Ancient Power

The visions brought me to this distant ruin. Ambry, an island unexplored, untamed, and nigh unassailable by the great nations of the world due to its vast and treacherous jungle terrain, and in my dreams was home to the ancient wreckage of a society I did not know the name of. I spent years reaching for my mirage. Years slavishly rising through the ladders of academia, allying and appeasing the snot nosed spawn of patrons of the Academy of Dulth, and then months gathering fellows and knowledge to tackle the unknown threats Ambry posed, all coalesced in this final, tragic moment as I plummeted screaming down an unseen slope from the collapsed exit of a ruin.

My life flashing before my eyes, I figured as I shielded my face with my claws. My brain, my past was spinning along with me. Foliage passed, and so too did memories of home and struggle. I was home again. My mother, a cave dwelling manticore with great, red wings built for gliding, embraced me before I set out for an education in a city far away. "Be careful," she said. She knew my obsession would never be sated in our little community. Her arms tightened around me and her sheathed claws held me closer than I could ever recall. "I love you."

I bounced off a fallen log. I was momentarily in the air, but in what I thought were my final moments I was gliding along the busy streets. It was illegal to do so, but I was running late for an important meeting. The laws be damned when I had a chance to ask a genius traveling scholar about my vision. Xiuying stayed just off campus in an apartment, but through some political maneuvering and a hefty bribe to a guard I secured an hour with the Hakutaku.

She was the picture of refined elegance. Proud, pearly white horns crowned her luscious, straight-combed black hair. She wore a flowing red gown in a style I would later come to learn was from her home country. I was innately aware of my crassness, although I do not know why in my supposed final moments I was haunted as such, but nonetheless I lingered on the feeling of ineptness just before hitting the ground again.

I slammed hard into solid earth, but my sheer momentum carried me further. My memory jostled loose my momentary sense of lacking and I was approached by another phantom; Brulette. She was my finest student, a fast learner, and even quicker wit than my own. "I cannot go Professor, tempting though your offer is. The danger is too great and I am needed in my home country."

"Ah, I understand. It's a shame. Ferdergio told me you would say as much. But before I go, I wanted to give you something." I pawed a padded bag into the human's tender hands. Brulette eyed the gift with unsure trepidation. "Poisonous spines of mine. Sell them, use them, just don't poke yourself with the sharp ends unless you want to, that is."

"Professor Perune I-"

I feel something break. My right arm maybe, or a rib, but the piercing pain traveling through my right abdomen nearly incapacitated me midroll. The memory ended just as I refused to take back the spines. Brulette graduated that week, then followed through on her mission to return home. My expedition began six weeks later.

I stopped at the base of the slope, but the canopy above kept spinning. I wanted to vomit and cry and scream some more. My left paw still worked. I felt around. The earth was cool and damp, but I wasn't going anywhere so it was a marked improvement. My right arm refused to work. Muscles acted like a vice and held the injury fast. A moan escaped my throat, followed by a hiss. My bruised buttocks and battered tail demanded I get up or at least roll over and ease the pressure in my posterior.

I allowed myself to turn onto my left side. A pained gasp indicated what I guessed; at least one of my ribs was broken, but not enough to inhibit my breathing. Lucky. I threw up. Less lucky. The humid air did nothing to soothe the remaining bile in my throat. I wretched again and again until I emptied myself out.

My humors thoroughly balanced, I regained a semblance of coherent thinking. I was not in immediate danger it seemed. No predator made itself known in the minutes I spent inert or pressing threats made themselves apparent. A moment to breathe and think. I'm good at those.

Ambry was an epicenter of seismic activity. The island sat on the intersection of three fault lines under the sea constantly grinding and crushing each other in cataclysmic outbursts. I lost my footing in a quake, tumbling first out of the structure I was examining, then taking a long trip down here. Ferdergio, Ne-Ceti, and two others saw me plummet. No doubt they would organize a rescue. I chose my research assistants and crew for this very reason. "Perune, you genius, ugh."

