

## FROM THE CHRONICLES OF LUPA VOLUME 2



- P. JULIAN -

FROM THE CHRONICLES OF

# LUPA

VOLUME 2

JESSE JAMES

From the Chronicles of Lupa Volume 2

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This text is set with fragments from those who taught me, along with variations upon scripture. This volume owes a particular debt to the strange vision of GS: “presenting me the waveless blue sea in the heart of winter.”

**for Panth**



Thus saith the Lord:

In the day when he went down to the grave I caused mourning: I covered the deep for him, and I restrained the floods thereof, and the great waters were stayed: and I caused Lebanon to mourn for him, and all the trees of the field fainted for him.

I made the nations to shake at the sound of his fall, when I cast him down to hell with those that descend into the pit: that all the trees of Eden, the choicest and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, shall be comforted in the nether parts of the earth...

To whom art thou thus like in glory and in greatness amongst the trees of Eden?

**Ezekiel 31: 15-18**



# A SORROWING GOD



LIKE all of those who languish, Jesse found that the nights were the worst. Like all who are interned. Jesse sought the sleep that would deliver him from his imprisonment, shifting and groaning in the formless dark where there was nothing to distract him or console him.

Whether his eyes were closed or open Jesse's mind would not let him be. In the silence of the grey cell his thoughts were unrelenting, his mind working away in the dark. He hoped his mind might quieten if he could manage a few hours of sleep but it was unlikely to come to him stretched out on the hard foam mattress, the rubberised cover and sheetless blankets grabbing and insulting his skin.

Sometimes in those nights Jesse would dream, even in those nights when he did not recall being asleep. In these dreams he wandered about, his clothes torn, his body beaten by the Watchmen of the City. He held out his hands and begged people the same question, asking them to say whether they had seen his lover. They would ask for her name and he would be unable to speak it, and they would deride him and hold him up to strangers, saying: he has lost a Love he cannot name! And still no words would come to his defence.

There were other nights, even other dreams, but mostly there was a kind of dread wakefulness, against the cold dumb silence of cinderblocks, painted in their same cold funereal grey. It was the colour dying men see on battlefields, before death comes to claim them, the grey of shrapnel and spalled metal and exposed brain tissue, the endless grey mud of the trenches. The end resolution of a man's battlefield vision, before he is mercifully unsheathed from reality.



**BOOK IV**  
( 4 Lupa )



CHAPTER 1

## Bring Out Your Dead

AFTER the joy of their reunion had subsided Ruby and Jesse sat together in the dust, sitting without speaking as the night came down again. They felt the night season agree with them, felt its tenor and impact upon them and upon all others who breathe and seek in the darkness.

The cool dark soothed them but their ordeal had been long. Ruby was taxed particularly from her outward pouring of grief, but although she longed for sleep she clung to Jesse with her eyes wide open, fearing she might lose him again if she closed her eyes.

Jesse was simply glad to be back in the world, whether it was day or night, but as he held Ruby close for the warmth of her body he woke to unsettling knowledge, things he needed to tell Ruby although he struggled for the proper words.

I need to go, he said.

Ruby hurried to agree, saying they should go back to the safety of her little house, but Jesse was called on to other places and so he softly denied those wishes.

I'm sorry Ruby.  
I need to go... alone.  
To the place that was prepared for me.  
God knows how long ago.

Ruby did not ask Jesse to explain because she knew well enough where he meant. The place maintained by Carlos Lasenex, whom she had defied in such terrible error, who wielded his power without any hallmark to tell her what he was or whom he served.

You heard him, Jesse said.  
When I fell.

Ruby had heard Lasenex cry out on the night Jesse had died, but she begged Jesse to think whether that cry was for Jesse lost or merely lost to him, whether Lasenex might be just one more creature anxious to possess Jesse, to use him for his own malicious ends.

Jesse listened to these doubts but he could not accede to them. You heard him, he said. There is love in him, Ruby, even though it might be severe. A great love and even greater responsibility. I cannot tell you how I know this but much of that love is for me, it is to protect me.

Now he is asking me to come to him. He doesn't demand it, but he cannot allow for any alternative. For my protection, he says. Until I am ready. And so that I can learn, although he will not tell me what.

Jesse shook his head as if to clear it, then continued.

I don't know how this is possible but I constantly hear his voice, like one crying out in the wilderness. He wants to prepare me, he says, to make my way straight. And he says there is work for you also, Ruby, work for you to do separately and alone.

Ruby could not deny any of these things but she could not bear the thought of losing Jesse again. She had once denied him Lasenex's protection at the cost of his life but still she begged Jesse to think of alternate places, alternate plans. For such places as Lasenex maintained are not comprehended by Lupa, and they will not enter in, being places beyond the reckoning of justice with their souls unfit to plead.

Eventually Ruby's exhaustion curtailed their discussion. She put her head on Jesse's shoulder and begged for a little sleep, and Jesse pulled her in close and said nothing but comforting words, saying close your eyes my darling as he pulled her body in.



Ruby's breathing deepened and her heart slowed down, and when she had settled completely Jesse gathered her up and stood with her sleeping in his arms. She had never been heavy but she now seemed infinitely light, as if special strength had come into Jesse designated for her protection.

As Jesse walked downhill Ruby fell deeper into sleep, breathing

in time to the sway of his heavy bones. Jesse passed the grotto, and looking at those waters he was filled with a fierce protective love for Ruby, showing him what his purpose was in the world and what it had always been. He strode all the way down to the car park, the pines still whispering in greeting, his new strength surmounting every obstacle that had troubled him on the way up.

When they reached the stolen car Jesse set Ruby down gently in the passenger seat, pulling her pashmina around her. He brought the engine back to life and pulled the car out on to the blacktop, knowing exactly where he should go although he was not sure how he had come by that knowledge.

As he drove Jesse reflected upon the things he had said to Ruby, and also the secret knowledge he had been required to suppress. How long he and Ruby might be separated, the pain that this would cause. Lasenex had also been frank with Jesse about the limits of asylum, the forces that were arrayed against him, but although Jesse feared for his own safety he was much more concerned for Ruby's fate if he could not be protected.

Ruby slept as Jesse drove sedately with the cruise control on. The car hummed sweetly up the freeway towards the Great City, then down the arterial roads that bled out gradually towards the east.

Lasenex had been stern with Jesse but underneath those strictures there lay tremendous care and also tremendous responsibility, to provide the best help and protection that the old man could provide. Bonds that were sealed with the promise of Lasenex's own life, pledged to be given before Jesse's life was lost. This blood pledge that was Jesse's best

comfort, and his greatest safety, his to take up before the sun could rise again.

## CHAPTER 2

### Asylum

WHEN Jesse arrived at the hospital Carlos Lasenex was standing outside to meet him, flanked by two tall men dressed in hospital scrubs.

The doctor presented with his customary formality but he also smiled very warmly, shaking Jesse's hand as he got out of the car, saying: welcome, welcome.

Welcome, Mr Quinn.

It is good to see you.

I had doubted whether we would meet each other again.

Jesse smiled weakly and said that he was glad also, but Lasenex only smiled and tutted at him. I think you might be putting that a bit strongly, Mr Quinn. You are here under sufferance, of course, there being nowhere else to go.

As his host ushered him onwards Jesse glanced back towards the car where Ruby still slept. Lasenex saw Jesse's concern but he moved to deny his request before it could be made.

I am sorry, Mr Quinn. You must enter this place alone. I would say it is not safe for Ms Tuesday, but under present conditions? It is quite a lot worse than that.

Jesse saw with his nascent sight that this assessment was correct, and that any neglect of detail came from the old man's wish to shield Jesse from the horrors that Ruby would encounter if she entered into the hospital. Jesse fought against these truths until Lasenex alleviated his distress with a promise of better things.

I will do my best, Mr Quinn.  
To make it safe for a future visit.  
But for the time being, as you see very clearly.  
She must not follow you in.



Jesse had been gone for some time when Ruby finally woke. She threw off her cover and sat up straight in her seat to see Lasenex sitting where Jesse should have been, alert and upright, staring out over the bonnet of the car.

Where is he? Ruby snarled.  
Inside, said Lasenex.  
Ruby looked over towards the whitewashed walls of the hospital.  
Take me to him.

No.

Yes.

No, Ms Tuesday. I cannot permit you to enter.

Ruby snarled and snapped at this refusal, demanding that the old man justify what he had said to her, and that he withdraw the refusal he had dared to utter. She was not civil in her demands and she burned to escalate things but Lasenex simply sighed and took them down into that shared space below speech where he could address her more directly, where the proper courtesies would be imposed on them and the right of Lasenex to be heard.

I have once before warned you, She-Wolf.

About the limits of your knowledge.

And yet you persist in your foolishness.

Ruby was forced to listen as Lasenex continued. The dangers within this place are far greater than any danger without. It was designed this way, for the containment of such dangers. And yet you would doubt me? Without once having ventured in?

Ruby demanded a full inventory of these dangers, with something like a scowl communicated even in that space, but Lasenex merely sank them further below speech to provide Ruby with the only explanation he was currently permitted to provide.

The dangers are manifold, he said. For the ones I keep here? Not all of them, Ms Tuesday, not by any stretch. But some are, as you would call them: The Unclean, The Unforgiven. Names that do not even begin to comprehend their depravity.

Ruby felt her hunting instincts flare at the naming of these creatures, her soul pulsing a deep arterial red, so that even Lasenex in the superiority of his current position felt a tremor come into him.

I know you would confront them, Lasenex said. Your courage, your commitment, these have never been in doubt. But these creatures are without fear, without pity. I swear to you: neither you nor your sisters, separately or together, could prevail over them for a single day.

This is why you hide, he said.  
This is why you have condemned so many innocent men.

Lasenex did not intend to wound Ruby with these words but she was wounded just the same. Her chance redemption of Jesse had not expunged her shame at having caused his death, or alleviated the blood guilt afflicting every one of her kind.

None of it was intended, Ms Tuesday.  
But you must remember: the dark places.  
Within you, as within all.



There was further debate between Ruby and Lasenex as they sat together in the car, and although there were many facets to their disagreement the major focus was upon Jesse and his safety: whether that could be guaranteed in this place, what

purpose might be served by his indentures there.

The argument between the two persisted over many different iterations, but while Ruby struggled bravely she already knew that Jesse would stay in this place, and that she would not be permitted to stay with him. She saw that she had lost Jesse to the care of the old man without understanding why the doctor had been assigned to protect him, or how the balance of light and darkness within those walls could possibly be resolved in Jesse's favour.

Eventually Ruby got out of the car and traded places with the doctor, who stood back from his open door as she got into the driver's seat. He had offered to disappear the car for her but she needed a way to get home, and in any event there were many places this car might take her on the next full moon, ways she could have her theft absolved and made to look like other crimes, perpetrated by people who deserved retribution even if they were innocent of that particular crime.

As Ruby started the car Lasenex bowed stiffly to her, and began to dissolve the shared thought-space in which they had contended. As he took his leave Lasenex praised Ruby for her commitment but Ruby rebutted that praise the instant it was given. Saying that it was the light within Jesse that had always bound her to him, that her heart would go into darkness should his light be lost to her again.

Lasenex nodded and said: your heart, of course, is lit up by him. And I can see that you are deeply illumined. But is this The One who will illuminate every human heart? Who died, and who is Risen? Who is come to redeem the utmost Heart of the World?



On her way back to her little house Ruby attended to various future plans, taking care of some pressing matters that demanded her urgent attention.

When she finally arrived home Ruby was soothed by the scent of her wild roses, but that was nothing compared to the scent of Jesse that still filled her tiny house. Ruby had prepared herself for solitude but not for Jesse's overwhelming presence, lingering most powerfully within her unmade bed, the twist of his heavy limbs still marked out against her sheets.

Ruby groaned and without thinking further she sank to her knees and put her face into her bedding, the warm scent of Jesse flooding her with sorrow and desire. As she knelt there Ruby begged for his safe return, calling upon every spirit she could name and some whose names were obscure to her, crying out in the last hour of the night as Jesse's lost presence overwhelmed her.

CHAPTER 3

## Wounds Like These

EACH morning Jesse Quinn would be brought back sleepless into the cold grey light of his cell. Each morning like every morning, the cheap frosting over the window glass diffusing the already sombre light.

Each morning Jesse would groan and roll about on the foam mattress but his denial of the new day would be wasted. Eventually he would sigh and then throw off his blankets, swinging his bare feet over the edge of the single bed, the cool concrete floor bringing some respite from the hardship of the night before.

Each morning Jesse would get up and slowly wander out of his cell, following the corridor down to the main room of his empty ward. He would greet the nurse sitting behind the glass screen of the medical station, who would smile back as though it might be the best day in the world.

Good morning Mr Quinn.  
Morning, Jesse would say.  
Did you manage to sleep?

No. Well. Perhaps a little.  
I'll get you some coffee.  
And your breakfast, if you're ready?

Jesse would nod and say thank you and then sit as his breakfast was brought to him. Although he always did his best to eat he found that food had completely lost its savour, his appetite like his sleep lost through his death and resurrection.

Each morning events followed the same precise course. Jesse would sit and shift in his seat, picking at his breakfast and watching the ward clock move slowly around to 10 am, the precise time that Lasenex would arrive to sit with him and chat and make his observations.

The doctor always greeted Jesse very warmly when he arrived, asking permission to sit with him, and Jesse would always say: of course. Lasenex would perch on a chair and engage Jesse in the same warm generalities and pleasantries, and Jesse would assent to these also.

After enquiring about Jesse's sleep and appetite Lasenex would open his small medical kit, asking very politely whether Jesse would mind showing him the damage done to his body. Lasenex would carefully examine each wound and abrasion left from the night of Jesse's death, wounds that would not heal or scar even under the expert ministrations of the old man.

These are strange wounds, the doctor would say.  
Very strange.  
They don't hurt, Jesse would reply.  
I wake up stuck to the bed every morning, but they don't hurt.

Curious, Lasenex would say. Curious. Of course there have been wounds like these before. Marking various men, for various reasons. Wounds that most men choose to cover, to avoid their... consequences. What speaks from them, what they might reveal.

Jesse would ask for further explanation of these things but Lasenex would just tut and purse his lips, carefully disinfecting and powdering and dressing Jesse's wounds in the same methodical way.

At the end of each consultation Lasenex would pack away all of his things, and then looking directly at Jesse would ask him the same question.

Do you feel ready, Mr Quinn?

Jesse would ask for more detail, what task might require his readiness, but each time Lasenex would evade the question with a strange smile and say: a test, Mr Quinn. Of what you have brought back. Jesse would sigh and shake his head and say no, he did not feel like being tested, and Lasenex would peer at him and then nod his head and agree with him completely.

Indeed, Mr Quinn.

Indeed you are not.

Well. We shall leave it there, for now.

Is there anything else you need?

Jesse would tell the doctor that there was nothing else that he needed, despite the fact that he wanted for almost everything: an end to his stay in hospital, a reunion with Ruby, a return to

his former life. But Jesse knew that to ask for such things would be a show of bad faith, because they could not be given, and that he was condemned to languish in this place until his destiny could be proved, his way onward ascertained.



Although most nights Jesse remained wakeful there were times when he would dream, even in those nights he did not recall being asleep. And sometimes these were kind dreams, soothing dreams, consoling Jesse completely for those moments he lingered within them.

In one dream Ruby came to him perfumed, her fingers slick with myrrh and aloe, and before Jesse could speak she was upon him like lightning, her lips glowing like embers as she kissed him, scorching his dead lips back to life. Jesse went to ask her things but the taste of her dissolved his questions, stealing them from him as her tongue swirled against his tongue.

And there were other dreams. In one of these another woman appeared, and although Jesse knew her immediately he stood quietly as she greeted him, knowing there was no need to speak her name. She came already announced with her hair like sheaves of wheat, thick braids of golden sunshine and her skin all the bounty of the fields. Jesse's heart melted as she smiled at him, and with her eyes pooled blue like oceans she told Jesse that she loved him, and that he had no cause to fear, and as

Jesse bent his head she spread her hands out over him like the outstretched wings of a dove, baptising him in her love that is called the Waters of Mercy and is also The Light of the World.

From these dreams Jesse would emerge particularly bereft, these dreams of heat and light giving way to the sombre reality of the dawn, his loneliness made worse by the solace that would be stolen from him as day crept into his cell.



Each morning Jesse would wrestle himself out of bed, sleepless whether he had dreamed or not dreamed. He would walk down through the empty ward to sit picking at his breakfast, the cereal and the UHT milk and the endless instant coffee.

Every morning Lasenex would come to see Jesse at precisely the same time, imparting the same pleasantries and attending to the same wounds, and if he was interested in the content of Jesse's dreams he never declared that interest or asked for those dreams to be described.

Lasenex would always conclude by asking Jesse the same question, a query that was obviously pointed and yet so hopelessly vague. Do you feel ready? Jesse asking each time for more information, Lasenex always smiling obliquely.

A test, he would say.  
Of what you have brought back.

But only if you feel ready, Mr Quinn.  
Only if you know yourself that today should be the day.

Each time that Jesse refused Lasenex would be in perfect agreement with him, saying as though clearly convinced of Jesse's answer: indeed, Mr Quinn. You are not ready. You will know to answer differently, when the time has come.

Jesse eventually grew tired of this routine. His despair had pushed him past caring very much what the nature of these tests might be, and he knew that the path back to his old life lay through whatever Lasenex had prepared for him.

And so on one morning that seemed the same as any morning, when Lasenex asked the same question, Jesse finally felt his patience break and his decision erupt within him.

Dr Lasenex, he said.  
I am tired of this game.  
So I am going to call you on it.

I have no idea what you are asking, Jesse said. Or whether I am ready. But I can tell you: I am sick of these questions, I am sick of this place.

So I am going to say: I am ready.  
Even though I have no idea what that even means.

Lasenex clapped his hands, smiling very broadly.  
Perfect, Mr Quinn.  
You are perfectly ready.

The doctor grinned and nodded excitedly, and as Jesse went to

ask him further things Lasenex held up his hand to silence him.

Ready for what, you have always asked.

Well now, Mr Quinn.

Let me show you.

Let us see what you are suddenly so ready for.

Jesse smiled weakly at the enthusiasm that had gripped the old man, who was still clapping his hands and chortling, and he wondered whether the doctor might be quite as mad as the people he kept in his wards. Jesse was thinking how to suggest this when he saw a strange glint come into the old man's eyes, and Jesse realized there was a much more pressing question that he had never before put.

Is this going to be dangerous? Jesse asked.

Lasenex smiled even more broadly. Ah, Mr Quinn. Now I must object to your question! After everything you have been through, everything you have seen. Do you really need to ask?

Jesse went to say no, and then to say yes, but as he thought about the question and the facts of his recent past he just sighed and shook his head and said: Dr Lasenex. One way or another, I need to get this over with.

The doctor sprang out his chair and motioned for Jesse to do the same.

CHAPTER 4

## To Those Who Are Bound

LASENEX led the way back down the hallway towards Jesse's cell, then onwards past the other empty cells that made up the high dependency unit.

The passageway ended at a small concrete stairwell. The two men walked down the bare steps turning right and then right again, ending up in a small access area, featureless except for a painted steel panel set flush against one cinderblock wall.

Lasenex muttered as he fumbled with his keys. You would expect me to have better technology than this, he said. But that is the thing, you are only as secure as the most advanced of your enemies. And I promise you, Mr Quinn, my enemies comprise some very sophisticated people.

And where would I hide it?  
A door they have not approved.  
Leading to what they could never imagine.  
And if it were found?

Lasenex fell silent after posing that question, leaving Jesse's heart to sink at the thought of what might be behind the door,

what he was going out to confront without protection or forewarning or any defences at all.

After some time Lasenex found the right key, inserting it into one of the rivet heads securing the steel panel to the wall. He twisted and pulled and the panel swung slowly outwards, a cool rush of air whispering past them as it escaped.

Lasenex ushered Jesse through the opening, closing it behind them to make the darkness absolute.

Doctor, Jesse said.

I can't see...

Of course, said Lasenex.

Just give me a moment.

Jesse heard Lasenex mutter to himself again. After a few moments the walls of the space began to glow softly with a strange diffuse light, exposing a great length of corridor in front of them, leaving Jesse to blink in wonder that such huge space could be hidden.

