

## In The Name Of Greed, Chapter One

By: DankeDonuts

<https://www.furaffinity.net/user/dankedonuts/>

The terrestrial planet designated AQ-57 IV sparkled as a bright, blue-green ball amid a blazing field of colorless stars. The Viscountess Aurora Kal'Vesniok admired her new prize from the observation gallery of her merchant fleet's flagship. Her reptilian face reflected off the wide transparosteel window before her. A head of smooth, dark green scales that came to a short snout. A coil of slightly lighter, slightly thicker, ones that started just below her jawline below the cheeks and circled around recessed ear-holes. Large, bright yellow eyes. A forked tongue darted occasionally from her lipless mouth to enjoy the vapors of a sweet, blue wine. Which emanated from a glass clenched tightly in one hand.

Between her reflection and her prize, the sleek, multi-armed form of Felissian scoutcraft. Whose captain was growing impatient. *"You see the situation you are in, yes?"* he asked over the *Final Offer's* luxurious sound system. A satisfied purr underscoring his every word.

Aurora's jet-black claws scraped against rich, red silk as she tapped her breast. "I expect you are referring to the fact that you have arranged this rendezvous to take place within the mass-shadow of the local superjovian in order to announce the tripling of your finder's fee."

*"That seems at it would be the case, yes Mu'um."* Captain Sharr could hardly suppress his glee.

"And in the event that I should refuse this outrageous demand, I'll find myself watching your much smaller and much faster vessel blast away to the nearest point from which you can enter hyperspace. From which you can chase down last-minute buyers while I'm still crawling my way out of the system."

*"The laws of astrophysics are a harsh mistress, indeed, Mu'um."*

"It's almost as if you've been holding onto the coordinates of this system until the planetary alignments were conducive attempt such a brazen act of extortion. In clear violation of several of edicts of pan-galactic law. And I, fool that I am, walked right into it."

*"I'm not saying yea or nay to that insinuation, Mu'um."*

"With me having no recourse to recoup my expenses, without exposing certain actions of my own to uncomfortable questions. As I'm clearly up to no good myself, or otherwise I would never have hired any... how did your associate put it again?"

*"Off-Guild contractors."* As polite a euphemism as any for 'pirates.' *"That appears to be the long and short of it, Mu'um. What say you to the new price of ending our illustrious partnership?"*

The aristocrat let out a resigned sigh. "I suppose I'll just have to accept these rather harsh terms... Or I could fire off some of the very pricy, very illegal missile launchers in my starboard cargo bay. Which seem to have been missed by every one of your weapons scan scans. And, oh dear, already appear to be primed and locked." She couldn't help but smile a jagged-toothed smile. "Truth be told, I was going to do it anyway."

Three yellow-green trails of energy appeared from the right side of her view-plate, on a deadly arc towards the scout-ship. Rotating about each other in unison, they effortlessly evaded the scout-ship's anti-artillery fire.

*"You cold-blooded harpy!"* The smaller vessel did its best to shoot back as it hightailed away. Every bolt of plasma it spat out dissipated harmlessly against military-grade energy shields (also illegal on civilian craft). His vessel was fast alright, but not faster than the latest Ferallo death-tech. Caught in their own trap, Sharr and his crew ended their pathetic existences as a blazing flash across the starscape, soon faded and just as easily forgotten.

"EDO-Prime!" Aurora called out. Her summons was met by the glowing of a globular interface at the center of the well-decorated chamber. "Chart a course to that planet which takes us through the good captain's debris trail. We'll let the navigational deflectors clean up the evidence. Prepare my away kit and a change of clothes. Something practical for a long walk." As she spoke, she approached the cushioned, practically throne-like command chair just ahead of the interface. Where a thick folder, opted to a series of fold-out starmaps, awaited her upon a gilded table. "There are some anomalies on Sharr's surveillance reports that I want to look into personally."

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At eighty stories high, the Pyramid Of Dreams loomed large over a wide coastal bay. Its base subsumed the whole of an island, one of dozens -- natural and artificially crafted -- that existed within a large, freshwater lake. Most of these were covered in much smaller edifices of urban design; buildings of baked clay brick, roads of weaker stone deemed unfit for use in the Pyramid Of Dreams or its smaller brethren. The next largest of which had once stood proudly at the north, east, south, and west corners of the city, the expansion of which had eventually surpassed them.

The Pyramids gleamed silver-light against the brown of the clay, under a bright tropical sun. Circles upon circles made up the shapes of these citadels, each rimmed with defensive ramparts. And each smaller in diameter than the last, until at the apex it formed a series of towers. The largest in the middle, four others laid out in the direction of the cardinal directions. The crown of the tallest towers -- which approached some sixty stories in the case of the Four Brothers -- was a spiky, many-tiered thing. Like a pinecone set upside down. Crowning each of these was a single, ominously large crystal. The largest ones in the known world.

