I can walk and swallow water, but I'm not really alive. Being kept from dying is not being alive."

Mik-Lam gingerly touched eir own chest. Yes, the knife-blade was broken off in there, and with that awareness, ey could feel it twitch with every breath.

"I must be the same way," ey said aloud. "I must be dead too." But ey didn't hear Uttigh calling, whatever that even sounded like. When ey closed eir eyes, ey didn't see the Stone Child or feel any insight into eir condition.

"You didn't bleed to death," the Healer replied. "Maybe you can be healed, once we know what to do. But I feel there's still something about you in particular we don't understand."

"Yes," Mik-Lam said, eir head clearing enough to remember everything that happened so far. "The Stone Child was watching me when it showed up. Why? And why did I have the bad version of the vision, when the Elders had the good version? Is it targeting me in particular? I'm not special! I'm not even an adult yet!"

The Healer shrugged his ears.

"So what do we do now?" said Natl-Han. "If my husband is dead, Healer, how can we find his peace? Or can he be restored to life?"

"I think we're far beyond a Healer's ability," said Kan-Lo. "My medicine is not that kind. These are Nightmare matters. That's Prophet business."

"You heard Pandel-Kyn," Natl-Han said. "He loves this thing, this Stone Child."

"No, not Pandel-Kyn," the Healer said. "And I'm not only saying that because he doesn't approve of me. I was thinking of Prophet Ghedel and his apprentice. Ghedel is very old and I've heard he's unwell, but he's studied the Nightmare World and its creatures. If this Stone Child is truly a Nightmare creature, or a tighi that has turned krek, he would more likely to know how to deal with it than anyone else in the Paltarayn."

“If he can’t travel here...” Natl-Han began.

“I know,” said Kan-Lo. “We’ll have to hope his apprentice is up to the task. We don’t have a lot of certainty here. *If* Ghedel is well enough to talk to us, *if* he knows what this Stone Child is and how to fight it, *if* his apprentice is prepared to stand in his stead against it....” He gestured his frustration. “But what other choices do we have? I don’t think we can fight it, and if it can make Elder Kamdel try to murder me, it could probably make others in the paltar do things. We could all end up dead.”

“Or worse,” muttered Frumin.

“Can we go to Prophet Ghedel then?” said Mik-Lam, struggling to eir feet.

“We’?” the Healer said. “I don’t think you’re in any shape to travel.”

“I can be,” Mik-Lam said, hoping it was true. “Besides, what am I going to do? If I stay here, eventually someone will find me and bring me back to my father. I don’t want to see him again until...whatever has happened to him is over.” But eir conscience prickled. “What about my mother?”

The Healer looked grave. “I don’t know what to do about her, Mik-Lam. If we can’t go to the village safely, we have to trust that someone will care for her. Your father hopes the Stone Child will cure her, so surely someone will be watching out.”

“If you aren’t up to the walk to Paltar Memdoth, you could come with me,” said Hunter Frumin. “I think I’m going to hide out in a Hunter’s lodge up on the slopes until it’s safe again. If Natl-Han will come with me, of course.”

“I don’t see why not,” she said. “After what happened today, I don’t know what anyone would say if I went back into the village. It’s either go to fetch Prophet Ghedel or hide out. I’m not leaving you alone to get into trouble again, so hide out it is. And of course you can come with us, Mik-Lam.”

“Thank you,” Mik-Lam said slowly. “Thank you, but I think I need to do this. If the Stone Child infected my ... my mother, I don’t know what would happen. I can’t just hide out and wait. I’d want to run back home every moment, and ... I just need to go.”

The Healer put a kindly hand on eir arm.

“All right, then,” he said. “But something occurs to me.” He looked down to avoid meeting anyone’s eyes. “I don’t know for sure, but if the spores from the Stone Child are what’s keeping you both alive, there’s a possibility you’ll both die if we drive the thing away.”

Mik-Lam flattened eir ears and didn’t say anything.

“I’m at peace with that possibility,” Frumin said after a while. “If that gray thing hadn’t infected me, I’d be dead now, and nobody would be surprised. I was unlucky. I feel...I feel answering Uttigh’s call is the right thing. I’m sorry, Natl-Han.”

His wife shook her head and looked away into the woods. “I don’t like it, but I understand. Accidents happen when hunting. Hunters die sometimes. If you had died the night before last,

I'd grieve you. At least this way...we know what's coming, we can say goodbye when it's time. I don't want to hold on to you when Uttigh calls you any more than you want to stay, any more than I'd want to stay myself when that time comes."

"Then goodbye for now," said the Healer. "Mik-Lam, let's go find Prophet Ghedel."



Frumin and Natl-Han went northeast, climbing up the slopes of the Spines. Mik-Lam and Kan-Lo headed southwest, away from Paltar Omtayl toward the Kayro River dividing the Eastern and Northern Paltarayn. Prophet Ghedel lived in Paltar Keldoth just on this side of the Kayro, but far enough south that the Healer thought they'd do best to follow the course of the valley. That path also had the advantage of avoiding most villages, and any questions they might get about why an adult — even a Healer — was traveling with an unrelated child.

"And this path will be as fast as any, I think," said Kan-Lo. "Once we're down from the highlands, it'll be fairly level walking."

Mik-Lam's pace was painfully slow at first, but as they went, ey found ey could ignore the feeling of the dagger in eir heart. Just ... not thinking about it helped, and ey could walk at a nearly normal rate. It just was hard to not think about it. Very hard.

Night set in, but neither of them wanted to stop. They pressed on until the bright planet Pogho had crossed the sky and was setting before they finally halted and made a rough camp. Mik-Lam had never traveled so far from home before, but ey had barely paid attention to the changing scenery. Sleep, when it finally came, was brief and restless.

They woke with the first light of Redsun and resumed their walk, arriving at Paltar Keldoth just before mid-day. Mik-Lam felt the knife in eir heart more and more the closer they drew to the village, as though it responded to eir anxiety over what they might learn. By the time they actually reached Keldoth, ey were gasping for breath and required a little time to sit and recover.

Meanwhile, following protocol, Kan-Lo introduced the two of them to one of the paltar's Elders, who took them to the Prophet's hut. The house looked like any other, except it had a glyph painted in ochre over the door of a stylized face with closed eyes and open mouth, flanked with wings: the Prophet-face glyph. Kan-Lo called his greeting quietly through the doorway.

"Come in," said a faint elderly voice.

