

# Sahmad's Tale

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## Chapter 1

My name is Sahmad. It may be a name you've heard around the home fires of the Agori or whispered by Glatorian as they stand watch. It's a name spoken with respect, and with fear, and that is how it should be. History will tell you that I am a monster, a slaver, someone who made a living capturing my fellow Agori and selling them to the Skrall. I'd be a fool to lie and pretend I did not do those things; of course I did. But there is more to the story than just that, and there is one thing you need to always remember about history: the winners write all the books.

I am a member of the Iron Tribe, not that you could tell by the color of my armor, that's intentional. Advertising that you were part of that tribe was probably, or still is, an invitation to be ostracized, mobbed, even stoned. We're not welcome in the nice little villages of the other Agori, good enough to share their food and drink, or clean enough to trade with. We're creatures for late night tales told to

new guards: "Better stay sharp or some Iron Agori will get you."

It wasn't always this way, of course. A long, long time ago, well before the Core War or the Shattering, my tribe lived in the mountains of Bota Magna and worked the mines. We sent the iron we dug out of the rock to the Fire Tribe for forging, and in return they provided us with finished tools and weapons. We were rough and coarse, but we were honored for our hard work and treated like any other Agori. Iron Tribe members lived a life full of hard, honest work, and didn't ask for anything more. Outside of some arguments with our neighbors in the mountains, the Skrall, we didn't have any conflicts with anyone.

When the end came, it came swiftly and quietly, like a dagger thrust to the back. A few miners working on the outskirts of our land began to act strangely. They were distracted, quarrelsome, and as days went by they got worse. Asked if they felt sick, they said no. The only odd thing that they could report was that their sleep had been disturbed, for they had stopped dreaming. Most of us laughed. After all, what mattered was the strength of our backs as we carved metal out of the rock and hauled it to the surface. What did it matter if our sleep was just that: sleep, unmarred by illusions and fantasies? And if you can't dream, then you don't have to worry about nightmares, right? Wrong. If you can't dream, your waking life becomes the nightmare.

The affected miners went from irritable to violent in short order, and from violent to mad. Dreams, it seems, are needed to release the bad energies that accumulate in all of us. Without them, the mind tears itself to shreds in time. Worse, what we now saw as a plague was spreading. More and more of my tribe lost the ability to dream. Those whose condition was far enough along would die raving lunatics. Those who were most recently infected were seized by horror and desperation, knowing the fate that awaited them.

Some of us seemed to be immune: myself, Telluris, a handful of others. Naturally our neighbors were curious about why we were still able to dream. None of us knew the answer. That didn't stop others in our tribe from talking of trying to find out, even if their efforts would mean our deaths. We banded together and hid in a cave, ready to defend ourselves against mad Agori who used to be our friends.

As things got worse, our village leader appealed to other tribes for help. The Skrall just laughed. The other tribes wouldn't even allow him to cross the borders into their lands. No one wanted the little bit of iron we still dug up, believing it somehow might carry the disease. All trade came to a stop.

When one of the still healthy Agori tried to join another tribe, he was driven off into the forest and killed by one of the beasts there. As far as we were concerned, he just as

well may have been killed by the Agori who rejected him. Being a member of the Iron Tribe now carried a death sentence. If the plague didn't claim you, your one-time trading partners would.

Telluris came up with the idea of using minerals to change the color of our armor and helmets in the hope of passing as members of some previously unknown tribe and finding sanctuary. It was a stupid idea, but I went along with it. I don't need to tell you how well it worked. Still, we survived. We watched our tribe die off one by one until there were too few left in any condition to threaten us. We made our escape, but there was nowhere to go. Add to that, none of us were sure if one of the others might be a carrier of the plague, and you could see why we chose to go our separate ways.

I headed south, not knowing Telluris was as well. I lived off what I could scrounge or steal. I saw the Core War erupt, and saw Agori killed by weapons made by iron my people had mined, and I laughed. When the Shattering happened, I was in Bara Magna. I had found a wagon and gained the loyalty of a Spikit in the only way possible—I fed it. I didn't know what the future had in store for me, but I had transport and I had hate. I would find a way to marry the two and gain my revenge.

Telluris took a different path. He started robbing the desert in a war machine based on the Skopio, acting like crushing a caravan or two would somehow make a difference.

I made other plans. I would turn the tribes' Agori into commodities. I would sell them to the Skrall and leave them wishing they had died in the plague along with my friends.

Much has changed in recent days. The Skrall have been driven from Rixtus, two giant men made of metal are battling in the sky for reasons I cannot imagine. I have no doubt the end of the world is upon us, but before that happens I have a task I want to perform. Somewhere, someone knows about what happened to my people. They know if the plague was accident or attack, error or experiment. Before Bara Magna crumbles to dust, I am going to find those answers. And if someone caused this fate to befall my tribe, then I hope somewhere they are dreaming of me, and waking up screaming.

## Chapter 2

I like to sleep. I like to sleep because I like to dream. Dreaming reminds me that I'm still alive.

