

EMERGENCE

A novel in three books – the first pages

I THE WELL · II THE WALLS · III THE UNKNOWN

THE END

He woke up in the cave—a little later than usual today. The cave felt too warm, the air too thick to breathe. He had slept in his clothes. He didn't even remember getting back to the cave last night.

He peeled off his pants and whipped off his shirt. He threw the shirt into the air as he took a deep breath. When he fell back onto the bed, he squinted against the light coming through the cracks at the top of the cave.

He had slept a lot. He could feel it in his body. Wine was still on his dry lips. His mouth tasted like dirt. He needed water.

On his bed of twigs, pine boughs and dried grass, he stretched like a cat and let the morning sun tell him when he was ready to get out of bed.

He was not there yet.

Instead, he watched the wandering dust motes riding the sunbeams. They moved at different speeds and in different directions. Some went up, some came down, some drifted sideways and disappeared. After a while his mind went still. He wasn't sure if he was watching the dust or if he was one of them.

He remembered his dream—something that rarely happened to him.

He was on a boat under the night sky. He heard the soft bumps of the hull against the waves, again and again. The dark around him was blue, almost velvet. The stars shifted colours as though they were blinking at him, telling him where to go.

They came closer. Brighter.

Then they formed an eye in the sky.

He stared at it for a while before he realised it was his own, looking straight back at him.

Another half an hour went by in total nonsense, with an occasional idea he really enjoyed. He lay there and bathed his body in sunshine until he finally got out of bed.

He climbed down a couple of rocks to the floor, as he did every day, and walked deeper into the cave, where he kept his food and water. He climbed up another large rock to reach his stash.

He wasn't happy about this climbing up and down the rocks all day situation, but it was the easiest way to keep himself and his belongings safe from the animals.

Not that he didn't like sharing with them. If an animal came to visit, he usually gave it something, and he always scattered whatever he couldn't finish.

"I love them, but animals are messy eaters," he thought.

He picked up his green ceramic vase with the black and orange patterns painted around it and poured some water into it.

Then he took a lemon from the bag of lemons and oranges and put it in his pocket.

He took the wooden bowl he had carved years ago, its rim cut with animals he used to see in the forest, and mixed his herbs in it. That morning he wanted turmeric, ginger, cinnamon, cacao and some ashwagandha in his tea.

His morning elixir.

He mixed it slowly. It reminded him not to rush into the day.

With a lemon in his pocket and the bowl in his hands, he climbed down from the rock and walked outside.

He breathed in the rosemary on the morning air. The earth was already warm under his feet, and the wind felt soft against his face.

Then he smelled something underneath it.

Ashes.

From last night's fire.

And little by little, he began to remember.

THE GAP

Every month, he made a thirty-minute walk to a nearby village to trade his art and what he had grown or found, for food and tools. On the way back home, he would also bring fresh water from the Great Waterfall Apsu. Yesterday he didn't bring anything back because last night he wasn't there to trade; he was there to celebrate.

Usually, he would pack his bags with goods, leave a mark on the walls of the cave to tell others that he lived there. The mark also told them that they could use anything they found while he was gone – respect was an unspoken courtesy he truly believed in.

He would leave his cave, climb up the hill above it, and slip through a mesmerising gap between two huge red rocks carved with ancient art. At one part there was a colourfully painted drawing of the solar cycle.

The sun came through the cracks differently as the year turned, falling across the carvings one after another – the circle, the spiral, the divided line, the double spiral.

He always thought there was something forgotten about these symbols.

This had been made by people who deeply knew what was happening around them. He didn't know who had carved them or when they were made—nobody did anymore—but each time he passed through this gap, he felt their strong presence. He could almost hear their voices. Sometimes he would start humming a melody just to greet them.

Downhill, between the two red rocks, he would descend eastward towards a broad, flat green field called The Prado, following the widening stream on his right as it transformed into a river running down the hill, passing through the village in the forest, Entia. The villagers called this river La Vene—"the vein." La Vene began at the Great Waterfall Apsu, ran down through the Great Cedar Forest Humbaba, and found its way to the ocean—or, as the Entians called it, the Unknown.