The islands, holy or otherwise, were protected by gunpowder cannons; rebuilt and perfected from the artifacts of failed invaders. And connected by bridges of stone and rope, or brightly-colored boats which ferried citizens from one place to the next. A million or more, citizens and slaves, called the place their native home. Thousands upon thousands walked among them as tradesfolk, liaisons, and even tourists. Within the waters moved countless ships flying multiple colors; the commerce of an empire. Amid its sky flew immense dragonflies large enough to carry two musketmen into war. Atop its marshy mainland, the criss-cross of canals and defensive walls, trod elephants of even larger scale; capable of carrying a siege tower into war. Further still, a vast and seemingly endless jungle called more terrible things its home.

The bay was called the Priapocah. The city built atop it was called Huitz Thom. The people who lived free lives upon its roads, or toiled under its boot, called themselves the Moctesrei. Builders of the Endless Empire.

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The Pyramid Of Knowledge stood at the eastern edge of Huitz Thom. From its summit, the Erudite Crystal watched over all those who trod upon the wet grass of mainland, no matter how far they might roam. Ishmael could see its gleaming yellow-white form from afar, but an orphan like him would never see it up close. Slaves like him, orphans claimed by the state, were not permitted up there. Nor any of the other eleven children on his work team. They were picking wild berries out beyond the tall gates of the great city-state. Each expected to strip a full-sized saska bush on their own in less than twenty minutes. Depositing the bounty into one of several clay buckets. After which, their work -- and their breath -- would be inspected by one of the overseers with them. Half of whom were sneaking naps inside one of the open-topped wooden wagons that had delivered the thralls to their work site. One, the largest and kindest one, was providing a song to help the workers keep up a fast rhythm.

Like the other overseers, and the warriors who acted as guards and escorts, the singer -- Tayatl -- wore a mix of bright colors made of expensive dyes. His being a turban of golden orange, and baggy trousers of yellow-green below a thick, blue belt. A bare chest, well-tanned and heavily tattooed, glistened with the sweat of a hot day spent watching others work. While the slaves wore clothes that were pale though no less colorful; pinks and lavenders and that made them stand out against the lush green world that they were scavenging among.

Ishmael heard the disruption before he saw it. A keening whine, like the very air crying in pain. Turning towards it, he saw, for the briefest of moments, a bright light leaching out from behind the taller bush that stood just before the first trees of the Yupi Forest. Which grew ever taller as they faded into the horizon.

"What was that?" he asked himself. He looked around, to see that no one had noticed it. Not one of the silent children, nor the singing overseer. Nor the camels hitched to the wagons. He looked back to the strange location, to see nothing out of the ordinary at all. At ten years of age, he knew he should have grown out of childish curiosity, and into contentment within his work. But the life of an indentured servant held precious few novelties. And this was one he'd seize upon, even if it meant he'd have to pack twice as many berries after the overseers pulled him back to the line!

Another furtive look to the overseers, and the moment he had all backs turned to him, he was off. Silently treading his way around the plant he'd been assigned to. And from there to the next closest shadow. And the next. And from there he wriggled his way under thickening underbrush. Suppressing yelps of pain from the needles and thorns he brushed against. He emerged within the tree line clear of the path which the overseers monitored. His ears drawn to a series of sounds he'd never heard before; a harsh, stuttered hissing. He might have confused them for the territorial calls of the large predators that roamed the Outlands, if not for the way they were broken up. Switching between a slow tenor and speedy soprano. Like... words? Had the Pale Ones of legend returned to try to conquer his homeland again?

Tree by tree, the child crept his way closer to the sounds. When he reached their source, he could barely suppress a scream of surprise. There, standing in an uneven clearing was a lizard who stood on two legs.

She was almost two-and-a-half times his size, at a guess. As was the scaly tail that was sliding through the tall grass. She had the bosom of a woman, and was wearing *clothes*. By way of a form-fitting garment that left no question of her gender. It was a sparkling mix of black and green, centred with a thick belt covered in pouches. Her human-like feet, however, were bare. Every toe ended in a claw as black and sharp as the ones which curled past her fingers, but twice as large. She was covered in jewellery, as well. The most elaborate piece of which was a circular collar of

gold and gemstones, which extended sideways all the way to her collar and extended down to near the curve of her breast.

Floating magically behind her head was a large, ten-legged spider whose bulbous back end was located on the top. A top that blinked with multiple lights in no order that the boy could fine in the few seconds he had before it let out another string of those indecipherable noises and began moving in his direction. Drawing the attention of the giant female.

“Are you a goddess?” he asked in all meekness. For this was no foreign invader, surely.