Last night, I dreamt I was back in the village of Iron, working in the cold and damp of the mines. The air was filled with the rhythmic ching-ching of pick striking stone. Spherus Magna was generous that day and we emerged from the dark with loads of iron. I stood upon a peak and saw the Rock Agori in the distance scrambling to and fro like spider beetles. Then they stopped and turned as one to stare at our village. I turned to see what they might be looking at, and that was when I saw the first Iron Agori vanish. One moment he was unloading the ore cart, the next he was gone. In the next few moments, more disappeared, and then more. I knew that something terrible was happening. I had to stop it.

I ran through the village in search of the woman I loved. When I found her, I took her in my arms and held her tight, and an instant later, my arms held only empty air.

Help. We needed help. I rushed down the mountain toward the Rock Agori, I shouted for them to aid us, but no one paid any attention. I screamed, I pleaded, to no avail. I moved to strike one of the villagers down just to get their attention. And then I looked down and saw nothing. I had disappeared.

I woke up in a sweat. I had camped not far from the Skrall River. I took off my armor and knelt on the bank, trying to wash away my nightmare. In the moonlight, I could see something massive in the distance. When I took a better look, I saw it was the Skopio vehicle Telluris had built, now sprawled out on the sand like the carcass of a dead animal. The owner himself was crouched beside it. I hitched up the Spikit to my wagon and rode to Telluris. He seemed to be in mourning.

"What happened?" I asked.

"They ruined it," my tribesman answered. "The Glatorian, they sabotaged it. It won't work anymore."

I always thought the Skopio was a gaudy waste of time and materials. No matter how big your weapon, someone else can always build a bigger one. You don't conquer your enemies with something they can see coming ten miles away. You do it by working your way inside like the larva of a spiked worm, making yourself a part of their society, and then blotting them out from the inside. The Skopio was Telluris' crutch, his way of throwing an armed and armored tantrum at the world.

"You can't fix it?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't have the parts."

I looked at him. In a couple days, maybe, he would think to stop missing his machine and get out of the sun. By then he

would be in no condition to be of use to anyone. But unstable as he was, he was still Iron Tribe, one of the few left, so I owed him.

"Maybe we can find what you need," I offered. "I'm headed north. Come with me."

Telluris glanced up at me, then gestured to the dead Skopio. "I can't just leave it."

"It's not going anywhere," I answered. "And when we come back, we'll rebuild it, bigger and better than before."

Telluris got up and climbed in the wagon. I yanked on the reins, and the Spikit started plodding north. I wasn't sure exactly where we were going, but I had an idea. If the death of my tribesmen wasn't an accident, then it was murder. And if it was murder, someone had to benefit from it. Whoever that someone was, I was going to make them pay for every dead Iron Agori. I couldn't return to the scene of the crime because Bota Magna had split off a hundred thousand years ago, and wasn't coming back. All I could do was go north and hope I learned something, preferably before the two robots slugging it out overhead wrecked what was left of Bara Magna.

We had been traveling for a few hours when the Spikit suddenly reared up, both of its heads arching in panic. Telluris jumped off the wagon. He pointed to something, shouted, but I had already seen it myself. A long, gray

serpent was coiled in the sand up ahead, a serpent with blue eyes, and there was madness in those eyes.

"Kill it!" I said to Telluris.

My tribesman grabbed a blade from the wagon and advanced on the snake cautiously. It was some kind of a viper, poisonous to the extreme, and it was of no use alive. Dead, it would at least be dinner. Telluris raised the weapon and was about to bring it down when the snake reared up, as if it were going to strike, but instead of attacking, it spoke.

"Go ahead," it said, "Kill me. I can't take this anymore."

Telluris looked to me to see if he had gone crazy. I nodded to let him know I heard it too. I was reminded of some wild tale I had heard from a few Rock Agori. They were fleeing Roxtus after losing a battle to the other villages, and claimed an Ice Agori named Metus had been turned into a snake. Sounded to me like they had been eating too many rotten Thornax, but now... Well, there were plenty of weird things in the Bara Magna desert, but talking snakes isn't one of them.

"You're... Metus?" I asked the serpent.

It hissed in response.

"They said you were vowing revenge for what happened to you," I said. "Give up on that, did you?"

"I still want revenge," Metus replied. "Being turned into this monster wouldn't stop me, being turned into an insect wouldn't stop me, I would still find a way somehow if it weren't for..." He stopped.

I waited. When he didn't continue, I said, "Except for what?"

The serpent slithered through the sand and looked up at me with pleading in his ice blue eyes. "I've stopped dreaming," it whispered.

Suddenly, the desert seemed to grow very quiet and still, and all I could hear was my own voice saying "It's starting again."

## Chapter 3

I was standing on the desert sands, having a conversation with a talking snake. The sad part is, that was the bright spot of sanity in my day. And right in the middle of our exchange, the world ended. At least, that was how it felt to me.