My legs remained unsteady though I managed to push myself up. I needed to further evaluate my situation. Despite it being a tropical summer, it was unusually cool under the canopy of the tall trees. Evening light from above filtered through sheets of leaves and cast the underbrush in an eerie, blue shadow. I hobbled next to a tree trunk and put my shoulder and most of my exhausted weight against it. Ne-Ceti, the lizardwoman I recruited to guide us through the jungle, explained how the trees were all related to each other on Ambry. Unlike the other flora, it was safe to trust the trees to not poison on contact. The small, budding pink fruits on the other hand, were filled with cyanide and were not to be eaten, or touched, or even eyed queerly. Spiders the size of a dog could ambush unsuspecting passersby. Trees were not to be trusted.

The high branches and lack of budding fruit boded well for me. Satisfied I was not going to be devoured or poisoned or both, I got to thinking. In what I thought were my final moments I neglected to track the distance of my fall. Ferdergio and Halla saw me go down so I had no doubt they would call a search party, and if I fell straight down Ne-Ceti could track me down the decline. The best move was to do nothing and await rescue in that case.

The trouble was the coming night. We were wrapping up our third day of exploration when the earthquake unsettled the ruins and cast me low. The canopy obscured the sky, but by

my guess I had a solid hour of fading light before night. I could fend off a single predator in my condition. Between my left claw and barbed tail, I was confident about that much. Ne-Ceti's speculation on what lived in and around the forbidden city was present and center of my focus.

Boars were largely unaffected by the Change. The rare mainland boar women, high orcs, were notorious drunkards rivaling oni and ogre folk, and drew their lesser, pig spawned Orcs to them like flies to honey. The Ambry boars' stubborn nature inured the boar to magics of all kinds, and they avoided being swept along with the Change like my mother and the other manticores had. Ne-Ceti warned of boars the size of horses or even larger breeds capable of toppling buildings. They were fiercely territorial and attacked on sight.

I checked my immediate area for hoof tracks, but found none. Perhaps this stretch of high canopy and sparse grasses did not favor the boars' feeding habits. The next two predators to watch for were the ax-beaked hawk and the flesh hungry apes. Like the boars, both avoided the Change en masse. The ax-beak hawk was an opportunistic carrion feeder. Smarter than one would expect, they dive at exposed heads at moments when one may not be able to effectively fight them off. They were also squawking, boisterous birds, which serves as a sort of dinner bell to nearby predators like the flesh eating apes. The red furred apes of Ambry stalked the canopy for prey, and used heavy logs or rocks to incapacitate their victims. The two together posed an even greater threat as the species developed a deadly symbiosis. The ax-breaked hawks hail the apes and felled prey together in a way Ne-Ceti spared the rest of the crew.

I listened. Nothing. The ax-beaked hawks did not hide their presence. The terrain also did not favor the flesh hungry apes. The apes preferred plenty of high ground, and rarely traveled far from their nests. The flat basin I fell into would be anathema to their instinct. At least, I hoped my hypothesis was correct. In my survey, I realized something else: there were no bugs here, no breeze, no anything.

The jungle was absolutely silent save for my shallow breaths. We were harried by bugs the entire trip to the forbidden ruin. It must have something to do with the trees or the grass

here. I rested for a time, contemplating the absent wildlife and peering up at the canopy for danger, until the full night overtook the forest floor. My ancestors were nocturnal, thus I could make do with the moonlight, but my body was exhausted. The hard days of examining ruins were finally catching up to me and the trip down the slope was the hay that broke the centaur's back.

My tenuous grip on the waking world slipped and through darkness I fell into my vision. The ruins of Ambry sprawled out below me. The jungle spread out as far as I could see. Specter stars of fading blue haunted high above and out of reach on a pane of midnight glass. The vision was indistinct. I observed the dream as though looking through a fogged mirror. I looked down from my perch upon the highest building. A giddy swell filled my heart. I explored this building on my first day in the forbidden ruin. It was exactly as I dreamed it.

I traced the broken road to where our camp would have been set. A stone circle of segmented, concentric circles, I suspected it may have been a crossroad of sorts, or a marketplace where the nearby populace congregated. There were so few records of ancient Ambry it was impossible to know what kind of monster or human society built and lived on the jungle island originally. Few ever tried to uncover its secrets; the scraps I gathered pointed to short lived lives of ill prepared humans lost forever to the dangers of the isle.