The village had been built, destroyed, and rebuilt many times through the ages. No one remembered the exact history anymore, but they had many stories and myths of their own. The village existed long before the caveman arrived. The village named itself Entia, and they called themselves Entities; they weren't named after the village—the village was named after them. They were once all travellers who had walked from far away, just like the caveman had done once.

To them, everything was an entity: rocks, sky, water, trees, animals, the wind, songs, themselves.

The caveman always felt at home amongst them, and the Entities always welcomed him with joy. He had thought about living in the village once, but he realised deep down he did not want to call himself anything at all—not even an Entity. He felt free when he was just nothing. He knew that once he called himself something, that would rob him of the possibility of everything.

Entities were peaceful outcasts who chose to live differently from the crowded cities: a small community of mostly young adults, their storytelling elders, and their tiny children running around like wild dogs. They always welcomed anyone who wanted

to be there. Entities lived in wooden houses built on giant cedar trees that were very sacred to them. They were spread throughout the Humbaba along La Vene, all the way towards the Unknown.

They used their houses mostly for storage and sleep; they enjoyed spending most of their time outside in nature, from the moment they woke up until they slept.

Waking up in Entia always felt warm to the caveman.

When it rained heavily, from a wooden deck on a tree, he would watch the raindrops softly join La Vene with a gentle tremble he would feel within his body. He would start breathing and humming to join the tremble. He could feel the rain dropping on his skin.

He wasn't there to trade yesterday. A big festival was underway –the summer solstice–which they celebrated as they did every natural event: solstices, equinoxes, moon and water cycles. Their big festivals were usually held on The Prado, just outside the cedar forest, where the village ended. The field was full of scattered small and large wooden and stone henges. They built bonfires throughout the year, piling them again and again after each festival, and kept it all burning all night long. They would only pick what had fallen to the ground and never touch any trees that didn't want to give. They believed the forest would always provide and this was their way of showing their reverent gratitude.

The food they ate came from the many different seeds they planted around the forest. They cooked from first light and ate together at sunset. The young ones drank only water until sunset, cleansing themselves for the feast. They welcomed hunger as a reminder of what had been lost before and what could be lost very easily. When the sun set, they gathered around the fire, held one

another's hands, and just watched the fire together in silence before they ate. The children giggling would break the silence after a while, but they wouldn't let go of their hands until their eldest said so.

After they filled their bellies with food and wine, they danced and chanted all night. You would see children running around everywhere, all day long, even at night. On big events like this, people from far villages would come as well—you would see people walking all along from The Prado through La Vene to the Unknown.

Last night, it was another special night. A red full moon also brightened the dark blue velvet sky. Mesopotamians used to substitute their king on a night with a red moon so that if the sky fell upon him, it fell on the stand-in.

The caveman remembered dancing around the bonfire. At one point he screamed his lungs out—he needed that.

He swam in the Unknown, then walked back to the cave under the red moon that shone through La Vene. He crossed the empty fields along the river towards the gap between the huge red rocks.

He walked slowly, aware of each step.

He stopped at the gap, sat down on the ground, and stared at the symbols on the rocks. The red moonlight made the rocks glow, and he felt like he was on a different planet. His eyes were caught on a carving of a serpent that reminded him of Quetzalcoatl with wings—he had a tattoo of it on his right thigh—and a huge, almost glowing Eye of Horus where the moonlight was hitting perfectly above it. That must somehow be related to his dream.

After sitting there for a while, he walked downhill back towards his cave, following the sea breeze coming from the Dragon beach.

He lit his fire pit in front of the cave and the fire, the wine and the Milky Way made him sit for a while.

He slept comfortably last night.

He also remembered Nyx – a dog that would appear only in the nights – walking along with him on his way back to the cave and sitting in front of the fire last night. Now he couldn't see her around. She must have left early in the morning.

LEAVING THE CAVE

He walked to the fire pit and realised there were still warm embers left from last night—enough to make his morning tea on. He picked up a couple of pine cones from the ground and, with a brush and a couple of strong blows, brought the fire back to life. He understood fire; he enjoyed being around it.