The voice of the doctor came to him as he wondered. These are my back wards, he said. Established by others, now bequeathed to me. For the patients that are kept here, who are as you might say: the Unclean, the Unforgiven. At least until this point in time.

As he finished these words Lasenex patted Jesse gently on the shoulder, smiling and nodding as if his speech agreed completely with every outward observation.

For souls are infinitely various, are they not?

And what might be between souls and their redemption.  
So that even the damned might have some chance.  
A chance for which I have suffered them to live.

In his confusion Jesse would have asked about these things but the old man's last comment chilled him into silence. The veiled threat in the gloved hand, the doctor's bland profession of his power over life and death. Lasenex felt Jesse's consternation but what he said next did not allay it.

Mr Quinn you come here as Light of Last Resort. What shines out of you, against the prevailing darkness. What other things might flow, once we prove what you have brought back.

Lasenex said nothing further and Jesse did not ask. They walked on as the floor began to slope gently downwards, passing though cooling air until they reached a metal door at the far end of the corridor. Lasenex touched his fingertips to a glass panel fitted to the adjacent wall and the door slid back to reveal a steel-lined chamber about the size of a goods lift, with another set of doors at the opposite end inset with opaque glass panels.

These particular doors are more sophisticated, Lasenex said. As well they might be. For these doors, chiefly the ones in front? These are the things that serve to hold Them in.

The men stepped into the chamber, the doors closing behind them. Lasenex pressed some buttons on the control panel and there was a hum of an electric motor, along with a rough abrading sound as if stone were being dragged across opposing stone. Through the transparent panels in the far door Jesse saw darkness interspersed with light flashing and alternating, a

succession of lit spaces emerging and fading as the compartment ground its way onwards.

Jesse was astonished by all of this but the doctor merely shrugged. He told Jesse that many facts about the world were secreted from ordinary people, including the resources available to select people entrusted with selected work, with all of them enjoined against specifying the source of their assistance or the terms on which it was given.

You would be surprised, was all Lasenex said.  
What might be available, to those who are willing to serve.

The compartment continued to shake and scrape its way onwards, the light of each cell window burning and fading as they passed by. Jesse grew disoriented with the distance they had travelled, what that said about the scale of these back wards, what dangers these patients must pose to warrant such extraordinary containment.

The compartment eventually ground to a halt with one external light centered in front of the opaque glass panels. Lasenex nodded somewhat wildly as he looked towards that light, his fingers hovering over the release mechanism that governed the front doors.

Are you ready? he asked.  
No, replied Jesse.  
But I'm guessing you're going to open that door anyway.

Lasenex laughed quietly, bowing a little as he did so.

You are learning, Mr Quinn.

But you are safe, I assure you.  
You'll see what I mean, once I open this door.

CHAPTER 5

## Man Infestation

THE doors slid open and the two men stepped into a room roughly the same size and shape as Jesse's cell: the same bed fixed to the floor topped with a rubberised mattress, with no other furniture at all.

At first Jesse thought the cell was empty, but then he saw a man crouched up on the bed, pressing himself into the far corner of the room. The man wore a grey jumpsuit cut from some dull material, so that with his pallor and his slight frame he was scarcely visible against the grey walls of the cell.

Kindle your fire, said Lasenex quietly.

I don't understand...

Do it, Mr Quinn.

Jesse looked down at the palm of his right hand to see his light spark there once again, flashing and soaring out of his open palm. The light grew and consolidated into a beam of brilliant blue fire as Jesse stood with his hand outstretched, the same blue light suffusing him and shining out as one with what he was.

Lasenex stared in frank admiration to see this light for the first time. This light prophesied by so many, now made manifest in the world, although none could say what it signified, what it might foretell.

Jesse went to ask Lasenex what he knew about this light but a strange growl and giggle cut that enquiry off, these noises coming out of the prisoner still crouched up on the bed. The man's face snapped towards them, glowing sickly in Jesse's blue light, and through his bared and filed-down teeth the prisoner began to speak.

Are you here to kill me?

O say that you are.

The Old Man will not let me live.

But the Old Man will never let me die.

Steady, said Lasenex quietly.

The prisoner looked puzzled as he gazed towards Jesse's light. He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head in suspicion before rasping out further words.

What is this light? he asked.

What does it portend?

Why does the Old Man bid you to wave it at me so?

O I see. I See. This is what you stole, from the place where you were fallen. But this is hubris, Son of Man. This is emptiness and deception. You feel that you are special? Because you suffer, you must be special?

Lasenex grasped Jesse's left arm as if to steady him but Jesse felt

the tremor that had come into the doctor, despite his long experience in dealing with such creatures. Jesse took no comfort in that grip as the wretch continued to hiss and sway, seeking to make an alliance with Jesse against Lasenex and his kind.

Saying: Son of Man you are one of us. We sought for you, that day you were revealed, that night the witches killed you. There was much weeping, Son of Man, when we lost you, when you fell.

The creature shuddered and began to shed tears, and Jesse was seized with a desire to placate that sorrow. But as he watched Jesse was sickened to realise that these were false tears, show tears, squeezed out of a creature only sorry for itself, savoring its own tears for the salt that was within them. Tears that dried abruptly once the creature drank its fill.

And now the Jackal has you. Held here, as he holds us. You believe his lies, that this is to help you? Then pick up your bed and walk, foolish son! See if he will let you!

Jesse stood in horror and revulsion, watching this creature writhe and shake and spit its words at him. This thing inhuman in everything but its upright form, now just the skin and bones of a man infested with something else entirely. Jesse heard its taunts but he did not answer them, causing the creature to spit out further things.

So. You would betray Us. Now your blood flows with her blood, now you reek of her flesh. But We do not ask, Son of Man. We Demand. Surrender her to us! As you surrender yourself!

Blasphemer! Apostate! You come from the King of Kings, who begat the Fish God, who fell for His sake. He kills his sons, for it is right to do so. You descend from A'har'ham the obedient, who stretched his son on the pyre before the she-devils spirited him away.

Bend your head, Son of Man.  
Stretch yourself across His Altar.  
He demands His sacrifice, His burnt offering.  
It will be rendered unto Him!

Jesse saw the man crouch back and tense his sinews, and then launch himself across the room. Jesse instinctively shot out his right hand but although his flame sparkled fiercely it did not repulse the attack. Jesse braced for impact but Lasenex was watching, seeing these familiar things as though they were occurring in slow motion. He saw Jesse fail to repulse the creature, saw its teeth bared and ready to bite down on any part of Jesse it could reach, and the old man sighed quietly and squeezed the small device he held in his left hand until he felt the switch click.

As soon as Lasenex activated his device the attack against Jesse was blunted. The prisoner stiffened and toppled over sideways to land convulsing on the floor, his back arching and pulling him away from Jesse, his eyes rolling back in his head.

Jesse gasped and staggered back against the opposite wall of the cell, his light now completely extinguished. He grasped at his throat to see whether any damage had been done, and as he tried to regain his breath Lasenex looked back at him with a gentle, apologetic smile.

I am sorry, Mr Quinn.  
He was under my control.  
I just needed to give you a bit of time.  
To see what might... result.

Jesse breathed hard, looking at the pitiful figure convulsing on the floor.

How did you do that? Jesse gasped.  
With this, said Lasenex, holding up his device.  
I have some electrodes planted within his brain.  
I can activate them any time I wish.

As Lasenex held up his little controller for Jesse to see he released the switch that he had pressed, cutting the current flowing through the patient's brain. The wretch stopped convulsing and lay groaning on the floor.

The two men stood in the stark room, waiting until Jesse had recovered. Lasenex looked back towards the metal compartment, causing Jesse great relief until the old man asked him: onwards?

Jesse had thought they might go back to his ward and he told Lasenex so, pointing out that his light had done nothing, that it had completely failed the test. Lasenex listened but he pursed his lips as he did so, saying:

This is just one subject, Mr Quinn.  
A sample size of one is not a sample.  
As you may have guessed, if you have the stomach for it.  
I have plenty of others to try.



Every time they hoped it would be different, and every time events unfolded in exactly the same way. Jesse and Lasenex went from cell to cell to confront these patients only to be harried and insulted and then viciously attacked, with Lasenex ending each confrontation by his kill switch and the convulsions it produced.

Jesse would kindle his light only to have it ridiculed and demeaned. The prisoners sneering at Jesse as his light shone in his hand, leering at him amidst their hacking coughs and their demands. That Jesse should submit to them, and surrender Ruby to them, and bow down before their Gods who lust to humiliate and enslave.

These creatures knew Lasenex was impervious to their wiles so they focused their hatred upon Jesse. They insulted him and disparaged him with endless excoriating names, calling him grave-meat and man-slave and the used-up ration of whores, their mouths seizing on every insult that could be hurled. They called him death-cheat and grave-dust, they slandered him with the words of every insane saint, every depraved prophet of history. They spoke of his redeemer especially with ugliness and contempt, naming things in Ruby that Jesse was sickened to hear named, all for the pleasure of the degraded souls who spat these things at him.

And they called him coward, coward, they asked whom he had killed and they laughed because they knew he had killed nobody. They called him weakling, simpleton, they laughed at

his conception of justice and they goaded him to agree, saying that all men were foul and wretched and corrupt, the same things that the princes of his church had always flung at him, the slander and accusation that drives the religions of men. They screeched that God is One, that their God was the One God who would strike down upon unbelievers, and strike at Jesse especially for turning against his God, denouncing this usurper who would make the name of God reviled amongst the nations.

Jesse was trained in words and he had some resistance to these taunts, so whilst they struck him violently he maintained some immunity against them. He fought against the words that slandered Ruby but at the same time he was comforted by the mention of her name, despite the efforts of these tongues to twist her name and smear it.

Jesse resisted and his accusers saw him do it, even though much of his resistance came out of weariness rather than any particular courage. And when it became clear that Jesse would not be overpowered these wretches would coil back like vipers and strike at him, launching themselves at Jesse with their teeth bared and their fingers grasping for his throat.

Lasenex watched each confrontation tight with hope that Jesse's light might prevail, but each time the old man was required to activate his device and bring the prisoner crashing to the floor, thrashing in the seizures brought on by the electrons flooding through their brain.

Each time the two men had the same conversation.  
It's not working, Jesse would say.  
Keep trying Mr Quinn.

I am trying Doctor.  
I don't know what else I can do.

Jesse tried everything he could think of but his efforts came to nothing. He would hold and shape his light differently, shining it straight out in front of him and then raising it up, fanning it across the whole of his body as a fine blue shield that failed to shield him from anything. Jesse found that he could intensify his light upon a single razor-sharp line, but although that blue lightning crackled and flashed wildly along its length, taking all of his efforts to restrain it, still that razorlight came to nothing.

Lasenex began with hope for Jesse and the light that he wielded but he grew discouraged as Jesse's efforts were thwarted. The old man saw each excursion end in the victory of contempt, the greater negation of Jesse's light and the darkening of his soul.

The prisoners knew what device Lasenex wielded, and as the days wore on they would merely toy with Jesse's light, pushing their hands and heads into it to show themselves entirely impervious. Jesse became demoralised and soon he hardly tried at all, leaving the cool blueness to sputter in his hand while the prisoners laughed at him, their derision killing off the last of the fight that Jesse had left within him.

Gradually these confrontations degenerated into complete stalemate. Jesse stood without hope and the creatures stopped bothering to leap at him, so that Lasenex began to hold his kill switch very loosely, without any cause to use it. The prisoners giggling in their mirthless superiority, showing Jesse the smug smile that is the final indicia of such victories.

Back on the empty ward Lasenex would try to rouse Jesse.

There are more cells, he would say.  
More possibilities.

With Jesse responding less and less.  
I have tried, he would say.  
There is no point.

Lasenex would not be deterred.  
Mr Quinn, he would say.  
I can assure you, there most definitely is a point.

With Jesse and his patience finally at an end.  
Then show it to me, Carlos.  
Show me the fucking point.

Time wore on. Jesse would go with Lasenex to the back wards but apart from that he moved less and less, the despondency of his captive life getting into his bones and sequestering itself there. Made worse each day that Jesse encountered defeat, leaving his courage to fail badly and his heart to go into darkness.

Eventually Lasenex stopped taking Jesse to the prisoners, saying: some time, Mr Quinn, I think might be in order. Jesse nodded listlessly without bothering to argue, knowing that Lasenex preferred his own view about such matters whether he agreed with him or not.



In the increased hardness of his nights Jesse confronted himself, asking what he was doing in this awful place, whether he really knew anything anymore. His dreams and his wakefulness merged into one blurred sense of unreality, a dreamscape grey and inchoate and making less sense every day.

As Jesse sloughed into despondency his mind began to play tricks on him. He had hollowed out his narratives by going over them too often: the memories leading to his night of love with Ruby, every crazed thing that had happened to him since. The grotto and the Twelve, his death and resurrection. His memories became more dream-like the more he went over them, the less he slept, until he saw very clearly that these were unreasonable things, fantastical things, things that might be imagined but lacking any plausible connection to reality.

Jesse sank as he combed his memory flatter and flatter. He began to wonder whether he was still dead and never resurrected, languishing in some purgatory peculiar to his own soul, a staging or testing place for souls whose merit had not been ascertained. Jesse saw that Lasenex would be a fine keeper of such a place, with the tests he set and supervised, wanting Jesse to prove himself brave enough or enduring enough to move on from this provisional realm.

Jesse began to clutch to this understanding because another possibility ripened in him, one far more in keeping with his current condition. That he was restrained in this common place for the common reason, the simplest explanation coherent with the known facts, needing no recourse to narratives that grew in their strangeness and fictivity every day that Jesse rehearsed them.

Not that, he prayed.  
Quite to whom he did not know.  
Please not like that.

Jesse resisted this explanation because all it offered him was loss, a brutal gouging of the best parts of his life. Those times when he was strong despite his loneliness, his solitude soothed by the consolations of his honour, the steadiness lent to him by his seamless, well-ordered mind.

Then there was Ruby. Everything that Jesse had wanted from her, and his much greater desire to give things to her, to love her as she deserved to be loved. Jesse begged for this part of his delusion to be maintained, at least for as long as possible, the way that dreamers do when they are about to exit a particularly beautiful dream. This fantasy that Jesse had sold himself now becoming exposed, leaving him alone amongst the squalid remains of his mind, with all of it lying wrecked against the ugly prospect of pity, which Jesse now saw as the cruellest prospect of all.

CHAPTER 6

## Noli Me Tangere

AS soon as the phone rang in her little house Ruby knew who was on the line. She also knew the message, the better part of it anyway, and that knowledge made her tremble. She would have picked up immediately but she forced herself to breathe, carefully and deliberately, waiting for three rings before answering the phone.

Lasenex was typically direct. He engaged in some brief pleasantries but did not waste any further time, speaking in terse terms about Jesse and the state that he was in. He asked whether Ruby might visit Jesse, as soon as she possibly could, he spoke of preparations made to guarantee her safety.

I can keep you safe, Ms Tuesday.  
For an hour or so at least.  
If you will come.  
I can restrain Them for that long.

Ruby was torn between her concern for Jesse and her desire to see him again, to touch him with her burning fingers and to kiss his mouth once more. She asked whether Jesse needed anything brought to him but Lasenex dismissed the idea.

Just bring yourself, Ms Tuesday.  
It might help him, if he sees you again.  
But I will not lie to you.  
In the state that he is in?  
Even your beloved presence might not be enough to reach him.



In quick time Ruby showered and dressed and before very long she was at the hospital, being ushered by two nurses into Jesse's empty ward.

She found Jesse sitting at a table with his lunch laid out in front of him: a plastic tray with plastic implements, a styrofoam cup of coffee. Although Ruby's heart leapt to see Jesse it also bled to see him so changed, with his hair matted down so strangely, his posture lately slumped to the shape of a much older man.

Ruby put on her best smile.  
Jesse, she said softly.  
To speak his beloved name.

At this greeting Jesse looked up at Ruby, as she stood there smiling at him. She saw his face light up with his great love but then a shadow crossed his face to take that light away, as he eased himself up from the table to embrace her.

Jesse's strangeness persisted as he hugged Ruby. She felt his

body grown slack, his soul sunk within him as well, and as tightly as she squeezed him he did not respond to her touch at all. Ruby was so dismayed by this that she broke out of their embrace.

Ruby was lost for words but then she remembered something. I brought you a present, she said.

She rummaged in her bag and came up holding a small block of fine chocolate, and a black notebook with a pen sticking out of the spine. I thought they might help, she said. Jesse was gracious as always and he thanked Ruby for her gifts, but his eyes remained averted from her as he held them in his hands.

They sat and Ruby did her best to chat but she felt deprived of speech, out of her concern for Jesse but also the anger that flared in her at the change in his feelings towards her, feeling ashamed for that anger the instant it arose.

One of the nurses brought Ruby a cup of tea but she felt too sick to touch it. She cast around desperately for conversation and found herself speaking of practicalities, various aspects of Jesse's legal practice and the arrangements she had made. Just as Ruby got to telling Jesse about the locum she had interviewed she saw a tear fall from him, splashing down heavily on the wrapper of the chocolate that he held in his hands.

As Jesse bent his head and wept quietly Ruby gave up her pretense at chatter.

Jesse, she said.  
Please talk to me.

I can't stand to see you like this.  
Please tell me what's going on.

Jesse sighed and wiped the tears from his face, but when he shook his head and tried to compose himself he only dislodged further tears.

I know what has happened, he said finally.  
Ruby grabbed his hand.  
Jesse I know...

Ruby, he said.  
Please just... stop.  
I know you want to help me but please, Ruby.  
I don't understand why you won't just be honest with me.

Ruby felt a horrible crashing feeling as Jesse said these words, feeling his heart recoil from her, the first time she had ever felt him withhold anything from her at all. In a tremulous voice she asked Jesse to explain what he meant but he just waved his hands in wordless explanation, gesturing towards the bleak grey walls of the ward. Ruby wished that he would speak but she immediately wished otherwise once Jesse found his words.

I know where I am, he said. I know why I am here. The staff care for me very well but I don't understand why everyone has to lie to me. Lasenex most of all, although I don't think much of that is real.

Ruby stared without comprehension as Jesse continued to speak.

I know what has happened, Ruby. You don't need to pretend. I

don't know how far back it goes, how long I have been deluding myself, but I have to say: it feels like it goes back a very long way.

Ruby gasped and held out her hands to implore Jesse against this madness but he would not look at her. She went to say things but there was only one word she could manage. No, she said. No, Jesse. But Jesse in his extremity was now well beyond her reach.

Yes, Ruby, he said. You don't need to prop me up. I appreciate everyone's efforts, really I do, but they have begun to feel patronising, even cruel. I know you mean well but I need to face up to this, I need to get my head straight and get better and get myself out of here.

But even if I do?

I don't see how I can recover.

I don't think my old life is ever going to come back.

Ruby began to feel unseated by Jesse's speech, by his obvious suffering but also his distance and his coldness towards her. Seeing him put such an end to himself, seeing him put an end to the two of them as well.

Jesse sighed to see this pain rise in Ruby. You see what I have brought you, he said. You came to work for me and I transgressed those boundaries, I owed you my respect and I showed you just the opposite.

I'm sorry for all of it, Ruby. To have kissed you, if that even happened. And I'm sorry for all of the trouble that I have caused you since.

But Jesse...

Please, Ruby. I have the best of help. The pills Lasenex gives me, for my blood pressure, for my sleep. I know what they are. I know they'll help me get better. I'm just hoping they kick in soon.

But Jesse...

Please Ruby. You should go. There's plenty in the cash account, you should pay yourself for as long as you need, until you find somewhere else to go.

Ruby began to sob quietly and Jesse could not bear to see it. He felt her sorrow more keenly than his own sorrow, multiplied by his shame that after all he had put this woman through he should be causing her further tears.

Jesse saw her heart collapse and his heart collapsed also.

Please Ruby.

I can't bear to see you suffer.

Not when all I have ever wanted is...

What, Ruby said.

What have you wanted?

Jesse shook his head slowly.

It doesn't matter, he said.

It was insane.

No Jesse...

Yes, Ruby. It was my longing, my loneliness. All of the love I wanted to give you, when in reality I had nothing to give to

anyone.

Don't say that, she said.

