

# ◇ THE LURKER ◇

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For the lack of a better word, Ilakh-Olam could have been called a God.

It came down to the world from the folds of time; snuffed out the cancers of feral intelligence growing within; and instilled its own order, one that would last until the planet's sun withered and died.

Settling down, Ilakh-Olam carved out rivers; grander and more fruitful than the blind workings of nature could have hoped to produce. It fed them from mountains, the heights of which no natural peak could have matched. At the mouths of the rivers it placed Eternal Cities, and frothing fields of mana to feed their dwellers.

And in the cities Ilakh-Olam settled people, which it re-moulded from the feral inferiors she found infesting the planet. It had caught them building pitiful, disease-ridden cities of their own. Ilakh-Olam began work by scraping the motes of self-awareness and language from their minds. It made sure that the beings could never cooperate again. Their physiques it shattered into a thousand wild forms - and out of them formed coherent, sustainable urban ecologies.

Forty million years passed that way, and the Eternal Cities soldiered on. Ilakh-Olam knew that without its intervention, the new-fangled sentient beings would have destroyed their world; in the same way its own cousin-ancestors had nearly destroyed their own planet in the distant murk of time. They had learned the hard way - that un-pruned intelligence was a cancer upon the universe.

So they spread, across space and the phases of time that was permitted to them; healing worlds, cleansing others; modifying, culling, grafting and remaking entire biospheres; ensuring that none were gripped by the self-immolating disease that was cooperative sentience.

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The lurker awoke, as usual, as the shaft of light entered her room from the small hole on the wall. She shifted, and the ever-present tin-min scampered away into their holes, where they would stay hidden until the night. She used to chase them when she was younger, nimbler... and less intelligent. The strength she spent in catching the fleet-footed vermin would not be worth the energy she gleaned from their meagre bodies; and besides, the creatures actually rendered her a useful service by cleaning up her leftovers and night-soil.

She stretched, blinked her large, black eyes and urinated. It was then time for water. She went up to the far wall, where cool water always condensed during the night. A few licks... and that would have to do, until rainwater poured in from her window hole, or blood came along.

Then, it was time to clean up. She flexed her muscular hands and stretched her large thumbs – enormous by the standards of her bygone ancestors. The thumbs, nearly as thick as her forearms, terminated in two wicked, piton-like killing-claws. She fastidiously licked and cleaned them, and made sure no food scraps, scabs or debris were trapped in their roots. It would not be wrong to call this a life-or-death task. An abscess in the wrong place could render her unable to hunt, or cost her a mortal struggle.

Then, as in every day, it was time to wait. That was how her kind lived, sitting and waiting, generation after generation. She crouched in the shady corner of the stone room, ready to spring to action. Her body settled in, nearly invisible as the colour of her matted fur perfectly matched the dark grey basalt of the room... Her brain shifted, hormones changed their flow in her body, slowing down her heartbeats, stilling her breathing... Activity died down... Time speeded up, such that she could discern the sweeping movement of the light cast by the single gaping window, in the sun's day-long tour around the city... In another time, observers could have compared her stasis to a form of meditation.

That was the time she was able to think with clarity, and re-live her memories. She remembered faint hints of her mother; a time of warmth, protection and love – before the fight that ended with her running away to claim a vacant room of her own... The red-streaked, victorious elation of her first kill – a dull moss grazer from the level of the ponds, looking for a place to sleep; the plunging, wet-warm feeling around her killing thumbs as they dug into living flesh for the first time, the orgasmic strangulation of the weakening victim; the pattering spasms of its feet on the basalt floor as the thing died and yielded her sustenance...

Yet other encounters: The time when the enormous, gangling builder walked into the room and both human-animals stared at each other in horrified disbelief, not sure whether to fight or flee. The day an earthquake shook the city, and outside she could hear enormous stone weights collapsing – a million screams of unseen others... Hiding from the slim stalkers, the burly shambler, pipe men and other predators, learning to recognise their scents... The day a small, bird perched on the window, and cast her a mocking, knowing glance. She could never have imagined the colour it sported on its bizarre, crested head... The day when she caught one of the child-sized large-eyed ones that fed on the tin-min, and on a whim, kept it as a toy instead of killing the thing outright. She fed it scraps from her kills and it in turn lured victims to her room... The large-eyed captive was fun, but the lurker broke its neck when one day, it bit her savagely in a fit of fury. The bite hurt more than it should have, all the more because of the feelings that went with it - betrayal, then sadness... and regret.

Memories came too, of the shy, soft-footed male of her kind that walked into her room one night – she knew he was around that level, the genital stink was unmistakable. A surprise, a rare lowering of the killing instincts, the sight of his serene, yet impish face - moments of tenderness and explosive passion. They had shared three kills together and he had departed, onwards to new floors and new conquests. Her belly had started swelling afterwards, and she started attacking her prey with newfound anguish and bloodlust. The children came sometime later, born rapidly like stings in the dead of the night. One died after three days, thankfully before she could start associating emotions with it.