He had forgotten the cup, the pot, and the ladle to make his tea. He walked back inside to fetch them—the cave was almost the shape of a snake; it curled more as it got deeper. Thin openings in the ceiling let blades of light fall across the stones. The cave smelled of sage and rosemary that he burned most nights just before he went to sleep.

The walls were full of carvings and paintings he had made during cold winter nights while staying safe in the cave. Some nights he would walk deep inside the cave, find a spot on the wall that felt right, sit in front of it for hours until he felt ready, and when his mind was clear, he would start painting the walls as he pleased and stop only when his eyes wouldn't hold anymore.

Now, as he walked back to his stash, he realised there was almost no space left on the cave walls anymore. He stopped walking. Suddenly the cave felt unfamiliar to him. He looked around him.

“Time to leave...” he said, yawning.

He brought back outside the wooden cup, a wooden ladle, and an iron pot from the cupboard he had built beside his stash and put them on the bench next to the fire. It was actually an old poplar log—a simple seat that was enough for him.

He sat on the log. Around the fire pit, stood the lemon tree he loved, the fig tree he had nursed back to life once, the plane tree with the swing, the apples scattered in small shade, and the olive trees shaped by the wind.

He prepared his morning elixir and took a sip; this was his last one before leaving the cave. He didn't remember how many years had passed since he arrived here. He didn't know how long it had taken to find it, either. He always felt like he had lived many different lifetimes, and this was the latest one, and now he was moving on to the next.

He kept his eyes open until he finished his elixir slowly, without a rush, with the sun on his face and the birds singing to his ears.

He took his time until he was ready and when he was without haste, he picked up the cup, the ladle, and the pot and walked back into the cave, placing them gently on the ground—he had an idea.

He packed quicker than he thought; he only took the shirt and shorts he was wearing, his pencils and drawing pad along with a book for his journey – he knew that was enough. He also packed some fruits, vegetables, herbs, nuts, and water for the way.

He decided to visit Gaia first – a woman living in the woods near the Great Waterfall Apsu, towards the west. He had known Gaia since not long after Nyx first found him on the beach. Gaia always had great food and many gifts for him for his way, so he didn't bother taking much food with him. It felt better to leave what was left for others, so he carried four bags full of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and herbs and left them under four different trees.

He left the first bag under a lemon tree—his favourite of all, those little drops of sunshine. The second was under the plane tree—the largest tree around his cave; he felt like a child when he looked at it. He even had a swing tied to it. He left one bag under it and swung a while for the last time.

Then he walked to the fig tree. When he first found the cave, the fig tree was almost dying; he took care of it, brought it back to life, and learned how to heal himself while he was healing the tree.

Finally, the last tree was an apple tree—he just liked eating apples a lot. He left the last bag under the apple tree, then walked back to the cave, where he had left the cup, the ladle, and the pot on the ground. He gently picked them up. He wanted to place them separately under an olive tree—because those were his personal items he used every day, and amongst all he felt closest to the olive trees. Each one looked the same, yet was shaped uniquely by the wind, bent like a sculpture, with golden blood running through their veins and green pearls hanging among their leaves.

For the rest of what he had but did not need anymore, he left it all in the cave and put his remaining clothes, cups, bowls, and tools in a wooden box at the entrance so anyone passing by could take them. With a knife, he carved a spiral on the box, meaning these were for anyone to take. A box in front of a cave also meant the cave was now empty and ready for someone else to live in.

He didn't think about who would live there after he was gone — the cave was now the past for him. It felt lighter than he thought it would be.

He looked inside the cave once more for the last time, and this time it really felt like it was someone else's home.

He picked up the bag he had made for his journey, wore his sandals, turned his back to the cave, and started walking west, towards the valley that would take him to Gaia.

THE DRAGON BEACH

He took the path among the olive trees. The trees and the birds on each side of the path were saying their goodbyes to the caveman or at least that's what he thought was happening. The waves in the wind were calling his name like a Siren luring sailors. He thought maybe he should have one last swim before he left, at the beach where he had spent many days and nights for many years before he even found the cave.