A small lamp lit the interior. When Mik-Lam's eyes adjusted, ey saw a very old man sitting on a pallet, with a striking-looking young woman next to him on a stool. She looked to only be a few years older than Mik-Lam, just past the coming of age. But Kan-Lo greeted her as Prophet Tragha, after making his formal introductions and required pleasantries to Prophet Ghedel.

A female Prophet? Mik-Lam kept eir expression neutral, but ey were still surprised. The

Paltarayn hadn't had a female Prophet in many generations, and ey hadn't heard about Tragha. Maybe, ey thought gloomily, that was deliberate. And if tighayn like Pandel-Kyn disliked Healers like Kan-Lo, they probably disapproved of female Prophets too.

"It's good to see you again, Healer," said Prophet Tragha, warmly.

Pleasantries done, Kan-Lo explained the situation briefly to the two Prophets. Mik-Lam let him tell the story without interruptions; he even included eir vision, so ey weren't called on to participate. Ordinarily, ey might object, but with the pain in eir chest, ey accepted sitting passively by.

"Yes, I know about the Stone Child," said Prophet Ghedel, once the Healer finished. "Not many of us in the Paltarayn do, I'm afraid. It hasn't been seen around here in a long time, certainly well before I was born. As you might guess, that was not a short time ago." His voice was so faint and cracked, Mik-Lam had to lean forward to hear him.

"What kind of thing is it?" said Kan-Lo. "And is there anything we can do about it?"

"The stories aren't clear," the old Prophet said. "But I believe the Stone Child was once a tighi, and possibly even a Prophet. Your own account supports that: it's visible to everyone, and it has powerful magic. Both of those things say it's not strictly a Nightmare, though the spores it uses are Nightmarish. Most Nightmares aren't visible in the Waking World, if they can even cross from one world to the other. The ones familiar from our stories — the Eater, the Guide, the Watcher — never cross the boundary. However, the Stone Child can also manipulate visions, which is Nightmarish. At the same time, it doesn't speak, and language is something a krek trades in exchange for power. All of that together with the fragmentary stories about tells me it's likely a Prophet-krek, which has been living in the Nightmare World."

"It hardly matters if it used to be a tighi if none of our weapons can hurt it," said the Healer.

"No, in fact that makes it worse," said Tragha, breaking in eagerly. Mik-Lam suspected she was happy to be able to contribute. "Nightmares in the Waking World are usually quite weak, once you can see them. What makes them most dangerous is their invisibility. This Stone Child is very ancient and obviously has learned a lot of secret magic."

"Worse still," Prophet Ghedel added. "Even Nightmares are frightened of the Stone Child. I spent a lot of time in the Nightmare World when I was young, as part of my research, and while I never came across the Stone Child myself, it carried the same kind of fear among the Nightmares that Nightmares have among ourselves."

"Then why is it here now, Teacher?" Tragha asked. "If it's powerful enough to frighten other Nightmares, why hasn't it come to the Waking World in generations?"

"That's exactly the right question, I think," Ghedel replied. "I suspect it can't cross the border without help. And that cuts down on the suspects: there are only three tighayn I know

of who can open a passage between worlds, and two of them are in this hut right now.”

“A Prophet,” said Mik-Lam. “Did Prophet Pandel-Kyn do this?”

“Maybe,” the old Prophet said. “Maybe. He might have opened the passage between worlds, but without intending the Stone Child to come back with him. I do know that neither of us didn’t do it. I haven’t gone into the Nightmare World in many years, and while I’ve taught my apprentice *how* it’s done, she has yet to do it.”

Tragha nodded agreement.

“Prophet Pandel-Kyn did behave oddly,” said Mik-Lam slowly. “He was eager to summon the Stone Child when my father asked him to.”

Ghedel sat up abruptly and looked directly at em. “Yes, and that’s something to consider!” he said, before pausing a few moments to cough from his exertion. “It didn’t fully register with me when you told the story, Healer. How did the Prophet summon the Stone Child? That’s not something I know how to do.”

Mik-Lam and Kan-Lo described the summons in more detail, and the old Prophet looked thoughtful. “That’s not a normal incantation,” he said. “There’s still something we’re missing.”

“Unless Prophet Pandel-Kyn met the Stone Child earlier,” said Prophet Tragha. “If he had, and was already prepared, that incantation could have just been for show. I don’t know why he lied about not meeting the Stone Child before, though.”

“True,” said Ghedel. “Very true. The lie is not hard to understand, either, since we know the Stone Child can influence minds. But why didn’t it influence yours the same way, young Mik-Lam? And Healer, why didn’t it influence you or the Hunters at all?”

“Unless...” Tragha paused. “Unless it’s trying to sow discord. What would it gain by setting Elders against Hunters, or a father against his child?”

“Nightmare motivations are generally simple,” said the old Prophet. “They’re predatory or parasitical, feeding and reproducing much like creatures in the Waking World, only their food is made from the contents of our minds and dreams. But if the Stone Child was once a tighi, its motivations could be as complex as ours. Maybe it wants revenge for some slight committed centuries ago.”

“Maybe spending that long in the Nightmare World without contact with another living thing has driven it mad,” said Mik-Lam.

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” Ghedel said. “Madness, as we usually put it, is a sickness, worthy of the same compassion as any ailment of the body. True, being in the Nightmare World for that long without the normal interactions that keep us centered wouldn’t be good for its health. Maybe that’s enough explanation. Maybe it really believes it’s offering us a gift. We’re still missing important facts!”

“It wants to be worshiped,” said Mik-Lam, then paused. “No, I’m not sure that’s exactly right. But in my vision, everyone in the Paltarayn, was paying homage to its giant image,

including everyone who was dead.”

“So it promised immortality and the resurrection of the dead in exchange for worship,” said Tragma. “I don’t know how it’s supposed to resurrect the dead after we’ve cremated them, but I suppose if it’s powerful enough that’s not an obstacle. Worship does grant a lot of power to the recipient. I wonder if the Elders had the same vision, then, but you just interpreted it differently.”

Everyone fell silent to ponder that for a moment.

“Now, let’s look at that wound, young Mik-Lam,” the old Prophet said.

Mik-Lam knelt beside his pallet obediently, opening eir jacket. Ghedel grunted and said, “I don’t think there’s anything to be done you haven’t already, Healer. I will call on Po’agh to see if he has any knowledge to help, but you probably don’t want to wait for his answer. These meditations take time and don’t always result in something clear. I can send a messenger to follow you to Paltar Omtayl if I learn something useful.”

“Is that what I should do?” Tragma asked. “Go with them back to Paltar Omtayl?”