It's true, Ruby.

I appreciate your kindness, your coming to visit me.

But even that is painful to me now.

Ruby reached out for his hand but Jesse pulled it back.

Don't, he said.

Don't touch me.

It only makes it worse.

At Jesse's rejection of her touch Ruby was cast down. The tethers of her soul scythed, her various parts left to spin viciously out of control. She sank into a bleak fugue where she no longer knew where she was or what she was or what she thought, no longer comprehending Jesse or what he was doing to her, his coldness and rejection of her done in the name of Love.

Ruby got up from the table and looked around wildly. She felt like striking Jesse or worse, so roused were her hunting instincts. She felt terrible fury but also profound waves of pity for this man put to such extremity, who would wound her even as he tried to protect her. *Don't touch me.* Ruby was wounded even by his courtesy, showing that his heart was now closed to her, leaving her to linger outside of his gates along with every other hungry ghost that leered and longed for Jesse from the other side of his threshold.

Ruby lurched over to the locked doors of the ward and banged on them, yelling out for the nurses, and when those doors were opened she rushed straight out of the ward.

After Ruby left Jesse sat there dull and disgusted with himself, with his comfortable self-loathing that had caused another woman to suffer. Seeing why his mother had always heaped such scorn upon his head, proving all of the contempt and accusation she had ever heaped up against him.

CHAPTER 7

## A Spring Shut Up

RUBY eventually made her way home from the hospital, arriving without any recollection of the route she had taken or the time she had taken to travel it.

Ruby fell down on her battered sofa with her heart in pieces. She would have made tea or sought some other solace but she knew there was nothing that could comfort her.

Her people could not help. Even the luminous spirit of her mother, who stayed with her into the night. They were divided into those who had loved men and those who had not, and those who had not loved men could not comprehend her sorrow, and those who had loved men were left shattered by it, by the disaster and death it had caused. And not one of these women had felt the scorn of a living man, this fate much worse than death, to be sent away in contempt or consideration with the cruelest of all injunctions: *do not touch me*.

Ruby railed against Jesse but every time she went to strike at his memory she was overcome by her pity and concern, and every time she tried to clasp his memory close she felt scorned by his words again. Reflecting those times that she had scorned

him, those times she was required to maintain her distance and so had rejected his love. Ruby also knew that she had brought this disaster upon Jesse, whose life had been so simple before she entered, a death he did not deserve and his consequent suffering, his love for her dragging him both ways through Hell and now into the place where he languished.

Ruby could not be comforted. She swung between her fury and her pity, she suffered for Jesse's suffering and the shame of bringing him to shame. Hemmed in by rage on her right hand and sorrow on her left, with no way to steer back from them and no way to journey through.

CHAPTER 8

## And 'The Word Was

NIGHT after night Jesse lay sleepless in his empty ward, listening to the rising commotion outside of the locked doors that secluded him from the other parts of the hospital.

Lasenex had alluded to this intensification in his usual cryptic manner, suggesting some escalation in the number of admissions and the severity of presentations. The old man apologised for the impact on Jesse's sleep but Jesse just shrugged and said that sleep seemed to have abandoned him whether things were noisy or not.

One night was so full of shouts and screams that Jesse lost his patience. He lurched out of his bed and walked down the empty corridor, thinking he might find a nurse who could dispense a few more sleepers, or perhaps just a cup of tea to distract him for a few minutes.

When Jesse reached the main room of his ward he stopped abruptly, suprised to see the double security doors now wedged firmly open, and beyond them the open corridor leading to the other parts of the hospital.

Jesse stared dumbly for a few moments. These doors had always been shut, unless a nurse was there to open them, and they were always locked securely after they had been closed. Lasenex had insisted that these doors were secured to protect Jesse, to cloister him until he was stronger and his powers had been proved, and yet on this night the doors stood open and completely unattended.

As he stared at the open doors Jesse took them for a sign. He saw himself called to go out and join with the other patients in their rancour and insanity, now that his own mind had ruptured, his own sanity failed. Jesse saw that he not only belonged amongst these patients but was in fact the very worst of their kind. He also saw very clearly that Lasenex had lied to him about these doors, pretending that Jesse was protected by them when in fact he was the one restrained, that he was the One against whom all others needed protection.

Consumed by these ugly thoughts Jesse stormed out of his ward and into the dark corridor, turning slowly with its curved walls towards the light of the main ward. The noise grew as he approached, resolving into frightening complexity: screams of every sort and every variety of laughter, with the strangest high ululation soaring over the rest, the whole of it some flat-chorded horror of pipes and bellows, heaving and groaning in a sickening simulacrum of music.

As Jesse walked towards the open ward his anger grew in him. For the first time in his life he did not suppress that rage or seek to divert it, and it grew in him like thunder. His pace quickened as this old rage burst in him, an explosion of outrage and indignation at these deranged creatures and also at himself, and above all at the cruel god who would suffer such

things to exist, who would visit madness upon Jesse despite his every conformity to His rules.

Jesse strode out faster as his fury shot upwards through his body before flattening outwards like the incalculable rings of a planet as he burst through the doorway into the open ward.

*Silence!*

This commandment shot out of Jesse as a spoken word but it also surged outwards in a shockwave of wreathed blue flame. The Light of the Word made manifest, blowing back against the darkness. Leaving every inhabitant of that place shocked into silence and stillness, out of their compulsion to what had flamed out of Jesse and filled the four corners of the room.

Jesse stood in the doorway with the glow of his authority still upon him, with every eye in the room either fixed on him or looking downward in obeisance. Many stood but many had been thrown to the ground, all of them overcome by the power of what had flamed out of him.

As the Word subsided various patients shifted and began to look insolently towards Jesse. One man detached himself from the wall he was flattened against, seeking to swell against Jesse as he stood there glowing and building in the power of the Word again.

Stand down, said Jesse.  
The creature still slinking forwards.  
I said. Stand. Down.

The creature saw the power build in Jesse again, feeling itself

condemned by the Word even as it built. The creature held itself steady for a moment, seeking to manoeuvre against Jesse, but with only a hint of his power released Jesse immediately prevailed. The creature scuttled back to the wall in total capitulation, pressing itself against the cinderblocks, unable to look in Jesse's direction.

Is there anyone else? Jesse asked.  
Gazing around impassively.  
Anyone who wishes to contend with me?

Jesse looked around the room and he saw there were none. He saw innocents staring at him in wonder and disbelief, he saw various Unforgiven coiled fearfully against the walls.

Thank you, Jesse said.  
Please go about your business.  
But do it quietly.  
There are people who are trying sleep.

As Jesse turned to go back to his ward he saw Lasenex sitting at a table in a dark corner of the room. The doctor was nodding his head vigorously, and as Jesse looked towards him he burst into a broad smile, leaping up from the table and coming over to congratulate him.

Well done Mr Quinn, said Lasenex.  
Shaking his hand and smiling, smiling.  
My instincts sometimes fail me, but they were good in this.

Lasenex smiled to see Jesse slowly realise that the open door had been the doctor's own design, leading to Jesse coming into the room and coming into his power. Jesse felt some annoyance

at this but Lasenex smiled so broadly that he also began to smile, shaking his head in resignation.

For god's sake, Doctor.

I could have been killed.

Indeed, said Lasenex, smiling even more broadly.

But you were not.

Instead: you have prevailed.

And what is more?

You seem to have found your voice.

Jesse thought about that, and he eventually said: no.

No, Dr Lasenex.

No?

No, Jesse said. My voice is nothing. I have been talking for my entire life, and look at where it got me. I rather think what I have uncovered might be better referred to as: the Word.

Lasenex began to nod his head as he thought upon this point, nodding in general and then absolute agreement with Jesse. He gestured for his charge to come and sit with him, as the whole ward watched on, to discern how the two of them might utilize Jesse's revealed strength, to structure their way forward and put a purpose to his powers.

The two men concurred and contended gently into the night. As they worked Jesse's light grew out to cover them, a shining dome shielding out everything exterior to their conversation. Leaving the innocent and the condemned to watch on in wonder, with none returning to their beds, with both men illuminated past the pole-point of deepest night as they spoke of that light and of its power, elucidating the many ways that it

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might be brought to bear.

CHAPTER 9

Fiat Lux

THE next morning Jesse rose without having slept, but he felt refreshed by the deeper compact with his powers he had entered the previous night, the true nature of his inner light and the paramount Word that suffused him.

Jesse ate a quick breakfast then went to find Lasenex. The doors to his ward were now permanently chocked open, and as he walked down the corridor towards the main ward there was a discernible hush that deepened as he approached. As he came into that open space all eyes were watchful against him, and there were still some inmates who pressed themselves against the far wall as he entered.

Jesse found Lasenex in a dimly lit office just off the main ward. Jesse knocked on the open door and the doctor leapt to his feet in greeting, shaking his hand and beckoning Jesse to sit in one of the tub chairs facing his desk.

Well, said Lasenex.

The victorious Mr Quinn.

Dare I ask if you slept well?

Jesse smiled broadly, with no need to answer.

Perhaps this is something, said Lasenex, that you have also brought back. Much like your wounds that do not fester or heal. You were roused out of eternal sleep, so perhaps sleep might be finished for you?

Jesse sighed and smiled at the old man.

Why is it, Dr Lasenex, that you only ever have bad news for me?

Lasenex shrugged in resignation and said: look around, Mr Quinn. This is what I do. I give people bad news, awful news. To patients, to families. Many do recover but I cannot retrieve them all. And what to say about the ones in my back wards...

I can retrieve them, Jesse said.

Lasenex looked at him in surprise.

But you have...

Failed. Before. I know.

And I don't mean all of them, said Jesse.

But there may be some I can redeem.

Lasenex looked uncertain for a moment, and while he was in that unaccustomed state Jesse did his best to explain, speaking out of the strange vision that had ripened within him after the events of the previous night.

Jesse told Lasenex that the light he wielded was a subsidiary power, subordinate to something greater than light and with the power to compel spirits. It was the enfleshment of these djinns, he said, that gave them their power, the possession of the earthly bodies of their victims. Jesse said that Light could not penetrate flesh but the Word was empowered to do so, and

that this could be seen from the action of ordinary words upon the ordinary motivation of men, let alone those specially ordained words with the power to move human hearts.

Jesse said that the choice of human beings was always the deciding factor, and that even those foolish enough to allow spirits to infest them need only reinstate their own dominion over their flesh for any spirit to be cast out. Leaving the victim sovereign again over the flesh bequeathed to them when they came into the world. Out of the tense commandment that souls should be free to direct their flesh in any manner they choose, although most souls do not have the courage to take up the freedom that is given to them.

Even the Word cannot compel them, Jesse said.  
But it can restore them to their power.  
It can set them free again, to choose.

Lasenex chafed gently at these final words. I have contended with you on this before, Mr Quinn. Such freedom, free choice, is very rarely seen.

And if they confirm their choice? Lasenex asked. If they choose to remain infested?

Then they are lost, said Jesse.  
But rather than have us speculate.  
If you would take me down to your back wards again.  
One way or another, we will shortly find out.



Jesse followed Lasenex back through the hospital and Jesse's empty ward, then down the concrete stairwell that led to the back wards.

As Lasenex fumbled with his keys Jesse recalled his previous visits to these wards: the fear that was in him at those times, the failure he had always encountered. He saw with some surprise that his fear was now completely gone, and in its place he found a mixture of resolve and resignation. Jesse was beyond caring very much for his own safety, and with the power of the Word now surging within him he knew that any further confrontation with these prisoners would be blunt and definitive, whatever the result might be.

Lasenex was more conflicted. He felt various things including a strange and rippling feeling: not quite fear but something very close to fear, an unfamiliar mixture of hesitancy and awe.

When they reached the moving compartment Lasenex felt this strange uncertainty grow to the point where he paused for a moment, turning to Jesse with the thought that perhaps they should turn back.

You are sure, Mr Quinn?

Jesse nodded his head.

Is there any patient you would like to see first?

Jesse thought for a moment.

No, Doctor.

Any of them will do.

Perhaps you might take me to the youngest first.

My guess is that they might be easiest to reach.

And Doctor, said Jesse. I know you have your kill switch with you but I would ask you to use it sparingly, if you can. Some of these confrontations might get a little... intense. I accept the risk, if you don't stop them in time. I just need you to give me as much time as you can.



The compartment ground to a halt down at one far end of the back wards. Lasenex glanced worriedly at Jesse, reluctant to open the doors, but Jesse just furrowed his brow and gestured for him to do so.

The doors opened and the two men entered the cell.

On their previous visits inmates had always begun sly and passive but this new encounter was wildly different. The creature hissed savagely then leapt up on the bed, pressing itself against the corner of the room as it grimaced and snapped at Jesse.

Lasenex saw this behaviour and how it was provoked, and to some extent he also saw Jesse though the eyes of this wretch. He saw the release and refinement of the powers within his protégé, how they could terrify this creature who feared no living man. Lasenex released his hold on his kill switch, taking his hand out of his trouser pocket as the creature tensed and snarled and muttered, while Jesse stood against it completely unconcerned.

Dr Lasenex.

Yes, Mr Quinn.

How old is this boy?

He is nineteen.

And what is his name?

Matthew.

This single word came from the creature that cowered and cursed in the corner of the room, spoken in the voice that the boy had been born with. A small voice weary and frightened as it came out towards them again.

My name is Matthew.

Jesse sat down on the edge of the bed, and without looking directly at the boy he said: Matthew. My name is Jesse. Will you sit with me?

The boy slowly detached himself from the wall and sat down next to Jesse, still hissing and jerking about.

As the two sat together Jesse saw how young Matthew really was, how small and frightened he seemed underneath all of his exterior aggression. Jesse was not sentimental about it, for he knew what outrages the boy had committed, but he also saw how these things had been counselled and procured by the djinn that infested him. Jesse also saw Matthew abused for his entire childhood, suffering cigarette burns and belt-marks and much more unspeakable things, and how this had exposed the boy to djinns who had promised him protection, who had told him for the first time in his life that he was cherished, for the

very first time that he was loved.

Matthew, said Jesse.

Can you hear me?

Yes, said the boy.

I need you to listen to me, Matthew.

OK.

As soon as the boy had said those words he twisted and cackled and his eyes began to glint again, as he resumed the strange imprecations that kept the dark spirit within him.

Matthew, said Jesse.

This thing that is inside of you.

I know it has promised you things.

But Matthew, you should listen to me.

This thing is lying to you.

Fuck You, said a guttural voice. And your lies, Deceiver. You know: We are to be Great. We are all that has been promised. Jealous as you are, lonely as you are. We will not be deceived by a Death-Cheat such as you.

Jesse kindled a small flame in his right hand.

Matthew.

Listen to me carefully.

This thing fears you. Not me.

Because it cannot hold you.

If you withdraw your consent, Matthew.

Whatever you say, it must do.

Matthew, said the djinn, in a soft, sing-song tone. You love Us, you have said that you do. You love our gifts, also. This man is

but a False God, who would steal what We have given. Have We not always promised? Have We not always delivered?

Jesse.

The voice once again small, boyish, human.

Yes Matthew.

If He leaves me.

Will you kill Him?

Jesse paused for a moment.

No, Matthew.

I don't think he can be killed.

But I can send him to a place where he cannot reach you anymore.

Matthew! The voice now imperious, the voice of a false and brutal father. We command you: kill this impostor, who would slander us so! You know what disobedience will bring you. False Son, breaker of hearts, do not defy us!

Jesse and Lasenex waited silently for the boy to make his choice: Lasenex in ignorance and wonder, Jesse in clear sight of the Light that was returning to the boy. He had seen it flow back with the first words the boy had spoken in his ordinary human voice, and the rankling of the thing crouched within him had only caused more light to flow in. Jesse saw the shrieks of the djinn for the death-throes they really were, and although the spirit said further things Matthew spoke his own words more and more until the voice of the djinn was silenced.

With his stolen voice returned to him the boy trembled and then slumped forwards, his eyes starting to well with tears. As

he wept the boy breathed out heavily, the tension in his body breaking to release his human feelings once again.

I am tired, he said.  
I want this to be over.  
I want you to kill me Jesse.  
Don't save me.  
I don't deserve to live.

Jesse sat with the boy as he wept.  
I cannot kill you, Jesse said.  
You know that Matthew.  
But I can restore you to that choice.

Choice? Matthew asked.  
Choice, said Jesse.  
The open door.  
O it has called to me, said Matthew.

There was silence for a few moments, Jesse remaining very still with Matthew slumped beside him. Lasenex also stood completely still, hardly daring to breathe, and for some time all three were more like stones than men, all waiting upon the result of the boy's election.

Jesse, the boy said eventually.  
I don't want Him anymore.  
I want Him to be gone.

At these words the room began to shake violently, and Lasenex shot his hand into his pocket to grab his kill switch. But there was no need for such crude means, and Lasenex held the switch in his increasingly slack hand as he watched a miracle unfold.

Up out of the boy there reared a ghastly vibrational presence, a pestilent cloud that sniggered and sneered as it rose out of his body. This thing welled up against Jesse but he was unflinching, the Word within him encompassing this event completely. Jesse uttered words that condemned the djinn for its filthiness and duplicity, exposing the lack of any conviction in the thing that might give it independent existence.

Jesse spoke the words he was given to say to the djinn, saying at the conclusion of every stanza as a reminder to himself: steady now, steady.

The djinn saw the magic in Jesse's words, and seeing every escape blocked it made one last attempt to infest the boy again. But Matthew was now completely sealed against it, sobbing for his deliverance, his human tears sufficient to repulse the djinn and condemn it to the void places once more.

Jesse continued his low speech as he opened his right hand, releasing his blue light again. The djinn slobbered incoherently but it could not contend with this light, or with the leverage of Jesse's replenished soul. This debased thing was sewn with inferior cord, its parts all agnostic to one another, and the Word seared against its every seam and the thing was rendered into pieces. Its screeches faded as it fell into irreconcilable parts, consigned to the fragmentary darkness where it would not be unified again.

And it was done. Jesse closed his hand to quench his fire, and Matthew mumbled some quiet words of relief before collapsing back on to his bed and going into a deep sleep.

After waiting for a time Lasenex made some observations, checking the boy's pulse and shining a small light into his eyes. The old man then nodded to Jesse and they left the room quietly so as not to disturb Matthew's sleep, going back into the metal compartment to discuss what they should do next.

Shall we go back? asked Lasenex.

Jesse pursed his lips, unsure.

I don't know, he said.

What do you think?

It depends, Mr Quinn. After that confrontation I would not be surprised if you were exhausted. But if I were a betting man? I would wager that you are feeling stronger, not weaker.

It feels that way, said Jesse.

Shall we go on?

Lasenex nodded in agreement and then paused to think of his prisoners: the next youngest, the next most likely to be redeemed. The old man then selected a button from the control panel and they ground on towards the next cell without any further discussion.

CHAPTER 10

## Even As The Silver Is Tried

THROUGH all of their adventures in the back wards Lasenex was very gracious towards Jesse, and he became increasingly deferential as Jesse's powers were proved.

Jesse felt uplifted by the old man's admiration but he understood that liberating these souls was only the first part of the work. He told Lasenex of the need to confront those liberated in an ordinary human confrontation, to try them in respect of their future intentions and whether their repentance might endure.

Lasenex deferred to Jesse in this next phase of the work, offering him the use of his private office in order to consult with these patients. Jesse thanked him for that offer but asked instead to have one of the consulting rooms: a few chairs, a plastic coffee table, perhaps a duress alarm if Lasenex would provide one. Jesse also invited the doctor to sit in with him, so that he could see for himself what might be proved of these patients. Lasenex eagerly accepted this offer even though the role of observer was unfamiliar to him, and the two men moved briskly through the list of patients that Jesse had redeemed.

Let us take one example.

Jesse sits quietly as a young man is shown into the room. Lasenex sits quietly also. The young man looks around skittishly, as though he might try to run, until Jesse says to him very quietly: Seth.

It's OK.

We're just going to have a chat.

Why don't you sit down?

The young man sits down facing Jesse, and although he tries to posture Jesse sees his hands feather anxiously around the edges of his chair. He sees the shame and the fear in the young eyes that will not meet his for more than a second, the colour rising in the boy's face as Jesse waits for a few moments before beginning to speak.

Seth.

