

THE EARTH TIGERS: opening to web serial which can be read in full at: theearthtigers.blogspot.com

The jungle shifted like waves in the early sunlight. The movement was ever present in the upper canopy. The activities of myriad birds and beetles, rippled across emerald fronds and made a seascape of the treetops. From the tip of the last standing pyramid, Horatch watched the world awaken. He shifted his rearmost legs, spun in a tiny arc to allow the sun's warmth to reach his carapace, and ran the tip of his foremost metatarsus through his chelicerae until each bristle lay as flat and smooth as velvet.

He groomed each foot in turn, eight soft, snow white toes tipped with hooked claws that could spear the tightest of tree bark without slowing him down. When he'd finished with his tarsi, Horatch turned again, reached one rear leg up as high as it would go and scrubbed it slowly across his bulbous abdomen. Soothing, always smoothing. The bristles that lay flat would keep the T'rant flying along his way, would keep him fast and agile, unlike his stouter, fuzzier cousins.

"I suspected I would locate you here." The words of his former mate vibrated through the pyramid stones. They reached him, tarsi first, and drove his long legs to a tenser, more upright posture.

"Niatha." He tightened his chelicerae and swiveled to face her. His abdomen raised to the sun, and he lowered his body, dipped toward the pitted stone in a bow of respect. "I was unaware you looked for me."

"Of course. I only realized who I sought upon finding you." Niatha dipped in return, less deeply and with a lowered abdomen. The gesture still honored him.

Once, he had tapped at the mouth of her burrow and she had happily received him. The egg sac of their mating had not proven viable, however, and their pairing could not continue. That she acknowledged him at all now, was testament to their lingering affection, one that her current mate would not find welcome.

"Has the council adjourned already?"

"Only for a short recess." She tapped her fangs together to punctuate the statement. Her bristles made an iridescent sheen in the early light, primarily olive, but with hints of fire at the right angle. Each of her tarsi bore an electric orange bolt that, he knew, flashed even in the darkness of her burrow. "We will continue once the sun is fully up."

"And what will they decide, do you think?"

"They will decide what I tell them to, in the end." Niatha sagged, looking older than he liked despite the fact that she would long outlive his own span. The weight of leadership wore on her. Her eyes shone with less brightness these days, and her voice vibrated with little force. "They cannot deny the future

any longer. The burrows of the Great Ones are stirring. We have not watched as diligently as we should have, perhaps."

"Our numbers are not what they were." He defended, but she raised her first and second left legs and waved his protest away.

"It matters little. Even if we had kept watching, we would have no Hands. No candidates approach our outer walls, and none have even stumbled near to them in generations."

"What will you tell them?"

"That we must go forth, that if the Hands no longer seek our walls, then we must search for them in their lands. We must bring candidates before the first Great One passes the gate."

"A very wise decision, High One."

"Don't call me that, Horatch. Not today. I did not seek you as your leader this morning, but as your...friend."

"My very dearest of friends, what might I do for you?"

"They will want names. Once we convene again, things will go swiftly. There is no more time for recesses and debates. They will ask me to choose scouts, to select the ones who might go forth."

"And you would send me?" His legs trembled, a mixture of fear and thrill. To leave the walls, to enter the jungles beyond the rift...no T'rant had dared as much since the Great Ones retired to their burrows.

"When I ask myself, Horatch, who is the best of us? Who is the one T'rant I would trust with this task, no other name could possibly come to my thoughts."

"Then send me, Niatha. I am ready to serve you."

"To serve all our people, but I did not wish to volunteer you without asking."

"Again, you show me too much honor."

"Again, and again, and always, my *setalia*." She lifted her abdomen at the word, the thought that meant everything they couldn't be to one another and yet still were. Her tiger stripes, pale green against darker moss, wrapped that segment of her body in a soft embrace Her spinnerets swayed far above. She was larger, faster, and far more of everything than he was, and she had no business calling him *setalia* out loud.

"You must not speak this," he chided, but his insides burned with joy. "If Metacha heard you."

"Metacha does not stir until the stones are fully warm." When she said her mate's name, Niatha's chelicerae snapped again. She showed the tips of her curled fangs and lowered her body.

Still, the fat bronze T'rant who was now sharing her burrow dwarfed Horatch. He was slow, but not to be underestimated. Horatch had seen Metacha feed. Perhaps, it was a very good thing that she sent him away to the jungles now. If Metacha knew she still considered him *setalia*...Horatch trembled again.

"I will go, Niatha." He dipped low and covered his fear with the gesture. "Tell the council that I volunteer."