First, the shadow passed over us; Telluris started babbling that the moon was falling from the sky; Metus buried his head under the sand. I looked up to see a massive celestial body passing overhead, a fragment of which slammed into the head of one of the two giant robots. The robot fell, and the impact knocked me off my feet. I made no effort to get up. If the world was coming to an end, might as well face it lying down. The second impact was, surprisingly, not as severe.

After a few moments, when no more robots were falling or moons flying through the sky, I lifted my head. Telluris was saying that Spherus Magna was whole again. He seemed excited about that. I didn't join in his celebration. You might wonder why I wasn't overjoyed to have the three segments of my planet one again. As anyone who has been on Bara Magna can tell you, it's very cold in the desert. I grew very cold over a hundred thousand years ago, and now all I can think of was that if the beings who unleashed the dreaming plague on my people were on Bota Magna, they were now within my reach again.

I got to my feet and brushed the sand off my armor. It was time to leave. "Let's go," I said to my two allies.

Telluris wasn't listening. He was still caught up in the miraculous return of Aqua Magna and Bota Magna, but then that's why I have the whip.

"You know what comes next," I said to both of my companions. "After the celebration is over, the Agori will start wanting to clean up the mess. Anyone who doesn't fit into their well-ordered little social structure will get shoved aside or trampled over. I don't intend to be either."

Metus looked unsure of what to do. He had stopped dreaming some time ago. The sickness had him. Within weeks, maybe days, he would be a raving lunatic, but before then I needed him. As he started to slither toward where the Agori and Glatorian stood, I brought an armored foot down on his body and pinned him to the sand.

"Think about it," I said. "I heard all about you. You think they're going to welcome you back? You're an embarrassment to them at best. They let you off with your life last time. Show your face again and they'll make a pair of boots out of you."

"What do you want of me?" the serpent, who had once been an Agori, asked me.

"I want to know everywhere you've been since you left Roxtus and everything you've done. I want to retrace every

inch you crawled. Somewhere along that route is a clue to what happened to you and to my people, and we're going to find it."

Immediately after the battle in Roptus, Metus had headed north into the mountains. Some of those mountains were gone now, reduced to pebbles by the battle between the two robots. But he said it wasn't until he had passed through them that his dreams ceased, so perhaps whatever I was looking for lay beyond.

He showed us where he had camped, near a pool. Had he drunk from it? No. What had he eaten? "Rodents," he said.

"Did they taste strange in any way?" I asked.

"They were rats!" Metus snapped. "Of course they tasted strange!"

"There must be something here," I said, looking around here, "something that infected you." "Maybe it's not something physical," said Telluris. "Maybe it's a... curse or something. Anyway, no one from our tribe would have traveled this far from the village, so how can this spot be the cause?"

"Perhaps whatever caused the plague moved on after its work was done," I answered. "Or maybe..."

I stopped. I had spotted something not far away, mostly hidden under plant growth. It was a scar in the earth in the

shape of a rough triangle, perhaps three feet wide at its base. I crouched down to see if there was a hole, but none could be seen, just a pattern carved into dirt and rock.

"Look around," I told the others. "See if you can find another mark like this."

We searched for an hour. There was no sign of any other triangle on the ground, nor any sign of who or what might have made this one. Was it a footprint? The track left by a mechanical device? Or some natural phenomenon I simply had not seen before?

I turned to ask Telluris his opinion, since he had seen much in his travels in the Skopio, but he was gone. Metus insisted he had not seen where he had went to.

I followed my tribesman's footprints in the soft earth until they stopped in the middle of an open patch of ground. The dirt had been disturbed here, as if something had swept it clean. I heard a soft sound behind me. I turned to see a sickly red tentacle covered in spines slithering up from beneath the soil. Before I could speak it wrapped itself around Metus and dragged him down into the ground. I didn't know whether to laugh or scream as a second tentacle briefly appeared to brush the dirt back into a normal pattern before it, too, vanished underground.

I aimed my Thornax Launcher at the spot and fired. It blew a hole in the ground, sending a shower of earth and rock

into the air. When the dust has cleared, I saw no trace of my two allies, or their attacker. Whatever had taken them was gone.

I was furious, frustrated, stymied at every turn. Just when I had found the first sign of an answer, it might be snatched away from me. At any moment, the tentacles might return. I had no way to reach Telluris or Metus, and no hope of survival if I stayed. But if I left... If I left, I might never solve the mystery that plagued me. My people would go unavenged.

I stood, right on the spot where Metus had disappeared. "Come then!" I shouted. "Attack! Drag me down! But before I die, creature, I'll know your truth."

I was still standing there as three tentacles groped blindly from the earth and wrapped themselves around me. There wasn't even time to yell as the sky above me was replaced by earth and clay, as I was ripped from the realm of light and sent hurtling down into a world of shadows.

## Chapter 4

I was dead. Three grotesque tentacles had erupted from the ground, wrapped themselves around me, and dragged me down to my death. That was the only explanation, for if I wasn't dead, then I was mad, and I'd much prefer extinction to insanity.