He found the beach at a time when he needed to stop walking and he couldn't move on any more. He was idle, numb, indifferent to any direction when he found the beach. The moment he saw the beach, he decided to walk into the water and not to come out of it unless he had a reason or desire to do so. He went in as a muted man who didn't know how to process any of his senses anymore and came out almost with an unexplainable sense of joy and freedom.

The beach had a naturally formed gate that opened up to the Unknown, made by the hands of the waves that had been beating these rocks for many years. The gate was almost like the hunch of a dragon with spiky rocks. That was one of the two reasons why he called the beach the Dragon beach.

That day – when he first arrived and walked into the water – he swam to the rocky gates where the water suddenly got shallow. He later learned that this only happens when the tide was low. It was a sunny day that day and he was happy to find some shade under the rocks where sounds were resonating wider and deeper as if he was in a temple. He found a spot and he locked his eyes

into the Unknown. He stood still in the water, with an idle gaze to the waves and islands in front of him.

For hours he tried to feel something but the pain was numbing. He wanted to cry and let himself go but it had been years since he had forgotten how to. He stood still with his body shivering and his teeth chattering. At the point when he thought there was no way out of this water, these words suddenly appeared in his mind and all made sense to him.

> I will enjoy this life.

> I will share the joy with others.

> I will keep learning and creating.

> If I can leave something behind, I will but I don't have to do anything.

Then, only at the moment where he didn't know where else to go but to deep into the Unknown, it was then when Nyx appeared in the night from the olive trees behind the beach and led him to the cave following the moonlight lit on his path.

The beach kept him sheltered and helped him much onwards—it had been a very good friend who now he had to say goodbye to.

There was also another reason the beach was called Dragon Beach. On warm summer days he would occasionally spend the night on the beach, and on his night swims he would always feel the presence of a creature in the water. It didn't feel threatening; it felt more playful, as if it was a child moving around too shy to say hi. He never had a clear view of the creature. Every time he tried to swim to the creature, it would swim away much faster than he could, but from far away it almost looked like a small dragon. He didn't expect to see him today during the day but deep down he wished he would. He only hoped that one day the dragon

would feel safe enough to come closer to him but he wasn't sure if he would see it again since he was leaving the cave now. Deep down he was sure they would meet again. He decided to trust his instincts – he always did.

He took his sandals off as he reached the beach and carried them in his hands. He walked towards the Unknown and dropped his bags somewhere close to the water. He liked being as close to the water as he could be. He sat down at the edge of the beach, half of his body inside the water, crossed his legs, and made sure he was comfortable.

The wind was coming from the land behind him today, which meant the water was bright, cold, and flat—just like he loved it. He thought about how much he loved this beach and how much he was going to miss it.

He closed his eyes, felt the wind on his neck, took a deep breath in, and let it go very slowly until none was left in him. With every breath he exhaled, he imagined a larger version of himself in the sky inhaling that same breath, and as it moved through that larger body, another, even larger version of himself in space would take it in, and finally it would pass through a version of himself he couldn't imagine but could certainly sense. Then he would take his breath back again and continue the cycle.

He did that a few times until he lost the sense of the boundaries of his body. He wasn't controlling his breathing anymore; he was just existing without an effort. He heard everything all at once without separating a single sound from another. The seagulls felt like they were always shouting at each other, jumping from one rock to another, flapping their feet, racing into the water, creating splashes in the silence. He could

feel the waves brushing the sand into his foot towards his hair roots, slowly flowing through his whole body and back into the water again.

He waited until the urge to be in the water was inevitable.

He stood up, took his shirt off, and let the water slowly pull him in. The cold water cooled his sun-warmed skin just like a sword moving from fire to ice to grow stronger. He took a few steps into the water and didn't wait long before jumping in. He closed his eyes and let himself go.

When he was in the water, he would think of himself as a sea creature trying to find its way. He wouldn't think about his arms or legs or even his breathing while swimming. He would focus on what was ahead of him and let his body move instinctively. When he did that, he felt a pure sense of effortless balance in his movement.

