

## The long road ahead

Damien took a deep breath, filling his mind with the smells and tastes of his youth. He had been gone for quite a while, but at last he was finally home. The tiny canoe was traversing the rivers at an unimaginably slow pace, moving in almost complete silence. Damien lied down with his eyes closed listening to the familiar stillness surrounding him.

The dim light of the moon and the stars seeped through the fog, forcing tiny speckles of light to dance across the water surface. Silence filled the air with uncertainty, like the calm before a storm. The dark riverbanks would be a perfect spot for prying eyes to go unnoticed. The Mokolé had once guarded these parts; but not anymore. This land, a gateway between the physical and the spiritual world had been abandoned for centuries. Only God knows what manner of creatures might have crossed the border during these years. The thought of spiritual beasts lurking the jungle, obfuscated by the veil of night occupied Damiens mind. His instincts were screaming to turn away, to go back to the city, but Damien fought it with all his might.

To calm his nerves and to reinforce the importance of his mission he recited the names of his childer in his head, again and again. For each full iteration he would repeatedly linger on the name of the one still alive. Each time, the fire within him would burn brighter and brighter. "*As long as she lives, I will never truly be alone*" the realization cured him of all fear.

Birds would occasionally fly above him and he could briefly hear the sounds of critters savaging for food, but he could still not shake the feeling of *something* watching him. It was at moments like these he doubted if he had made the right choice. He had parted ways with his partner in the Arizona desert, and for the first time in what felt like forever he had truly been alone again. During any other circumstance he would have welcomed the loneliness, but now he could sense that it made him a target. Damien was quite unsure whether or not this was due to the importance of his mission, or if he simply had grown accustomed to the company of others. Nevertheless, it made him feel weak.

It had been gradual; he hadn't noticed it at first, but he could now feel a strong desire washing over him. Something, or *someone*, was calling for him. When he realized it, he peeked over the edge of his canoe. A large crack was floating a couple of centimeters above the water further down the river. It reminded Damien of a cracked mirror.

Damiens sudden movement backwards violently rocked the canoe back and forth. Quickly grappling his oar, Damian forced it into the water but no matter how hard he tried to turn the canoe, it would not change its course. It was as if the river itself was trying to force him towards the crack. With only a couple of inches to spare, Damien flung himself into the water.

The sudden loss of orientation sent Damiens mind into disarray. His instincts took over and he began flailing in panic trying to reach the surface. Even though he was unable to see or hear anything, all of his senses were on high alert. *Something* was calling from the other side of the crack; something forgotten, best left alone. Damien struggled for his life, but no matter how hard he tried the currents around him grew stronger. For the first time since his childhood, he was truly terrified.

At the peak of the currents strength the river came to a grinding halt. Damien managed to resurface. As he was calming down he began noticing the complete silence surrounding him; all previous signs of life had vanished; there was truly no sounds at all. Something was off. *"At least the crack is gone"*. The river was completely still, not even a ripple from the wind. As a matter of fact, it was as if the wind had vanished. Damien swallowed hard when he realized; there were no longer any reflections in the water. He looked towards the sky; his gaze met complete darkness; as if he was staring directly into the void.

Damien glanced towards the riverbanks. The entire scene was illuminated, but not lit, by some gray ambiance. *"My god, I have transitioned!"* He could feel a tingle of excitement build up in his chest. *"I have actually done it!"* Damien began laughing. But his laughter quickly died out when he looked towards the opposite riverbank. Staring directly at him were twenty, probably even more, beasts. Enormous humanoid creatures covered in scales and spikes were sizing him up with the same intensity as a predator waiting to make their move on their unsuspecting prey. Damien swallowed hard. *"They never disappeared... The Mokolé have been hiding in plain sight all along!"* With no fear for his life, Damien met their gaze, one at a time. The beasts seemed to not move at all, just as Damien began questioning whether or not they were alive they spoke. "Augerra, you have been summoned by the council to stand trial for your crimes!" All the lizard-like men spoke in perfect unison. Damien had missed fighting these creatures. During his early years he had slain quite a few of them. He met their demands with a grin. *"And so, it begins..."*