This strange creature took one look at him and stepped closer, affixing a flat crystal over one eye. She squinted at him through it, an unreadable expression upon her alien face. “Hssssk k’vk.” her voice was a soft rumble. “Hssssk qwek, val’knkt.” Ishmael couldn’t move. Not to run, not to kneel. His head was swimming with every lesson he’d learned in temple. Aching to dredge up the names of any lizard-bodied entities. It was the training of a slave; no matter what else you do, don’t forget to call your betters by their names!

She crouched down before him. Her voice was now a growl. “Hssk! Hssk!” Her hand was wrapped over his faster than he could react. She started to rise, putting him on his tiptoes.

“Let go!” he cried. All thought of fear or piety gone, only the instinctive anger of a child protesting his innocence. “I didn’t do anything! Let me go!” Pulling back did nothing against the claws brushing against his palm. But twisting his whole body around so as he’s turned a circle and a half did the trick. He slipped from her grasp and scampered away.

A thick tail slapped him to the ground. A bare green foot slammed atop his chest. To pin, not to kill. But five claws tapped on his sternum in unspoken promise of violence to come.

“Please!” the boy begged. “Don’t hurt me! Don’t eat me! I’m going to get in trouble!”

The spider-thing’s beeping shut him up. The large one regarded it with a sideways nod, tapped her lobeless ear, and spoke again to Ishmael. “How many apekind? How far do you infestation spread?”

“...What?” he grimaced, confused.

“Oosless,” she scoffed. “Uhwel. You make a good pet for my scrap of a niece, at the very least. And a fine incubator for viral solutions to the problem...” She seemed to say this last, indecipherable thing to herself, tapping on her chin.

But he could understand enough. “You can’t take me anywhere! I already belong to the city!”

She either laughed, or sneezed. “Everything here is my property. The city. The cityfolk. You.”

The spider bleeped again, this time much more frantically. The pressure on Ishmael’s chest lessened as she directed her weight to the other leg and her full attention to the air creature. “Worth *how much*?”

Ishmael squirmed out from under his captor and scrambled to his feet. An angry roar followed and the sound of heavy legs followed him to the edge of the clearing, where he rolled out of the

way of another tail-strike. Yelping an alarm, the boy ran into the trees. Through a dark and unknown maze of trunks. Right into the muscular body of a soldier of Huitz Thom.

. . .

“That’s what I get for working with pirates,” Aurora grimaced, as she watched the little intruder flee. On the red side of the ledger, the Lady’s hatchling-sized drone was keeping her connected to the *Final Offer* high above in orbit. And its expanded sensor array had just detected five megacarot gemstones in the near vicinity. A prize to be prioritized. Which the locals had already done the work of digging up for her.

“The presence of indigenous peoples was not accounted for in Captain Skarr’s surveys.” Noted EDO-3.

“If he was even the one to write them,” she mused. There had been some rather questionable stains on the magnospheric tables, after all. While considering the possibilities of just how thoroughly her pawn had been conned, she tapped the side of the omnicle set over her right eye. Scrolling through multiple visual filters, zoom settings and a live-feed from EDO’s eye-cam.

“The boy will doubtless bring more of his kind to investigate this area,” the drone noted.

“Yes,” she sneered. “More grubby feet mucking up my nice new pleasure resort spa. And all the lovely profit it will make me, once I get this rock up to code.” Days like this where why she preferred to do her survey work alone. With an automaton whose hard-wiring had been custom-hacked to remove any meddlesome prohibitions.

“Looking toward the positive,” EDO-3 mused, “We can surmise that the anomalies in the opposing hemisphere’s atmospheric data may be blamed upon industrial-era pollutants. And, further, that the ones in the surface scans were the result of deliberate tampering.” Aurora listened with one ear cocked the drone’s way, and one in the direction the humanoid ran. “Shall I download myself into the orbital probes and conduct an unblemished analysis of surface topography?”

“Yes,” she ordered. “And matbeam the Q.M.R. to this position. Immediately.”

“I hasten to remind you, Mistress, that the research and development team of the terraforming firm you bought out and shuttered expressly to acquire sole ownership over said device were adamant that it was not ready for use in the field.”

“I said *immediately*.”

‘Immediately’ ended up taking thirty seconds.

The Quantum Mass Regular appeared before the Reptile’s eyes in a twirl of golden light. It was long, about the length of her arm. Comprised mainly of sleek tubes of bronze and chrome. Partitioned along one side of its length in the pattern of a heat sink. A few panels blinked from the other, but these were mostly for displaying the status of various systems. The controls for the device were to be found upon the wrist-strap that lay set upon a large, metal ring. The center of which acted as a mount for the machine.

She had just gotten the control-grid strapped to her arm when she began hearing noises from the distance. Ape-like grunts of fear and anger. Followed by the distinct tones of determined readiness.

EDO-3 directed one of his many appendages in that direction. "As I believe the saying goes, the natives are becoming restless."

"Then help me get this thing on," she ordered the drone. "*Faster* than immediately."

. . .