“I think so,” said Ghedel. “Everything will have to depend on you, Prophet Tragma. I think you should go and see with your own eyes what might be possible to do. You also should look for the passage to the Nightmare World, and close it if it’s still open. Who knows what sorts of Nightmares could be creeping in if it’s left unguarded. And if you can’t figure out how to stop the Stone Child, bring back whatever you discover here, and maybe together we can do what you can’t do alone. I trust you can do all of this, Prophet Tragma. You are a powerful Prophet in your own right, and soon you will be working on your own.”

Tragma bowed her head to receive Ghedel’s hand and blessing.



“Are you up to returning right away?” Kan-Lo asked after they took their leave from Ghedel. “If you aren’t, I’m sure you can stay here. I could even stay with you, though Prophet Tragma might need my help too.”

“Certainly it would be easier if you came along, Healer,” said the young Prophet. “I don’t know the landscape around your paltar. But you might not be safe going back, if the Elders are turned against you. It’s your call though.”

“I would like to go back,” said Mik-Lam, wishing ey felt as confident as ey sounded. “If I’m immune to the Stone Child’s influence, you might need me. I can walk.”

Kan-Lo accepted eir decision with the stipulation that they all try to rest until Yellowsunset. Mik-Lam put up a mild objection, but in truth was relieved to lie down on a pallet in the paltar’s guest house, even if it took some time to fall asleep. However, ey were sleeping deeply enough ey had to be awakened by the Healer.

Tragma was waiting for them beside the village fire, but she was deep in conversation with another young woman. Mik-Lam stopped to stare at the newcomer for a moment: she was

stunningly beautiful, and like Tragma not much older than emself.

“Peace,” said Kan-Lo with amusement. “That’s Prophet Tragma’s wife, Kay-Lan, who also happens to be my cousin.”

“Sorry,” said Mik-Lam, cursing emself.

“Just try not to be so obvious,” the Healer said, chuckling. “And before you ask, I know it’s unusual for two women to marry. However, it’s clearly in Paltar-law that a Prophet may choose a wife, so Prophet Ghedel argued it should be taken literally when Tragma selected Kay-Lan. He said it wasn’t her fault she’s the first female Prophet in many generations.”

He had enough amusement in his voice that Mik-Lam laughed along. When they approached the fire, Kay-Lan kissed Tragma, embraced Kan-Lo, formally and politely greeted Mik-Lam, then withdrew.

“Prophet Ghedel is still in his meditative trance,” said Prophet Tragma, though her eyes were on her wife.

“Then we’ll have to just go like he told us to, and hope any messenger he sends can catch up to us,” said Kan-Lo. “Let’s eat something and be on our way.”

“Well, there’s another option,” said the Prophet, sharing out some food. “I was feeling uneasy, so I spoke to my teacher one more time before his meditations to see if he had any other advice. He said ... he suggested we could go directly to the Nightmare World and see what we can find on that side. Particularly if we can find where the Stone Child came through to the Waking World.”

Mik-Lam and Kan-Lo were both too surprised to reply.

“I know,” Tragma continued. “I asked him why he thought this was a good idea, since none of us have ever gone to the Nightmare World, and I’m the only Prophet among us. He said he had a feeling Mik-Lam would be an asset.”

“Me?” said Mik-Lam, feeling stupid and self-conscious.

“You did resist the Stone Child,” said Kan-Lo. “I don’t dismiss the idea out of hand.”

“And Prophet Ghedel’s intuition is more trustworthy than the average,” Tragma said. “But it’s not my decision. I’m willing, but you two both need to agree. I wouldn’t ask anyone to go into the Nightmare World unless they were fully willing. Being afraid is fine — I’m a little afraid myself — but don’t say yes unless you mean it.”

Mik-Lam thought silently. Eir initial feeling was one of terror, but with reflection curiosity began to overtake fear. Yes, the Nightmare World had a fearsome reputation, but how many had ever had the chance to go in under the protection of a Prophet? This was literally the stuff of legends.

“I’m willing,” ey said at last. “I just want to fix everything and make sure to my mother is all right.”

“I’m willing too,” said Kan-Lo. “Although I don’t know what good I’ll do there.”

“The Nightmare World doesn’t follow our rules,” said Tragha. “You never know what you might manifest there. In any case, for any potentially dangerous venture, greater numbers are better. I’d even suggest taking a Hunter or two, but Prophet Ghedel doesn’t think it’ll come to ordinary sorts of fighting. I don’t understand why he thinks so, but I also trust him.”

When they finished eating, Tragha led them up a trail up the slope away from the Kayro River, leaving Paltar Keldoth’s fires gleaming behind them among the trees.

“Not far,” she said. “We’ll be there shortly.”

Mik-Lam was about to ask what “there” meant when they arrived at a shallow bowl in the slope backed by a sheer rock wall a little taller than the Healer’s head. The clearing was a little larger than a hut in width, with signs it had been cleared with fire a long time before. Eight low flat-topped rocks were arranged in a semicircle facing outward, obviously seats with some ritual purpose. The back wall behind the rock seats was flattish rough stone, which artists had covered with petroglyphs, most prominently the Prophet-face glyph.

“This is one of a few sacred places where the boundary between the Waking and Nightmare Worlds is thinner,” said Tragha. “That makes the ritual for passing between worlds possible to perform, and guarantees we’ll come out in the Nightmare World in a place with solid ground.”

“Is it likely the passage the Stone Child came through at another one of those places?” Mik-Lam asked, trying not to think too hard about the “solid ground” comment.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” the Prophet replied. “There’s an even larger site near Paltar Memdoth, where Prophet Pandel-Kyn lives.”

She pulled on the Prophet headdress and began chanting, moving her staff slowly over the rock face in a pattern Mik-Lam couldn’t discern. Then abruptly

The short cliff was not

A bubble of nothingness extended

Then a giant eye looked at them

And vanished again

The bubble became real

Like a cave entrance, but with depth as well as height and width

Tragha sat down heavily, but waved off the Healer when he offered help, saying, “That was just more strenuous than I expected. Are we ready?”

The uncanny cave entrance opened onto a short passage that seemed to be made of hard rock, yet the walls and floor rhythmically expanded and contracted, almost as though it was breathing. Mik-Lam felt relief that it only seemed to take them a few steps to cross into...

Part III

...a bright world with a black sky, the Twinsuns high above looking like a painting, though it had been night when they entered the Nightmare World. They stood on a gentler slope than the one they had been climbing in the Waking World. All around them, the ground was perforated with holes, most narrow as Mik-Lam's arm, but many wide enough to swallow em whole. The only thing visible beyond the slope on the horizon was a tall thin pillar of rock, which seemed both impossibly distant and close enough to touch.