I'm going to ask you a few questions.

OK, says the boy.

You know what you have done.

Yes. Sir.

You know these are terrible things.

Yes Sir.

And do you repent from them?

I don't know, Sir.

Jesse looks at the boy, puzzled.

You don't know whether you repent?

No Sir, said Seth.

I don't know what you are asking.

I don't know what repent means.



Jesse found himself again and again with these young inmates who were ignorant of the basic syntax of conscience, let alone what might be required of them if they wished to retrieve their souls.

Even the grammar of admission seemed foreign to these boys. They would seek to excuse themselves for what they had done, trying to shift the blame, and when that effort failed they would spit out the words *I'm sorry, OK?* In the nasty tone used by reprobates who don't feel sorry at all.

Jesse would get under these assertions and say you are not sorry, and these boys would twist and fence until they abruptly changed their tone, beginning to tremble instead, and more than one of them would say as their hearts were broken open: I don't know what you want from me. For what I have done, there are no words that will do.

Jesse would explain patiently that every crime can be expiated if the price will be paid, that every soul can be redeemed no matter how grievous its sin. Jesse described what it was to repent, assuring these boys that unless they changed their ways their remorse would count for nothing, and in fact would just further condemn them.

Jesse also spoke the hard truths of atonement: what must be

given to set the ledger straight, the hardship inherent in this and the role that suffering always plays. He told each penitent that they might be required to face death and do so willingly, describing how that willingness in particular can bring hearts back into an immediate state of grace. This fast path to redemption, of which all our stories speak.



Jesse tells these things to Seth before he questions him again, the young man brightening with every word he hears about the power of the human conscience, the genuine Good News with its infinite power to redeem.

Eventually Jesse puts the boy to his election.

I'm going to ask you once more, Jesse says.

Do you repent?

Yes Sir.

And will you atone?

Yes Sir.

To what extent?

Sir?

In atonement, Seth. How far will you go?

To death, sir.

You mean that?

Yes Sir. You can have my life now if you want it.

Saying this Seth holds his hands out towards Jesse, his wrists proffered upwards in the immediate submission of his life.

Jesse sees the scars that tell of a life already forfeit, nodding just as Lasenex nods to see the instant redemption of this boy, who does not fear suffering, who will travel that path willingly despite the dangers on every side, without a thought for his own safety because his life is already given.



Each of these interviews differed, and yet each one went down in substantially the same way. Jesse would put the penitent to a full inventory of their offending, and then describe these things back so these wretches might examine their conscience in the full light of their wrongdoing.

Some candidates were unwilling to participate in this examen, but for each one who refused there were a dozen more who gladly submitted to it. To these there would always come tears, brimming but held back, and as Jesse absolved each one of the need to be stoic they would collapse in tears, holding their hands out in mute appeal against the horrors they had committed.

Each penitent who broke down would immediately declare their life to be forfeit, and beg Jesse to light up his fire and take their lives away. They knew that death was the one thing that could match the gravity of their offending, but no man is warranted to dole death even to the worst offender and Jesse would tell these penitents so.

I cannot give you what you ask, Jesse would say.  
But I can offer you the chance at a good death.  
To die well in the service of other people.

Jesse would make that offer to see it gladly taken up, as inchoate and formidable as it was, but before he accepted a pledge from any penitent he would issue the same stern warning.

I will only tell you this once, Jesse would say. If you are not sincere, if you betray your vows? The Sisters will deal with you. You beg for death now but death is nothing compared to what they will take from you.

So if you doubt your repentance.  
And your willingness to atone?  
Then tell me now, for your own sake.  
Confess to me before the Sisters find you out.



In his proving of souls Jesse was very methodical, working carefully through the list of names held by Lasenex, grateful to the nurses who would present each candidate to him and then wait just outside the doors.

Most of the souls tried by Jesse were quick to confirm their redemption, but there remained those who felt cheated out of

their previous power, reviling Jesse as deceiver and thief of their former inheritance. These wretches sat hunched before Jesse, whispering and nodding to themselves, their arms clutching at their bodies as they rocked back and forth in lament for what had gone out of them.

Jesse would speak the same words about repentance, about what it was to atone, speaking these truths exactly as the regretful railed against him. Jesse would describe the election that was required and the consequences of that election, but these recidivists merely snarled at him, their mouths pulled back to bare teeth by their spasming facial muscles.

Saying: Deceiver, I was warned about you. I was told not to listen. Give me back what you have stolen! Violator, rapist! I was weak and you took Her from me. I want Her back. Not this filth you have to trade, I want Her back!

To such patients Jesse would always put the question three times, asking whether they would repent, escalating the terms each time by describing more vividly the consequences of refusal.

These things were offered to every patient but the greedy and double-hearted would never assent to them. They spat their words of refusal and accusation at Jesse, likening him to Judas who had once robbed them of their prize. They would hiss and deny Jesse and say: do not tempt me, you son of a whore, I do not accede to your terms.

The first time he faced such a refusal Jesse sighed heavily. After three offers and three denials, intensifying his demands with each attempt, Jesse fell silent and thought for a moment about

what he ought to do.

Lasenex was about to suggest something when Jesse spoke.

Shackle him.

Lasenex momentarily uncertain.

I beg your pardon Mr Quinn I...

Shackle him, said Jesse.

With whatever you have.

The Sisters will deal with him.

But Mr Quinn...

Doctor Lasenex, Jesse said. I must ask for your trust on this one. This man will not be redeemed. I have asked him three times, and three times he has denied me. I could ask him a thousand times and his answer would be the same.

So I would ask you to restrain him.

Wherever you think fit.

The Sisters will deal with him.

There's nothing more we can do.

Lasenex was not used to taking orders, but after a brief moment of hesitation he leapt to his feet, leaving the room briefly before returning with four male nurses, their faces blank and impassive.

As the wretch was lifted and carried away he began spitting and cursing, saying: Madman, Murderer! Give me back what you have stolen! Murderer! Thief! My Angel will find me!

The wretch screeched these things and worse as the nurses took

him away. As if to demarcate the strict limits of redemption, and the gates through which it shall pass, with no man predictable until he is put to his election, and no man judged until those gates shall beckon him through.



The final candidate was a tall woman with some nondescript name, one of the few women who were imprisoned in Lasenex's back wards. Condemned out of her grievous offending, her taste for every type of amphetamine and her secret, unspeakable cruelty.

She sat facing Jesse in her pale, sun-damaged skin, her eyes lacking any human warmth, her yellowed teeth protruding from a mouth that was set too far forwards, her chin receding into the ropy muscles of her neck.

Lasenex had been called away and so Jesse confronted the woman alone. He went to address her by name but he hesitated in a moment of violent repulsion, as she smiled her grim smile and swayed her head from side to side. There was something reptilian about her, with her dead eyes and her fingers curled up like claws, exuding some force sick and treacherous that caused Jesse's skin to crawl. He cleared his throat a couple of times but he found no words to say to this creature in her swaying, hypnotic silence.

As Jesse steadied himself the woman began to moan, amidst a

strange clicking and whistling that sounded more insect than human. Although her voice was distorted her song had clearly discernible lyrics, saying:

Drums, the Drums.

I hear His Drums.

The Fish God rises for the drums, He Comes!

To fulfil His vow to His faithful ones.

The woman fell silent and Jesse went to speak but a mute horror had been instilled in him by this dirge, slimy and corrupt as it emerged from the woman's mouth, seeking to worm itself into Jesse's chest as well as his ears. Before he could recover himself she began to sing again.

He shall drown the land, and all its kin, the seas will drink as your blood flows in! The blood of the Lamb, made drink for the damned. The Monstrous One, He Comes! He Comes!

Jesse sank back in his chair, overcome by rising nausea. The escalating horrors coming out of the woman swaying in front of him, her eyes now glittering like the skin of an insect king. She lurched and began to chant again but this time her language was not human, it was some guttural speech belonging to the diseases of memory, the chittering of scaled creatures long extinguished from the world.

The chanting grew louder and more dreadful and then it stopped abruptly, with the woman looking at Jesse with unnatural desire in her eyes, mixed with an awful, child-like terror.

He Comes!

The Fallen One!  
He Comes!

At these words the woman's eyes and mouth snapped closed and her head was drawn upwards into a regal bearing. Her face remained passive as her neck began to extend further upwards in a popping, grinding distension of cartilage and sinew. Her neck stretched until she sat impossibly tall and erect, then without warning her head smashed down against her right shoulder, rupturing the opposite side of her neck in a riot of viscera and a gushing fountain of blood.

With her neck shattered and her spinal cord severed the woman slid lifeless to the floor, in a growing slick of blood, her eyes open again but devoid of any expression, looking upon life and death with indifference through her already glazing eyes.

Jesse gaped in horror for many moments, a fine spray of blood on his clothes and face as he stared at the corpse crumpled before him. Thinking to speak but without the voice to do so, thinking to run but unable to move or to cry out -





**BOOK V**  
( 5 Lupa )



CHAPTER 11

Mizpah

IN all of his endeavours Carlos Lasenex was an extraordinarily careful man. He was always immaculately presented, his suits pressed and his shirts starched, every hair on his head assigned to its proper place.

Lasenex had no interest in the mindless flitting of fashion, but the strange antiquity about his clothing only cemented the general impression: that this was another kind of man, belonging to another era, when decency and charity were the expected features of men, along with a life freely given to work that was mostly thankless, mostly unrewarded.

Most claims to celibacy arise from fear and self-deception, the damage done to certain men by certain mothers, but there are those genuinely called to this state and Carlos Lasenex was the first amongst them. His work was too important to risk any distraction or division of his loyalties, so that even a little allowed to his own desires might thwart the fulfilment of his mission.

Like all celibates Lasenex suffered from the pangs of loneliness, but keeping his own company was usually enough for him. He

suffered more for the lack of physical comfort, the want of humane affection and intimate human touch that was written in tense lines about his body. But he was accepting even of these restraints and he moved bravely through their limits, keeping his own counsel and enjoying the other consolations that his faith brought to him.

When angst did infringe upon the doctor he would pause and let those feeling grow in him, pausing for long enough to feel them drain away as well. He would take stock of his present condition and re-order the things around him, and he would reflect upon his many blessings and the satisfactions of the work he was charged with. Although his relief was never absolute these efforts would soften his harder feelings, allowing him the courage to continue, even though the yearning within him was never completely assuaged.



Carlos Lasenex was a busy man, always fully absorbed in the work he was given to do. He oversaw the ebb and flow of patients presenting at the hospital, viewing such flows through his various lenses, his inherent human sight and his trained professional eye, the more secret ways of seeing that may not be openly discussed.

The old man knew the various forces acting upon his patients, the phases of the moon but also more mundane phases. Religious holidays that might seem arcanelly significant but

which simply subjected people to increases of ordinary stress, the Christmas rush and the Easter flow presenting Lasenex with more patients and more work than at calmer times of the year.

Carlos expected patient numbers to fluctuate but he had become increasingly concerned at the recent spike in presentations. He was also unable to account for the severity of those presentations, although tracing the figures back had shown him that the surge began at the exact time that Jesse had died and then been redeemed out of hell.

After him, the deluge. Middle-aged men with perfect mental health suddenly decompensating into psychosis, with no precipitant at all, presenting with florid religious delusions that could not be explained in terms of their interests or upbringing. Younger men more prone these things but not in such numbers, without any drug abuse or other catalyst that could explain their descent into insanity.

Carlos pored over his notes and his statistical manuals but he could find no explanation for this recent surge. He watched without comprehending as presentations became more bizarre: the sudden eruptions of fixed religious mania, religious terrors coming upon people without prodrome or accompanying functional decline.

More and more he saw patients suffering merely from an overwhelming fearfulness which they could not explain. Strong men found crouching in basements and roof-spaces, shuddering in wordless terror with the rest of their sanity intact. Lasenex also noticed that the usual stream of drug-induced psychosis had completely dried up, as though the use of methamphetamine and alcohol had somehow become

protective against the onset of illness, rather than the violent provocateur of psychosis they had previously been.

Most disturbing of all was the self-harm. Lasenex had never seen such horror, actions so violent and grotesque they were suggestive of some external force acting upon the victim. The wretch who had died in front of Jesse was not the worst of these. People were found with blunt-force trauma suggesting an attack from some unimaginable beast, catastrophic injuries self-inflicted by people with no conceivable means of doing so. Men dying after pulling their own hearts clear of their chests, women rupturing their lumbar spines by jerking forwards out of a standing position, literally snapping themselves in two.

Carlos looked for the known signs of Lupa in these injuries but there were no signs of the She-Wolves at all. He knew very well that Lupa worked mostly within exterior spaces, executing judgment within metaphoric space and not upon the literal flesh of their victims. These were sheer physicalities that Lupa had no way of inflicting.

All of these things combined to suggest some monstrous external force, lately risen into the world, and Lasenex was learned enough in scripture and mythology to shudder very deeply when he considered what this thing might be. Out of whole universes imagined by tortured writers, fiction that was much closer than anyone would suspect to the utmost horror of reality. And what lurked in those inhuman universes, ghastly enough to convince Lasenex that he must take drastic action to find out what he could about this Thing that had come into the world.



The doctor was a solitary man but there was profound company available to him: a source of solace and instruction that rare men are enabled to access, men with the receptivity and the merit to connect with the help that seeks them.

This help would come to Lasenex any time he was humble, any time he faltered and admitted that he could not penetrate a mystery alone. Lasenex would bow his head in full confession of his need, holding the problem within his heart as he asked to be given wisdom, the answer reaching out towards him the instant he submitted in prayer.

The night soon came when Lasenex was given his answer. He felt the familiar static, the growing presence of the Friend, smiling as that presence came closer to him and he heard the familiar words of greeting. The Friend greeting him as *sheikh* and as *mullah*, calling him old one, wise one, in the full tradition and honour of that address. The Friend wishing him *salaam* and bestowing a host of other blessings as the evening deepened and stilled.

As the evening slowed Carlos communed quietly with the Friend. There were elaborate courtesies to discharge, the praiseful names they had for one another requiring recitation, and if these sounded like incantations or the weaving of spells they were in fact far more subtle and reverent than that. Lasenex giving thanks to the Friend for His presence in his hour of need, the Friend observing His own requirement to call that gratitude unnecessary.

In the elegance of these courtesies there were secrets imparted, as the formal parts of the evening gave way to pressing matters. Lasenex spoke of the signs and wonders he had seen and the

Friend had also seen these signs. Lasenex and the Friend described these portents to one other, the events within the hospital and also in wider places, recounting the sudden failure of crops, the huge increases in road deaths and infanticide and workplace fatalities. Good business relationships abruptly descending into violence, families who had enjoyed years of peace suddenly turning on each other, inflicting wounds emotional and physical that were as savage as they were unexpected.

As Lasenex spoke the Friend also consulted with His other sources, testing what Lasenex was relating to Him against those stores of knowledge. Every store and source agreed that while this might be something new, it was much more likely to be some ancient, pestilent thing: a beast long dormant, classed with all primordial things that chafe in their prisons or roam the void places, assuming false names to delude the faithful into worship.

Lasenex and the Friend considered how such a thing could have been released, and what this might mean for the lines of justice and decency that stretch so tenuously across the hearts of humankind. They also speculated about how such a thing might be confronted, without any particulars of what it was or how it had emerged or even what its names might be.

The Friend eventually broke from these speculations, seeing only fear and uncertainty rise from them, and not the knowledge that both of them urgently sought. In the resulting silence Lasenex knew what the Friend was going to ask, but although he knew it was the only path his heart rebelled against it.

No, said Lasenex.  
Yes, *Sheikh*.  
You must use his gifts.  
His second sight.  
There is no other way.

Lasenex was deferential to the Friend but he begged desperately against this suggestion. He acknowledged Jesse's recent victories but also pleaded Jesse's youth, his fragility, his struggles with himself and the parlous state of his soul.

He is vulnerable, said Lasenex. He is brave and he shines but he is still no more than a boy. His enemies lie in wait, for the smallest chance. How can I expose him to horrors of which we can scarcely speak?

The Friend acknowledged these concerns but He also reminded Lasenex of the scale of the present danger, what might be in store for Jesse and for everyone else should the prophecies prove to be true. Lasenex deferred to the Friend and praised His constant wisdom, but with the greatest respect he continued to ask for Jesse to be spared, or at least be granted some time before being called on to show his face.

Carlos and the Friend agonised over their decision. They made further enquiries wherever they knew to look, consulting canonical texts and the oracular records that persist in the background signature of the universe. Possibilities were suggested and then hunted down, possibilities that did not provide any answer. Carlos searched for some means that might flush out the creature without exposing Jesse, but none of his searches revealed anything useful at all.

As time wore on the Friend became insistent.

We have no time, *Sheikh*.

We have come to a tipping point.

You must look through him.

You must use his sight.

The night deepened and the portals of the evening slowly closed down, leaving less and less of the Friend's presence in the room. The Friend and the whole world sinking back into the darkness, but before He faded to a point where communication became impossible the Friend repeated His exhortation.

You must look, *Sheikh*.

Lasenex nodding his head sadly.

Whatever the risk.

You must look.

The night slipped between the old man and the solace of the Friend, leaving Lasenex with his fears for Jesse but also the familiar feeling of loss, the loneliness felt by those who must commune with the dead because those who are left living are no longer enough.

CHAPTER 12



CARLOS Lasenex sat quietly in his garden cottage, drinking coffee and cold water and preparing himself for the task at hand.

Although he had anguished with the Friend he had known that this work was inevitable, even with the danger that it posed to Jesse. Lasenex knew that his own soul would also be badly endangered but he was no stranger to risk, and he remained completely unconcerned for his own welfare. His only prayers were for Jesse as the night welled and deepened, the doctor waiting anxiously for the proper time to come.

As the night approached its zenith Lasenex left his cottage and made his way through the darkness to the main hospital building. He entered and nodded to the few staff working the graveyard shift, with their observation charts and tepid cups of tea. They nodded back to him without any special interest, for they often saw the doctor working very late or very early, walking his rounds that seemed just as pressing to him in the night as in the daytime.

Lasenex walked briskly towards the empty ward where Jesse wrestled with sleep. As he entered the doctor closed the doors to the ward behind him, pulling them together so that the locks slotted back into place, arming those same locks by means of a small plastic card he pressed against the lock-facing.

Lasenex went over to a wall-mounted switchboard and snapped the plastic cover open. He flipped a switch that was set up to look like a residual current device, but that was for camouflage only and did not indicate the true purpose of the switch.

Lasenex closed the cover of the switchboard and then made his way over to the darkest corner of the room, where he sat down on a plastic chair and waited for the cold to come.



Lasenex sits with infinite patience in the cooling ward. The secret refrigeration unit working overtime until his breath smokes visibly out of his mouth. The same mist that settles under the mountains where he was born, the other mountains where he was taken to be trained. The cool Breath of God that cups the peaks and ushers the night in, blanketing and comforting the sleeping people, replacing their memories with dreams so they can recover the strength to press on.



Eventually the cold in the room reached its quickening point, bringing forth the perfect conditions for conduction. Lasenex felt the slick channels chill down and cement themselves, and when they were solidly formed he reached out towards Jesse as gently as he could.

Lasenex took Jesse and brought him down into a cool insensate condition that was very much like sleep. The old man then shifted his own vision so that he shared Jesse's dream sight, gradually dislodging Jesse from that place so that Lasenex looked out alone. The old man subsumed in Jesse's vision until he was no longer cognizant of his separate self, his own body emptied of consciousness as he took up the reins of Jesse's soul.

In Jesse's borrowed voice Carlos began to recite a long poem, or rather prose with various features of poetry, the stark metre and strange run-on rhythms of poetic and scriptural speech. Words that spoke of the light of the mind, the only light that can prevail against the darkness, and the illumination in the presence of fear that is called the courage of men.

Jesse was lulled by this speech and his breath slowed down, as Lasenex caused him to sink ever further out of himself. That process reached finality and Carlos gasped and arched his back, his eyes rolling backwards in his head as he was transported wholly into the landscape of Jesse's dreams.

