

The Long Hunt

They stopped to watch as a lonely braid of lightning made its way to earth. Spasming on its flight and revealing a horizon of rent metal, meadows of plastic. At a squint, you could see where the largest buildings had fallen, their great plasterboard corpses, their chains and girders protruding like bones.

The sky appeared unfaithful to the land and bled a soothsayer's crimson before the lightning faded entirely. Then all remaining to break the gloom were their own flames. Flames that spoke but were never heard, such was the depth of darkness and the frailty of human tools.

They wore the scrap like finery, each of them clanking forth as though born from it. In their right hands were carried the slats of iron they called pikes, in their left were the palmfires finding, so far, only the bodies of vacant tin cans and polyester

bags but Manuk knew, with every step, they might uncover something that could watch them back.

There had been a shrieking from the east.

Their pace was growing quicker.

Hunting was a patience game. They'd found little in the way of footprints and so they tracked blind, craning for a human voice, studying the code of the waste floor. He'd seen the charred remains of some quadruped lay broken inside the husk of a generator but otherwise no sign their quarry had passed through. His feet were sore. Like with all tribesmen, they were hardened by way of experience, grey and papered and impervious to all but the sharpest of jags, though after hours of hiking even the toughest soles could be worn down.

He looked up to chieftain Dahka, scrutinising the road ahead.

“It feels colder this way.” One of the huntlings muttered. No one spoke to disagree. As they had ventured further from the tribe so had the rime grown ever corpulent beneath them and the hills of litter started to glisten.

Dahka had gathered twelve. Disposables, whose lives were pledged to the hunt. Some were the real thing but most were still huntlings and unfit for bloodshed. Manuk raised his torch and those fellow spear-hands were revealed in the burning motes. Copper skin and brazen eyes that blinkered under the scrutiny of his light. They had the lurch of soldiers, made weary by fear and the constant threat of violence. Each of them casting black and stoic apparitions across the surface of the world.

“Up ahead.” One of them whispered. Someone from the front lifted the edge of their hand and gazes were drawn to a crest on the landscape. It appeared like the shape of a man but was too still to be breathing.

They stalked a wary circle before putting the fires upon it. An effigy. Cut from an iron stake, feathered with plastic, pointing up like a finger, skyward.

Someone had placed a dog’s head upon the nail. It had drooped under rainfall and looked like it was sulking. In the tribal tongue, they would have called it a ‘hork’.

The troop slowed to a stop but, for a moment, no one risked to breath. Manuk heard the gasp of an engine and turned to see Dahka steering his arak closer. He was the only one granted a vehicle and

that great machine crept forth, sweating oil, its eight legs punching holes into the waste below.

He braked to inspect.

What was left of the mutt's face had been undressed and revealed behind each wakeless socket were the hollow spaces in which thoughts had once swum and little dreams gathered. Manuk saw, behind his breathing ventilator, Dahka's eye was moving. A bloodshot orb that gazed a slow trail across the troubled expanse beyond.

Was it worth the risk?

His torch was larger than the others and raged so brightly that you could make out its trembling reflection in the scrap metal below. Eventually he nodded them forward and they'd begun to advance when a small voice interrupted.

“We can't go out there.”

The group turned to see one of the huntlings, stood alone beside the hork.

He pointed at it,

“Don't you know what this means? Any further, we'll be on their land.”

He was sweating and the sweat had waxed his skin to an anxious shine.

The rest of them looked around.

“Everywhere is their land.” One hunter replied.

The boy was chewing his lip,

“Let’s go back. We tried. We got far.”

Manuk traded a glance with Oloa. His friend’s eyes were narrowed.

“Fall back in line.” Someone muttered and they each turned their backs.

“I- I won’t-”

No one answered.

The pack continued on and eventually Manuk did glance back. The boy’s torch had quickly become a speck on the lightless hills, quivering as the dusk came to claim it.

“Wet land.”

One of the frontrunners warned them back. She stepped in ahead and let the rainwater taste her calves, begun to poke that slush in search of traps.

“Keep your fires low.” He heard ordered.

The rest of them bent until their knuckles dragged, then they filed onto the dry road.

A moat of sediment was forming either side. A pool made black from the dregs of tar and molting acrylic. Dahka motioned ‘forward’ and they began a silent slouch, one behind the other, careful so as not to slip.