Tragha pointed toward it. "That is one of the guide-pillars," she said. "They are one of the few fixed reference points in the Nightmare World, so if you get disoriented, try to find one. There are four, but I can't see the others from here."

"How do you know that if you haven't been here?" Mik-Lam asked. Ey realized suddenly that the pain in eir chest had receded, leaving em oddly without sensation.

The Prophet looked at em wryly. "If you were Prophet Ghedel's apprentice for six years, you'd have learned a lot about this place. I used to wonder why we spent so much time on Nightmare lore if Prophets rarely came here, but now I see he had the right idea."

She turned to look at the passage back to the Waking World. "I don't want to risk leaving this open, to let Nightmares get through. Also, if things go well, we'll be leaving the way the Stone Child did. However, if things go badly, I worry about finding our way back here."

"Where is here, anyway?" Kan-Lo said. "I mean, in terms of Nightmare World geography."

"I'm not sure," said Tragha. "I feel like Prophet Ghedel told me something about these holes, but they weren't a significant landmark, so I don't remember now what part of the Nightmare World they're in." She gave the other two an anxious look. "However, I think I have to risk sealing us in."

On this side, the passage was a shimmer in the air rather than the strange bubble, but the Prophet-head petroglyph hovered in the air above it. Tragha murmured a chant, and the shimmer faded. The petroglyph remained.

"That's reassuring," she said. "Now to see if I can answer your question, Healer. The places I know of are ... well, not like this. There are several mountain ranges and canyons in the Nightmare World, which you can't see until you are literally there. Most of the place is an empty desert plain, though."

"So how do we know which way to go?" Mik-Lam asked.

"North, south, east and west are the same here as in the Waking World," the Prophet said. Mik-Lam could tell she was pleased to be able to share this knowledge, which made em feel better about bombarding her with questions. "Paltar Memdoth is to the northeast of here, so ... we need to go that way." She gestured vaguely to the left of the rock pillar. "Distances are tangled up, though, and so is time. The other passage to the Waking World could be a short

walk, or it might feel like days, but back in the Waking World we might come out just a few heartbeats after we entered.”

“Or years?” Mik-Lam said, nervously.

“I haven’t heard anything like that,” Tragha said. “But there’s also no sense worrying about it, because there’s not a thing we can do about it. If I reopened the passage and we left right now, we would face the same problem.”

“We’re here, so I guess we press on,” said Kan-Lo.

But almost immediately, they ran into trouble.



“It’s no use, I’m caught,” said Mik-Lam, panting.

Ey were suspended a hand’s-width above the ground by something unseen, that held em tangled up. Ey had gotten only a few steps among the holes in the ground when ey felt something catch eir jacket, and resisting got em further trapped. Nothing seemed to actually be there that ey could feel with eir hands, and nothing seemed to be hurting em. But Mik-Lam was stuck all the same.

The other two watched warily, but they were so far untrapped. “I think if whatever this is wanted to eat you, it would have tried by now,” said Tragha. She reached out with her staff, and met resistance. Straining, she pulled her staff free again.

“All right, I think I know what this place is,” she said. “This is the Inverted Forest.”

Mik-Lam had a few impolitic words about that, but the two adults let them pass without comment.

“The holes are the tree trunks, and Mik-Lam is caught in the tree roots,” the Prophet went on. “So we should be able to hack em free.”

She and Kan-Lo drew knives and gingerly sawed at the invisible roots binding Mik-Lam. Finally ey dropped to the ground again, flustered but unharmed.

“This is going to be slow going,” Kan-Lo said.

“We don’t have much choice,” Tragha said. “We either turn back to where we came from the Waking World, or do our best.”

However, using the Prophet-staff and care, they found the invisible roots were most treacherous near the biggest tree-holes, and there was a tricky sort of winding path that kept them away from serious entanglement. After some uncertain amount of time, the holes grew less numerous and more widely spaced, until they emerged onto a large empty plain. The pillar of stone was still visible ahead and to the right, and a second — colored a dark red — was somewhat off to their left.

“Is there anything ... important about that Inverted Forest?” Mik-Lam asked, curiosity returning now that ey were no longer in danger of being trapped by invisible roots forever.

“No idea,” said Tragha cheerfully. “But it’s good to know that’s the location of the thin place

between worlds, for future reference. Let's just hope the one near Memdoth is also near a landmark."

"And let's hope we meet nothing worse than invisible tree roots," Kan-Lo said.



Despite everything else, the strangest thing Mik-Lam recalled from the Nightmare World was the lack of sensation. Walking across an open plain in full daytime in the Waking World would be intensely hot, which is why it was rare for anyone to walk anywhere in the middle of the day unless they were guaranteed to have plenty of tree cover. But the Nightmare plain was neither hot nor cold. No wind blew. The black sky overhead was cloudless. Mik-Lam couldn't smell or hear any sound beyond the trudge of their feet across the hard featureless ground, which was not dirt or sand or rock.

The Nightmare versions of the Twinsuns didn't help matters either: they walked what seemed like a very long time, but the Twinsuns didn't move in the sky. Mik-Lam felt eir mind numbing, as time and sensation receded. The knife in eir chest was just part of em, not even a feeling now. Thoughts of eir mother ... and father ... and the Stone Child ... faded.

Then Tragha jerked her head up and said, "Look!"

Ahead of them, a small dark shape broke the monotony of the featureless plain. Or it looked small, without anything for reference. Tragha shifted her staff into a more defensive position in her hands and increased her pace to approach it. Mik-Lam and Kan-Lo followed apprehensively.

But whatever this thing was, it didn't move. It was probably half Mik-Lam's size, and as they approached Mik-Lam realized it appeared to be made of the same rock-like fungus-skin ... as the Stone Child.

"Prophet, watch out!" ey shouted, but eir voice came out as a creak, nightmare-like. "That's the Stone Child!"

Kan-Lo croaked out a warning too, but Tragha didn't seem to hear either of them. She reached the thing and prodded it with her staff. It still didn't move, so the other two reluctantly came near.

"I have no idea what this is," the Prophet said. "Whatever it was, it's dead now."

Up close, Mik-Lam saw it wasn't the Stone Child after all, but some misshapen lump that only vaguely resembled anything once alive. But its covering seemed to be the same dark stone-like material as the gray creature, which ey explained to Tragha. Inevitably in dream-fashion, eir voice was back to normal, now that the fear had passed.