If you have been following this chronicle up to now, you know that I, Telluris, and an intelligent Agori-turned-serpent named Metus have been searching for the cause of the Dreaming Plague that had wiped out the Iron Tribe ages ago. Our investigation had not gone well, considering we evidently wound up a meal for a monster. But the world beyond death was not at all what I expected.

I was lying on a cot in a large room. There were perhaps three dozen other cots, half of them filled with wounded or ill Agori. Now and again a water Agori would walk by, bringing food and drink to my companions. When she noticed my eyes were open, she dropped her tray and rushed over.

"Sahmad, you're awake!" she said, smiling.

Agori do not smile at me. Sneer, yes. Curse, certainly. Even spit on occasion. But smile, never.

Hence my belief that if I was not dead, I was in an asylum of some sort.



I tried to sit up. My body refused to cooperate.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"The healer's chamber," she answered. "We thought you would never awaken."

"Let me rephrase my question," I said. "Where am I?"

"Where?" A light dawned in her eyes, "Oh, of course you wouldn't know. This is the city of New Atero on Bota Magna. You were found on northern Bara Magna and they took care of you as well as they could down there until things were ready here."

Yes, she was mad. There was no New Atero, certainly not in Bota Magna. And if they found me, they would have found my two companions, but I didn't see either of them here.

"Telluris, Metus, they were traveling with me. Where are they?"

My deranged new friend looked uncomfortable. "We never found Telluris. Metus survived for a few months, they even used the mask to turn him back into an Agori, but it didn't help. I'm sorry." "I'm surprised you bothered," I said. "The three of us were not exactly popular with the majority of the Agori."

"That was a long time ago."

I recognized that voice. It was a little older, a little rougher, but it belonged to Kiina, the water Glatorian. Sure enough, there she was, her armor more battle scarred and her left arm hanging useless at her side.

"Really?" I said. "I didn't think there was a time limit on hatred."

"A great deal of change after the fall of the Skrall," Kiina answered. "You missed all of it. You've been asleep for 750 years, Sahmad."

There was a moment then, just a moment, mind you, when I felt rattled. I mean, it could have been true. The monster might have chewed us up and spat us out. Someone might have found Metus and I and kept us alive. All Agori and Glatorian might be living as brothers and sisters in a beautiful new city, ready to welcome even survivors of the Iron Tribe into their arms.

And Thornax fruit might taste like boiled Skopio meat, and the Great Beings might be handing out gift baskets of implants, but I wasn't ready to believe that either.

I pushed myself up off the cot, ignoring my body's protests. The Agori handed me a stick I could use to support myself. She tried to talk me out of leaving the chamber. I told her I had places to go.

Outside, the city was as busy as a nest of dune spiders. Agori and Glatorian ran here and there, interacting with other beings, large and small. The strangers seemed more machine-like somehow. Yet at the same time, their movements were too fluent and graceful to be purely mechanical.

My first thought was that they would make good slaves. I guess old habits die hard. It all looked, sounded, and felt real, but I knew it wasn't. If I hadn't been sure before, Kiina's appearance had quenched it. I don't care how much time had passed. She would never appear at my bedside except to stab me. And 750 years was not enough to wipe out over 100 millennia of suspicion, fear, and disgust. Someone wanted me to think this was a brand new world. But in my heart, I knew it was the same old one. Worse, even. Before there had been someone to fight. Who did you battle when the enemy was determined to stay hidden?

As I looked around at everyone wavering together for the greater good, I kept thinking, Whose dream is this? It certainly wasn't mine. My people were dead. They couldn't enjoy all this peace and good feeling, and if they couldn't benefit from it, I didn't want to either. I would just have seen New Atero go the way of old Atero.

I was pondering ways to make that happen when I spotted a flash of familiar armor. The metal bore the colors of latter-day Iron Tribe, post-plague. Okay, I admit it, now I was intrigued. Was this supposed to be some survivor who

made his or her way to the city and found acceptance? If there was one in this fantasy, could there be more? I wondered: what if there was a grain of truth to all this? What if any Iron Tribe member who showed up in this illusion really was alive somewhere? Was that the point of this, to point me in the direction of other survivors?

I started to run, pushing my way past Agori and their mechanical helpers. I rounded the corner and wound up in the middle of a market. Tables were piled high with armor, food, cloth, pieces of art. I spotted my quarry at the far end of the square, turning into a side street. I kept moving, knocking over display stands and provoking angry exclamations all around. Ackar, a Fire Glatorian, tried to stop me, but he was too old and too slow.

I took the corner at top speed and skidded to a halt in the soft earth. An Iron Tribe member was standing in the center of the street, aiming a Thornax Launcher right at my head. But this wasn't just any of my brethren. This was the woman I loved, who died from the dreaming plague more than one hundred thousand years ago. I started to say her name. She fired her weapon. The Thornax sped toward me. I felt an impact against my helmet, saw a flash of light, heard the dull roar of an explosion, and then I was dead. Again.