Here was the place where the Ambrians traded stock, there they passed gossip about the coming and going in their travels, and all teased some history I yearned to know. My time on the island illuminated more than I even began to imagine. The climate, the instability, all the details missing from my recurring dream evident moments after my arrival on the island.

I clutched my right side. The phantom injury lingered even here. I was told that others did not feel pain in their dreams, or woke up when they would suffer an awful fate, which I found strange. My body took to the dream as it left the dream. A sprained ankle in here hurt out there, a scent of heaving, wet earth carried over when I awakened, and the cloying dampness of the jungle stuck close to my wings even if the moisture did not. The vivid nature of my dreams

convinced my mother to seek help for me, and when we did meet the soothsayer succubus traveling through the nearby village she told us I was possessed of "a vision of an unknown origin." For both weal and woe, she understood my obsession and encouraged my mother to let me pursue it.

Still, I dream of Ambry, even though I will wake up there once again. I almost expected the vision to fade or change if I found the ruins. A lull in thought passed and from the blank space I felt a gnawing dread. I was going to dream of Ambry forever. The realization ate through my core. "No, no, I came," I said to the stones at my feet. "I found you. I will learn all I can. Please, please, just let me rest." I fell to my knees and cried once more. "Please… just let me go. I'm begging you. Let me go."

The world shook at my pleading.

The dream reflected the real. I awoke to the violent shaking of the ground and the near-deafening groan of Ambry in upheaval. I braced myself against the tree I fell asleep next to. The deep rooted anchor shook like gelatin. I closed my eyes until the world ceased its seizure. Twelve seconds of absolute powerlessness passed in agonized moments. I gritted my teeth and latched my claws tight.

The shaking and crashing of tectonics plates slowed, then stopped, followed by the trees, then me. The worst was over, I thought, though it wouldn't surprise me if Ambry tried to lurch itself into the sea. I pulled myself up. It was then I realized why there were no animals living in the basin.

A hideous stench blinded me. All at once I was crying, sneezing, shivering, and gagging. My brief reprieve upended by some invisible assailant. I threw myself at the ground, rolling and expelling every fluid I had. The quake must have flung whatever irritant lurking underground into the air.

My tongue swelled. I won't be able to breathe if this goes on. I ripped a barb blindly from my tail. The pain is nothing compared to the increasing dread of suffocating. I jab it into my

face, my neck, and back again, and only pause between stabbings to ensure injection. The venom of a manticore is a sedative, and dulls those affected. First, it numbs the injection site. My skin goes from burning to a dull throb as the venom overtakes my body's overreaction. Second, it slows the metabolism. The prey experiences euphoria. The canopy distorted into shades of harsh, unnatural greens and pinks speckled like droplets of pure color. A side-effect, or an unpredicted interaction between the gas and venom. I clutch my head. The hallucinations weighed heavily on the front of my skull. Finally, the venom induces a mild paralysis without knocking the affected target unconscious.

I laid helpless on the ground, but breathing. I was lucky to have been the one thrown into this basin of death rather than anyone else, although my attention focused singularly on my creeping sense of doom. Ferdergio and the others humans may have succumbed to the gas instantly. The others would fare little better. I wondered how long I would be trapped here, when would the others arrive, and this cascade of questions pummeled my morale. I simply delayed the gas's effects. The agonizing pain would find its way back. It could sink back down to the earth and suffocate me. Another quake could loosen the earth and swallow me. My mind crowded with dreadful endings and for the time I sunk deeper.

Yet, the end never came. Minutes of maddening anxiety turned to two hours. Manticore venom typically lasted around five hours, but I was fortunate to have clipped my barbs this morning. My mother's stern hand at play; she insisted her daughter care for the length of her barbs like humans obsessed over their teeth. She was a doting mother, a kind woman with only a grudge against the coming winter winds, and she showered her only daughter with affection for six. It also meant she kept an eye ever-present on me. The numbness lessened as I wished for her in this moment. I could feel my hands tensing and relaxing. My mother always said my venom was weak, but it was my brain that got all the potency. Lucky me.

The increased temperature even under the ever present canopy was rising. The humidity, suffocating. I lurched myself forward when I could. I needed to escape this death trap

before another quake. My options were limited. I could double back, and attempt to climb the hill. The idea of a hike on an empty stomach wasn't thrilling and thirst was creeping up on me. Better to stick to the lowland for a short time, search for a stream and hopefully a break in the tree cover.