"Noted," said Tragha. "I don't think I want to touch it with my hands, just in case it's full of those spores or something else dangerous, but I'd like to see what its underside looks like."

She levered it over with her staff, and all three of them recoiled at what they saw. Its lower parts were sticky with multicolored fungal slime, which had dissolved anything that was once

distinguishing features. Mik-Lam was thankful for the Nightmare World's lack of smell.

"Ugh," the Prophet said, letting the thing fall back to the ground. "I can't even tell if it was once something from the Waking World or something that belongs here. But from what you're telling me about the Stone Child, the way it's decayed can't be coincidence."

When they looked up, they found the landscape was now littered with more of these dark dead things, which had not been there moments before. They were a few dozen paces apart from each other and apparently randomly scattered. None moved. Tragma prodded a few as they proceeded, and the pattern held: their upper parts were the dark gray skin of the Stone Child, while below they were decayed and fungal.

"Plague or battlefield?" Kan-Lo murmured. "What have we found here?"

As they went on, the number of bodies — or whatever they were — increased in number. More alarmingly, they also got bigger, until some of them were slightly larger than a full-grown tighi.

Then one began moving.



The dark shape shifted, then sat up. Mik-Lam froze, but Tragma strode two paces forward, planting her staff against the ground. The thing was a little smaller than the Prophet, and when it sat up its underside was not as decayed as the others'. It still had a face, something like an insect or the ombo-te'ayn that lived in the creeks and wadis when they were full after rain. The creature's belly was armored with overlapping plates of chitin, which were threaded with fungal tendrils that seemed to be dissolving it. Only part of two limbs were left, something like segmented legs among the mycelium strands.

Despite eir revulsion, Mik-Lam felt relief: these things had never been tighi. They were Nightmare denizens. But eir relief faded a bit upon reflection. Surely even Nightmares didn't deserve to die like this.

"I am Prophet Tragma," the Prophet said. "Can you tell us what happened here?"

The thing regarded her. "Are you with him?" Its voice sounded like knives scraping on bone.

"I doubt it, since I don't know which 'him' you're talking about," Tragma said. "I'm trying to stop the Stone Child from hurting anyone else."

"Too late for me," said the creature, making a sound like a wooden mallet on a skin drum — laughter, thought Mik-Lam. "I'm already dying. If you can stop the Invader, though, you'll be doing a service to both Worlds."

Invader, Mik-Lam said to emself. If that meant the same thing as the Stone Child, then it confirmed what the Prophets had suspected: it originated in the Waking World. The thought wasn't reassuring, though. It would almost be better if the Child was a true Nightmare. Thinking that ... thing was another tighi like emself was frightening.

“So the Stone Child, the Invader did this to you?” Tragha asked. “Why?”

“He found our nest and decided to experiment on us,” the Nightmare creature said. “He didn’t tell me why. He just ... filled us with spores until we died.”

“I am sorry for what he did to you,” said the Prophet. “Our Healer can try...”

“Thank you, Prophet,” the creature interrupted. “But I doubt your Waking World medicine would have any use, not on anything that lives here. I can give you some advice, though, if you trust me. Our nest is nearby, or what’s left of it.” The creature gestured toward a dark speck on the horizon. “After the Invader killed us, he took our nest for his own. It’s now where he does his experiments. If you can kill him, you have my blessing.”

“Thank you for that information,” Tragha said. “I’d say I wish we had met under more pleasant circumstances, but....”

“Yes, I would likely try to eat your mind if I wasn’t dying right now,” said the Nightmare thing, laughing its percussive laugh. “Go well.”

As they watched, the creature tumbled forward and was still.

“This gets worse and worse,” Tragha said to the other two. “But I’m not sure we’re any closer to an answer of how to stop the Stone Child. It can slaughter hundreds of Nightmare creatures and influence the minds of the Waking. I was hoping there might be some variety of Nightmare weapon that could help us.” She shrugged her ears.

“We might yet be lucky,” said Kan-Lo. “After all, the spores that kill Nightmares don’t seem to kill *us*. Even if their effects aren’t what we desire.”

No one had any reply to that, so the group continued on.



None of the other bodies moved or spoke, and before long they abruptly reached a dome-shaped mound of dried mud, at least ten times Mik-Lam’s height and several times wider than a village hut, which hadn’t been there moments before. The surface of the mound was riddled with round holes just a bit larger than a tighi head, which led into a dark interior.

The three of them walked around the mound’s perimeter, and soon they found an entrance more suited to their size: something had widened one of the openings near ground-level into a rough uneven doorway.

“Here goes,” said Tragha, and walked in, wielding her staff like a spear. Mik-Lam followed, equal parts curiosity and fear.

The inside of the Nightmare nest was much larger than its outside, rising to a roof lost in shadows. The holes to the outside, or perhaps something to do with dream-logic, lit the interior brightly. The ground inside sloped down to a second mound, which appeared to be the same size as the exterior of the one they were in, also perforated with holes and a torn-open entrance. The decaying bodies of Nightmare creatures were scattered all around, some nearly dissolved completely into sludge. Mik-Lam found it hard to pick a path that didn’t

force em to step on any of them; when ey accidentally crushed one, the horrible squelching sensation was palpable even through eir moccasin.

The nest-within-a-nest was the only obvious destination, so Mik-Lam and Kan-Lo followed Tragha on her circuitous path. When they entered that second torn entrance, they found themselves in another cavernous room with a third nest at its center. But just when Mik-Lam was about to comment on the cursed recursiveness of the Nightmare nest, ey realized this central structure was different: blackened and shiny, almost oily in appearance. And instead of a tighi-sized hold ripped in the pillar, one side had been smashed open completely, clay dust spread out across the floor.

“Mold,” said Tragha as they cautiously edged their way forward. “No doubt the Stone Child’s doing.”

Mik-Lam realized that, unlike the other bodies, the Nightmare creatures here showed signs of violence. Not merely victims of the Stone Child’s spores, they had fought for their nest and died defending it. Ey felt a profound anger rising. Yes, these were Nightmares and no doubt would be happy to chew em apart — or whatever they did to their victims — but this level of slaughter seemed cruel and unnecessary. Ey thought back to Prophet Ghedel’s words: Nightmare creatures might be predators or parasites, but conscious deliberate sadism is a property of the Waking mind.

The area right around the mold-blackened structure was largely clear of bodies, so the three were finally able to stand side by side and contemplate what they saw.