Firelight echoed far across those haunted rivers and revealed the mounds of trash floating. Some giant metal carcass had, long ago, risen from the water’s edge and died with its wires and joists spilling forth like entrails. There was too much randomness in their landscape for there to be sense also. Most of those old-world oddities remained nameless.

They walked quickly for some time and then stopped altogether. A group of warriors, drenched in iron from the waist down, made immediately noiseless. Their heads were turning one by one.

Something had disturbed the water.

Dahka raised his torch and that greater light went scrambling over bin lids and bottle caps.

Nothing.

Manuk turned to check the tail of their procession. Behind the last man, the path retired into a veil of darkness. He met eyes with another huntling, a boy, blinking furiously into the shadows.

“Shouldn’t we go back?” The boy whispered.

“Quiet. Or I’ll gut you myself.” Manuk spat.

Whatever oddities had been left to float in the marsh now began to creak under a nameless weight. A gentle groaning, spoken from the gloom. Their vision stretched no further than the foamed ripples that had appeared upon the shoreline.

“Keep moving.” A hunter demanded.

They did. Pressing through, each pike pointed as hairs on a dog. Manuk squinted out ahead and saw his brothers’ footprints in the mire.

Distance had become their anxiety. Every step further from Echolo was another willing yard into the undetermined. As they had trekked deeper so had their voices turned to whispers and their whispers to rattled thoughts. Of songless burials. Of ends unspoken. Those dank prophecies they kept noiseless in the mind for fear of disturbing the perfect silence that had enveloped them.

Manuk knew those dunes better than most, vast pews salient and full of old wisdom. Their secrets and stories. It *was* getting colder and their chances, increasingly slim.

He was so concerned with watching the flanks that he almost tripped over something cylindrical. He looked down to find a commune of roaches scattering in brainless directions to reveal a canister of some kind, he brought it to his nose. *Scented*.

Oloa emerged at his side,

“Another for the collection?”

The question had no likely answer. Manuk placed it into a net that swung from his belt.

“Stay alert.” He muttered.

Not long ahead, two larger trash heaps began to rise from the water like great, marsh tumours; too steep to be climbed and suffocating the path between. There was a sound like percussion as something made its way down and came clattering to their naked feet.

A bucket.

It rocked tenderly where it lay, drooling forth a pale and alien mucus. One of the huntlings was dancing hysterically, unable to

apprehend this disturbance and troubling the scrap with panicked feet. Manuk gripped his pike tighter. Oloa hurried over to the boy,

“Sh! It’s just a bucket. Look.”

The boy began to cry.

“They’ll hear us. Do you want them to hear us?” Oloa hissed.

The boy was shaking his head feverishly. Burrowing his chin into his neck as if looking there for a way out.

Manuk spat to his side. Then, between two bent oil chambers, he saw it. If he had blinked he’d have missed it; a dirt-speckled ankle that disappeared before the light could catch it. It remained, for a second, then disappeared back into that unmapped world, beyond sight.

Manuk turned to the rest of the pack, still fussing over the boy. He glanced once more into the darkness.

No sound.

No movement.

But he could feel it. That unmistakable feeling. He was being watched.

His hands were clammy as he rubbed them against the fabric on his waist.

He listened closely and found a slow and rasped breathing from behind the veil of shadow.

He waited for the movement that would betray his prowler. The movement never came. The breathing had stopped.

He swallowed.

A moment passed.

And he backed away, filing into rank without so much as a mutter.

It was no better as they trod a wary pace through the marshes; the shapes on their flanks were growing in number. More horks, festooned as the figures of men. Their message was simple: go back.

This time he reckoned around twenty, assembled from ribs of copper and the old, black shreds of cloth from the litter bed. At a closer inspection, he fell to shivers. They had, tethered to them, entire handfuls of human hair.

One by one the youngers were awakening to the horrors.

Oloa was biting his lip,

“We can’t ask them to go any further. These hills are going to be swarming.”

Manuk looked up at the idols, their freakish bodies, their faces painted like dolls of ritual.

“We must.” He eventually replied and paid a glance to their chieftain, Dahka, leading them forward; the man’s great spider, bred of molten steel, creeping amid the fleshlings below. It was an artifact of the metalworks; eight legs fused beneath a larva tap. To the hunters, such contraptions made little to no sense; Manuk reckoned that in fire some things melt and some things come out stronger.