Lasenex steadied himself and then opened his eyes in that space. He was initially dismayed by the breadth of Jesse's vision, to see the earth yaw and thunder from every angle as it rolled on impervious to human concepts of night or day. Lasenex saw the dry land and he saw the prodigious depths, the blue waters seething and foaming, and under them the

deepest gouges out of the planetary surface. Lasenex felt himself dragged unwillingly from the land toward the sea, then plunged deeper and deeper as the green-blue shallows turned to black, and beyond them the dense waters, the crushing gloom.

At one profound limit of the deep Lasenex was shown a huge gravitational anomaly, a cave hollowed out by forces secret to the depths, built up by streams of convective chemical energy flowing out of the heart of the planet. Lasenex saw the walls of this cave scratched with marks of madness, huge smears of cosmic depravity that caused his skin to crawl. The carvings of an insane prisoner interred for millions of years, delighting to think of its release and the commission of its crimes to come.

With a sudden sickening realisation Lasenex saw that he was looking at an empty prison, an empty grave. Despite his fear the old man shifted his vision out of the cave towards the trail left by the fleeing prisoner, a trail fecal and disgusting and unholy, the vile leavings of a creature now freed to go lumbering and shrieking towards the land.

Lasenex saw the trail rise up out of the depths of the ocean trench, seeing it become fresher and fresher as it rose towards the light. He would have followed this trail all the way to confront the beast but that would have been a death sentence for Jesse, and in any event Lasenex already knew what it was that he followed, from its marks and its leavings, from prophecy foretelling the havoc it would wreak upon the world.

For this was Chixulub. This prurient God, the God of Pestilence, this Thing of the Void Places. The Unholy, The Unredeemed. Among its many names. Lasenex was instructed

in the legends of its fall but he had hoped that these were false legends, hallucinated by some poet in the grip of a laudanum withdrawal, a remorseless psychotic spiral conjuring sick and impossible things. And the legends which spoke of its slumber, so long after its Fall, the predictions that the beast might awaken from its sleep to march against the world.

This was Chixulub. Who fell to earth, plunging the world into darkness. Who had limped and crawled to the great depths to repair the insults of its Fall, who slumbers in the deep ocean dreaming of the land. Who despises the upright creatures that walk there, in the arrogance of their speech especially, who imagine their gods to be benevolent as the Scaled God waits for His time to come.

Lasenex had seen enough, but as he tried to quit Jesse's dream-vision it shifted and clamped down on him. Lasenex found himself standing on a chalk cliff looking out over the ocean, and as he stood there he saw a beast rise up out of the waters. It seemed to have many heads and many horns, and upon those horns were festooned many crowns, and upon each forehead of the beast was inscribed the word: Blasphemy.

Lasenex groaned and tried to wrestle his mind out of Jesse's dreams but they grasped a tighter hold on him. He was brought down to the depths again, and he looked upwards to see the vast bodies and souls of the ones who rolled and sang in the upper parts of the ocean, they who had wearied of the land and gone into the seas once more. Lasenex saw into the minds of these beings, saw their powers and what they were able to transmit, and he saw these powers usurped by the Abomination who now controlled and amplified them to its own disgraceful ends.

Amongst so many unspeakable things Lasenex struggled for the words to comprehend this aspect of the disaster.

Fifteen pounds of brain?  
Used only for swimming?  
It cannot be...

Oh my God.

Lasenex was then shown these crimes in absolute clarity. He saw the great whales in their customary role, using their powers to transmit comfort and protection to the people of the world, principally the faithful and the broken-hearted who cried out for such protection. He saw the same whales now used by this monster, used to scatter insanity and violence amongst the people. He saw millions of silver threads spinning out into the world to conduct this depravity, and he saw millions more spun in preparation for the wholesale insanity of the vulnerable peoples of the Earth. So they would lay down palms for the Fish God when he arose out of the depths, so they would hail Chixulub with hosannas and acclaim him as their King.

As he looked about in horror Lasenex felt the Abomination turn its attention towards him. He made a final desperate effort to break out of Jesse's vision but he was held there by the Beast, and with a thousand lidless eyes the creature stared at him and shrilled. Lasenex knew he was looking death in the face, and he felt death coming to claim him as the creature swelled against him with a hideous roar, and what came next for Lasenex was terror and then: darkness.



Dr Lasenex.

The doctor lost to the darkness, even as Jesse shook him.

Dr Lasenex.  
Are you OK?

Lasenex opened his eyes and looked around in confusion. As he came back to himself he gulped in the sharp air, unsure of how he had escaped the death that had seemed certain to claim him. Jesse looked around the ward in matching confusion, his breath steaming, his fingers turning blue in the cold.

What has happened to the room? Jesse asked.

Lasenex gradually recovered to the point where he could get up out of his chair, limping over to the switchboard and flipping the switch to the cooling circuit. He felt the compensatory rush of warm air flood into the room without any of his usual relief.

Lasenex turned and looked at Jesse, and although the old man had intended to speak he saw that Jesse had notice of everything he might have said. The same things that the old man had seen with Jesse's stolen sight, the same abject horror. And Jesse saw things that were hidden from Lasenex, including the sure shadow of death that now shrouded the old man, although Lasenex saw some of that shadow reflected in Jesse's face.

P. JULIAN

The two men stared wordlessly at each other across that grim divide.

CHAPTER 13

Argonauts  
(The Slaughter of the Innocents)

NOW come the grave preparations, the urgent meeting of minds. The Friend reaching out to His other familiars who come to the Old Man with help, with offers of fighting men -

These preparations made in secret and so the numbers must be small, the technology absent. Fighting fleets with scant freeboard, their gunwales sunk down to the sea -

The Fish God sees the preparations and so He calms the sea. He sends machine noise against mariners so they can use no diesel, just as they are without sails -

So they go down to the sea in boats, roughly provisioned with oars -

The Old Man addresses them as they hang upon his words, the Argonauts going seaward and being blessed by the Old Man, saluting them with praiseful words, saying -

What, my shining sons of men? What hearts and minds, what arms sinewed in steel? What fortune that it should fall to me, to

have this honour to command you -

The Old Man speaks further to the men, saying: the Fish God said He would make His disciples into fishers of men, and His minions have sharpened their hooks and taken us one by one -

The earth heating up as the seas begin to rise, the polar regions melting so the earth shall again become a sea. The Scaled God who longs to flood the world, to master the insolent race of Men -

And if a soul is to know itself, he said, it must look into its own soul. Just as you were strangers in Babylon, so you know the soul of the stranger -

The Old Man falls silent, and with his blessing the men set out under the cover of darkness, under the stars of the night sky, the dark sea beneath them also teeming with stars -

The Argonauts rejoice to be joined by other companions, the sea-wolves joining and renewing the blood compact between whalers and the killers of whales. The ties that bind their ever-reciprocating souls -

In honour of this covenant the men have no percussive weapons. They bear only the shafts of ancient harpoons, sharpening the rusted steel and dressing it with wolfsbane -

To avert their hearts from Chixulub their clothing is fleeced with gold. To shield their minds they make helmets out of the glowing metal, coins and rings hammered into sheets that they splay across their foreheads -

And in such finery they descend like a horde of flaming angels, coming down out of the high places to contend with the Beast that was cast down -

They were brave, the companions, they bore up bravely against the sun and the rain and frost, enduring sleet and sea-ice and the maddening heat of the tropics -

Their eyes reddened with the salt water, their oars streaming with the endless brine. Their hands bound up with cloth that is immediately wet by the sea, drying to salt sheets that scrape their bloodied skin -

The Beast has no imagination equal to the courage of men so the innocents are not concealed. They are hidden in plain sight as they have always been, rolling towards the land to better achieve His purpose -

The companions could not draw out Leviathan with a hook, or draw his tongue with any cord that could be sent down. Instead they raised themselves up in the prow and they drove their harpoons in, nailing the Dragon down to earth with each lance -

They learned to implore the great fish to come and be caught, to be of great courage and to fear nothing. They cried out that their death would be to serve, that all memory and honour would be given to those who would give of themselves -

The men promising that their bones would not be burnt, so that the soul of the slain might in latter days reclaim those bones. And lest their frames be broken no dog would be allowed gnaw on their bones -

There was made each time one man to be husband to the slain, so that the bereaved man might cry out to all such creatures, to warn them of the fate that was upon them if they did not amend their ways -

And some of these bereaved were so overcome with the slaughter that they went to sacrifice themselves as soon as the whale was killed, with such conviction that they would have been lost had they not been restrained -

And without pleasure they broke the head of Leviathan into pieces. They pierced his side and they drained out his waters, they gave of him as meat to the wolves that roam the sea -

In the slaughter their arms became leaden, their hands torn from the wood of their oars and their weapons. Their voices broken from their cries to each other, crying Hold! And Hold Fast!

And with these cries their hearts held, their hearts remained true to one another and to the task they had been set, as the waters churned and their spirits trembled to fight the ancient foe -

There was a terrible cost amongst the companions, in the flimsy boats they rode, with their rough and tentative weaponry and no proper footing amongst their prey -

They were dashed against sands and shallow reefs, their napes smashed by the mighty tails, the bulk of Leviathan crushing craft and men in a ferocious threshing upon the sea -

With rudders torn and keels ripped away, oars splintered and

thrust back through chests, men pierced by the jagged splints  
that would bear their souls away -

So that those who remained living were caused to envy the  
dead, their eyes raw with sorrow, hoping death would come for  
them also, having begged for the chance at such a death -

They should be remembered, in the dawn and at the going  
down of the sun, these unknown mariners who gave of  
themselves for the sake of we who remain -

They should be remembered, under night skies filled with stars,  
the massed Pleiades and Orion turning soundlessly above the  
living as they turned above the dead, shining above the night  
sea that is also full of stars -

No one remembers them. Justice.

CHAPTER 14

## In Aquitaine

IN the place where he languished Jesse did not see these confrontations but his heart was heavy with them, weighed down especially by the dangers they posed to Lasenex.

Jesse had said a bright farewell to the old man, shaking his hand as warmly as he could, saying things he did not believe in order to shore up his courage. He knew that Lasenex was bound to this fight by the tenons securing his destiny, and Jesse had no wish to unsettle him or cause him more fear than was necessary.

Lasenex was terse in his own reply, casting his eyes downwards. Having neglected no aspect of his preparations, knowing how scant were his chances.

The two men spoke but they did not embrace. They shook hands and parted with grave words, like strangers to be parted from one other, like men who no longer share a common destiny although their pasts might be deeply entwined. One going out to the battle that he had been born to, the other left behind without hope of seeing his friend again.



With Lasenex gone Jesse found himself stretched out once more against the blankness of open time. The work to be done in the hospital was finished, with the redeemed now gone to fight under Lasenex, the Unforgiven still shackled in their place and with them poor Jesse James.

Jesse shifted and chafed against time. He fretted about things unfolding in the world outside of his knowledge, he feared for Lasenex and prayed for his protection. He was at times moved to contact Ruby, if she would speak to him again, but he knew that he was constrained from doing so while the battle lay unfought, that he was bound to focus upon the fortunes of that battle even from so far away.

Jesse hoped and prayed and as days wore into weeks he only intensified his prayers. He began to pray as he had when he was a boy, kneeling down on the hard concrete floor, begging for intercession from the bottom of his heart. He cried out for the welfare of the Argonauts and the old man who led them, pleading for those men he had liberated and the promises he had made. And although Jesse could not say to whom he made these supplications, the fruits of prayer came to him nonetheless.

One night as he knelt Jesse felt himself quietened. He listened intently in the darkness with a sense that a voice would speak to him, if he would make sufficient space within him. Jesse fell silent and in the quiet spaces of his heart he heard a question put to him, asking whether he would know more about the

gifts he had been given, how they might be joined with the purpose of his prayers. Jesse assented to this immediately, and in so doing he was opened to the secret sight that lay within him, the same sight Lasenex had commandeered that night on the freezing ward.

As Jesse looked with his new sight he saw things that confounded him, dismayed him. He saw that it was his own redemption that had loosed the monster from its prison, the earth shaking at the sound of his fall. And even harder truths: Lasenex and his men gone out as decoy in this confrontation, theirs being a subsidiary role in the battle that was to be waged. And Jesse saw who was in fact destined to engage the beast directly, who must rise to battle if the Fish God were to be defeated.

A voice within Jesse called his attention away from these things, and he heard himself asked a stern question in that voice which cries out to all. Who will confront the Great Serpent? Who has such courage within him? Jesse immediately responded that he was willing to fight, although he had no weapons or any knowledge of how he might prevail. But such courage is means in itself, and Jesse knew that he would find his weapons prepared and sharpened for him when he strode on to the field of battle.

As Jesse bent to this burden he was released into the knowledge of many further things. He saw that his skills to fight had been awoken by Lasenex as he conducted his researches in the freezing ward, breaking Jesse's gifts from their restraints and training them upon their target. Jesse saw that his weaponry was one with the Word that resounded within him, the Word that is adaptable to every purpose including the waging of war.

The Word that Was before any God could be, because only out of words can any God be made.

Jesse was gladdened by these things but he felt mostly glad to be in motion, having languished for so long, feeling the relief that flows into men after their launch into resolute action, despite the dreadful consequences that such action might bring.

Jesse closed his eyes and felt his way downwards, following the light of the leading Word to the source where it opened out within him. He began to hum and rattle and moan and still he followed that light downwards. He sank his attention past the Word as Light and he saw another Light that was called Power, a firelight teeming like a dark sea that would have terrified Jesse had he retained any exteriority to it at all.

Jesse continued to rumble and chant and he saw his blue light move against implacable darkness, and also the strange radiant fire that would not speak to him of its origin. He saw that He who is blessed to command such lights could by their power divide the darkness, by the innate power of such elements to illuminate differing things, to show them up in their true reflection and set them one against the other.

These powers built like a cyclone turning in the centre of Jesse's soul, a maelstrom that could shift and turn the vast weight of the oceans. All of it building and turning within Jesse, waiting for the right moment to come, waiting for the Fish God to turn and join in fierce and unequal combat to decide the future of the world.

## CHAPTER 15

### The Fisher King

OUT in the world of deep water and dark rock the Abomination was halted. It was filled with a feeling of approaching danger, although in such creatures the instinct for these things is dulled by their innate lust for destruction, their own death being just as satisfying as any other death.

The monster felt itself pressed against by a slight searing flow, the first touch of the power that was building within Jesse. The monster slowly turned as it identified the source of this flow, in a great lumbering gyration that showed Jesse the nexus between himself and what turned, the axle joining their two poles together although they were such poles apart.

As it turned to face Jesse the Fish God saw his human frailty, the same weakness that impaired its own disciples and caused them to bow down. Chixulub also saw Jesse tremble in the face of its vast bulk, feeling its customary contempt for men and the fear common to all of them, especially their fear of death which the monster did not comprehend.

Chixulub would have struck blows against Jesse immediately but it lusted after his pitiful humanity, how he might be

enslaved and turned against himself, the slow violence that was much more delightful to this creature than the bringing of quick death.

And so the beast began to warble in subtle tones, and in a song without words it called to Jesse as ally, as brother, as a chosen and cherished son. The beast sought an alliance with Jesse, a promise that would see them rise in victory over the world, subduing all temporal powers to a new spiritual kingdom. Replacing every corrupt power with Jesse's own will to power, the better knowledge of justice that was within his superior soul.

Jesse felt himself drawn by this temptation, towards imposing what is good for people over what their own freedom would decide. Seeing what the monster sang to as Jesse's Heart of Greatness, his Light far superior to the lesser light of liberty, going out to corral every person before their lives could go astray.

These temptations called to Jesse but he was not incited by them, at least not in his deep heart where the decision over these things lay. The compassion within Jesse was actual compassion, going out towards individual people and their simple needs, it was not the bloated imitation of love that goes out of broken souls to seek power over multitudes. Jesse resisted these seductions and the monster saw him do it, and thwarted in this way it rolled back upon itself, sullenly daring this man to try what he would against it.

Jesse stared out over undifferentiated space, still orienting himself to the battlefield as it rolled and shimmered before him, and likewise the image of the beast.

As Jesse looked he realised that the space before him was dream-space, available to his conscious mind now that sleep had forsaken him. He saw that in turning to face him the monster had lumbered into the landscape of Jesse's own dreams, where Jesse alone was sovereign, free to resolve that space in any manner he might choose. Jesse's heart leapt to see Chixulub's error, this creature that did not sleep and could not dream, even if it had been imagined to do so as it lay inert in its underwater prison.

Jesse's hope increased as he tested his powers in that space. He dredged up scenes from history and his own imagination, adopting the most advantageous of these and arraying them around himself. He dreamed up heavily forested plateaus, riven with gullies and gorges, he dreamed up nightmare jungles and typhoon-driven seas squatting beneath blank equatorial skies. He set out each scene in different layers of his dream-reality, and he lured the Abomination into each one simultaneously before changing each scene abruptly. The creature began to stutter with the uncertainty of its surroundings, seeing Jesse multiply them and change them faster and faster, consuming the beast in its effort to comprehend the various battlefields as they flashed and swung around.

As the fiend turned and flailed Jesse began to unleash his words. At first they were few and mild, lightly disparaging the Abomination, deriding it for its lack of speech and mocking it for a king. Jesse set up childish chants that taunted and insulted the Foe as the battlefields continued to churn through their many iterations. Jesse increased the vehemence of his words very slowly, so that the monster would not revolt against them,

raising their temperature so gently that the beast would not think to jump free of the space in which it was slowly being burned.

For the sake of drama and the telling of the tale this battle should swing and shift in its fortunes. Jesse should quail under withering fire and then return fire, in a great dramatic shifting of fortunes across the battlefield.

But to say so would be to tell the story falsely. The Abomination was infinitely brutal but it was like all brutes devoid of words, and it could not dream, and it was unable to predict the winning manoeuvres of even one brave man liberated from its slave religion. Jesse had been to far worse places than the void from which this thing had slunk, and he had lost any fear of death now that love had abandoned him, and in this state Jesse reclaimed the irresistible power wielded by a man who has nothing to lose.

Jesse soon relented from his hesitation and began to devastate the foe. He increased the intensity and variety of his attacks, addressing Chixulub in lofty speech but also speaking of small denatured things, worms and slimy creatures that scuttle and cling to rocks. He multiplied his words singly and then in sentences, and he found that every phrase could admit of almost infinite permutations, and every sentence by its nature could say one of an infinite number of things. His words became a storm and then something much worse than that, a terrifying inferno of meaning that could devastate any mind in existence.

For the first time in his life Jesse was not clement. He knew the beast deserved no respect and no honesty, and that bringing

these things to bear in this confrontation would be stupidity and not honour. He also knew that Lasenex and his men had gone out to fight the creature, that they were all alone at sea, and he knew what the beast intended for his friend Lasenex especially. Jesse had always fought best when he fought on behalf of others, and for the sake of these men Jesse burned and fought violently, viciously, without restraining himself at all.

Jesse attacked the Beast with every weapon he had. Along with the mounting storm of insults and accusations he crooned to the Abomination that it was loved, that it was full of love and deserving of love, and these falsehoods burned the loveless creature in secret and terrible ways. Chixulub began to screech in outrage but Jesse crooned all the more, telling the beast that it was beautiful, that it was worthy, that he loved the Beast and that this violence was all done with love, piercing the Beast with the opposite of those words just as they were spoken, the unspeakable opposite of being worth anything at all.

Jesse mocked and abused and then sweetly cajoled, and every time the Beast turned to face a new attack it found that sortie withdrawn and a hundred new attacks launched in its place. Jesse set traps and he laughed as they were fallen into, he offered parley and indemnity and then immediately broke his undertakings. He created false selves with a thousand different faces, showing indifference and lust and desire, and as the beast struck at these faces Jesse would slash at its variegated tentacles, letting out huge gouts of vital fluid from each wound he inflicted. The Beast screeched at Jesse to make him Stand and to make him Fight but although Jesse acceded to these things in words he departed from his promises immediately.

In one last desperate manoeuvre The Abomination saw the

route to Jesse's mind, but as it reached out to devastate that place it found Jesse no longer resident there. For Jesse was wholly absorbed in the Word, which spans far more space than our conscious minds can, putting him far beyond the mind-games of this wordless, screeching creature.

Finally the creature tried to mobilise Jesse's mercy, crying out of its many eyes and trying to plead with him that this was brutality, that this was injustice. Jesse felt himself tempted towards mercy but he found Ruby's fierceness within him, completely blocking that way. He rejoiced to repudiate the creature in the same spirit, saying: you cry that this is Tyranny but I say to you: no, you coward, this is Judgment.