Darkness became light. I was back in the healer's chamber. This time, there was no water Agori, no Kiina, no Agori of other tribes in cots. All I saw were Iron Agori. The

attendant stopped to stare at me. The patients sat up in their beds and they all spoke at once in the same voice.

"We thought you would be stronger, Sahmad. But you were just as weak as Telluris, Metus, and all the rest. Still, we can take some comfort. Weak souls taste lovely, after all."

## Chapter 5

There are some days when you feel like every weapon in the world is loaded and aimed at you. There are some days when you know that even your best friend, if you had one, would be pointing you out to a Skopio as a possible meal.

I was having one of those kind of days. Let me explain.

I was sitting in an illusory healing tent facing a bunch of Agori who weren't really there, yet were all talking in the same voice. And they weren't sending warm greetings, they were talking about...well, let's just say they were good at making threats and leave it at that. Was I afraid? Sure. But just like you could take a Thornax fruit and turn it into a weapon, you can take fear and turn it into anger. Fear is a rock you can hide under. Anger is a rock you can throw at someone else.

"Are you going to show yourself?" I asked my unseen host, "Or just keep talking through your made-up Agori?"

Laughter filled the room. It sounded like crystal being shattered and then being ground into dust.

"You think the beings seen before you are the products of my imagination?" my captor asked. "Then look again."

The Agori were shimmering, fading, and in their place stood Sisters of the Skrall, maybe a dozen. I began to regret my question. I knew what the Sisters could do to your brain.

But there's an old saying, "You don't get across the Skrall River by just dipping in your toe."

"So the Sisters work for you? Are they responsible for what happened to the Iron Agori of the dreaming plague?"

There was that laughter again. I was starting to hate that sound. "The Sisters are silly little fools," came the answer. "They actually believe a Great Being vested power upon them. It was I that gifted them with the psionic powers they wield. I thought it would be amusing to see them destroy the males of their species. But, like you, they were too weak, and allowed themselves to be driven out. They didn't have the will to conquer, and now they have no will at all."

"And was that what the plague was, just another one of your experiments!?" I demanded.

The mouths of every Sister opened, and the same answer came from them all. "Experiment? Oh, no. That was lunch."

The Sisters of the Skrall dropped to the ground then, as if their legs could suddenly no longer support them. A pinpoint of light appeared near the far wall and rapidly grew larger and larger. My host was making his appearance. I was about to confront the being who wiped out my tribe.

Imagine staring directly into the sun, and the reddish streaks burned into your eyes, taking the shape of things too hideous to describe. Even when you close your eyes, look away, it makes no difference. You know you've seen

something you can never erase from your memory. Would you be fortunate to stay sane, or would that be the worst possible luck?

"I hungered," said a voice from the center of the sphere of light. "And when I hunger, I feed. The dreams of your people were a very satisfying meal. Enough so that I did not need nourishment again for many years. Of course, once I was done, your people had no dreams left. But they, like the dreams themselves, were hardly to be missed."

I needed a weapon. I needed something to blow out this malevolent sun that was still expanding. It filled the room with light, but no heat. Just a bone-chilling cold that made the desert night seem tropical. But I had no weapon. Anger, defiance, stubbornness, a willingness to die to avenge my people, those I had in abundance. They would have to do.

"Nice light show," I said. "Pretty fancy for something the Great Beings made and threw away. That is what you are, isn't it, another one of their projects gone wrong?"

The light flared brighter. Crimson tentacles erupted from the glowing sphere. I barely avoided their grasp.

"I existed before your Great Beings were born," said the creature. "I sensed their coming and wondered if they might pose some threat to me. I even tried to touch them with madness, but their minds were too... strange. Their minds fed on mine. They took the dreams from me and that

energy inspired them to greater and greater feats of creation, and I was forced to hide in the depths of Spherus Magna."

Hide and wait, I thought. And while waiting, it got hungry. And the Agori paid the price.

I heard noises behind me. I glanced over to see Metus and Telluris rushing in. Or was it them? Last time I had seen Metus, he was a snake. Now he was walking on two legs, like any other Agori, and there was nothing serpentine about him.

"Dreams," said the creature, whose brightness filled the room now. "Is he a snake, who dreams he is an Agori, or an Agori who dreams he is a snake?"

"Come on!" said Telluris. "We have to get out of here!"

I admit it. I hesitated. I wasn't sure if my two allies were real or more figments of imagination. By the time I made a decision, the Sisters of the Skrall were back on their feet and heading for us. We ran then, one fellow tribe member and one Agori who shouldn't have been able to run. We ran through tunnels that stretched for miles, ran until we saw the light from the surface shining up ahead. Telluris let out a whoop and forced ourselves to keep going. On the surface, in the sunlight, everything would be alright. We would leave our fears behind us in the dark and then find a way to banish their source forever. All we had to do was

make it to the light. And we did. We climbed and clawed our way back to the surface, back to the bright Spherus Magna morning. For now, we were safe.