Dahka had not stopped to heed the dead nor so much as turned his sight from the road approaching.

On the chieftain’s orders their movements were reduced to tiptoes. Each inch reluctant. Eyes gambling every direction except for down.

Through paranoid eyes, bottlecaps became eyeballs. Fuel rods were fingers. Their feet slipping on the unworn path, collected rust in their calluses. Until the ground was no longer the ground.

They were some ten paces in before one of the huntlings cried out.

Manuk was amongst those ‘shushing’ before he felt something snap below and looked down himself.

A nexus of teeth and cleft limbs. Human ivory that flashed, pale as calcite, under the study of their fires. He saw fingers and groins and ribs but not a shred of flesh unlicked. Each skeleton was clean, the more freakish for it.

“It’s a boneyard.” One of the huntlings spluttered. Some began to hop around, unable to land their feet without disturbing the dead.

“Calm down! They’re going to hear us!” Oloa hissed. The hunters were outnumbered by the huntlings. Their young and nimble bodies quickly found ways to escape the confinement of the group, slipping between armpits and ankles and departing into the dusk. Veering off in singlets back towards the scrap road.

“Everyone fall in!” Someone hissed.

Manuk reached down and pulled a spine from the pile. There were hundreds of them, great white centipedes left to harden, one over the other.

Oloa leaned in to inspect,

“Where have they all come from?”

A boy stood apart from the pack, his shins submerged in the salt white of the fossils beneath. He came to Manuk.

“We have to go back.”

Manuk narrowed his eyes.

Oloa swiveled on the spot, his lip arched to a snarl,

“Say another word, I’ll add you to the collection.”

The boy pointed at Manuk,

“He would have us all die for her.”

Manuk looked out into the approaching darkness,

“We don’t have to die, we just have to go a little further.”

He muttered.

As if in some clairvoyant unity, they all turned from Manuk to

Dahka, looking or hoping for an order. The elder had not shifted.

Governing from his perch above them, a vast silhouette without the

need of words. The sparks of his torch were trapped in the breeze,

writhing above their heads. Eventually he centered his eye on

Manuk and Manuk saw it glossed with confliction.

Is it pointless? Does he know? Anymore than I do?

The chieftain might even have given a command, before a voice

came hissing from behind them all,

“No! Not up there!”

They turned to see a huntling, making to scale the hill, lodging his fingers in the wrinkles of the scrap. He raised a leg and something came loose. What followed was a cascade of broken glass and wheel spokes and weather-beaten litter, enough clatter to echo for miles.

The pack turned stiff.

Those huntlings who had escaped, froze where they stood. First there was silence, then the first shriek arrived. A sound that tore open the silence, whistling gradually higher, until it was cut short, snapped like a drum string.

“Close in.” Manuk heard one of the older hunters mutter.

None sought to argue this time. The boy, dismantling himself from the mess he had created, scampered back into their ranks, his torch left smoldering upon the ground behind him. They all watched its yellow tongue, lapping hungrily at lean air. Not one of them dared to fetch it. The flame lay there rasping, reducing to a mere kindle. Then, for a second, they saw the flash of a withered white hand. Then the flame was doused.

That artless image hung, outstanding, in all their memories. They shambled closer into themselves, devising a phalanx of inked skin and pointing steel. With their light collected in one place he could see the pronounced jaws, the dense brows of his clanmates. The youngest of them peered out from behind a tier of soot, watching the world through guiltless white bulbs, unknowing of how to act. Manuk could smell something staining the air and when he followed the scent with his eyes, saw a clear liquid forming downward lines on the calf of a huntling. Pooling like gold in the scrap below.

Manuk's heart beat so fierce that it hurt. His eyes flitted across the darkness. He could see nothing there but his own projections; the lowliest of nightmares, old terrors that he hoped had been forgotten, that had woken him upright and sodden. In those dreams, his legs froze when they should have run, his teeth tumbled from their gums.

“Let me in.”

He turned to see the runaway had been pushed to the periphery of their line. It was the same boy who had tried to climb the scrap. Without a torch in hand he appeared out of place, as though he belonged to a different species entirely. The grey of granite was

still wed to his palms, proof of his transgressions. He reached for his friend's torch and missed.

"Please. We can share." He whispered.