The broad-chested warrior had a long beard, braided with lines of red twin. His belt was lined with knives. His bare chest was crossed with gunpowder pouches. His bright pants and cape offered no camouflage. His rifle was held firmly in one hand. The other clasped Ishmael by the wrist, stopping his sprint dead. "There you are!" The man named Zalulo grinned, no doubt dreaming of the two coins coin he'd receive for recovering an escaped slave.

"Help! There something, *someone* back there!" The boy tried to pull away, but now he faced someone who knew how to keep a human immobilized. A tactical twist of his arm sent the boy down to his knees, to pained and of off-balance to stand again.

The warrior was enjoying this. "Someone, huh? All I heard was the growling of a hungry beast! You tried to run just to come running back at the first sign of trouble!"

Tears strained down Ishmael's face. "No! You don't understand! She's evil!"

The warrior raised him to the air, and shook him fiercely. "You will be silent, slave!" He whistled a trio of signals, one which would bring the other fighters into position to run a dumb animal out of the trees. "Your betters will save you. And you will watch!"

Trembling but silent, Ishmael followed his handler back towards the last place under the Temples' eyes that he wanted to be.

. . .

The unwieldy Q.M.R. was firmly strapped to Aurora's arm -- at least, the back end was; the rest extended past her hand like a mounted javelin -- before she heard the rustling of branches and the snapping of wood. One ape barking above the rest, giving orders.

"I detect seven humanoid lifeforms headed our way," intoned the drone. "May I suggest we merely shoot them? You did bring a rather potent energy weapon with you. One whose disruption cells, might I remind you, will not be viable in an enlarged form."

While it was true that the Drellaxian Snub Pistol strapped to her was perfectly capable of disintegrating trees *and* the folk coming up from behind them, what she had in mind was more fun. And would, ultimately, leave less forensic evidence behind. A flick of her free hand's claws, and the belt was off and resting by the Q.M.R.'s mount-ring. "Back to the ship with those," she stated.

The drone obediently matbeamed the gear away, but couldn't resist but add. "Please remember that the prototype -- the *very advanced* prototype -- never intended for use on living matter. Potential side effects of its use may include--"

"Never mind that!" Aurora spat, certain the aliens were close enough now to hear her words. She could certainly hear them spreading out, keeping to the cover of the greenery. She slapped the wrist control with her tail. It started to life with a keen electric whine, almost too high for her ears to register. "It's not as though this is my first ti-i-i-i-mmmme!" The world around her took on bright outlines, which shrank inwards as she increased in height. For all of a few seconds. And then again for a few more. Then a third time, after which the control band indicated the need for a cool-down period.

At the end of her cry, she estimated she might have gained all of six inches in height, if that.

"What the blazes?" she snarled. Looking about her not-all-that-different surroundings. And to the drone which was even then floating towards her field of view. Multiple appendages twitching nervously.

"The S/C compensators need a moment to adjust to local gravity, Mistress. It is one of the notes left by the development team. Several notes." EDO-3's droll commentary went on as Aurora's body lurched its way to another foot of height. Followed by another two. Then four more.

Three beeps again declared another cooldown period. With the sounds of her would-be hunters too close to evade.

"It'll have to do," she told herself, assuming a defensive posture and testing her left wrist. At her current dimensions -- just over eighteen feet tall -- the end of the Q.M.R. was still sticking past her wrist, like a mounted knife. Too precious to risk.

The first furless ape to come racing out of the green -- out from the shorter trees -- was one-third her size, now, at best. He bore a colorful cape, red and orange, which was clasped over one breast. Her eyes knew gold when they saw it; the clasp was carved in the image of a bird of prey. The iron blade of his spear was crafted to far deadlier purpose, enough to calm the greed in her eyes. He screamed as he charged, irrelevant grunts. A sidestep and a swipe of a near-twenty-foot tail sent him arcing across the clearing, to snap in half against a tree.

Only after that first Human's death did she realize he was a distraction, meant to move her. The next two who came out from the shadows were less foolhardy. They'd come at her from opposite sides of the clearing, aiming to put her in the crossfire of their flintlock rifles. Their arms were practiced, but their iron rounds only manage to slice lines into her outfit; one across the left of her ribcage and the other across her right hip. She lunged at the man to the left, taking a few more glancing blows as she did so, from both ends. Only one of these managed to wedge itself, just barely, in between her scales. She let it stay, harmlessly, for the fear it would inspire in her target.

It worked. The dark-haired gunner's eyes widened and he rose. Though pulled a pre-loaded pistol from his side and he stood his ground, his aim wavered and his fingers shook weakly. He turned to run, far too late to avoid Aurora's extended reach. Head in her claws, she slammed it into a tree with force enough to shake half the leaves away.