Jesse looked further at the things Ruby had taught him, and amongst those gifts he found her shining mirror of justice, reflecting all things truly without the distortions of mercy. Jesse held this mirror up and the Beast saw itself for what it was, bloating and twisting like an image in a fairground mirror, a gorgon shattered by disgust at itself, appalled to witness the true nature of its being.

The battle was won but Jesse had his own reasons to keep fighting. He had been born to this fight, and he would end it on his own terms. Jesse also yearned to release one further weapon he found hidden within him, one so unexpected and brutal that he shuddered at the thought he might use it, while trembling at the same time with his eagerness to set it free.

Jesse went down to the cold prison of his childhood and he opened the gates to that place, finally liberating what was locked within. As he did so a demented scream shook the battlefield: the cry of a demonised child, more devastating than

an earthquake and much more to be feared. The betrayed child that Jesse had been now released to cry out in anguish and devastation, the cry of every child abandoned to the horror of the widespread dark. Cries especially devastating to those who have never been born, who have not known the horror of separation, the exile that can be remediated only by death.

With this shattering cry the Abomination was condemned. It had imagined itself as the Most High and Lord over all Peoples, but in truth there was nothing within in it that could match the full extremity of humanity: the screams of a terrified child, the edicts of the brave man that this child had somehow become. Chixulub had descended to rule over a different kingdom, and although these clever apes were not matched to those extinct creatures in size or might they had in quick time arrogated the whole universe into themselves, the conscious universe surging in every direction upon oceans and oceans of words. The same universe now condemning this puerile God with those same words, mediated through the agency of a single conscious man.

Although his victory was complete Jesse did not relent from his attacks. This battlefield was made out of the lost landscape of his dreams, and in his longing for sleep Jesse was determined to linger there for as long as possible. The monster saw Jesse's resolution to remain, and that it would not be released, and that only stronger words would come out of him even though that seemed impossible. Chixulub had entered that space only by Jesse's express permission, and it could only leave by that same permission which would never be granted. Chixulub saw that there was only one route left to it, the only way out of the horror that Jesse was inflicting, the mounting compression of this deepest circle of hell.

In places without time words shake loose of their meaning, and dreams always want for the proper words of description. The surging and the retreating, our vast inner worlds and the power of our unhealed wounds. So this tale might stretch on forever; and so might it just as well be terminated immediately.

## CHAPTER 16

### A Lion, Roaring

THE battle against Chixulub raged across many fronts, some plain and some secret, all of them oblivious to one another as they tallied the fortunes of the fight.

The slaughter of the innocents had thwarted the monster's attempts to send madness against the people, and robbed it of its chief means of locomotion across the ocean floor. Chixulub was also halted and lamed by its battle against Jesse, this inner struggle hidden from the knowledge of the seaward men.

After the slaughter Carlos Lasenex went down to the ships. He was bound to go out to confront Chixulub by arcane laws that would take lifetimes to explicate, and by those same laws he was required to offer armistice: if the beast would return to the place where it had slumbered, if it would go under the massive weight of the oceans once more.

Lasenex knew the danger that lay in this confrontation. He had no idea how he might bargain with Chixulub, or bend the will of the creature, but he knew he must do so before the monster found other ways to rise. Knowing it might birth the necessary accomplices out of its own flesh, tearing chunks off its own meat before breathing autonomous life into them and sending

these drones into battle.

The ships were prepared and the best of them selected, crewed by the most able of the surviving men. With the sea wolves gone back to roam the ocean they were now equipped with percussive weapons, massive depth charges that might blast the monster out of the comparative shallows where it rolled and blistered and seethed.

The crews fell silent as Lasenex came down to meet them. Out of respect for his wisdom, the generalship he had shown. As he boarded his flagship his lieutenants stepped forward to offer him the best of protection: a hood of heavy golden mail, a breastplate beaten out of white gold.

Lasenex was moved by the offer of these gifts but he bowed and declined to take them, saying:

I am come to confront the monster.  
To bargain with it, perhaps to redeem.  
I cannot hide behind a cowl.

Thus it was. The ships sailed for many days and nights towards the place where the monster had been halted, until they came to the very edge of the place where it had originally fallen from heaven, the vast impact crater left by the conveyance that had brought it down to earth.

As the ships approached Lasenex felt the tentacles of the monster reach out towards his mind. It no longer had the agency of the slain to amplify its powers, but as the armada drew close it no longer needed that assistance. It felt its way towards Lasenex with special urgency, the light of his

unprotected mind shining out to the Beast as the source of its current ignominy, the architect of its disgrace.

Lasenex saw Chixulub surge towards him, and he saw how his mind might soon be overthrown. And so with stern words he ordered himself lashed to the forward mast, bound hand and foot and then roped securely in place, these orders being fulfilled just as the old man began to convulse and cry out with the monster's intrusions upon him.

The Argonauts stood wringing their hands as their captain fought against the beast. He cried out directions to them amongst his groans, he directed the armada forward until they were close enough to Chixulub to hear its audible rumblings, despite the protection that they wore.

The roar of Chixulub reached the mariners but it tore through the mind of Lasenex, making him strain against his restraints, overcome with his desire to escape that unspeakable howl by throwing himself overboard to be drowned.

The old man in spasms as he cried out from the mast.

Chixulub! Surrender yourself!

Shuddering and falling against his ropes.

Chixulub!

Condemn yourself!

The Abomination saw itself surrounded by many ships, crewed by men wielding blunt and barbarous weapons. It was also overrun by Jesse in other inward dimensions, where its torture was increasing exponentially.

The creature was bestowed with some sight of the future, out of

a stolen sense hidden somewhere within its folds. That sense now predicted total defeat if the monster would not retreat, and no further escape should it retreat to its former prison. Chixulub was also dismayed by the moral superiority of Lasenex, who had come down to the sea to confront it without protection or a thought for his own life. The monster had no shame but it felt a sordid imitation of that emotion, a sense of its own inferior worth, being enslaved by the laws of entropy in a way that these strange warm creatures were not.

So in the ultimate act of disgrace and cowardice the monster turned upon itself in its vast, inescapable greed, consuming its own flesh in a hideous gorging feast. Its many mouths tearing at its own bulk, the dire mass consuming itself and excreting itself only to have that excreta coil around to be consumed again by so many gobbling mouths.

Once this banquet had begun the beast could not restrain itself. It began to emit groans of satiety and then nausea at its own consumption as it continued to suck and bite and swallow. Chixulub vomited up strings of its own chewed flesh and then ate up that vomit again, as what served for bowels in this creature were filled past proper functioning, and then were themselves viciously consumed. The ocean began to boil like a drum, as dark clouds came down to shield the innocent from witnessing this event.

Finally there was a terrible gnashing of teeth as the many mouths of the monster found nothing further to consume, millions of teeth clashing and grinding against themselves as they fought for the final delights of self-consumption. Those teeth broke and pulverised each other as a huge belch of satisfaction rose up from the sea floor, breaking when it reached

the surface to spread rankly amongst the ships.

As this orgy came to an end Carlos Lasenex fell back against the mast. He gasped and tried to recover himself from the horrors he had witnessed, for the outward signs of these events were far less disgraceful than what Lasenex had seen inwardly. He heard the sickening silence, and then in Jesse's stolen voice the creature uttered its own epitaph, carving it in blood upon the best stone that could be found.

Yes, Old Man.

I am Decimated.

But not by you, Pretender.

With the last of its strength the monster reached into the mind of Lasenex, wringing out the doctor's consciousness so violently that his brain was torn from its moorings. Various parts of it were wrenched in inconsistent directions and Lasenex became one with the death-throes of the monster, his brain torn apart in a final act of vandalism and brutality, the blunt forces shearing this most beautiful of minds.

The seas stopped boiling and with them ceased the monster. The ships sat righted upon the sea again, the men who sailed in them breathless for their reprieve.

But there was no reprieve for Lasenex. The Argonauts cut their captain from the mast and they carried him into the bowels of the ship, they laid him on the pallet they had improvised and they wept for his condition. They wiped the blood from his ears and his neck, they wiped the blood out of his ruined eyes that had wept with his own blood.

Lasenex shuddered as they tended to him, crying out for friends long dead and for the mother who had brought him into the world. He begged his mother not to suffer him to be born, he begged for his life to be ended before it was given to him. He begged and wept as he died, his tears of blood resolving themselves into salt tears as his eyes closed for the final time.



In the evening the Argonauts bring their fallen captain up to the deck. They pray for his soul to keep watch over their ships, to guide them into the night watch for the final time.

With praise and thanks the Argonauts consign the old man to the deep, to the sea that is jealous and will not give up her dead. The sun reddens as it sinks and puts triumphal colours in the clouds, and against the calm sea there opens the vast vault once more, the first stars shining out as heralds of another night, for all of us made sailors upon this worldly sea, all poor eastward passengers who must sail into the night once more -

In the silent heavens there is no clamour for this man or for any other. No man torn from the world or yet to be given breath. The skies remain passive and alien as men look skyward through their tears, their pleas for intercession going unheard amongst the heavens. That will send such beasts against them. That remain indifferent to the outcome, to the fortunes of battle and the losses sustained, to the bravery and the broken hearts and the endless suffering of men.







# PSALM FOR THE NIGHT SEASON



ALTHOUGH brave men might despair they are never truly abandoned, and they may quickly retrieve themselves by observing the proper form of prayer: *make me to understand wisdom secretly* -

For Wisdom waits patiently to answer the supplicant. She responds without hesitation to any right man who prays. She seeks him out just as he calls upon her, she goes seeking amongst the children of men to see if there are any who might understand -

She is called by many names for she is devoid of a common name. She is called for her succour and her good counsel, these fragmentary glimpses of her. The devout seek her in the cool places of the earth but she is also of the desert places. To the frozen wanderer she is Mother of the Snows, to lost seafarers Star of the Sea -

There are some who have sought for her all of their lives, whom she now cherishes as her sons. For these she glows fiercely in her loving protection, for the man who has the heart to call upon her constantly -

She moves beside him as he wanders in his waking state, she coils around him as he seeks the solace of sleep. Her compassion for him is perpetual, she will never forget him or leave him orphaned. Even if he should stumble, even if he should fall -

She whispers truths to him so that he might understand, she tells him wise things so he might stagger onwards to the finish of his journey. She bestows all of these gifts so that he might turn and bring comfort to her People -

She loves particularly those rare boys who grow properly into men. She does not hide her sensual parts from these, she calls to him like a Lover and not like a son, with all of the desire that has hitherto been hidden from him -

Knowing that men's hearts respond especially to this. Knowing that if she calls to him as a Lover then he might comfort her People like a Lover, and not simply like a valiant, fallen son -





**BOOK VI**  
( 6 Lupa )



CHAPTER 17

## A Season In Hell

TO each the responsibility of their role, and although the task of confronting the Abomination might have been allocated to any, it was a duty that was in fact reserved to the resourcefulness of men. No knowledge of it was given to any other, not the ranked sisters of Lupa or their brightest Ruby Tuesday.

As the world heaved in that confrontation Ruby sank and smouldered alone. She grieved for Jesse but she also raged against him, oblivious to the danger that he faced. Her heart turned against itself also until it was completely arid, a cold desert bereft of any feelings for Jesse or any care for herself.

In her suffering Ruby still managed to sleep, entering that dream-state whether the world woke or the world slumbered. She dreamed of many things including her powers remaining intact, she dreamed of things she owed by blood fealty to her sisters that not even a broken heart could abrogate.

Ruby was no stranger to the lucid dreaming that holy men describe, the potent conscious dream-life that acolytes covet more than waking sight, waking power. For thus were many of

the deeds of Lupa transacted, in dream-space with far more texture than real space, particularly in the identification of evil and the righting of the ledgers of the world.

So on one moonlit night Ruby found herself looking around the same place where she had driven with Jesse, the gravel car park where he had scintillated so wildly before going on to his death. She jogged up the rocky track without demarcation between her dreaming and her waking, interpreting the landscape with her hunting senses that rose as the moon rose. Detecting the scent that betrayed Jesse's movements along that upward trail.

As Ruby hurried on she was greeted by the soughing pines, in warmth but also in puzzlement that the man she had brought to them was gone. They would have queried Ruby on this but her body spoke it in heavy accents, and in how the light in her was dimmed. These sentinels saw that love had abandoned the young initiate, but although they would have expressed their sorrow they lacked the flesh and blood to do so, restrained as they were by the summary hardness of their bark and their branches.

Ruby clambered over boulders and she jumped fallen logs and she kept on until the slope softened and the country opened out around her. Soon she faced the granite walls of the grotto, the familiar waters and the faint luminescence that joined and sundered there.



Again the familiar movement, the swirl of phosphorescence out of its random distribution. The lights coming together to form the shapes of the Twelve, like stars dragged into galaxies and then coalescing into their glowing, familiar forms.

As the Twelve formed out of the darkness they reached out in greeting to Ruby Tuesday, only to feel their touch rejected as soon as it reached her. The Twelve churned to feel her grief, but before they could properly comprehend the changes that had come upon Ruby she asked for permission to speak, and then began to speak without waiting for a reply.

I have come to tell you things, she said.  
Of which you have some notice.  
But you do not know: the horror.  
You do not know what will be required of you.

The Twelve were not used to being addressed so directly. They demanded the proper courtesies from Ruby but her heart was lost, she was mad with sorrow and she ploughed on directly with what she had come to say. Telling of her redemption of Jesse from the place where he had languished, witnessing the means of his redemption by her forbidden tears.

As Ruby spoke she showed the Twelve many images that were stored up inside of her, the images Jesse had shown her as he narrated the same story. The Twelve saw the rigours of hell, they were shown piteous images of the men who suffered there. Ruby showed clear images of their faces, as young as the day of their death but now torn in agony, defaced by the cruelty they had suffered for the love of Lupa.

The Twelve knew these men instantly because they still loved

them absolutely. They also knew why these men had been condemned, having sent them into death just as Jesse had been sent, to deliver the Daughters of Levi.

The Twelve had thought death would mean safety for their beloved and they fainted to see their error exposed. They saw torment stretching out infinitely beyond time, the degradation and suffering reserved for those men who could really love, the warmth of their hearts tapped and bled out for the delight of the djinns who tormented them.

The Twelve decried these truths as they were revealed, their forms shuddering and fading as they were pierced by the horror they had caused.

Ruby, they cried out.

Say it is not so.

These, our Beloved?

They languish in this place?

Ruby nodded her head silently because these things were unspeakable, leaving just the images of the truth she would prefer not to witness. But she could speak of other things: the mitigation of these evils, the better part of the truth, the story of Jesse's redemption and how these others might be redeemed.

There is a way, she said.

The way my Jesse was redeemed.

The way that has been forbidden to us.

As she spoke these words Ruby heard a dead silence fall. The Twelve saw her prepare to utter blasphemy and all of their sorrow was stilled, as they recoiled from the heresy that Ruby

was about to speak.

As the silence deepened Magdalene moved forwards from the centre of the Twelve, gliding in silence and majesty until she stood directly in front of Ruby. The grief within her matching Ruby's own grief, the same shame and sorrow that Ruby had felt for consigning Jesse to the grave. But the heart of Magdalene was overrun with weeds, the chains of two thousand years grown heavy with rust, sinking her heart until there was no prospect it could be raised up again.

You pine, Magdalene said. You suffer, as do we all. Have I not warned you? Have I not always said, that this is the consequence of presuming to love Men?

Ruby went to say what was on her heart but it was denied before she had the chance to begin it.

No, said Magdalene. It is unthinkable. Our law has always been thus. You wept and your love was raised but he was only recently dead. I have been in my grief for two millennia, Child. And I will mourn for thousands of years more.

Not if you weep for Him, said Ruby.

Impossible, said Magdalene.

To release my grief, my tears?

It would tear the Earth from its hinges.

Unseat the world and all of our places within it.

As the sisters heard these words they shouted in agreement, crying out the words of the statute that had permanently stayed their tears. But Ruby would not be moved by these reproaches,

not even when they cried out to accuse her of heresy, insanity.

There is no other way, Ruby said. These men languish because of us, because of their love for us. They cry out and there is nobody to stand for them, nobody who can redeem them.

Ruby held her heart open and the sisters looked within, and they saw how pierced she was by Jesse's rejection of her. They cast these stones against her but even against such cruelty Ruby found she had an answer.

My love Jesse wounds me because he is in the world. He breaks my heart, but he no longer lies in torment. Would you condemn these men for fear of a broken heart? Would you abandon Him, and His brother, the bravest and most blameless of them all?

Gradually the Twelve replaced their cries of outrage with sighs of sorrow, sighs of wonder that there might be some way to reverse these evils.

Magdalene however remained like stone. Her love was the last to have been interred, and it was for His sake that Lupa had finally separated their lives entirely from Men. She heard Ruby say that their statutes might be amended, but her ancient grief denounced these claims without any consideration.

Eventually Magdalene rose and came towards Ruby once more, wanting to put this madness to an end.

Very well, my child.

You may try the gates of my heart.

But you will find, as others have found.

The sorrow within me sunk and turned to stone.



Magdalene closed her eyes and Ruby did the same.

Ruby gently sought a way into the great one, past all of her held-back tears, but there were terribly hard places within Magdalene and Ruby found no way to enter. Her heart was walled up with the fibrous layers unique to old grief, a barrier built out of sorrow and hardened by self-reproach, holding out against Ruby as she sought to illuminate these protective layers of darkness upon darkness.

Ruby softened her heart and felt her way towards that walled-up space, moving slowly to unbrick it piece by piece. As she worked Ruby also began to sing, quietly at first, soft simple notes with short words that repeated themselves, much like the first songs Mother Ruby had sung to her when she was newly born.

Ruby sang until she saw movement, then watched as the figure of a young woman was revealed. She seemed scarcely out of her childhood, huddled in the immanent dark and turned away from Ruby, holding herself tightly against the weight of what she had witnessed, the horror of what she had caused.

Ruby softened her voice further and began to sing directly to the young woman, a lullaby devoid of any direct words that might cause her to recoil. Ruby infused her song with gentleness and intimate forms of address, wishing to make her

love known to the girl, to coax her out of her terrified turning inwards.

As Ruby sang the girl gradually released her hold on herself and her head began to turn, stealing quick glances at Ruby before turning away again. Ruby sang to her in a voice she had been waiting to hear for her whole life, and the girl wanted to open to that song despite the fear that closed her in. She began to wail softly in tune with Ruby's song, singing her own fear of being hurt again, but Ruby sang on with words of love and comfort and her song was irresistible. To this girl and to all of the lost and the lonely, especially those lost when they are so young.

The girl tried to hold herself back but her heart swelled and swelled, until in a sudden rush all of her fear was released. She turned and cried out to Ruby, and after hesitating for one final moment she ran straight into her arms. Ruby caught the girl and held her and comforted her, in the reprieve that had been denied to her for the past two thousand years.

Ruby held the girl in that layer of reality, but out in other layers of space and dreams she also held the slight form of Magdalene, now reconciled into the tenderness of her youth. Her great heart trembled there in Ruby's arms, gathering in sorrow and relief as she began to weep.

At first Magdalene's grief was shallow, halting, her lost tears baulking as they emerged into the light. Ruby held her steady through this stage of her release, slowly taking the great soul down through the layers of her defences until she was united with her core sorrow, that was of all sorrows, that had been by the Man of Sorrows made.

Magdalene wept to open the halls of her past life. She saw blood and tears, so bright after so long, she remembered the deep eyes that had stared into hers and how she had battled to resist Him. She sighed to remember failing in those efforts and kissing His soft lips, the desire within both of them mounting to condemn the world.

Magdalene saw the horror and the pity, the fate of the brave men destroyed by her desire. She saw Jesus retching and convulsing and perishing, just as Jesse had done, she saw brave Judas going out to the sacrifice only he could make. Out of his love for his twin brother, going out to protect the sisters who had no other protection. She saw herself dazed and numb as these things unfolded, unable to cry out or to resist the bitter fruits of her love.