Only...only it wasn't morning. It was the middle of the night. And the light we had seen, the light we had run to past all endurance was not the light of the sun. It was the thing. The creature we had tried so hard to escape, it was on the surface, it was freed from whatever had forced it to hide below ground for so long. And somehow I knew it was hungry.

## Chapter 6

A long time ago, I stumbled on a nest of desert leeches. If you've never seen one, they're disgusting little things. They nest on the ceilings of caves, and that's where their young hatch. The babies cling to the roof, waiting for someone to pass underneath. Then, they rain down on you, attach themselves to any exposed flesh and feed on your life energy. When you find yourself under a nest, the first thing you feel is anger. "How could I be so stupid as to walk into a cave and not look up?" And then the horror hits you, dragging your guts down to the ground, turning your arms and legs to water, making your spirit clench like a fist.

It's the worst feeling you can imagine. And it's how I was feeling right now as I watched the thing that had wiped out my people manifesting itself on the surface of Spherus Magna. It was bellowing its triumph in my head. I could hear it shout its name, "Annona", as it exulted in being free after so many years underground. And it only stayed hidden out of fear of the Great Beings, and last time I checked, no Great Beings were around.

This wasn't good news. I looked at my two companions. Telluris was never a picture of sanity to begin with, and this experience was close to rendering him catatonic. Metus was a greedy, backstabbing crook who'd been turned into a snake by this Mata Nui guy with a magic sword or some

such thing. Now, he was back to walking on two legs, not sure how.

"What are we standing here for?" he was saying. "We need to run away."

I shook my head.

"Run where? Do you really think there's anywhere this thing couldn't follow? All we would do is wear ourselves out and make things easier for it."

"I'll get my Skopio," Telluris babbled, referring to the war machine he built from scraps a while back. "That will save us."

"Your Skopio is a pile of junk," I snapped. "Not that it wasn't much more than that when it was intact. No, we're going to need more than that to stop something that turns snakes back into Agori."

Metus looked at me like I was crazy.

"Annona didn't do that. What are you, nuts? Mata Nui never intended that snake thing to be permanent, I guess. Or maybe something happened to him. I don't know. All of a sudden I was back to being myself again. Although granted, I still have a real craving for rodents." Through all this, Annona's radiance kept getting bigger and brighter. It looked like a star, a red star, although I can't recall seeing a star with tentacles before. It was scouting, I guess is the best

word for it. It fed on dreams. It would seek out a community and take that dream energy from them, driving them all mad in the process, and I had no idea how to stop it. Maybe it couldn't be stopped.

I felt it pause. It had sensed a feast waiting for it. Where? Would it be back in the desert where the Bara Magna Agori were assembled or in some village in Bota Magna? Could its reach extend even to other worlds?

All I knew was that someone was on the menu, and they had to be warned, or they would end up like the Iron Tribe. Annona flared brightly. It was getting ready to leave, heading for its next meal. I started to run.

"Come on," I yelled. "It's not going without us."

"You are crazy," said Metus. "I'm not going anywhere near that thing."

"Telluris, get moving," I answered. "This thing, it's going after your Skopio, you need to stop it."

That was enough to get Telluris moving, but Metus was rooted to the spot.

"Stay," I told him. "You're only in the middle of nowhere, unarmed, with no idea how to get home, and no home to go to. Why should you come with us? After all, you have so much to lose."

Metus cursed and started running toward us. Together, we leapt into Annona's radiant sphere, even as it blinked out of existence. The next thing I knew, I was drowning. By sheer instinct I kicked toward what I hoped was the surface. My head broke the water and I gasped for air. When I had my breath again, I looked around, stunned.

I was in Aqua Magna. Metus and Telluris were nearby, gasping and choking. In front of us, about fifty yards away, was a stretch of beach and beyond that, rocky cliffs. Perched atop one of the cliffs was a fortress, gleaming in the moonlight, bursting with defenses, and looking impregnable.

And there was Annona, slowly rising toward that fortress. I didn't know whose fortress it was or who lived in it. I only knew they were all dead if Annona reached it. The three of us swam for the beach and started scrambling up the cliffs. Annona hadn't noticed us or, if he had, simply didn't care. But I knew we would never reach the top before it did. Our fight was over before it started. Sure enough, Annona vanished from view well before we made it to the top of the cliff, particularly given what a poor climber Metus turned out to be.

The sight we saw when we reached the fortress was something out of a nightmare. Weird warriors, heavily armed, powerful, with what looked like grins plastered on their faces were busy battling empty air. Annona had diverted them with illusions just as it had us. Now it would conceal itself and feed until these warriors and anyone else

here were dead. The radiance moved toward the vast doors of the fortress. Nothing stood in its way.

Nothing, that is, until the doors burst open from the inside, and something stepped out into the night. The newcomer was twelve feet tall, with golden skin and rippling muscles. Its eyes and face were vaguely reptilian, and it looked at Annona through the narrow slits of those eyes.