He wandered for a while, swam under the rocky arch gate of the beach, enjoyed the acoustics for one last time. He lay flat on the water and felt weightless.

He wanted to take his time in the water today and didn't want to rush, but he was also excited for his walk to Gaia, so he slowly swam back to the beach.

As his feet hit the sand, "Come on, baby dragon," he said with his eyes locked to the gate. There was no other movement in the water but his.

He stood up, pulled his shirt back on over his sun-dried salty skin, put on his sandals, grabbed his bags, took a final deep breath and a look at the beach before he started on his journey.

CLIMBING TO GAIA

He started walking towards the West, towards the Great Waterfall Apsu where Gaia lived.

He walked up the hill from a different path until he rejoined the main road. The main road from his cave to Gaia was a passage through the woods that led to La Vene. La Vene ran through a great canyon before it reached Entia. He needed to follow the river back to its source. Gaia lived upon the hill where the waterfall broke, in a house full of plants and animals facing the Unknown to the East. The canyon had many caves connected to each other with tunnels inside and steep paths outside. It was said that once many people lived in these caves. The caves were more like rock-cut settlements that could hold more than any amount of people he could imagine. Once you entered from one entrance you would find yourself in an underground world with narrow roads and small galleries, almost like an ant farm.

He wondered: who carves cities in mountains unless they really need to. He thought his life was easy and he was lucky when he saw these monuments.

People called this place now Venera, named after La Vene—but there was another name for it many, many years ago. Kásskara, the lost city. Some said it was not just a city but a world beneath the stone, carved deep into the canyon walls and hidden under the earth. Others said the name did not belong to this place at all, but to something that once existed even long before the river found its way through the rocks.

The elders spoke of people and giant sloths who lived inside the canyon, moving through its veins. They told stories of a spider woman who led them in the darkness to the light, showing them cracks in the stones. They followed the spider to the deeps of the earth, carving their paths where the light barely reached, tracing the water back towards its source.

Some believed the spider had not led them inward, but towards a small opening deep within the earth—a Sipapu, a place of emergence. Through it, the first of them had once come into this world, and through it, perhaps, they had left again.

They spoke of life as four passages through the same opening, each revealing a wider world.

The first was dark and close, where beings moved like roots beneath the soil.

The second opened into dim light, where they began to shape what surrounded them.

The third was the world of breath and sun, where they walked as they did now—forgetting where they came from.

And the fourth... no one spoke of it clearly.

Some said it was not a world at all, but a return—back through the Sipapu, not to the beginning, but to something that had been waiting beyond the Unknown.

No one knew what became of them. Some said they disappeared when the river changed its course. Some said they went deeper, beyond the caves, into places where no one could follow.

And some believed they were still there—moving quietly through the hollow parts of the canyon, as they always had—guided by threads no one else could see.

Mesmerised and full of grace, he followed La Vene through narrow paths and bridges made of worn-out ropes and wood. The deep growl of Apsu was rising, the cool spray of water thickening on his skin as he got closer. To reach Gaia's home, he would have to climb up the stairs carved into the bedrock, surrounded by plants – some of them breaking the stone and coming out of the rocks. These plants reminded him of the canyon people, who he liked to think had built the stairs too. He found the beginning of the stairs behind a pebbly beach that had formed around the waterfall. Apsu was now deafening; he couldn't even hear his own footsteps. "Walking in noise doesn't have much difference than walking in silence," he thought. He started his ascent with steps he didn't rush, and a melody he didn't know. At the end of the climb, stood the great entrance, a vast, dark mouth of the earth, veiled behind its wild blue curtain, Apsu. Every time he walked through there, it was one of those moments when he felt like he was standing in front of something much greater than himself.

Apsu would always put him in his place, and he respected that – more than respect, he craved it.