She charged at the other in a serpentine route intended to confound the aim of the man who had only just managed to reload. Only to be ambushed by the final two men. Men who bore large

clubs studded with iron ingots, meant to bludgeon a target who'd been softened up by the riflemen. With the advantage of covering fire, they charged. Weapons held high and still dangerous despite the size difference.

*Teetle-eetle-eet!!!* The wristband's ready-signal chimed. She was quick to press it anew, and assume her defensive crouch again.

One foot forward, the other back and clawed deeply into the earth. The other foot was the one to move as she acquired eight... then sixteen... more feet in height. The expected third spurt in the cycle did not come. But it was enough; she'd gained many, many times her previous mass. And with mass came momentum. Her shin contacted the runners, as a growing foot tore up the ground between them. Striking them both before they'd realized what had happened. The first clubman took a direct hit, and end his battle cries ended forever. The second, a glancing blow, was pushed backwards far enough to knock into the rifleman, whose weapon flew away into the woods.

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Terribly near to Ishmael, draped limply against a tangle of roots, was the arm of the first man to die at the monster's hand. The boy was being held there by Zalulo, who had lost the will to fight upon first sight of the murderous woman. But that didn't mean he wouldn't take out his kill-hunger on an easier target.

"You summoned, this monster, didn't you?" the bearded man now had a knife in his weapon hand. And a lethal glint in his eye.

"No, no, I didn't. I swear to the Gods." The boy, now wearing a rope leash held in Zalulo's grip, was whispering so as not to attract the ire of the larger monster. His voice was shrill with terror. The sound of the failed gunshots was still ringing in his ears.

"Should I take you back to face the God's justice? Or should split you open right here for your sacrilege?" He made the blade's point dance before the boy's eyes.

Ishmael could not take his eyes off his murderer, but also could not help but see the green shadow growing on the other side of the tree wall. So, so much higher than his captor's crouching form. A shot rang out, and Zalulo's skull exploded. *Phlak!*

The boy shrieked his terror, a frozen-limbed wail. Drawing the attention of the metal spider heard, which zipped through the branches above and around him to triangulate the source of the cry.

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Claws as long as the last two living men were tall ceased their growth just to either side of them. Aurora let her foot rise and fall. The ground shook. Trees rattled. Birds fled their roosts. A man died, ground to red paste under her angry sole.

The lone survivor managed to find his feet. He'd turned as pale as a ghost. But he didn't run, and he didn't look away. The fear in his eyes confirmed this groundling knew that he was facing one who would not stop until everything he knew was utterly, unquestionably hers. One whose victory was already certain.



Yet, his eyes hardened. His arms found their strength once more. Raising his club, the warrior wrapped his fingers firmly around the hilt, and rose it blade high. Set on bringing it down fast and hard into the seven-foot-long foot before him. He never took his eyes off of hers. She let him make his strike, which bounced back harmless as rain. He tried again. He failed again.

Aurora smiled a toothy smile back at the silent man. "If you vermin think you'll invalidate my investment, forget it!" She leaned down towards him, her hand outstretched. She flicked him with two fingers. That was all it took to shatter his ribs and end his life.

EDO-3's alarm cut short the joy of victory. Though out of sight, its voice in her ear-piece was as clear as if it were hovering right beside her. "Mistress, I have located the child!"

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The wail of a metal abomination in his face roused Ishmael free of his shock. And just in time to hear the rending of wood; the too-tall figure followed after him, pushing trees out of her way as easily as he might press through a cornfield. Ishmael started running again, to find the dead man's hand still clutching his leash. He wrangled himself free for the second time that day, and swiped the dead man's knife besides.

A wave of trees behind him fell to their ends. A swipe of wind overhead took with it the trees ahead. "Eeeek!" A hand as long as he was tall came slamming down from the sky. Enormous fingers curled to imprison him. Long black claws warned him not to duck under them.

The cage of flesh ensnared him, cold scales pressing against him from all sides. The jungle floor drifted away and the monster's face got closer. With one arm and both legs pinned, all the captive could do was scream and hack away against his prison with a knife that glanced harmlessly along bark-thick scales. She squeezed the air out of his lungs, denying him the ability to protest. The strength in his arm dropped right off. The pressure was agonizing, and she wasn't letting up. If anything, it got even worse; an on-and-off coiling that told Ishmael she was testing the strength of his bones.

She smiled a smile that held within its curves the very definition of the word 'evil.' "I will do far worse if you persist." The monster's voice had become deeper, no longer recognizable as female. And even angrier. She tightened up her grip again and held it thus. "I can make your suffering last for days. As others could tell you as much, had they survived offending me!"

The edge of Ishmael's vision darkened. The center was a storm of falling stars. He had nothing else to lose for committing to what could be his final act. *'Goodbye, Sister.'* He limply brought the side of the knife against the tip of her thumb and pushed for all had left. It followed the dark curve up towards her finger, and bit deeply into the quick. A line of red blood was his reward. That, and a sudden weightlessness. "Whhooaaaaahhhooooo!"