“I have come to feed,” said Annona. “Surrender.”

The golden being smiled.

“You feed on dreams, and we would not exist without them. They are food for you, but we take them and make them real. And in so doing, we conquer and enslave. And thus it would appear you are destined to go hungry this night.”

Annona flared brighter, its radiance blinding. I couldn’t see anymore - only hear its voice and that of its new opponent.

“And who will deny me my feast?” asked Annona. “You, a pitiful amalgam of lesser races, bandits, thieves, and, yes, one thought dead? An experiment in desperation. You would stand against me?”

I don’t know for certain what happened next. I heard a sound like the sky had ripped open. The ground shook violently beneath me and then I heard Annona screaming and one thing more.

The golden being said simply, “Yes, creature. I would stand against you.”



## Chapter 7

I came to the shores of Aqua Magna once in my life, back when I had a life. And a tribe, friends, and love. I was there to scout a trade route. Coming from the mountains, I had never seen so much water before. Even though the shoreline was rocky and desolate, it still looked like the most amazing - and in some ways, terrifying - thing I had ever seen. Since then, I have seen my people wiped out, my planet shattered, and a thousand other things that would make most people's nightmares look like idle daydreams. But I had never seen anything quite like what I was seeing now.

Annona, all crimson, fiery brilliance of it, was in agony. Spears of rock had suddenly erupted from the ground and pierced the energy being, and it writhed in pain. How mere rock could affect someone so powerful, I didn't know. But it might have had something to do with who it was fighting. The golden being didn't have a name, at least not one I knew, but I had learned a great deal about him in the last few moments as he watched his enemy fading. He was made from other beings, species whose names I had never heard before, kept referring to himself as "we" and "us", which was kind of creepy. But his argument with Annona was easy to see.

"The dreams of my people give me life," said the golden being, "and in return, I make their dreams real. And they dream of your death, Annona."

"I know all this," Annona replied. "Why do you think I sought you out, creature? Dreams are my meat and drink. With them, I am power. Without them, I am nothing."

The golden being shrugged and turned away. His followers, warriors who had been fighting empty images conjured up by Annona, followed. Evidently, Annona was too busy dying to be able to keep his illusions up.

"It makes little difference to me what you are," said the golden being dismissively, "as long as you are dead."

For just a moment, I felt satisfaction. The creature that had destroyed my tribe was going to die, and if it wasn't by my hand, it still felt like justice had been done. I should have known better.

All around the golden being, his warriors began to collapse. Some sank to their knees, some babbling insanely, others drew their weapons and started advancing on their leader. Taken off-guard, I guess the golden being's power weakened. Annona wrenched himself free of the spikes, a peal of laughter coming from its core.

"I have always preferred to eat my meals slowly," it said. "I have never before tried consuming all the latent dream energy in beings all at once. But I see the result is the same:

madness. Now, my friend, I believe the topic at hand was imminent death."

The golden being actually looked scared. I didn't like that at all. Behind him, his fortress was starting to waver and blur. Worse, there were...things appearing in the windows, others slithering or crawling across the landscape.

"You imbecile!" the golden being cried. "You don't understand. I bring dreams to life, even the dreams of the mad. Do you realize what that means?"

I did. All of a sudden it was like going for a walk through the head of my pal Telluris. The ground was buckling, the fortress was melting, and as for the warriors...I don't get sick easily, but the dreams of the deranged are pretty horrible things.

Annona was growing brighter. I doubted it ever had so much energy inside it at once. As if it wasn't dangerous enough before, it looked about ready to incinerate anyone who got too close. I wanted to run back to the ocean and swim across the planet, but I knew there was no place on this world that was safe. A few of the warriors reacted to Annona's approach by raising their weapons and charging. It was the last bad decision of their lives. The fortress was completely gone now. The horizon was full of gibbering things, some practically formless, some with forms you could still see even when you closed your eyes. The golden being was retreating back toward them, but he was off-

balance and rattled. It was going to be over in a matter of minutes.

That's when Telluris broke. He bolted out of our hiding place, screaming and waving a branch he had picked up from the beach. He headed right for Annona. If this were a tale, Metus and I would have risked our lives to try and stop him. But it's not a tale. Not that kind, anyway. And neither one of us was going to die for Telluris. He wasn't worth it. I'm not sure anyone is. I'll give him credit, he got within striking distance of Annona, but that was all he got. He died in mid-scream. It was a stupid, reckless, idiotic way to go, and I was about to repeat it, but I didn't plan on dying today. Then again, there's an old saying: if you want to make the Great Beings laugh, tell them your plans. I was banking on the golden being having the power to take out Annona if he got the chance to use it. That meant getting my enemy off his back for a few moments. I thought I saw a way to do that. The only things the golden being created still intact were those rock spikes. I didn't know why they had been able to hurt Annona - maybe someone dreamt they could - but they had. They were about to hurt him again.

"Come on," I said to Metus, "we need to break off one of those spikes."