The other she raised in a whirlwind – the brief period of suckling before his teeth and claws grew long enough, cracking; chewing and regurgitating bones from flensed victims; the few lessons in which she taught him – in a stunted language of grunts and pantomime - the ways of the various denizens of the city; what to avoid, what to eat, how to clean your killing claws, how to find water, which fungi and mosses to eat when sickness came... Waiting together for interloping prey; hugging each other at nights... And finally, the inevitable fight that sent the child scampering away, hopefully ready for a life of its own.

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A scampering from the hallway snapped her back into the present. She tensed, expecting a struggle with prey, fearing the intrusion of a predator. It came closer... closer... and trailed

away. Disappointed, she drifted back into torpor. Many foolish victims walked the corridors of the Eternal City, but not every day was a lucky one for the lurker.

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Later on, when the air cooled and the light disappeared from her window, the lurker heard another sound. She snapped aware, back from the non-sleep of memory-ridden dreams... and a cold shiver ran down her spine. The sound she heard was a distant, wind-like howl. One could almost mistake it for the sounds the night-wind made as it coursed through the empty halls and the open courtyards. But this sound was distinct – and had a most unfamiliar companion – light. It wasn't the warm, yellow-orange light of the sun; nor the dim, greenish glow of the corridor fungi or fireflies... The aggressive, purple-actinic glare undulating as if through watery depths - this was a light from beyond her world – the effulgence of a prowling God.

Her mother had warned the lurker about it – she had endured it twice before in her days – and had taught her son how to cope with it as well. You couldn't see the Light as its source finally confronted you. All one remembered was a comatose haze... All one could hope to do was to repress thought, and ensure only animal reflexes confronted the Light. If done right, one woke up. If not...

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She remembered searching for a vacant chamber after being evicted from her previous nest by an intrusive shambler. She was in no condition to confront the giant, dim-witted omnivore. In desperation she ran down to the lowest level of the tower – where she knew large, cavernous rooms extended deep into the ground. She had slept there, quivering and sobbing - mercifully unharmed throughout the night.

Light seeped into the room in the morning, illuminating the strangest things the Lurker had seen in her life. Drawings.

Maddening silhouettes, some tiny, some large, cavorted across the uneven wall. Something had struck her then – she realised for the first time how marks could stand for things, people... It took her some time to recover from the shock caused by bridging the mental gap.

She was drawn into the painting.

She discerned the lean, running forms the large-eyed ones, the large, black dabs that resembled shamblers and others; atrium-sludge swimmers, moss-grazers and vine-grazers, wall climbers, slim stalkers, red facers, pit scrapers and gangly, slab-handed builders... A strange figure with an elongated face represented by long red stripes, and another with too many fingers likely represented human species that she no knowledge of. Even insignificant creatures such as the tiny hordes of tin-min and birds were there: Pigeons, crows, wing-hand-men, tooth-gulls and sea-gulls all flew above the composition in a lively tangle.

And yes, her kind was also depicted – a lurker resembling a black blob, with the unmistakable killing claws on her hands, crouched in a corner of the composition. She tried to imagine the kind of human that could have made this drawing, and failed...

Then she realised, that the creator of the paintings was likely dead... gone. Nothing with such forbidden skills could survive the Light. She reached out to touch the surface of the painted wall... and her fingers came away covered with a fine layer of dust. The paintings must have been old, this type of dust did not accumulate easily. She felt shameful and guilty for having seen them. She tried to scrub out their memory – nothing good would come to anyone who knew of such things.

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The lurker barely pushed the memory out of her mind as the intensity of the Light got too difficult to bear. She concentrated on baser memories – of the children she had borne, food, blood-lust and the joys of food and sex... Then, the Light of Ilakh-Olam struck her.

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She woke up – limbs and face tingling. She felt a momentary burst of joy – she had survived another examination by the God of the Eternal City!

The feeling was followed immediately by a dreadful sense of vulnerability, and she swiftly crawled into a corner, in case others tried to take advantage of her dazed weakness. Specialised light stalkers existed in some buildings, following the trace of the Light and

preying on survivors incapacitated by its touch. She urinated, masked her scent... and waited.

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Fate was kind to her that night. A chunky pit-scraper, perhaps also disoriented from the passage of the Light, wandered the wrong way, and she quickly leapt upon it – dispatching the creature by plunging her killing claws into its beady eyes. The warmth of flowing blood roused her lust – even an orgasm struck during the brief struggle. The dying swipes of the pit-scraper's own spade-like claws were dangerous – but the lurker had long since learned how to tackle its kind. For the time being, hunger and thirst were banished.

She slept. The day came again, the tin-min once again scuttled back to their holes, and the lurker settled into her usual rhythm. She felt happy to have survived the Light – and feasted. What could have been the end of her life turned out to be a night of bounty. In joy she did something that she rarely dared to do. She whistled a song – a primitive affair of four rising and four falling notes – and briefly, remembered a part of her that was still human. The sound echoed through the silent, endless corridors.