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"Hiiiisk! You little fiend!" the monstress shook her hand off as her prey met the ground. He landed on the soft, wet ground with the speed and luck of the young, rolling right into a desperate sprint.

Aurora brought her undamaged hand down hard and fast to catch him. Only for the world to change again in its stuttering way; the growth cycle had chosen the worst possible time to complete itself. This one adding thirty-two belated feet to her prowess. Her hands and fingers

scaled up along with everything else. Widening the gap between her fingers, which her prey bolted clean through. Worse still, her wrist was now pressed against two tree trunks. Forcing her to put her effort to freeing herself while he got clean away.

Biting back pain and fury, Aurora picked the iron sliver free from her pulsating finger and nursed her wound. Into the lingering silence of bitter hindsight came EDO-3. It floated up, up, up to her ear. "Congratulations, Mistress. You have achieved a steady-state size of seventy-four-point-five feet. "And, incidentally, there is another wave of soldiers on its way."

. . .

The trees were diminishing in size and number; Ishmael was nearly out of this horrible place! But the lack of cover made it all the easier to see a new line of warriors approaching, and for them to see him. The slave braced himself for another round of accusations and threats. Instead the man who reached him first, bearing golden stripes of command on his cape, pushed the boy behind him. Towards the jungle's edge.

"Whatever you saw in there, tell your overseer! Tell it to everyone! Go!" The commander did not look back at the child.

The child obeyed without question. His first sight upon exiting the treeline was countless bags of berries lay abandoned on the ground. Save for one, which Isabel's was still clutching as she was rushed onto the back of his assigned wagon. Doubtless more afraid of the workhouse Commander than an unseen enemy in the trees. He wasted no time joining the evacuation. Trying to act as though he was innocent of any knowledge of what lay behind the trees. But when old Cualli lifted him up over the vehicle's back rim, he could tell she knew he'd been away.

There was only one other adult with the party; the camel-driver Tayotl. The moment the elderly overseer clambered aboard, the last of this party, he whipped the reins. To either side of the vehicle, others carrying their own share of the work force joined it in racing away from the Yupi.

The canopies of all the trees between him and the lizard woman shook about as though a great storm were sweeping through. Ishmael heard a final round of agonized screams sound from behind the green wall.

"Gods save us," whispered Overseer Cualli to the sky, her hands set in the sign of the Great Condor; palms out, fingers spread, thumbs hooked together. Penitence left the old woman's face when she looked down to Ishmael. Grabbing him by the arm, she demanded. "What have you done, boy? What ancient curse have you unreleased upon us?"

"She was already there!" he insisted. "Honest!"

The trees shook again, loudly enough to be heard over the groaning wheels. No, the trees were *breaking* now. Ishmael didn't have to wrest his hand free, for the elder released it that she might turn back herself to see. Ishmael looked too, feeling the press of eleven children crowding up behind him.

What he saw was her face coming up over canopy of the sentinel trees. She did not rise in the manner of one climbing the trees. No, with the distance between them, he'd barely have seen her arrival. She *grew taller than the young trees!* There came another sudden growth spurt, doubling her already immense stature. More than enough to best the height of the trees behind her. Trees

that every child knew could go as tall as four hundred feet tall. Trees which shattered and fell from view by the dozens. She was much, much too big now to fit into the clearing where he'd found her. The monster's head now all-but-rivalled the Temple Of Knowledge for sheer height; fifty stories at a guess. Her groin now plainly visible over the smaller trees between himself and her.

Near a dozen screams blasted Ishmael's ears, the high-pitched shrieks of terrified children. He didn't even know that he, too, was shouting until his lungs were forced to take in new breath.

"Make those camels move faster!" demand the Cualli to the driver, who was sitting ahead of a barrier of wood where no slave could touch him.

"Do you think they are holding anything back, woman?" called the man who was straining at the reins. Not sounding at all brave or confident. "It's all I can do to keep this crate from turning over!"

His fear inspired even more from his charges. Ishmael's ears felt as though they'd burst under the noise. The weight of his fellows vanished as they, as a single organism, cowered towards the driver's box. Leaving the boy and the woman to watch as the giantess kicked and clawed her way out of the trees. Men died calling to the same Gods Cualli had appealed, crushed under foot or trunk.

When a thickly-clawed foot, festooned with golden ankle bands, breeched the forest wall, Ishmael knew for certain that he was looking at the same terrible woman he'd seen before. Her costume, also the same, was marked with cuts, but no signs of blood. She looked about herself for any further sign of warriors at her feet. Satisfied, she looked up again, to count each and every one of the fleeing wagons with a predator's eyes. She did not move to run any of them down. But Ishmael was not relieved to see her raise a might left palm in the direction of the middle of the wagon line.

Her brow furrowed in concentration.