The blinding, choking gas must have escaped into the air. Ne-Ceti no doubt would sniff out the danger as long as they moved from downwind. I would have to hope so. I hobbled along my imagined pathway. My legs were still weak, and my balance was testy at best, but I managed. The lack of the grasping foliage that made traversing Ambry so ponderous. The concentrated gas prevented the brush from developing.

An important skill cave manticore's learn at a young age is how to form a mental map. The vast underground dungeons and cave systems my kind called home were perilous even with excellent dark vision. Thus, young manticore are taught to process space in an orderly way. I pictured my starting location, the towering temple over the basin, the hill, and the small mud hole I made on impact. From there, I traced my steps, counted the trees, and took diligent measurements of each step should I need to reverse course. I would move around the perimeter of the basin as best I could, and hopefully discover an escape.

I lucked out early on, a break I felt well deserved, when I found a natural stream trickling along a rock face. I was unable to tell how far up the source began or where the stone face extended beyond the green curtain, but if it was moving it was probably safe. To be certain, I wet my paw and waited for a minute for a reaction. Nothing. I took my time refreshing my parched throat. I drank and drank until my stomach could hold no more. I cleaned my scratches next, then traced the sheer faced cliff with an open palm.

The stone was unlike the soft earth of the basin. The composite material reminded me more of distant coastal minerals than the largely homogeneous stone common in the forbidden territory. The cliffside posed an interesting question my assistant Ferdergio would better articulate. He, like me, studied at the Academy. He studied geology, the monsters made of

stone, and the relationship they shared. Ur-geology, he called it. Anyway, he remarked how the island's constant upheaval should have destroyed it long ago, but Ambry defied reason and compounded itself with each quake rather than split apart. He likened it to adding layers to cake. The cliff was from a completely different layer, and it perplexed even a lay woman like myself how such a deviation occurred.

I spent time treading around the stone face and investigating, pretending Ferdergio was guiding my attention to anomalous breaks in the pillar. It dawned on me quickly: the cliff face was not a cliff, but a pillar. The structure was the same number of paces from end to end, almost square around each corner, and where it met the steep slope of the basin it cut such an acute angle. I could not help but imagine it being placed here by some intelligent design. I was about to navigate the steeper slope when I spied a sizable, oval hole in the pillar. I peered inside. It was deep, but I could squeeze through if I were desperate. Without thinking, I passed my right hand into the empty only to be rebuffed. A dull, green haze flickered into existence and repelled my hand. I jumped back, my brain going into a panic. A trap? Here? Was my hand okay? It felt funny, but the gasp I took irked more. I let out a sigh. Get a hold of yourself, I repeated over and over. My tail swung back and forth with each repetition of my short mantra.

Don’t touch anything! It’s the number one rule I drilled into my expedition. I would scold myself later. The damage was done, and it’s not like I did touch the magic with purpose. I thought it was empty space. No one needed to know. I tested the space again. The magic was weak and with a little effort the shroud of green light gave. I pushed harder. The green mist crackled and flared, but harmlessly bounced off my skin. I scrambled inside on my left arm and knees, wings folded, and tail straightened as best I could. The barrier allowed me passage inside the darker corridor, and for the first time since my fall, I let down my guard.

The passage ran deeper, but here I was more at home than the open sea or the oppressively humid jungles. I shuffled along like a manticore cub spelunking only guided by desperation to escape the next quake. The magic barrier convinced me of this pillar’s greater

significance. Mind racing, I entered a rounded chamber. The tunnel was above the ground. Long preserved soot stuck to my furred palms. I crawled through was a ventilation shaft, and here, a room with enough historical value to reshape the understanding of Ambry.

Two statues twice my height loomed large over the chamber. They faced away from my perch, directed towards an exit. A cross shaped cut in the stone floor centered over a fire pit as evidenced by the pile of ash undisturbed by the ages. I hopped down to investigate the statues. They were masked figures resting their scaled hands over rounded scepter heads. The fine detail of the sculpture's hands, the details inscribed onto the scepter heads, and the masks themselves all surpassed intrigue. I was awestruck., only to be undercut by a rumbling in my stomach. I can't linger long. I still needed to get back to camp.