Finally Magdalene saw where both of these men had languished since that time, the horrors they had endured for the last two thousand years. She sought a last escape from these truths but Ruby held her steady, the truth rising and confronting Magdalene as she fell back from her denial. Leaving her with the blunt truth: her hopeless love for these men, her unbearable shame and grief at the suffering she had caused them.

As she was recovered to these things Magdalene broke free of her constraints. Her soul expanded outwards and upwards and Ruby lost her grip, falling back on the hard rock as Magdalene's soul soared to resume its true form.

There was a huge shellburst of golden light and suddenly everything was Mary, the wind and the waters were Mary, the

sheer rock and the skies above the grotto. All those present gasped to see the towering golden form of Mary Magdalene, freed from the dark garments of her grief, now become a mighty tower as tears fell from her, huge peals of sorrow falling and ringing out like golden coins, her reclaimed tears pushing her past grief into the pure power of outrage and indignation. The world shook as she decried the treatment of these men, as she gave herself over to mourning what had been lost to her.

The outrage in Mary built and shuddered and all those watching began to tremble in fear. They saw the vast might of her soul as it built, and they feared the immediate fulfillment of her warning: the earth laid to waste, the world torn from its hinges.

But the world was not condemned. Magdalene gathered in her golden power and then without warning she crashed down through the permeable barrier between this world and the next. Worlds shook and kingdoms fell but it was only the kingdom of Hades that was made untenable. Magdalene smashed through the houses of the prisoners and those walls came tumbling down, setting all of the captives free, routing and destroying the ghouls who had tormented them for so long.

One by one the Beloved of Lupa were liberated from their suffering. Remus and Ham were liberated, poor murdered Abel who was interred so long ago. Each man rose and his soul flamed into shape before the women of the grotto, and each by each the Twelve were joined with their lost love. These men no longer had earthly bodies to resume but their souls were completely intact, and they remained in the world just long enough to join with the soul of their lover before both were gratefully released, going on to those places where lovers will

be reunited after their separation by death, places that have no mention in the craven books of history.

The joining of these souls was done in rapture and deliverance but this was nothing compared to what happened next. Ruby sighed to see Jesus rise up out of hell to take his place beside the towering form of Mary, shedding His heart-light against a universe of stars, His light cruelly stolen from a world so in need of illumination. Jesus spread his arms out against the firmament and joined with the twinned light shining in Mary, in such ample recompense of the love that was stolen from them.

Finally there arose one who did not have any lover, yet whose suffering is our best symbol of the depth and constancy of love. Brave Judas Iscariot, the most slandered son of the world, the self-hanged God so viciously accused for the latter part of history. Ruby saw what Judas had given, and how he had been repaid, despite how he ought to have been remembered for his great love and great loyalty. But she also saw the poor and the earnest kneeling in praise of Judas, as he hung there in their churches, and how this devotion had reached him and sustained his soul even in the deepest parts of hell. So that he might now rise and shine forth, the sufficiency of his silver now transmuted into gold.

Then it was done. Magdalene embraced both of these men, with one touch healing the wounds of two thousand years. As their souls soared in holy trinity they looked back to Ruby in gratitude and relief, hoping to provide her with some consolation but their souls were called onwards, and before they could say a single word they shimmered and then disappeared, going out of this world forever.



The night was quiet again, and the phosphorescence sank back to swirl without any form. Leaving Ruby alone on the hard rock of the grotto, just as she was left on the night that Jesse had died, having reprieved so much sorrow but not her own sorrow.

Ruby sat slumped and disconsolate. She saw her life receding from her as she tried to press on alone, just as Jesse's life was forfeit to his loneliness and longing for her. These strange cruelties of the corporeal world, where twinned souls are kept separate for the harvesting of their tears.

Ruby found herself wishing that she had not redeemed Jesse, and that she herself had perished in the attempt. So that he might have been redeemed by Mary Magdalene, so that the two of them might throw off the bonds of earthly sorrow and go on to those places where separation is unknown.

But that was no longer for Ruby to decide. And so she forced herself to get up and begin her trudge back downhill, moving on in her grief from one solitary place to another.

CHAPTER 18

## Poured We Libations

IN one of the manifold places where it is possible to wake Carlos Lasenex opened his eyes. He was disoriented but he felt no fear, feeling certain he was in a safe place although it had not been his choice to come there.

Lasenex gradually regained his sight, and he was opened to other vision concerning who was sitting with him in this place. Who had gently woken him, who was watching over his soul as it righted itself to its surroundings.

Dr Lasenex.

The voice very familiar although the speaker remained unseen.

Doctor.

Lasenex suddenly realised he was not dreaming.

Where... where am I?

You're with me, Doctor.

Mr Quinn?

Yes, Jesse said.

And please, Dr Lasenex.

After all we have been through.

I think it's probably time you started calling me Jesse.

Lasenex struggled to orient himself towards Jesse's voice but each way he turned that voice was directly in front him, soothing him and reassuring him. Jesse told the old man there was nothing to fear, assuring him that the present space between them was only temporary space, that it would be resolved out presently into some greater, better resolution.

Eventually Lasenex relented from his struggle and sank back with a sigh.

What has happened? he asked.

To me, Jesse.

What has happened to me?

Jesse was silent, as he thought of how to answer.

And my men?

Lasenex groaned to think of them, alone upon the vast sea.

What has happened to my men?

To this question Jesse reached out quickly, saying: they are safe, Doctor. You know the ones who were lost. The others survive. They did not come to harm.

With that reassurance Lasenex relaxed further into the space he shared with Jesse, who now seemed to stand beside him, both of them facing forwards with their shoulders aligned.

Lasenex was slowly restored to his memories of the hunt: the

seas churning and boiling, his final confrontation with Chixulub. He saw the Sunken God feast upon its own flesh, he saw that ghastly banquet and how the Beast had been destroyed.

O Jesse.

I see Him.

I see Him... Consumed.

Yes, said Jesse.

I see the manner of it, said Lasenex, I see you face him...

Lasenex was then provided with absolute vision of the confrontation between Jesse and the Abomination. He saw his ships and his men going out in a flanking manoeuvre, to cover Jesse's soul until the main battle could be joined. He saw Jesse unflinching in how he had faced the beast, he saw Jesse excoriating the creature without pity or hesitation and the Word by which he prevailed.

How did you know? asked Lasenex.

Jesse smiled at the question.

I didn't, Doctor.

You made the path for me.

I travelled down it to face Him.

Other than that, I just kind of made it up.

And He is gone?

Yes, said Jesse.

He is gone.

At these words Lasenex relaxed completely, and he was restored to every memory of the events that had brought him to this place. The shrieking of the creature as it passed out of

existence, the feeling of his own brain being sheared and torn away. Lasenex surveyed his memories of these events but he also saw them from the outside of his body, the blood flowing out of his ears and his eyes, his body thrashing violently and then slumping against the mast.

So it is true, Lasenex said.

I am killed.

Yes, said Jesse.

Lasenex rested for a moment in that knowledge, and then for some reason he began to smile a strange impish smile, letting out a gentle laugh as he did so.

You know, dear boy.

I would have preferred to live.

Some further years, perhaps.

But this death, I am sorry to say.

It comes almost as a relief.

Lasenex sank back as he spoke these words, starting to lapse out of his provisional consciousness. His soul would have ceased at that point but Jesse was charged with being his guide onwards, and so he gently roused the old man.

Dr Lasenex.

It's time to go.

I know, said Lasenex.

I see where I am bound.

My body immersed in the White Sea.

Yes.

I see the White Islands.

Yes, said Jesse. You know their name.  
I do, said Lasenex.  
But as strange as the world is.  
I never imagined such tales might be true.

Jesse reached gently into the old man's soul, and with tremendous care he began to release each point of anchorage fastening Lasenex to this world. The doctor tensed a little as he felt himself flow onwards, like all living things do, trying to dig in to his hold upon this earthly reality. His struggle was the common struggle but Lasenex also felt there was something he had forgotten, something he needed to restore before he was called onwards.

As Jesse slowly unpinned his soul Lasenex gasped in realisation, turning back urgently towards Jesse before his soul could journey onwards.

Ruby, Mr Quinn.  
Jesse halted at the sound of her name.  
You must... You must not...

Suddenly Lasenex was entirely with Jesse, in the importance of what he had to say, restored for one final time to his great mind and its great rigour.

You must listen to me, said Lasenex. Everything depends upon it, Jesse, everything. If you do not listen then we may as well have not have fought.

You condemned her, Lasenex said. When you sent her away. She is wounded, Jesse, she pines and there is nothing to be done for her. Without her nothing will be achieved, for you to be

redeemed is only part of the victory.

Jesse was quiet and contrite.

I know, Doctor.

I have to make it right.

Do you see her?

Yes, said Jesse. I know where she is.

Good, said Lasenex.

You must go to her.

Bow your head to her.

Reserve nothing to yourself.

And do not waste any more time...

Lasenex faltered and his voice broke down as though he were deprived of air, and as his life ended he had only one further thing to say.

I am sorry for my strictness with you Jesse. It was only ever to teach you. If it were up to me I would have embraced you, I would have cared for you like a son. Although with what you have achieved I do not know whether I would be worthy.

I would be honoured, Dr Lasenex.

Ah dear boy.

Such respect in you, even to the end.

As the two men said their final farewells a fair wind blew through the space where they communed, blowing to absolve that space of their words and to bear the dead man onwards. As it surged the wind also shaped Carlos' soul for flight, whispering the high praise and honour reserved for those who give of their lives for others.

As the wind drew him onwards Lasenex sighed.  
It feels good, he said.  
Ah. What relief.  
And here it comes, the mystery...

In a cool sliding rush Carlos Lasenex passed over towards his destination. As he passed he felt all of his burdens slough off him, leaving him relieved of them and slowly rising, rising. The rigour of his mind uplifted, the other strictures he had observed without rancour or complaint.

As Lasenex flowed onwards he was absolved back into his younger self, transmuted from Old Man back though his vigorous years into his childhood once again. Although this is a common feature of death there is no way to explain the joy that rushed back into Lasenex as these changes occurred, the composite parts of his dignity deconstructing themselves back into innocence, laying out before him all the good he had worked in the world.

As Lasenex journeyed onwards he also detached from the realm of syntax and common sense, obscuring the completion of his journey and his entry into his reward. So that we may only guess at the reward of heroes passed, and so that bravery might be proved against other more cynical things, attempts to appropriate the rewards of the brave by imitating their work in the world.

CHAPTER 19

## The Wages Of Sin

RUBY Tuesday was not born merciful, and neither were her people inculcated in such ways. She was instructed only in love and the opposite of love and there had been no complexity in her experience of either. The thought that love might end, in cruelty or indifference, these were the lessons of heartbreak that Ruby had never learned.

On some nights she would wake with a sudden involuntary thrill, her senses telling her that Jesse was beside her in bed. She would look around in hope and then in despair, realising that her impression of Jesse was fleeting and was not his bodily self she so craved. Ruby shook her bedding and washed her sheets but she could not erase Jesse's impression from out of her bed, or out of her soul where his largest impression lay.

Ruby's heart had been a stronghold but her defences were badly breached, and so undefended her soul began to darken. She hardly ate or drank, she tore at her hair and her skin. Mother Ruby sang to her and her grandmothers gathered around, but none of these women had tasted the poison she was dying from and had no help to give her.

Amongst all of her sorrow Ruby also burned, in her lupine insolence and pride. She could have gone back to Jesse, to ask him or to beg him, but she was restrained from such entreaties by her arrogance as much as her tenderness of heart. Ruby knew that if she overreached and was rejected again her soul might distend past the point of failure, to the point where the hitches holding her heart together could no longer be expected to hold.



When her phone rang early one evening Ruby knew who was on the line, but although she picked up eventually her troubles left her unable to speak.

Ruby?  
She didn't answer.  
Ruby, said Jesse.  
Can we talk?

Ruby managed a noise that Jesse took as agreement.

Ruby, Jesse said.  
I need to apologise to you.  
For sending you away.  
It was insane. I was insane but that is no excuse.  
I am sorry for what I have done.

Jesse's words were spoken truly but they did not entice Ruby.

The sorrow within her was shadowed by a glittering fury that threatened to engulf her as Jesse reached out, leaving not a single open route within her.

Jesse stood against Ruby's silence and consulted his deep places, waiting until the right words came to him before reaching out to her again.

Ruby, he said.

I know that I have hurt you.

I know you are terribly angry with me.

Whatever excuse I might have, I don't wish to plead it.

But please, Jesse said. For the sake of my life, and for yours. I am going to ask you to understand.

Ruby remained silent but Jesse felt something lift within her as he spoke these words. He saw small spaces within Ruby where his light might come in, and where that light once admitted might continue to stream through.

You know what you are to me, he said. What I was before I met you. I breathed and I moved but my life stood only in the desolate places. I dreamed of love to see it denied to me, I dreamed of Love because the world could not provide it.

But you came to me, Ruby. You came and you were kind to me and you asked for nothing in return. Even though it was forbidden you reached out and you comforted me, with your admiration and your praise. You refreshed my spirit, even though you knew I could give you nothing back.

And when I fell, he said.

You did not abandon me.  
You washed my poor body.  
You bore me upon your shoulders.  
You interred me into the ground.  
You sat watch until I was safely protected from harm.

And even then, Jesse said. You could have left me, you could have turned from me just as your people exhorted you to do. I was just one fallen man amongst so many, gone into the ground as it is our fate to do.

Jesse was overcome as he remembered these things. He paused to breathe and wipe tears from his face, and to steel himself against further tears before he could continue. He felt Ruby at the other end of the line, trembling and walled-up but threatening to be released, and although Jesse did not know whether that flood would be loving or lethal he continued with the speech that he was given.

Even then, Ruby. You stayed with me. You shook and you grieved and when that was not enough you broke every commandment of your kind. You wept for me, you pledged your soul in exchange for mine and the gates of Hell were opened. Ending my suffering, setting my soul free.

What man could hope for such love? Who am I, to be loved in such a way? Without you I would still be what I was: a lost soul struggling onwards without any hope, a heap of flesh battling against the predations of time.

But Ruby this is merely history.  
Here are the current things I accept.  
I do not deserve your forgiveness.

I do not deserve to be your man.  
But I will ask you for both of these things.  
And I will pay the price, no matter what it might be.

Jesse stopped speaking, with the words within him finished.  
He heard Ruby breathe on the other end of the line, and after a long silence he heard her gather herself to speak.

Jesse, she said.  
I can't allow you to do this to me.  
Not once I have given myself to you.

I know, he said.  
You didn't need to send me away.  
I know.

Ruby continued. I can't allow it. You can't just turn away from me, Jesse, or send me away like you did. Once I am given to you? My heart is not divisible, once it is given it is lost to me entirely.

Even if you were insane, Jesse. I could have helped you, I could have looked after you. I could have redeemed you even from that. But not that, Jesse. Not to send me away, to leave me heartbroken, to hate you with my whole heart and to hate myself even more.

I'm sorry, she said.  
I have no choice.  
I cannot allow that to happen to me again.

With that Ruby was finished what she wanted to say.

Jesse felt despondent but he knew that he had further words within him, and that there was hope in those words if only he could say them truly. He asked for permission to speak, and although Ruby was silent her tacit consent was given and so Jesse went on with what he had to say.

The words that Jesse spoke were softer than apology, words that approached Ruby gently and tangentially and thus found new places to enter. Even as she tried to post herself against him, to cement her decision never to speak to him again.

Jesse told Ruby many things he had stored up within him. He told her stories of his life before he met her, going back to things that had come to him as a boy, his epic daydreams as he spent so many hours alone. He described how those dreams were always of love, and he told Ruby he had not known the name of this Love or seen her face but he knew that she was small and quick and fierce and that she would one day be revealed to him. He also knew he would love this girl instantly, hopelessly, without any limit to his feelings. Jesse said he had liked certain books because the heroine reminded him of his dreamgirl, and how as he grew up he had sought her out in the real world, but although he had encountered some similarity in the girls he met he had never found her exact likeness. And how curious it was that he should know her so deeply, before he had spoken her name or seen her face or known anything about her at all.

Jesse told Ruby about the first time he had met her, the day she had come in to his office for an interview. He had known immediately that she was terribly special and strange, and he described how further knowledge had dawned in him of the strangest thing. That Ruby in fact exceeded his dreamgirl in

every facet: in her quick beauty, her fierceness and her kindness. Jesse trembled to say that from the first time he met Ruby his dreamgirl had said farewell, and although she sometimes appeared in his sleeping dreams it was only to assuage the fact that he was not able to take physical comfort with Ruby. And even in that she had slowly drifted away, perhaps to console some other lonely man now Jesse had found a woman who could take her place, and in fact exceed her, with the flesh and the blood that Ruby walked within, her complete and complex reality that seemed like the most extravagant dream of all.

Ruby remained quiet during these stories, managing to keep her heart turned away from Jesse even through his description of these beautiful dreams, with her pride of place within them.

Ruby sat recoiled but all words have their power, especially words of truth and tenderness and reconciliation, and slowly, against her own wishes, Ruby felt those words recover her and warm her and slowly cause her to open. There being no way for a right heart to resist the warmth of such words, and no reason for any right soul to do so.

And there are other parts of speech, manifest in the outside world, in part more powerful than words, with the power of direct intercession between lovers who lose their immunity to these things. As Jesse spoke his words receded in importance and Ruby was left listening only to his voice, his warm deep tones beginning to flow over her and around her and then very gradually within her. Jesse's voice thrummed and searched Ruby out, it went into her hard places and ameliorated them, his warm tones vibrating within her increasingly as she softened and created more space for them to enter. Ruby began

to tremble with his tones, to resonate with their frequency, and she found herself resonating with the whole of her body even as her mind commanded that this must not be so. She heard Jesse's breath as it drove those rhythms, and without knowledge of the fact she was also moved by the movements of his tongue, directing the air with subtle sibilance and soft pressing, the friction and releasing of friction, all of these things pressing against Ruby now she had forgotten entirely whether she wanted them to or not.

Ruby sighed and made other soft sounds and whenever Jesse fell silent she said keep talking and he would say Ruby I am finished and she would growl at him and say: I Am Not Finished. Keep Talking. And although Jesse was quite finished with his words he was also very obedient, and he found more words to say. Although the content of his words was now unimportant still they needed to be sincere, and so he told Ruby further stories, disclosing secret facts and secret wishes from his life before he met her.

Jesse found stories to tell that he thought he had forgotten, which surprised him in the telling of them, and Ruby did not hear a single word of what he said. She rode the waves of Jesse's voice as they filled her increasingly, and they caused her to burn and then burn very hot, and with his voice swelling and filling her she bore down hard against it and his voice was more than matched to that task. As she burned she squeezed her thighs tightly together but that only made it worse.

And with the softest shock Ruby saw what Jesse's voice was calling her towards, the rise of that oblivion and ecstasy, and she saw the futility of her efforts to contain the uncontainable. These throes rose up in her and she leapt towards them, and as

she gasped and twisted she said no no no and was given over to ecstasy entirely.

Ruby heaved and gasped and Jesse stopped talking.

Ruby, he said.

Are you OK?

To her silence on the end of the line.

Do you want me to keep talking?

No, she eventually said.

Perhaps I could just...

Jesse.

Please just... shut up.

Ruby said nothing else and Jesse did as he was told, listening to her breathe hard as she recovered. Jesse heard Ruby take a couple of deeper breaths, pulling herself together until she regained enough composure to speak.

Jesse, she said.

I need you to listen to me.

OK Rubes.

Are you listening?

She continued without waiting for his reply.

Your words are fine Jesse James but they do not absolve you. Your voice resounds in me like the song of angels, but it does not reprieve you of your crimes.

Ruby settled herself further, and continued.

Jesse. You don't know what it's like. You feel your love for me but you don't inhabit it like I do. I feel things that have been

forgotten by the world, insane and prohibited things.

You don't know what it's like. You can't imagine feeling love like that, loving someone the way I love you. My love is not different from death because it endures like death, and if my love were to end it would leave my soul and the world in ashes.

Jesse's cheeks burned with shame as he listened to these words, but as he went to declare that shame and perhaps also to soothe Ruby she silenced him immediately.

No Jesse. You don't get to tell me what I should feel. You have no idea what it is to burn this way, to be burned down. You can abandon me but I can only burn for another thousand years, deeper and deeper underground.