“I think the Stone Child deliberately cut these creatures open to inject spores,” said Tragha, horror in her voice. “But why? What does this do? What did it want to accomplish?”

“Maybe we’re overthinking this,” said Kan-Lo suddenly. “Fungi use spores for reproduction. The Stone Child may be trying to make more things like itself. The dead creatures outside this nest even had the same stone-like skin, but they didn’t survive the process.”

“So is that what it’s trying to do to ... us?” Mik-Lam asked. “Make me and Hunter Frumin into something like itself?”

“It’s possible,” said Tragha. “The reaction to the spores is very different between Waking and Nightmare beings. Maybe it tried here first and failed, so it switched to the Waking World.”

“But I still feel we’re missing something,” said Mik-Lam. “It killed *all* these Nightmares when it didn’t need to.”

“We’re closer to answers than before, I think,” the Prophet replied, and they proceeded cautiously to the smashed-open nest-within-a-nest-within-a-nest.



The innermost nest was also larger on the inside, but merely twice the size of a hut. While

the floor was clear of dead creatures, Mik-Lam's eye was drawn to the walls in horror. First, a very large version of the insectile Nightmare creatures was pinned against one wall, flayed open with the edges of its shell curtained to the wall by stone daggers. Where its insides should be was just a mass of fungal stalks, which writhed like maggots. And next to it, the wall was covered in a mural of the Stone Child, mushroom-head opened out, its paddle-hand raised as though in benediction.

Just like in Mik-Lam's vision.

"What is this?" asked Tragma, snapping Mik-Lam back to emself.

Of course she hasn't seen it yet, ey thought, and explained.

"But the mural was in a different setting in your vision," the Prophet said thoughtfully. "It means something, but I don't know what. However, I think we need to get out of here as soon as possible. It can't be good for us to be around this much Nightmare fungus."

But as they turned to leave, the air rippled and an indistinct ghostly figured appeared in front of them.

"Ah it worked!" the figure said in a cracked elderly voice.

"Prophet Ghedel?" Tragma said in astonishment. "How did you pull this trick?"

"I had a sense of where you might be going," the specter of the Prophet said. "But I can't hold this up very long: it's like balancing on a rock too small for both feet. So listen, please! We've got the wrong handle on the Stone Child. I was given a view of the painting from your vision, Mik-Lam, and it's not blessing us — it's a threatening gesture."

"How ... how do you know that?" Mik-Lam asked.

"It's easy to miss the Stone Child's eyes, but they're in the painting," the old Prophet said. "It's cursing us, though I'm not sure why. But there's one more thing and..."

But he faded from view before finishing. Tragma tried calling him back without success. While she did so, Mik-Lam and Kan-Lo examined the mural again. Underneath the mushroom cap, nearly hidden among the gills were eyes, dozens of them, glaring malevolently out at the viewer. Mik-Lam began to assemble eir scattered thoughts and felt enlightenment dawning.

"I think I understand," ey said slowly. "What if the Stone Child wants to die, but can't? It's been alive a long time, and maybe it's been trapped in the Nightmare World for much of that time without anyone else to talk to, to help it be ... normal. Maybe the Nightmare spores were what was keeping it alive, so it experimented on these Nightmare creatures, but it didn't work."

"You might be onto something," Tragma replied. "Then somehow it got into the Waking World—maybe Pandel-Kyn accidentally let it through, though we may never get him to admit it. And since it was once one of us, it knew infecting us with spores would have the same effect on us as it did for itself. But I still don't understand the rest, such as how it convinced your

father it was doing something good for us? What do you think?"

"In my vision, I thought everyone was worshipping the Stone Child," Mik-Lam continued, with more excitement. "But what if the Stone Child knows immortality is a curse, and is ... I don't know, sharing that curse? Maybe this is its twisted way of getting revenge on all mortals. Then it would want to convince us its 'gift' was a good thing."

Ey stopped, eir hand reflexively going to eir chest. Kan-Lo reached out reassuringly, but his eyes were worried.

"Come on, we were going to leave this place," said the Prophet. "We can decide what to do when we're out of here."

They retreated out of the nested nests as quickly as they could. When they exited, though, the world outside had become dark and indistinct, like the gloom inside a hut at night. Just beyond the nest in the direction they had been going, the formerly flat ground sloped down into a wide pit with edges and bottom too far away to see in the gloom.

"This is delightful," muttered Tragha. She murmured a few words and her staff burst into shimmering heatless flame that flowed up and down the wood and over her hand. The light didn't pierce far into the darkness, but it illuminated their surroundings well enough to see each other, and where to put their feet. The guidepost pillar of stone was too far away to be seen in the dim light.

"Which way do we go now?" asked Kan-Lo.

"Down, I think," said Tragha. "It's the only way that offers a direction to us. And I feel we're close to the other opening between worlds."

"Wait," said Mik-Lam. "Before we go, can we ... burn this nest? Or tear it down or something? The queen of this colony is dead but the fungus was still alive in her body, and the Stone Child was using her chamber as its lair. And though they're Nightmares, these creatures don't deserve what happened to them. We can give them something like a funeral."

"A strange but kind thought," said Tragha. "I don't object, if the nest will actually burn. What do you think, Healer?"

"Yes, burn the nest," Kan-Lo said. "It seems right."

Tragha extended her staff and the fire leapt from it to the nest. Despite appearing to be made of hard-baked mud, the structure burst into flame and crumbled within a few heartbeats to nothing. The flames even leapt to the dark, dead shapes on the plain, and left the world empty.

"May Uttigh bring peace," murmured the Healer, and the three tighayn turned to walk down the dark slope into the pit.



The gloom surrounded them. Mik-Lam couldn't see anything except Tragha's shimmering staff and the indistinct shadows of the Prophet and Healer. Yet ey began to feel they were

being watched, a paranoid sensation that grew as they descended. Ey wanted to shout. Ey wished ey had a weapon.

Then abruptly they reached the bottom of the pit, which was a perfectly circular flat space about a hundred paces across, with slopes up in all directions. A thin, faintly glowing mist clung to the ground, tendrils forming and disintegrating and reforming around their feet. The mist grew thicker toward the center of the pit, rising up in a writhing pillar toward...

The other passage between worlds. As where they came in, it was a glow in mid-air, marked by the Prophet-head glyph hovering above it.

"The passage was left open after all," said Kan-Lo. "Confirmation we didn't really need."

"I was hoping we would find a way to defeat the Stone Child before returning to the Waking World," said Tragha. "At least we can close the passage. I still don't think the Stone Child opened the way between worlds itself, or it would have done that years ago."