The cross cut was done with a small blade. The shallow marks were hastily made and shaky. I looked up. Ah, more soot. No doubt a ritual by flame was conducted here. I stood opposite of the statues' gaze over the long sleeping fireplace. A thrill shot up my tail and into my spine. I was standing where the ancient Ambrians once stood, closer than any human or monster has or had been, ever. I basked in that sensation for a solid two minutes. Awards, applause, and maybe an end to the persistent dreams all passed in my daydream dalliance. I turned to the only other exit.

The adjacent room was half the size of the ritual room, with eight pedestals arranged in a descending, concurrent pattern forming a rhombus. A holy number? A shape of some magical or spiritual quality? I do not believe so. The ruins above the basin were arranged in hexagonal blocks and the buildings were formed with square structures that terminated in partial domes reminiscent of weathered boulders. I checked back around my entry after inspecting the nearest pillar and I spied something ten times as stunning.

A skeletal figure, the preserved remains of a lizardman taller than even me, encapsulated in amber. It was held fast by the golden substance, a citrine jewel of unparalleled value. Everything about the specimen was extreme: the bones of the skull, arms, legs and more

built to support a monster's frame. The creature was trapped upright, it's four fingered, hooked claws crossed in front of its chest in repose, and the adornments of dark stone pendants along it's ears embedded with emeralds and gilded with gold. A pre-Change inhabitant perfectly preserved in stasis. I pinched myself, then again. "Amazing," I muttered.

The words echoed weakly back in the confined space. I had to bring the others here. The finer points of surviving the gas and the slope could be hashed out later, but my discovery needed to be shared. I moved to the tunnel. I would climb out, I thought, then begin a fire with what strength remained. If there was a barrier preserving the pillar, then the smoke would interact with the green haze and create a visible disturbance for Ne-Ceti or Halava, the harpy of our expedition to find. I was about to chimy up to the vent when a stone gave under my weight. For the second time in twenty-four hours, my life flashed before my eyes, although the prevailing vision was tumbling down the basin slope.

I awoke standing over my own body, my spirit held fast by the green mist, watching the blood drip out of my skull. Strange, I noted, as I rubbed my translucent hands together. I was some sort of apparition with a tinge of the green outlining my blurred form. Ghosts were a common phenomenon on the mainland; most concentrated in the hinterlands. It was speculated that the land itself captured the spirits of the recently deceased. I read on the subject in preparation of my expedition should I encounter any ancient undead, but I did not imagine becoming one myself. Why didn't I feel distraught? I am watching myself die, but it's impossible to work up any emotion other than exasperation. Stranger yet, the room with the pillars was aglow with eldtrich energies.

With my new perspective I saw the crackling fonts of energy sparking up from each of the pedestals. Bolts of light bounced from one to the next, each louder and stronger than the last, and as the current took shape I witnessed the amber prison begin to illuminate. Golden

light shone from the monster's corpse. The skeleton in turn took on this radiant energy and became a luminous hue. At the peak, a shade passed from the ceiling into the room. Eyeless, formless, and without regard for me, it entered the amber. No doubt if I were in my right mind, or body, I would panic uncontrollably. I would try and interfere with the ritual. I floated over to a pedestal. The green energy was still harmless to the touch, but in it I felt something tangible.

A feeling of alien nostalgia overcame my torpor. I was the catalyst for this incomplete project and through my blood the magic's intentions clarified. There was a terrible omen, an approaching star would collide with the planet and plunge it into an age of nightmares. Ah, the Prior Age, the era before monster tribes and human cities, the era of new gods. I was of two memories, this invading memory and my own knowledge competing for space. I isolated the new memories for layer examination behind a mnemonic wall reserved for pesky mind readers and plagiarists.

The ritual continued unabated. The purpose of the tower we occupied was to revive the survivors of the Ambrian civilization, yet time passed and power was lost in protecting the tower from the shifting of the world, it could only preserve a single soul. Even her body would only be reanimated rather than given full life like the Council intended.

These were her memories. The monster trapped in the amber. I was casually reading them as though they were a book. I pulled my hand back. It felt wrong to peer through her life even if it killed me to observe more. Well, it was my lust for knowledge that did technically kill me so I dont have much of an argument either way.