None thought to shake their heads, choosing instead to watch him with something closer approaching fascination. He looked back longingly into the dark where he had lost his flame. And froze. Something else had caught the boy's attention.

There was time for a grunt, the first half of a word, before he fell onto his back. Lying there, he looked like an overturned insect. He thrashed, with appendages snatching for a handhold. Then began to slide towards the shadows. Manuk saw his eyes flicker up, sable and blinkless before they were gone completely.

They listened to his last pleas and then there was silence.

Many were turned to Dahka. The elder seemed untroubled by what he had witnessed, either that or he knew better how to hide his concern. His eye was still secured upon the horizon, intent on something else. He appeared to inhale, a long and wounded breathe. The rest of the pack did the same as they waited.

Then he turned and shook his head.

A hunter, seeing this, turned to them all,

“Back. Go back.”

The order seemed to awaken the pack from a stupor and they began a concurrent shuffle towards the narrow road. All, save for one.

“Wait-” Oloa, realizing too late, reached for his blood brother and missed by a finger.

Manuk slithered into the open with a practiced guile, hitting the forbidden ground on all fours. Behind him the pack watched in mute horror. Looking out towards that nearing darkness he saw the white fingers again, shy of the light but inching closer. He clambered to his feet then cut a short ring across their line, pausing before Dahka.

“You can’t go back.” He breathed.

The elder observed him with interest, the remaining eye slender between lids. Manuk felt a grasp on his shoulder and was revolved to face a senior hunter,

“No one person is worth all of this.” The man said.

Manuk did not respond.

In the silence, far on the distance, something, someone was crying out; a woman’s voice. They had heard it. All of them.

Manuk could see, beneath their fear, a weight of guilt upon every shoulder. He gazed once behind him, saw the throat of the world and its long, vacant swallow.

He looked up into their haunted faces, their tired eyes,

“She’s worth it to me.” He said.

And threw down his torch.

The flame burst against a bone part and flakes of ash curled in the new heat. The first row of spear-hands shrunk from the blast. The distraction gave him enough time to reach through the blaze and find a good grip. The steel was hot from the burden it carried. He wrenched once, hard, and saw a screw fly loose.

Dahka was too slow to stop him.

He escaped, stumbling, with the chieftain’s massive flame between his arms. He could hear his brothers’ cries, the panic at seeing the great light leaving them. But he had ears for only one voice. She was calling from the wilds, alone at the last and if she had no light, then he would bring one to her.

In his early scavenges, they'd venture onto the scape and, for every few steps, find a nick of food. Back then, you could have picked out a can, ran a finger along its hull and found syrup stuck to the nail, thick as mucus, ready to be sucked clean.

Scanning the vista, he knew that there was no syrup left to be sucked. Even the mould had renounced that place. It looked as though the colours were slowly bleeding from their world. It had become quieter too. The strays were long eaten. He'd once listened out across the domain and heard their lonely songs, a confused kind of howling like even they, bred into that squalor, did not understand it.

So deep into those wastes, even the elder's flame showed him little more than his own breath. As he had hoped, the skulliks did not follow him. They had scattered from the fire like its rays were caustic. And so, he had left his kin to face them alone.

If there was a trail to be found, it would be found in the frost. He wandered, hunched lame, with two fingers tracing a mapline through verdures of frost, rubber bands, battery cases. He raised a nail to the light and found it moistened. He licked the end of his index to be sure.

Blood. It could have been spilt over a hundred feet ahead. Sure enough, he found those red speckles leading towards a hill.

He reached the top with little air left in his lungs and thrust his spear into the peak like a flag, then gazed a black horizon; endless thorns of junk but, also, a tiny, desecated pearl of light. It shriveled and stuttered but it was a light nonetheless. He squinted and saw the shadows of her tormentors projected onto the hanging fog. He counted four, limber and faceless, marionettes in some deranged puppet show.

He rode the trash to the bottom of the hill and stealthed closer to the commotion, shoulders low, nostrils flared.

He caught glimpses of those pale bodies. They had grown excited at the scent of flesh and were restless outside the radius of her fire.

The fire itself was almost burned out entirely.

Then he saw her.

She was reclined across the blade of an old propeller, one hand fixed to her gut. Nothing could have readied him for the sight of her organs leaking out between fingers, steaming in the cool air.

He crept closer, delicate not to crush the leaves of aluminum underfoot.