The light was dim, the cave was damp. He had to walk deep into the cave, following the thin light that would lead him to an opening right in front of Gaia's home, above the waterfall. He thought this must be the place they call the Sipapu – or could it be the entrance he came from – maybe it was both of them. For a second, inside the loud growl he thought he heard a dog bark. Could it be Nyx? Nyx was the one who led the caveman to Gaia towards these tunnels one night. She must have felt his presence... Nyx somehow always appeared when the caveman needed her most and she would only come out in the dark, the caveman never

once saw her in the daylight. The barks sounded like they were coming from far away somewhere in the cave.

After walking for a while he finally saw Nyx waiting in a corner for him. Nyx was a large dog with black fur that shone even in the dark. They walked together to the exit that opens up to the opposite side of the mountain behind Apsu. They climbed up the stairs that led to the entrance of the house of Gaia. Gaia was standing on the top of the stairs with her arms open waiting for them – as she already knew he was coming.

Gaia was a tiny old woman with long braided white hair and kind eyes. She wore a layered dress woven from impossibly soft linen, dyed with faded reds, deep saffron, river blues, and earth pigments that looked as though they had been pulled straight from roots, stones, and flowers. The fabrics moved around her lightly, almost like hanging threads or a spider's web drifting in the wind, and the caveman had never seen cloth made with such care before. Nyx rushed into the house while the two shared a gentle hug between old friends who had truly missed each other.

Outside Gaia's house, the world felt older. The house stood on the cliffs above Apsu facing the great waterfall directly, as though it had been built there to watch over the river and the valley—almost like a lighthouse waiting for ships and guiding them in the dark.

The house was mostly carved into the bedrock rather than built. It wasn't a huge house, but it was very homely—being there always warmed the caveman's heart. Old darkened cedar wood curved together with stone and clay, while living vines stitched the walls like threads. Ancient fig trees leaned over the roof and huge ferns spread wide beneath them. Olive trees twisted around

the edges of the cliff, their roots gripping the rock like hands refusing to fall—yet still bending more and more every year, as if they were trying to jump into the waterfall and wander.

On one side there was a garden with seasonal fruits and vegetables like tomatoes, green peppers, grapes, and melons. On the other side, poppies, daffodils, blue lotus flowers, wild barley, mandrake, ivy, rosemary, sage, myrtle, and small patches of papyrus grew amongst one another in uneven clay beds and hanging baskets. Everything around the house looked alive and entangled together, just like Gaia's dresses.

Large spiderwebs covered parts of the wooden railings and corners of the roof. The spiders appeared more like guests in Gaia's house. Gaia never removed them. Swallows nested above the beams while lizards rested on warm stones. You could hear tree frogs beside the shallow pool at the center of the main terrace where dragonflies hovered over the water. A pair of ravens watched silently from a cedar branch while goats wandered freely between the terraces eating whatever Gaia had spread out for them that day.

Near the entrance, hanging lazily from a fig tree, was the giant sloth of the house—Mégas. It moved so slowly that the caveman only realised it was there when Mégas's unwillingly hanging hand brushed against his head as he passed into the house.

Inside, the house smelled of smoke, wet stone, herbs, and something sweet he could never identify. He reminded himself to ask Gaia about the smell but he would always forget to. Deep within the house, you could hear the raging roar of Apsu, yet it felt more like a gentle lullaby softly coming through the walls. Light entered through round openings in the ceiling and through

thin woven curtains dyed with saffron and indigo. The whole house glowed amber, red, and river-blue depending on the time of day.

On one side, drying herbs hung everywhere in bundles from the beams: sage, rosemary, mugwort, thyme, lavender, mint, and plants he did not recognise. Clay bowls filled with seeds, roots, figs, salt, and stones covered the shelves. There were woven baskets full of pomegranates, lemons, walnuts, cacao beans, and strange mushrooms growing from damp logs near the darker corners of the house. Thin threads tied with little bones, shells, beads, feathers, and knots hung between the wooden beams like webs.

At the center of the house stood a low circular fire pit surrounded by layered cushions, old rugs, animal furs, and smooth stones warmed by the heat. Cats slept wherever they pleased – there were many many cats in Gaia's house. Nyx was above them all, lying on the sofa, relaxed as if she was happy that the caveman was there. Small mice and ants moved openly near the walls without fear.