The scales of the giant's palm became less distinct, as though seen through the rippling mist which obscured the horizon on a hot day. These same scales were soon glowing; a bright yellow-gold most prominent closer to her unseen skin. The color and heat coalesced into a gigantic ball of fire. A ball that shot forth from her hand, towards one of the fleeing carts. The middle-most one, two to the left of Ishmael's. On contact, it burst into a bright plume that engulfed the screams -- and the lives -- of all occupants. Two driverless camels powered the blacked wreck further away. In their blind fear they began to trail off of the left, forcing the next rider over to slow down in order to keep from being stampeded or catch fire. And the next, and the next.

By then, the giantess had eradicated another two carts. The ones to the far right and left of the chain. Setting even more camels into panic. The one that now made the left end of the line, it's wheels blazing with flames that had claimed the wagon beside it, rushed rightward to escape another blast. Three wagons thus ruined each other in a collapsing heap of death.

"Aiiiiieeeeeeeee!" Cualli cried, pointing over the boy's head. Towards a driverless wagon headed their way from what was now the far right of the line.

. . .

"I love it when I can make my enemies destroy one another!" Aurora beamed, her hands clasped together in unbridled joy. Before her, nine transports had already whittled down to three. Make that two; a pilot was thrown from his box and been run over by his own wheels! She watched with

baited breath as the pilotless craft collided with another one, sending them both careening onto their sides. Then she summoned up the psychic charge to toss another fireball into the one wagon that had managed to escape being fried or wrecked by an ally. Columns of black smoke rose up from the field of death she had created.

“Keep track, EDO. I’m going for a record.” She slapped the wrist unit for the fifth time.

Again, the world’s contours shrank in her eyes three times in quick succession. Trees which had reached up to her mid-thigh at last growth cycle -- those that had survived the expansion of her feet and their widening stance during this fifth -- now barely came up any higher than her foot! Their trunks were as twigs against her meat and claws, tumbling aside until she was in a clearing that opened up the face of the forest to her.

“Four thousand, sixteen and one-half feet,” declared a drone which she could now only hear through subdermal implants in her upper jaw. “You biosigns still read nominal. Q.M.R. energy systems stabilizing.”

“I told you there was nothing to worry about.” Aurora’s voice had lost all of its feminine lightness due to the change in width of her throat, which was now large enough to swallow one of the dead trees whole. “Except perhaps that city’s threat to my plans.” She could see it clearly, now. A metropolis of stone and brick laid out in circular forms atop a series of islands. Islands that would have had a lovely view for her paying guests. And would again after a bit of constructive terraforming. “Take a picture of that, EDO. I’ll want to rebuild that bay to its natural contours.”

While the drone made its visual scan, the merchant duchess scanned the site of her destruction again, with the aid her omnicle. With its magnification, she noted a glint of movement amid the trio of wagons that had destroyed each other. Survivors crawling out of the wreckage, or lifting themselves up off the ground.

One of them was infuriatingly familiar.

“There you are! I’m coming for you little pest, and this time I’m going to crush you.”

. . .

Ishmael pulled himself up off the ground and shook the ringing out of his ears, only to be slapped by a wave of vertigo. He tried not to vomit while sorting the events of the last few moments into some kind of order. The flashes of fire. The giantess. The screaming driver. Soaring through the sky. How far had he flown when the wagon threw him? He couldn’t say. Couldn’t put words together at all, actually. Nor make a sound other than a pained moan.

Only, the moaning wasn’t just him.

The boy looked back behind him. “Oooohhh!” the very act caused another wave of nausea. The first thing he saw clearly was his own body’s imprint upon the marshy ground. The second was a withered arm, attached to a withered head, trying to drag itself out from under a wagon. *His* wagon.

Cualli had no problem recognizing the sole remaining orphan under her ‘care.’ “You foul child! You rotten little sinner!” She stopped clawing at the earth long enough to waggle a bony finger at him. “You come over here right now and get me out of this mess you’ve caused!”

A voice from deep inside Ishmael shouted down the din in his head. The voice every slave had inside them, waiting for the right moment. *'I should just run away. Let one monster kill the other.'* Other voices, the ones he'd been trained to hear, disciplined into listening to, were warning him not to be so foolish. Not even now. *'Others will know. They always know.'*

Canny as she was cold-hearted, the old woman must have read the discussion playing out on his face. "I see what you're thinking, and you'll be a fool to try! If you go back alone, without one of your keepers, you'll be branded a runaway! You'll be marked and sent to the Outer Colonies! You'll never see your sister again!"

"Chellah..." the very thought of Cualli's threat coming true put a panic into him that could only be matched by the oddly inactive giantess in the trees, who was busy kicking her way out of them. He ran over to the overseer, and started pulling at her free hand.