"But do we want to trap it in the Waking World?" the Healer asked.

"Yes," said Mik-Lam, who had been examining the shimmering pillar below the glyph. "Look, this mist isn't just a mist — it's fungal roots. The Stone Child is like the mushroom, but the roots of the fungus thread into the ground or the dead tree. If Prophet Tragha closes the passage ... maybe the Stone Child will die."

"That's amazing!" said the Prophet. "How are you guessing all this?"

"I've helped with the mushroom beds," ey said. "But I wonder if the real answer is that the Stone Child's spores somehow made me understand it? I don't know. Even now, I feel like there's still one missing thing I need."

"Hopefully it will come to you soon," said Tragha. "We're here and I don't know if we should wait any longer before closing the passage between worlds."

"Yes, let's go," said Mik-Lam. "That matters more than any mystery."

They stepped toward the air shimmer cautiously. The passage suddenly engulfed them, and the Nightmare fungal roots entangled them. Tragha lashed out with her staff, as Kan-Lo slashed with his knife. They seemed to be inside the fungus, being absorbed by it. Mik-Lam struggled helplessly for a time, then gasped as the pain in eir chest abruptly returned. Ey had barely missed its absence in the Nightmare World, but here it was in full force again.

And just like that, they were through, back in the Waking World, free of the Stone Child's tendrils.



However long they had been in the Nightmare World, it was full daylight on the other side. They stood on a shelf of stone, blackened from many years of fires for ceremonies that had been performed here. In front of them was a wall of stone twice Mik-Lam's height, covered in petroglyphs, with the Prophet-head image at eye level right where they emerged. Turning, Mik-Lam saw the strange way into the Nightmare World hovering in air, a cavern entrance

with no cavern.

But on the far side of the passage was a crowd, distorted and demagnified. The better part of Paltar Omtayl had gathered, watching the three tighayn silently and unblinkingly.

Kan-Lo swore and said in a low voice, "I think the Stone Child has been busy while we were gone."

"What do we do?" asked Mik-Lam nervously. Eir father stood at the head of the group with Prophet Pandel-Kyn; eir mother was nowhere to be seen, which ey found surprisingly reassuring. If she wasn't there, maybe the Child hadn't infected her. Strange to prefer her still being ill. Hunter Frumin and Natl-Han were also absent. Mik-Lam, Tragha, and Kan-Lo held their ground, using the passage between worlds as a sort of shelter against the potential threat of their own kind.

"Can either of you see the Stone Child?" Tragha asked. "It must be close."

Mik-Lam thought a moment, then said, "Can I try calling for it? If my idea is right..."

Kan-Lo gripped eir shoulder reassuringly. "It might be our best hope. What do you think, Prophet?"

"Agreed," she said. "I think you're the one to talk to it anyway. I haven't met it yet, and to be honest I'm a little anxious it might be able to incapacitate me before I can do any good."

Mik-Lam swallowed hard. "Stone Child!" ey shouted, wincing against the pain in eir chest. "Stone Child! I know your secret!"

Suddenly it was there, standing with the paltar and a little to the side, mushroom-head contracted into its featureless ovoid. To Mik-Lam's eyes, it looked smaller, and its gray slatelike skin looking slightly shriveled. Wishful thinking, perhaps, ey thought, but if my idea is right it could be dying already. That will make this easier.

"I know your secret," ey said again, in a normal tone. "You can't die, so you're sharing your curse with everyone else while pretending to bless us with immortality. But..." Ey faltered as the Child's mushroom head extended, but no spores came out. "You're going to get your wish. We can help you die. You can find peace. Please let Paltar Omtayl go."

Ey felt the Stone Child's eyeless malevolent glare and abruptly ey were immobilized. However, Tragha suddenly sprang into action, sweeping her staff through the air and chanting a nonsense phrase. The passage between worlds shrank and vanished in a matter of a breath. When it did, the Stone Child staggered and Mik-Lam was free again.

Tragha rushed toward the thing. It sent spell after spell at her, but she batted them aside with ease, rattling the leaves of the surrounding trees and making the ground tremble. Mik-Lam found emself staring, open-mouthed.

"Now is your chance," said the Healer in a low voice. "Go after her!"

Mik-Lam obeyed, but ey doubted what should be done. If they could actually kill it after all, *should* they? The murder taboo in the Paltarayn was incredibly strong. Violent death

produced a ghostly contagion brought by the victim's last breath; would killing the Stone Child produce something of that nature? Something worse?

But the assembled paltar moved forward, forestalling eir decision. They formed a silent barrier between the Stone Child and the charging Prophet, many with knives in their hands. Tragha pulled up short.

"Is this what it comes to?" she said to Prophet Pandel-Kyn, who just stared at her blankly.

The enthralled crowd didn't attack, though, and the Stone Child itself stayed behind their protection. Mik-Lam tugged on Tragha's robe until she leaned close; ey whispered, "I think it may be at the end of its strength. You wore it down. If it could stop us both like it did before, I think it would."

"Test it then," Tragha whispered back, without taking her eyes off the other Prophet. "I'll give you cover."

She gestured and muttered a phrase. Mik-Lam felt a sensation like having a container of dust poured over em. Ey looked down and saw eir outline was blurred — ey weren't invisible, but even to eir own eyes eir body was hard to focus on. Meanwhile, Tragha laid her staff on the ground and crossed her arms across her chest, a gesture of submission.

"What do you want?" she said. "You want another Prophet? I don't think you have the power to control me anymore."

Mik-Lam took eir cue and slipped around the side of the crowd. They had formed a barrier all the way around the Child, but they all continued to face Tragha, paying Mik-Lam no notice. Ey found a large enough gap to squeeze through, and cautiously worked eir way to the center ... and the Stone Child.

Up close, it looked even worse than from afar. Its formerly stonelike skin was peeling in places, slick with slime. Its mushroom cap head was frayed around the edges, the gills beneath crumbling. Mik-Lam had half-planned to tackle it, but now seeing its decayed state decided to take another risk.

"Let go," ey said quietly. "You want to die, and you're dying now. I can see that. Prophet Tragha cut off your connection to the Nightmare World, so you won't regrow. You can end this. Let the paltar go. Be at peace."

The gray creature seemed to notice em for the first time, turning its attention away from Tragha. Mik-Lam felt an invisible blow that drove em to eir knees. Gasping, ey said, "Hurting me won't solve anything. If you had told us — told me — you wanted to die, we could have helped you. Instead, you decided to try to torment us. Stop trying."