Her pike was half-submerged in a splash of blood. He stepped out into the clearing with his own weapon extended.

The skulliks burst into shrieks.

There, he saw them clearly for the first time.

Those emaciated bodies, rungs of bone strapped in a pale hide.

Burning as white as chalk in that darkness and gazing out through bulbous, black eyes.

As they hissed so did they each reveal columns of bloodied lips.

“Get away from her.” He snarled.

They were blinking frantically into the blaze of his fire, their slim palms raised in protection. One whistled at him; an unbearable sound ejaculated from between closed teeth. Another reached out to touch his leg and almost got a grip.

He gasped and, for a moment, could hear the fright in his own voice.

They were quiet as they moved, with toes splintered and legs spread wider than seemed possible. He realised he was encircled.

They were longer than humans, easily oppressing the space with their gangled bodies, and they looked to be smiling, their mouths were cut wider, their teeth bladed harsher.

As he swung the fire about he saw one scuttling across him. Its back was ruttled, arched so the bones protruded like scutes.

“Manuk!”

She was crying out.

He tried to step towards her and realized his foot was tangled in cloth.

Cloth.

This is no clearing.

He chanced to observe the space around them. Wires strung at head height, rags hung like pelts. And, most of all, some kind of structure; four fence sheets, a slice of aluminium for a roof.

“Is this- is it your home?” He asked them.

He was met by the same flinchless black eyes. He turned and saw one had braved close enough to tug at her.

If there had been time for debate, it was long since passed. He descended to his knees and allowed the fire to feast.

Much of their land was moistened in oil; lightning fires sometimes burned for miles out there. Still, he was alarmed by how quickly that little flame devoured the cloth. Shooting a furious conduit across his feet and emerging in time to singe him at the fingers. He yelped as it sprang, excitedly, upon a wire and, in a matter of seconds, their nest was revealed; the contours of their homes enlightened in a brazen amber. A hallow ground burned and the skulliks ignited into shrieks. He readied himself for some kind of retaliation but it never came. Something popped under the stress of the fire and they were startled, flitting from foot to foot as they took turns to scarper, quickly and as quietly as they had arrived.

He strode amongst the fires as if a friend to them. The largest one was still gripped in his own trembling fist. He could barely carry the thing and so set it down in the crease of a water drum. Then he came to her.

She did not look up.

“Ma?” He asked.

She’d lost a few shades of her complexion. When he knelt beside her, she collapsed like she’d been waiting to for hours.

“You’re a fool for coming here.” She groaned.

“We came to save you.”

“There is no ‘we’, Manuk. How many times must I tell you?
It’s me and you and-”

“Them.” He swallowed. “But I couldn’t have made it out
here by myself.”

“You should not have come at all. You’re-” She groaned.
“Oh, it’s too late now for any more lessons.”

He moved his eyes over the wound. Seeing him, she nodded,

“It’s time.”

He shook his head,

“I’m not ready.”

“You are not, but there is our luck.”

“What will I say to the elders? They’ll suspect something.”

“You will tell them nothing we do not need them to know.”

She planted a finger beneath his chin, “you must continue our work
alone.”

He turned away from her,

“I can’t do it alone.”

“You will have no choice. If you cannot protect it, if you
cannot keep it secret, then everything has been for nothing and I
will have died in vain. Do you understand?”

He did not. Not her, not why.

“Who am I?” She asked.

Frowning, he answered,

“You are Lalua... You are the huntress.”

“No Manuk, who *am* I?”

He bit back the first tear and a second never came,

“Mama”

She warmed his cheek with her palm. Smiled like when she had sung balu to him long ago.

“Sometimes you must listen to me, even if you do not understand what I say, yes?”

“What if- what if you’re not here to teach me.”

“You will find me, Manuk. If you need me, you will find me.”

“I’m scared.”

“Of course.” She nodded and turned her eyes towards the sky. “How are you going to be brave, if you are not first afraid?” She had begun to pant, ugly heavings that made her whole frame rock.

He turned and found the clearing was being softly consumed. He could see plainly now, in that auburn lens, the bloodtrail that had led him to this place.

He turned back but she would not meet his eyes. A new expression had taken her, one of profound calmness. When her chest had stopped lugging, he rose from where he'd knelt and looked again into the darkness, somehow more daunting than before.