It was all he could do; there was no hefting the wagon for either of them. But it was enough to get her torso out far enough for her to pull her other arm free. She clawed at the ground with all of what little might she had, straining to free herself completely. The ground had other ideas: it trembled under the force of the giantess' first step out of a shattered jungle. **BOOM**

Ishmael looked backwards, out of sheer reflex. He instantly regretted it. The green monster was even larger! Larger than anything he had ever seen of ever even dreamed of seeing! Almost too large for his mind to accept! For his eyes to fully take in! For his heart to beat in terror against! He wanted nothing more in that moment than to be smaller. Small and un-noticed, an invisible thing the angry lizard would pass right on by.

"Aaaawwwgggg!" Cualli's scream called his eyes back to her. Something in the wagon had given way and resettled. Its weight was now pressed firmly down upon her back, just enough to pin her firmly down.

Ishmael gulped and pulled with all of his might. But the woman was beyond help now. And the monster was still moving; he could feel the wind being cast by her leg, and it chilled him to the bone.

**BOOM** A shadow enveloped the boy. He peered upwards, just in time to see a toothy green smile be obscured by the underside of a scaled foot. He let go of his soon to be former overseer, and started to back away. Unable to take his eyes off the pale green wall of flesh.

Pain tore into his naked ankle. Cualli had latched hold of his leg. "Nooo! Don't leave me! Don't let the demon have me!" He kicked her face to make her let go and ran off, his stride boosted by a wind at his back. He didn't entirely realize what he'd done until he was racing hard and fast to the edge of the shadow. A doomed woman's pleas chased him down and suddenly stopped. He could practically hear her final, useless prayer. A mere moment later came another **BOOM** and the wall of mud and dirt and wind that threw him off his feet and into the air.

He fell against the ground with near force enough force to sprain his arm. He covered his head and lay down flat against the earth. Playing dead was the only thing he could think to do to spare himself the fate that had befallen so many. An effort he knew to his bones to be futile. A shadow passed over him. Twin rumbles sounded to either side of the boy, and he was showered with even more grass and muck. Cualli's scream grew fiercer than before, but further away as well.

The boy tried to lift himself to look around his surroundings, and rolled screaming right into a ditch that hadn't been there a second before. Flat on his back, his breath erratic, the boy could see up, up, up to a sky-high demon squinting at something in her outstretched right hand. Tiny black dots circled her flattened hand. The other hand was picking through something he could not see. Some collection of the muck and grass that he was only just realizing she had clawed through to form the very hole he was laying in.

Impatience was clear on the monster's face as she slid her finger, or her claw, across her palm. A muffled scream of agony was the result. It was Cualli's "Aaaaaauughh! My back! Gods, help me!"

The reptile did not seem satisfied with the contents of her search. The voice easily overwhelmed that of her victim: "Still on the ground, then. No matter." The monsters tossed a whole wagon into her mouth. Not any wagon, it was *the* wagon! The very one that he had only just escaped! Dead camels still hitched to it flopped free and down on their way to a grisly end. Ishmael's guardian screamed one last time, and went silent forever.

"No... No.. She couldn't have..." Ishmael muttered. Even though he knew very well that yes, she could have. And she had. *The evil thing had eaten Cualli!*

The beast licked her lips, then turned her head sharply to him. She sneered, raised her foot, and brought it down upon him. The world went black. Hellish noise battered the boy's ears, sucking the air from his lungs. It was through a sea of sparks in his eyes that he saw the foot withdraw, and yet another wave of earth raining down from it in pieces large and small. Mercifully small were the ones that landed his way, half burying the lad but leaving him alive. Some debris found instead the edges of two vast toe prints that now lay on either side of him. Sparing the boy's aching body, but adding more drumbeats to the ringing in his head.

Through a fog of unfocused sight, Ishmael witnessed first one foot and then the other step over him in strides so vast their length could not be measured. Followed by a long, long, long tail. This last appendage had not fully passed him by before he slipped into unconsciousness.

. . .

"My sensors find no remaining humanoid lifesigns in the immediate vicinity," EDO-3 informed its mistress. His words fitting easily in between quarter-mile strides. "Congratulations on your inevitable victory."

"Thank you, EDO." She double checked the status reading on the Q.M.R. Everything read green, but as always she was looking towards the future. "Double check the O2-exchange interlinks on this thing, will you? I don't want to suffocate when I when I hit thinner atmosphere."

"Of course, Madam." The little probe rooted itself onto the device, and chirped a series of wireless signals. While she made her own appraisal of the surroundings.

From her great vantage, Aurora could easily see three long, grey lines between herself and a large body of water dotted with countless islands. As well as the five gemstones resting atop the five pyramids located among their number. Brilliant beacons of red, yellow, violet, blue, and green. "Come and claim us," they all-but whispered to her.

“I will,” she assured them. “You’ll soon be in hands worthy of your splendor. Don’t you fret about that.”