"Are you crazy?" he predictably answered. "I'm not going out there."

I put a firm hand on his shoulder. "Do you remember when you were a snake?" I asked. "Remember how that felt?"

"Sure," said Metus.

"Well, I can make you feel a lot worse and I don't need a magic sword to do it," I growled. "Now come on."

Together we made a run for it, dodging crazed warriors and hoping Annona was too drunk with power to notice us. We made it to the nest of spikes all right, but then cheerful Metus pointed out a little problem.

"They're solid rock!" he said. "What are we supposed to use to break them?"

I was tempted to suggest that we use his head. Instead, I noticed one of the spikes had been weakened when Annona wrestled itself free. With Metus' help, I snapped it off. It wasn't a very long weapon, but the pointy end was intact and that was all I cared about.

"You stay here," I told Metus. "If I fail, try to break off another piece and try yourself. What am I saying? You're going to run as soon as my back is turned. Alright, if I die, don't tell anyone how. I don't want people thinking I was quite this insane and idiotic in my final moments."

I hefted the spike and I ran. As I got closer to Annona, I realized I had to close my eyes or be blinded, so I did. As soon as the heat became unbearable, I knew I was a close

as I dared get. I reared back and threw the spike as hard as I could.

I heard a sizzle. Then I heard a scream. You know, a scream can be a delightful sound, if the right person is doing it. I stumbled backwards until I couldn't feel the heat anymore. I took a chance and opened one eye. Annona had stopped moving forward. The rock spike was buried near one of its energy tentacles joined its main body. It was positioned just right, so that its tentacle couldn't reach to pull it out. It wasn't a fatal blow, far from it, but it had slowed him down.

That was when I saw the golden being. He was looking right at me. Somehow, I could hear what he was saying, even from so far away. Then I knew what I had to do. Both of those powerful entities thrived on dreams. Annona fed off the kind you have at night, good or bad. The golden being took the ones you had in your heart or the darkest parts of your soul - the aspirations, hopes, wishes - and made them real. There were a hundred ways he could attack Annona, but only one that would really hurt. I closed my eyes again. I dreamed a dream. And in my dream, no one on Spherus Magna, no one on any world anywhere near, could dream or wish or hope. I dreamed that there were no more dreams.

I opened my eyes again and I felt it, the emptiness, the void left behind when dreaming stops. This was how my tribe had felt just before they died. But this time the energy had not gone into Annona, it had not gone anywhere. It had just

ceased to be. The golden being had made the last dream real.

I saw him falter. I saw Annona flare up. Suddenly it knew that even if it won today, there would be no more meals. It would be trapped on Spherus Magna as its inhabitants went mad and died, but it would starve long before the last Agori perished. I expected Annona to rage and scream. Instead, it just hovered in the air and spoke directly to the golden being.

"You did this," it said. "Why?"

"Perhaps because monsters belong in dreams, rather than dreams in monsters," the golden being replied. "Or perhaps, I just want you dead."

There was a long silence. Then Annona said, "A deal."

"What sort of deal?"

"A dream...of another world filled with other beings where I can live and feed. Your empire will be safe, and I will be sated."

The golden being pondered the offer for a while, and then said, "Agreed."

I started to protest, and then something made me stop. I realized that I could have dreamed Annona out of existence before, but didn't. Maybe because somehow I knew it wouldn't work. If the golden being could have eliminated

Annona that easily, he would have done so. Yet here was a second chance to do the job, and do it with some style.

"Sahmad will dream the dream," the golden being said.

"No!" Annona answered. "I do not agree!"

"I have given my word to you," the golden being said. "Sahmad will not dare to violate that."

He was right - I had no need to violate it. I was going to give Annona just what he asked for. I closed my eyes. I imagined a lush, green world, a paradise. I imagined Annona there free to feed to its heart's content. And I imagined a population for it to feed off of, each and every one of them a being just like Annona. They would feed off each other and within a year, not one would be left.

I opened my eyes and looked at Annona as it faded away. "Got you," I said.

When he was gone, the golden being approached me. "You could have dreamed me out of existence as well. I am surprised you did not."

I looked him up and down. He was a weird one, probably too clever by half, but for right now...

"You're not my problem," I said. "That thing was and now it's not. So we go our separate ways."

"For now," the golden being said. "After you give the world back the gift of dreaming."

"And give you back your power," I said. "Alright, done."

"You will hear from me again, you know," the golden being said. "I will not be content to stay on this spit of land forever."

"Let me know when you and your army are coming," I answered. "Maybe I'll join up."

I could have had him make me a boat, but I decided to walk. Annona was as good as dead, and there was a lot going on in Bara Magna worth seeing these days. Not that I would be welcome to any part of it. Metus either, wherever he had run off to. But that was all right. If I was right, they were going to have more trouble than they knew how to handle pretty soon and I'd enjoy watching their misery.

As for me, I was heading north to the mountains. There were people I lost a long time ago that I could finally say goodbye to. After that...well, that will be another tale entirely.

**THE END**