The regeneration of flesh and muscle passed in an instant. The amber cracked with the sound of glass and then became dust. Thousands of years passed in moments. The newly formed body crumpled to the ground. "Hello?" I offered.

A spasm of throaty, hacking coughs followed as the woman gasped. I inspected her as she tried to recover. She was still massive, a full head and shoulder over the tallest of the minotaur race. She was strong. Lean, purple-blue muscles under fresh, graying scales both

animated by anti-atrophy necromancy braced the women's frame for each cough. A tail the size of a grown human whooshed by. She stabilized herself and prepared to stand. Harsh, yellow eyes irises shot forward. The diamond shaped pupils narrowed in the dark.

“I cannot see.” She spoke in the common tongue. Her voice was cracked and dry, but deep. Her four-fingered claws reached forward for direction. “*Gi’las, No’ber’ak, eth lak ahn.”* I recognized the speech. A mainland language used by lizardfolk, but different in its harsh pronunciation. The words were archaic, but I could assume the structure was the same.

“N’teth,” I began. Her eyes jumped to me, but her gaze passed through. She was calling for her friends or family. Gi’las and No’ber’ak must be names. N’teth was a formal introduction or announcement of challenge depending on which half of the word carried the emphasis. I hoped the pronunciation of which is which mattered less in our current circumstance.

“Who… are you?” She reached out. “I’m speaking a language I don’t understand. *Eth lak*.”

I took her hand, or at least placed my semi real hand inside her three times as large palm. My paws looked comical in the grasp of this lizard woman. I could be her plush toy.She did not hesitate to take hold like a lost child. She held it dear and close only until she was certain I was there.

"I'm Professor Adly Perune."

"Where am I?"

"*Ambri'ah*, the island. I found you asleep in amber."

"Is there no light? Nothing is coming outright. I feel… wrong."

"I do not know much, I am afraid. I stumbled on this place by chance, only to die in the next room." I gestured fruitlessly to my corpse.

The Ambrian shook her head. "It's… *hur'detat'min.*"

"I don't know what that means. Why not tell me your name?"

"*Gi*, I have no brood mother. I was an… orphan, a *Gi.*"

"Gi? That's a nice name." The Ambrian muttered under breath a string of common and ancient Ambrian. A faint, light of pure white scattered the dark ritual room. It took the shape of a flower on the floor. She stood up straight, and exuded a confidence not present moments before.

"You are dead." She looked toward my body in the next. A number of calculations passed by in the wrinkles of her human nose and scaled jaw. "I wish to make a pact. Let us leave this foul place and never speak of it again. Teach me of this world that hangs like a daydream in my mind. In return, I will restore you to true life."

I did not have much room to argue. If she left, I would be stuck just like her shade until someone else came along or the barrier holding the tower together fell. I wasn't an expert on seals, but if it could last over 2000 years, it surely had more than enough mana to keep me imprisoned for a long, long time. Not to mention, she was the embodiment of my life's ambition, an actual Ambrian. Forget the ruins, the expedition, and this godsforsaken rock, my career would be at its peak. Forget accolades, I would be remembered for all time as the one who unearthed a civilization that was all but extinct an hour ago

And yet… I knew nothing about this woman or her thoughts. She may as well be bones in a crypt for as well as I could read her intentions. She composed herself quick, and made a demand with acuity. I would be liable for her the minute we stepped outside, and she could overpower me just as fast. Resurrection magic was rare, yes, but to animate a corpse older than some of the oldest tomes in Dulth? There were a lot of unknowns, but she had gone far beyond the rule of "not touching".

"I have a stipulation," I replied. The Ambrian raised her scaly brow. "A lot has changed since you last lived, even in the last one hundred years. Humans, monsters, gods, and others have sought an understanding with each other, and I want you to honor it as well. You may not harm another unless they would inflict a greater harm to you or another."

"Interesting," she hissed. "I agree. Take my hand and I will seal the pact."

Our claws met, and a surge of power passed between us. I felt my form waver. In the blink of an eye, I was looking up at the ventilation tunnel and pulling the trea theros brick that killed me from out of my wing. My hunger was gone, and the pain in my ribs as well. The heavy footsteps of the Ambrian followed.

"Come, Perune. I loathe this place more than any other."