The Stone Child reached its fingerless hands out to grab Mik-Lam's head, but ey batted them away easily: the thing had far less strength than an actual child now. On its second attempt, Mik-Lam struck the arm hard enough that it came off entirely, splitting raggedly off the gray body. Where it had attached was a pale deathly white hollow, bloodless.

Suddenly, the paltar all fell to the ground in a faint. The Child itself staggered and aimed another blow at Mik-Lam, but missed. Tragha strode forward, while Kan-Lo moved to make sure the fallen tighayn were alive.

“You were right again,” she said to Mik-Lam. “I don’t think we even need to kill it now. I think it’ll die on its own.”

The Stone Child glared eyelessly back at her, but its attempt to strike her was even weaker than its punch at Mik-Lam.

“I don’t think you have anything left in you but hate,” ey said to the decaying creature. “You convinced my father that you could save my mother’s life, and that got the paltar under your power, but you can’t even hold your own body together now. Let the paltar go.”

The Stone Child paused, then sagged. It gestured with its remaining hand, and the fallen tighayn began to stir and cough.

“Thank you,” Tragha said. “Now you should probably make yourself scarce, in case someone decides to kill you.”

The thing shook its mushroom cap head, the most tighi-like gesture it had yet done. It stood up straight again, and ... crumbled. Its body disintegrated into tiny fragments that themselves dusted into nothingness. As it did, the pain in Mik-Lam’s chest spiked, and ey collapsed, the world spinning itself into darkness.



“Can you hear me?” The voice seemed both too loud and muffled, but Mik-Lam shook emself from a sleep ey hadn’t expected to wake out of. Ey opened eir eyes to see Kan-Lo and Natl-Han looking down at em. They were all in a hut, but it wasn’t one of the normal paltar-houses: it was too small, the roof too low.

“What happened? Where are we?” ey asked. Eir chest still throbbed, but it was more of an ache than sharp pain. But more importantly, eir heart was beating again.

The Healer looked grave. “Your father didn’t take the death of the Stone Child well. I think he genuinely believe it was offering something good to the paltar and to your mother especially. He wouldn’t listen.”

“Are we banished then?” Mik-Lam said, fear creeping in.

“It’s not decided yet,” Kan-Lo replied. “Your father wants to banish me, because he feels I’ve somehow led you astray. But the other Elders seem a little reluctant to banish the paltar’s Healer. I got them all to agree to let me take you to the Hunter’s lodge Natl-Han has been using to see if I could heal you. You were unconscious for three days, but I managed to remove the knife point from your chest and perform the healing ritual. With the Prophet’s help: she knows a ritual that kept you stable until I could do my work. She’s been waiting for you to wake up before she feels right going home.”

“And Hunter Frumin...?” Mik-Lam couldn’t meet Natl-Han’s eyes.

“Yes, he died, apparently the instant the Stone Child did,” she said, looking out the lodge door. “The Hunters came and performed the funeral rite with Prophet Tragha. I can’t blame you for what you did. I miss him, but it’s what he wanted too. We had a few more days together, which is more than most get when Uttigh calls.” At that her voice broke, and she fled the lodge.

“I wish I had been awake,” said Mik-Lam bitterly. “I needed to be there for the funeral.”

“Nobody holds that against you,” said the Healer. “Even your father’s resentment isn’t really against you, or me.”

Mik-Lam gathered courage and asked the question most on eir mind. “What about my mother?”

Kan-Lo picked up eir hand and squeezed it. “She was still alive when the Hunters came here for the funeral. Now that you’re awake...maybe you should try to see her. And perhaps you can convince your father that you haven’t turned evil. I can help you as far as the village.”

“Let’s do it,” Mik-Lam said, and gingerly got to eir feet. The absence of the dagger in eir chest freed em to breathe normally again, which was a huge relief. But ey felt weak, and grateful for the Healer’s steadying arm.

Prophet Tragha was waiting just outside the Hunter lodge.

“I need to get back to Kay-Lan and Prophet Ghedel,” she said. “But I couldn’t leave until I knew you were going to recover. You did a great deed, Mik-Lam. I know you are close to your Coming of Age and ... should you be chosen to become a Prophet, come find us. You would honor us by joining us.”

Mik-Lam bowed eir head humbly and thanked her. Ey felt suddenly overwhelmed, remembering how powerful a Prophet she was: how she battled the Stone Child that had defeated Prophet Pandel-Kyn, then helping restore em to life. Tragha surprised em with an embrace, which she followed with another for the Healer, and took her leave.

They watched her go, then Kan-Lo helped Mik-Lam down the rocky slope to Paltar Omtayl, what would be a short walk ordinarily but which felt like a hard day of labor.

When they finally reached the village proper, the Healer said, “I think I am going to voluntarily leave, Mik-Lam. I’ve had time to think, and though I know your father wasn’t in his right mind, I will forever remember him trying to kill me, and coming close to killing you instead. Maybe if one day he asks for forgiveness I can return, but until then, I don’t know how I can be welcome here.”

“Where will you go?” Mik-Lam asked. Eir voice trembled. Ey had grown fond of the Healer over the course of the calamity.

“Paltar Endoth’s Healer died not long ago,” Kan-Lo said. “It’s the largest paltar of them all, at least three times the size of Paltar Omtayl, so they won’t want to be without a Healer for long. I was thinking of offering my services, if they’ll have me.”

Mik-Lam nodded. It made sense: while not as rare as Prophets, Healers were uncommon, such that only perhaps one-third of villages had one. As a result, they were more mobile than most professions, and less tied to the paltar of their birth or marriage.

“My main regret is leaving you to cope with your father alone,” Kan-Lo continued. “But you can probably do that better without me anyway. If he wants to blame me, you can let him.”

“No, no,” Mik-Lam said, blinking tears. “I won’t let him blame you. But I’ll do what I have to, so I can care for my mother. And my Coming of Age is soon. When that happens....” Ey didn’t say eir thought aloud: if and when eir mother died, and ey were fully adult, ey could leave and go wherever. That idea would have seemed unthinkable not that many days before, but as Kan-Lo had said, seeing eir father’s face twisted in murderous rage was something ey would not get over soon.

“In that case, come look me up when you’re of age,” the Healer said. “I know Prophet Tragha offered you a place with her, and I can offer no less.”

Mik-Lam embraced him, smiled as best ey could, and walked alone into Paltar Omtayl. Some things change when you die and have a second chance to live, ey thought. The next time ey left, ey knew it would be the last time.