Gaia had already placed some snacks and wine for the caveman on the main terrace under the fig tree where Mégas hung. It was a sunny day, and she knew the caveman wouldn't want to sit inside while all this life was happening outside. They sat beside the shallow pool, where dragonflies hovered over the water and Apsu roared below them like the world breathing loudly.

For a while they did not speak. Gaia poured the wine, pushed a small wooden plate of figs, olives, walnuts, soft cheese, and honey towards him, and watched him eat after his hours-long journey through the valley.

The caveman noticed Mégas slowly hovering above them and getting closer to the conversation, a smile spreading across his face. "I left the cave," he said.

Gaia looked at him with interest, though he knew she already knew it. "Good," she said, reaching towards the low olive wood stand between them to pick a grape.

"I am not going back," asserted the caveman.

"The last time I saw you, I knew you would be leaving soon."

"I know you did... I knew it too, I guess, but I don't think I am still fully aware of what's happening."

"Well, you are not meant to know everything, my child, and that's why you came to Gaia first, didn't you? You need Gaia to show you the way?"

He sighed with a smirk on his face. "I just couldn't think of anywhere else to go... also, I like your terrace," he said, gazing at the birds flying far away in the distance.

"Now, if so, then be here. Taste my wine and tell me how it tastes. Look at my mountains and tell me what you see. Talk to my animals and tell me what you hear. Smell my flowers and tell me how you feel."

"Ok, I will drink your dark wine and tell you how it tastes. I will look at your giant mountains and tell you what I see. I will talk to your wild animals and tell you what I hear. I will smell your gentle flowers and tell you how I feel... but first, Gaia, tell me the story of the people who roamed the underworld."

"You wonder about the stories of the past."

"I don't know... I think about them often. Is it true that you were the one who led them through Sipapu? And that you are still waiting here for the ones who might appear one day?"

Nyx quietly appeared behind Gaia as the sun went down behind the webs of her hair. She crawled onto the floor between them and sat down. Gaia straightened up where she was sitting and paused for a while. She looked at the cup in her hands.

“I was much younger than you... born into darkness, fire, and shadows. We didn’t know what darkness meant back then because darkness was all we knew... and light was only magic that maybe once was a memory. We had our own light – the fire... the light of Maui that made the shadows of children and animals run across the walls.”

She looked into the distance. “Life was different back then. It was harsh, but simpler. It made sense to us... even when the earth was on fire, even when it was covered in ice. We just kept moving – all together.”

“When are we talking about exactly?”

“Who knows... there was no time back then, it doesn’t exist when light doesn’t,” she said. “But I have lived enough to know time means nothing to life.”

“Tell me more.”

“We would follow the water running through the walls deep into the ground. Anything we could find became food to us... You would think you wouldn’t see much, but you would be surprised how much you can find in the dark...”

She noticed a beetle passing through the patch of moonlight on the ground. “We used to see everything without our eyes... now I have forgotten how that felt,” she said.

Swirling the wine in her hand, she continued. “The earth kept changing, and with it, so did we... we kept moving wherever we could until we found this place... right where we are sitting now.

Sipapu is where I first laid my eyes on the trees whose roots I had only seen all my life. Before then, trees were gods reaching down to us from above. I remember the first time I stood under this fig tree, I don't know how long I sat here and watched the valley."

"Gaia, are you saying we are sitting at Sipapu... and that you are the spider woman from the story?" he asked, pointing towards the steps where he had come from.

Gaia laughed loudly, almost spilling the wine from her mouth. "Do I look like a spider to you?"

"Of course not... but are you?"

"They did indeed call me that... didn't they? But I am not the spider woman in this story, I am afraid. When we had to move underground, the sloths and moles showed us how to dig, and the ants and spiders showed us the way. We followed them, we lived with them, we became them. I don't know when or how, but in time that became my name."

"And you led them here?"

"Somehow I became the one who remembered... I was the one who could see. I was the one who kept going."

"And before finding this place, you passed through these four worlds?"