You ask the price of my forgiveness? Beloved you already know: I am a creature of reckoning and retribution. I do not forgive, and I very easily condemn. My name is the name of Judgment, transacted in the currency of blood.

So here is my demand to you, Jesse James.

Come to me, to be tested.

I will not forgive you.

But I will give you the chance to atone.

Do you doubt me? Then you are foolish, my love. You offer me words and the seductions of your voice but it will be the whole of your body that will be tested, if you come to me.

So come to me, Beloved. Do it now. I will not tolerate your objections. Come to me as quickly as you can. Don't bother to

shower. Do not dress up for me, your clothes will only get torn.

If you mean what you say, Jesse James. You will be mine or you will be nobody's. That is what it means, to be loved by a woman like me. Bear all of your strength to me, even in the knowledge that it may not be enough.

Ruby finished what she had to say and sat quietly, listening for Jesse's voice on the other end of the line. Even though she knew that he was no longer there, that he had ended the call in obedience to her demands and was running to her through the darkness just as she had commanded him.

In her deep heart Ruby saw Jesse coming towards her, in her pledged soul that would always know when this man was on her horizon. She felt him gather like a sun and speed through the night towards her, his arrival that would precede the majesty of the dawn. At the merest thought of it, the light and the heat within his body, Ruby was released into her ecstasy once more.

## CHAPTER 20

## Homeward Bound

AS her ecstasy subsided Ruby waited for Jesse, sitting quietly in her little house that had only received this man once, yet in its timbers and its fixings still yearned to receive him again.

Ruby sought to maintain her fierceness against Jesse but all of her judgment and indignation had drained away the instant he responded to her demands, the moment he submitted to the penance she would require of him.

Ruby struggled hard but her efforts were wasted. She could not harden her heart, and the more she tried the more she felt it break open: for this man whom she so loved, this man who had by his love changed her soul completely. Leaving Ruby now susceptible to Jesse's softer sense of justice, some of the moderation and clemency that had instructed him for his entire life. Putting a stay on her own innate severity, the vengeance she had brought into the world and never thought to temper.

Ruby was stubborn and she maintained her efforts until she heard the soft knock at her door. Her heart swelled at the sound and she knew her efforts to repudiate Jesse were doomed. She opened the door gently and sighed with the futility of her attempts, seeing her poor love standing there soaked with the

night rain, looking at her in contrition and in hope and most of all in love, in his shapeless hospital garments that were not much more than pyjamas, an odd shoe on either foot.

Jesse went to say the things he had prepared but Ruby interrupted him with a sigh and said: Oh Jesse. What are you wearing? Jesse smiled with his eyes cast downwards at himself and he said: I know, Rubes. I look ridiculous. I just wanted to come to you as quickly as I could.

Jesse went to say other things but as he looked at Ruby he saw the petals of her heart open out towards him, showing him that words were now completely unnecessary. He had pondered as he ran what he might plead, if she would give him that opportunity, knowing that what he had done to Ruby was never done against her, that his actions had been to protect her even though he had been insane. But these truths were written on his heart and in his wet hair and on each one of his mismatched shoes, and he knew as he stood there that Ruby understood everything and accepted everything, and that there was no need for him to explain anything anymore.

Ruby took Jesse by the hand and led him through her little house, feeling it surge to receive him again. She took him to the bathroom where she began to run a bath, and without any words Ruby undressed Jesse slowly, taking care not to abrade any of his unhealed wounds.

When the bath was run Ruby led Jesse down into the water, and she washed his body with every care and every comfort. Jesse felt the relief of the warm waters, enriched with Mother Ruby's unguents, the washcloth cut from a cloth specially consecrated to this task.

As Ruby bathed Jesse she felt the hard lines left in him from his confrontation with Chixulub. She also felt down to the wounds he had suffered with the death of his friend Lasenex, his inner stripes matching the wounds he bore on his body. Ruby felt how Jesse had triumphed against the monster, the totality of his victory, and how he had battled not only with his own gifts but also the gifts that she had bestowed on him. Ruby swelled out softly to think how much Jesse had been changed by her, how the justice he had executed in that victory owed more to her justice than his own.

Ruby tended to Jesse but she did not deny herself the pleasure she took in caressing this man once again. She stroked the broad seat of his skull and the neck that held it up, she followed his bent nape down to where the thews of it ran into his shoulders. Feeling the broadness of him with her slender hands. Feeling through that the indomitable spirit that had always lodged within him.

As she bathed Jesse and he submitted gratefully Ruby felt her great soul finally give itself over to him. She felt it break open beyond hope of closing again, and amidst the bones of her anger and her retribution Ruby reached out to Jesse to show him for the first time in his life what comfort really was, and what was Love, this man who had languished for so long in Gethsemane that he had forgotten there might be other gardens, other kinds of passion.

As he was washed and soothed and loved wordlessly the constant blue light in Jesse mixed with a soft emerald glow that began to shine in his heart. The room was soon suffused with the most astonishing aquamarine brilliance, growing to the

point where the waters and the light merged, the bathroom transforming into some fabled underwater kingdom, an Atlantis rippling and shining coextensively with Jesse's heart and soul. Ruby sighed to be immersed in the cool sea-light shining out of Jesse, out of the caresses that she would always give to him.

With Jesse bathed and dried Ruby took them both into her bedroom. She asked Jesse to lie down and he did not refuse, and as she got into bed he lay there thankfully beside her. Ruby was still fierce and she bit Jesse as she had previously, but the touch of her teeth was now very gentle, a reminder of her fierceness and her vengeance and what it had been provoked by. She grazed his skin softly in correction for sending her away and Jesse sighed and said again: I am sorry Ruby. She softened at that and withdrew her teeth and nuzzled him instead.

The two lay together quietly as their love built in them again. Jesse reached for Ruby and she turned to him like the turning of a planet and here we must leave them, in this night where their love will be soft beyond the softness of any words, and slow to the point that it could not be said to be lovemaking, or any other kind of love that had previously come into the world. A love made infinitely warm and infinitely light, shaped secretly beyond the reckoning of words, and also shaped and strewn with newly improvised words of love, some spoken and some remaining unspoken.

And there were spoken simply their names.

Ruby.

Kiss me.

Jesse.

Kiss me.

Amidst their endless requests for kisses.

Kiss me now, she says.

Kiss me back.

Without there being any need to ask.

His kisses healing her, as they always had.

Her kisses transforming his wounds into gold.

So many night-secrets buoy up the turning of the world. So much healing done without count of it being kept. On such nights of such love there turn many pages in the books of our lives, and there are written many further pages by the shapes our bodies inscribe. Not corresponding to any other inscription. All bound securely within the vast Book of Love that may one day be set down, by a heart broken badly enough to need its secret medicine.

All created out of these joinings together.

The inheritance we all know to be ours.

Which is why we all seek.

Which is what we will return to.

When we finally find our way back home, *Masha'Allah*.

CHAPTER 21

## People Get Ready

AFTER their night of love and recompense Ruby slept deeply and forgetfully. She reclaimed the deep parts of sleep that grief had denied to her, and in their recovered embrace she slept so deeply that her heart barely beat within her at all.

Jesse did not sleep. He lay beside Ruby feeling glad to be awake, her body pressed against his body being better than any dream. His cool blue-green glow illuminated Ruby as she dreamed, and over his customary gentleness there shone a new and hawk-like aspect, his light going out as watchlight to protect Ruby as she slept beside him.

Ruby's dreams had long been dark but these were new dreams, of Jesse now restored to her and everything that would result. In one dream Ruby stole up silently behind Jesse, reaching inside of him to steal his heart, popping it into a sack like some cheeky version of Santa Claus. She let some suspense build before planting his heart and the most enormous tree shot up out of the rocky ground, spreading its canopy and reaching down over them, sprawling with apples: juicy and red and heart-shaped, delicious.

As Ruby dreamed she also shone out with the deep red light that was the hereditary marker of her soul. Jesse felt that light further augment his powers just as he felt the ongoing amelioration within Ruby, the balancing up of their respective strengths, bringing them towards a resweetened concept of what right judgment might be, the powers each of them might wield now they were recovered to one other.

As Jesse felt this exchange finalise and cement itself he knew there was nothing more for either of them to hide, and no hope for either of them should fate or death seek to separate them again. For they were now of One Body, and they were of One Blood, and to part them would be to cleave a single thing into separate and unsupportable parts.

So let him say, who would bring glad tidings to Zion, and to the cities of Judah: Behold! For truly she was the vine and he was the branches, he the deep roots, she the tender bloom that rises amongst the vineyards of En Gedi.



Ruby woke late, feeling restored by her sleep in a way that she had never felt. Her sleep was always watchful against the terrors of the night, but Jesse had been her watchtower for the night past and so her sleep was long, forgetful, undivided.

Jesse kissed Ruby as she swam back up out of sleep. It was a deep kiss that could have continued but before their bodies could dive back into love Jesse hauled himself back, asking

Ruby whether she knew about the things that her dreams had taught him.

Ruby was puzzled by this question and Jesse did his best to explain. What she had imparted to him as she slept beside him, in dreams so plain he could see them unfold before him like films projected in the darkness, with their clear notice of events that were soon to come about.

Jesse told Ruby that the things cemented between them were not only private things: that their love and reconciliation held consequences for the outside world. Things that would flow out of their joining together, and endless further things to come once they were further joined. Ruby asked with a playful smile how much further they could be joined, and Jesse laughed softly and said he was unsure of how to answer but he knew there was more to come.

Jesse spoke other truths. He spoke of myths about the beginning of the world, saying as Ruby nodded that there are true beginnings but also false starts. He told of badly born things that might divide into parts antagonistic, and the evil that would inevitably flow from that antagonism. Jesse spoke of the long enmity between men and women, what had been lost because of that, and the fact that greater and greater numbers of men and women seemed to preach this same hatred in order to profit thereby. Jesse spoke of the losses that had been inflicted on both men and women equally, and particularly upon loving people who were in their deep hearts far more unified than they were set apart.

Jesse finished speaking and listened while Ruby told him other things, related facts confirmed by her fluent wisdom that Jesse

had never known. She spoke about the Great Truth: that any myth could be reversed, no matter which way it pointed, and indeed in this circular universe every myth strained to return to the way it once was. Ruby said that although evil now flourished there was no regime that could stand forever, and the innate mutability of things was the chief salvation of the world.

Jesse asked Ruby to explain the story of Adam and Eve, how one could understand a God who would seek to divide men and women, driving them out of Paradise for such a tiny sin. Ruby said that this was just one story, one part of one song, and that there were many other songs within her cutting the other way. Telling how the Two might be reconciled to one another, how they might cast the Trickster God out of the Garden and give their hearts to one another once more.

Ruby had always known these things and yet she learned them anew as she described them to Jesse, weeping Eve's original tears as she witnessed her suffering and exile. Jesse listened until Ruby's face shone, hushing her gently and wiping her tears away. He kissed her and said there was no longer anything to mourn for, and Ruby nodded as her lips burned and she said: I know, Jesse. I know.

As Jesse soothed her Ruby thought further along the lines of her Song, and she saw from those lines that there was one final thing required of her. She felt some fear in doing it, exactly as her Song foretold, but she was very courageous and she moved closer to Jesse, putting her arms around him, releasing her soul into the custodianship of his soul as they lay there in the early morning.

Now Jesse had known Ruby before, and even possessed her body, but there was nothing to prepare him for this gift of her Sacred Heart. The doors to her soul clanged opened and Jesse was ushered though, into a space known by many names including the Palace of his True Reward. Jesse was seated there with great ceremony and he was crowned King, and he knew victory and he knew splendour and he knew Kingdom. With Ruby at his right hand and Jesse at her left, his power also her power and the path that they should tread.

And they shone.

Eventually Jesse came back to his senses. Without parting from Ruby he moved slightly back from her, turning very slightly to take up his position at her side.

Ready? Jesse asked.

I'm ready, she said.

He squeezed her hand.

My darling Ruby Tuesday.

She burned at the sound of his voice.

The very best, at the very last.

Burning for his words, what his voice could do to her.

With Ruby addressing him in her turn.

As: poor old Jesse James.

My King, she said.

Your King, he said, tears welling in his eyes.

Jesse took a few moments to compose himself, and then he smiled and squeezed Ruby's hand, smiling even more broadly as she squeezed him directly back.

OK then.  
If we're going to do this.  
And not just sit around weeping?  
Let's go, he said.

OK, she said.  
Let's go.

I love you.  
I love you too.

OK then.  
Let's go.  
Ready?

Let's go.



## EPISTLE



1 To my sisters and my brothers:  
by the grace of the Original  
Covenant, the miracle of the  
Stayed Waters and the recovered  
Dominion of the Land.

2 I set down these things in  
accordance with what has been  
requested of me, by the Two  
who have enabled it to be so. My  
witness to the origins of the  
Light that has come into the  
world, the events of the Last Day  
and the First Night when the  
Light first came amongst the  
People.

3 This is not any Gospel I would  
declare to you but merely the  
witness of my senses. Should my  
testimony differ from the facts of  
your own witness then let not a  
single letter of this prevail. For  
the Light cannot be proved by  
mere proclamation as to its  
fierceness or its brightness, but  
rather by what it has  
illuminated, by shining itself  
into.

4 Thus is my witness. I had  
walked for many miles, across  
grassland and then harder  
country than that, having set out  
according to a voice resounding  
in my heart, the voice of one  
crying out in the wilderness.

5 I met with many others in the  
throes of the same journey,  
weary and foot-sore but without  
a word of complaint, even from  
the little children who walked  
alongside them.

6 Around the evening of the  
third day I saw many paths  
converge in the wilderness,  
leading a great throng to gather  
together in the lee of the Signal  
Mountain.

7 In my eagerness for a sign even  
the shape of the mountain spoke  
to me: my antipathy to my own  
self carved like those poor  
waterless slopes, by persistent  
rivulets of my own unwept tears.

8 The crowd milled about in  
thirst and hunger. Some pilgrims  
felt their courage fail and they  
set up a cry saying: we have been  
deceived! We were led here by a  
demon! And yet there were  
others who calmed these fears  
saying: if there is a purpose to  
our journey it must soon become  
apparent, and if we have walked  
here in error then our feet shall  
know the way back.

9 I cannot say for how long we  
stood upon the plain, the same  
doubts assailing me as they

assailed all of the faithful. I moved forwards through the throng and I saw only dismay, growing as the night fell and the light was extinguished from amongst the People.

10 I am not too proud to confess: I was greatly discouraged by what I saw. I also confess my resolve to quit and go back, as soon as I reached the head of the throng. I also confess: I intended to exhort the People to do the same, to spare themselves from the madness that had led us out there to die.

11 As I reached the front of the crowd I saw the Two, who had ascended the Signal Mountain by some secret route. They emerged before us at the head of a high escarpment, looking out upon the multitudes that were gathered there before them.

12 The Two did not beguile the crowd with words, or with miracles animating inert matter. The Two merely joined in a passionate embrace, folding their bodies together and also joining their souls.

13 Suddenly there came a tremendous wave of light and

heat, the mountain and the plain convulsing together to cast the faithful down. I fell down to writhe in the dust along with my fellows and I was taken with a shocked and woken feeling, my heart beginning to swell against itself, opening the barricades of my soul.

14 And I felt a host of spirits leave me –

15 Dear friends I cannot declare whether these were autonomous spirits or merely my own greed and despair. For how should I say? They came out of me regardless, my soul sealing itself against them to deny them further entry.

16 As I came back to my senses I was induced never to get up from that delightful first contact I had ever felt with the Earth. Belonging wholly to this realm, and not to some other fabricated realm. And in this my first communion with the flesh I felt the tremendous sweetness of being alive, in this wholly unlikely sliver of life between the terrifying extremes of the cosmos.

17 For what insanity is it, to mortify the flesh? This madness wrought by all of the Old Religions. To accuse this sweet, tender skin and blood? To deny the sheer agility and delight, the fabulously improbable nature of it? To slander every sweetness it has to offer?

18 Friends do not think I was innocent of this slander. All of the posturing I had done, yoking myself to an insane God, the greed that made me contort my body into shapes it was never meant to assume. I broke open my energy centres, hungry to feed on them, I lusted after power and I was infested all the more.

19 In all of these sins: I was the greatest among you. I venerated the Void and I proclaimed silence to be golden, I denigrated the Word and gave over my tender flesh to every djinn that creeps and possesses and deceives.

20 We were told that we were wretches and worms, all such degenerate accusations. We were led around by chimeras and pillars of fire, by djinns masquerading as Prophets and

as the Risen Christ. We esteemed the madness of the Revelator, the pitiful insanity of Saul.

21 How easily we were deceived! To believe that a single trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, or that one act of brutality resulted in justification and life for everyone!

22 So too were we exhorted to wait, but for what? A false hope and a broken promise, a man who died and never rose, and out of that every horror that has since enslaved the world.

23 Even the falsehoods spoken about The One. I saw plainly that two are better than one, for when one falls the other may uplift her companion. Though one might be overpowered, two can withstand the oppressor. And with such power in two, then what of three? Or more than that? They shall twine into a cord that shall not easily be broken.

24 On that day there was complete restitution for the many who had gathered. The peacemakers among us were blessed, the bereaved and the lonely were blessed. Blessed were those who had been beaten

down, who were slandered, blessed even those afflicted with bitterness against their fellows. We were blessed to inherit the Earth, as we had always done, and by this blessing all of us were comforted, all of us were redeemed.

25 Brothers and sisters you will know these truths I declare, in your hearts that now brim full of mercy. Because we were shown mercy. Because we came into this world pure of heart and have longed to return to that state, lacking only the signposts that would direct us back to our original state of grace.

26 Night fell among the people but the Light did not depart. Each one of us rose like a star against the darkness, shining out in a vast array of colours, all of us astonished to see the long night of ignorance banished by the coming of the Light.

27 Now my sisters and brothers I would ask you to attend to this part of what I am given to say. For there abounds cheap talk and gossip about the Ascension of the Two, by columns of fire or by chariots wreathed in the same element, the same superstition

that has always seduced the credulous.

28 I tell you solemnly: none of these things happened. Rather than usurp some high place above the People, as had the jealous spirits before them, the Two merely uncleft from each other. They uncoupled to hold hands, as simple a gesture as that, walking down on their human feet to descend the Signal Mountain.

29 As the soft lights swirled and the people embraced I saw the Two walk towards me. I thought to kneel or prostrate myself but I was held there upright in my human dignity, looking into their smiling eyes.

30 As I smiled back I felt myself requested: *Tell this to the People*. I would have protested my incapacity and asked with what words but they merely smiled at me. *Comfort the People*. And I was infused with the incipient Word, the assurance that right words would come to me so that I could set them down.

31 I trembled as the Two passed on either side of me, rejoining with each other as they walked

away through the crowd. Leaving me with the simple injunction to set down these words, these lessons that I now see I have always known by Heart.

32 Dear friends there is no need to admonish you against your own beliefs, or to claim any primacy for this my message to you. My own words may be doubted but not what has been effected by the Word, and these pages are nothing more than signposts upon the path, some comfort to the weary traveller who yet presses on alone.

33 So much has been written of faith, the victory of faith over the law, but in truth both of these strictures have been overcome. I do not exhort any of you to believe but merely to look, charging you as I do so: guard what has been entrusted to you, your greatest and most god-like part, the sovereign capacity for doubt that secures the shining citadel of your mind.

34 For it was faith that murdered so many. It was certainty that always damned the world. In the fullness of the new kingdom brothers need not follow, and

sisters need only open their eyes.

35 Dear friends I am now ended the things I have been given to say. I conclude in my hope that you will rejoice in the Good News, not simply because it was prophesied, but because it has now come to pass.

36 God's People have been delivered out of the wilderness. They have entered into the Promised Land, the original Garden of Eden out of which they were exiled so long ago. And it is in Her name that I send you these words, so you might turn to Her ways: the One True Mother, the inestimable and pure-hearted kingdom that we now know as the Earth.

37 I proclaim these things out of the fullness of my heart, with some tears but also the frank consolation that these words might speak comfortably to Her People, and liberate those still in bondage to the perverted gods of men.

38 Leaving others to speak of the days since we resumed our inheritance, our days now lived in heaven for there is no other one.

39 Remaining as I do so your  
faithful companion, and your  
every friend – Lilith.