"I don't know how many but first fire turned everything dark," Gaia said quietly. "The air was black, the rivers were ash. We thought the world was ending, so we crawled into the stone."

The fire beside them cracked. "Then in the darkness chaos grew, and we crawled back to where we came from only to find madness. Madness burnt deeper than fire... and reached colder than ice. We broke slowly, and then we divided. The mad ones separated, and we kept moving until we found this valley... Nyx

was there from the start, she knows more than I do,” she said, stroking Nyx’s head.

Nyx made a sound as she remembered.

“Just like you are doing right now... you are crawling out of your cave to find a new world!” Gaia shouted, standing up on the moonlit terrace and raising her glass towards Apsu.

“So what did you learn from my story, boy?” she asked.

“I learned... that life is not meant to be comfortable, it can and will get tough, but when it does, you just keep going – no matter what. Also if you can, try not to go mad on the way.” He smiled, sipping from his wine.

“Now tell me, how does my wine taste?”

The caveman smelt the jasmine and rosemary in the air and took another sip, letting the wine pass through his lips and tongue slowly. He sensed berries and wild honey first... then something more earthy underneath... almost like the roots of a tree or grass after rain. “It tastes old,” he said quietly.

“Careful,” Gaia laughed softly.

“Ancient, I meant... but it truly tastes amazing. Definitely has something in it. What is it?” corrected the caveman.

“It is a good wine indeed... I made it myself, you know. It’s blackberries mostly... a little fig, wild grapes from lower down the valley, honey, and some herbs I don’t remember now.” She smiled softly. “Oh... rosemary. I remember that one. It helps me keep my memory. That’s funny...” she said, realising the irony.

THE WHITE OWL

Gaia, almost as if she had forgotten to do something, stood up and told the caveman that she would be back after a while. The caveman watched her layered linen dress flow around her slowly as she walked across the terrace. Nyx also watched Gaia fade away, and after a while she followed her into the dark.

The caveman suddenly felt the presence of himself again. The roar of Apsu felt calmer now, and he could hear the frogs in the distance. He could feel the wine in the heat of the blush on his face, but when he stood up he realised he had to move slower than he thought. He had been sitting and drinking wine for hours now, and after all that wine he could feel that nature was calling.

He walked into a dark corner of the garden facing away from the valley where he could still watch the moon. He thought about how it must have felt to walk out of Sipapu for the first time. His mind wandered through caves with tunnels lit by fire and walls covered with shadows. He felt something very close to those people; it made him feel warm, but it also scared him. Maybe something in their story made sense to him.

Tonight, Gaia's story gave him comfort. The sound of the frogs and the stream in front of him made him think that he was a frog on a leaf floating down a river with absolutely no control, never knowing what was coming next. Looking at the mountains ahead beneath the rising moon, he realised the only thing he could do as the frog was to watch, stay aware, and keep moving.

He locked his eyes on the glowing bright white moon and from within the light a bird flew ascending towards the valley, passing

right in front of him and almost turning its head to look at him. It was a large bird, but in the dark his eyes could not make it out clearly. It almost looked like a very large white owl spreading its wings above Apsu. It flew a little higher into the air and finally landed on a tree at the edge of the terrace, facing and looking directly at the caveman. "What was in that wine?" the caveman wondered, trying to focus his eyes on the white owl. It seemed larger than it should.

The owl started moving around the branch, trying to find the right spot for itself; the leaves moved when it did. It began shifting its wings and making strange sounds that almost felt ceremonial, there was a rhythm to it. The owl switched from one foot to the other as it widened the span of its wings, as if it was showing off its balance. For minutes the owl continued this strange ritual until it grew tired and the sounds, along with the movements, became slower and slower until they faded completely and the owl stood still.

It stood there silently for minutes.

The caveman never took his eyes off the owl. The owl was no longer looking at him.

Suddenly, the owl let itself go and dropped from the branch into the bushes below with a soft sound.

He could hear the bird struggling to get out of it.

THE SAMPLE ENDS HERE.

The full manuscript is available on request.

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