

HUNT OR BE HUNTED



THE DESERTER

PEADAR Ó GUILÍN

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About the Book

To save his tribe, the cannibal Stopmouth must abandon it. Leaving the stone-age world of the Surface behind, he makes his way to the Roof, the mysterious hi-tech world suspended above.

But the Roof has its own problems. The nanotechnology that controls it is collapsing. And now a rebellion against the ruling Commission is about to erupt.

Hunted by the Commission's nano-enhanced agents, Stopmouth must succeed in a desperate hunt of his own: to find the woman he loves. Only she knows how to save his tribe. But in this super-sophisticated world, all he has to fight with are his raw strength and fierce courage.

Human primitivism collides with futuristic technology in this original and pulse-racing novel.

THE DESERTER

P E A D A R Ó G U I L Í N



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To my mother, inventor of beans and mash

Who art Thou, feasting thus upon Thy dead?

Bhagavad-Gita, Chapter XI (translation by Edwin Arnold)

Those who gave counsel to build the tower [...] drove forth multitudes of both men and women, to make bricks [...] Let us see whether heaven is made of clay, or of brass, or of iron. When God saw this He did not permit them, but smote them with blindness and confusion of speech, and rendered them as thou seest.

Greek Apocalypse of Baruch, 3:5-8

PROLOGUE

THEY'RE HUNTING FOR Indrani, combing the Roof, projecting her picture everywhere. Squads burst into apartments. They wave weapons, shine torches in women's faces. 'Is this her, do you think? Man, for a reward like that ...'

But Indrani is hunting too. Everything she has seen in her short life has been recorded at ninety frames per second. Almost three billion images per year, and that's just the visual information! Smells too have been digitized and stored away; every odour encountered since the age of four, immaculately preserved on the tiny chance that she might want it again some day.

She can choose to play back the scent of her father's skin from the first fight she had with a rival toddler in the care group.

'Bad girl!' he'd said, but whenever she accesses that recording (one of her favourites), she can hear the pride he'd been trying to suppress over her victory. He was training her even then, whether he'd meant to or not; moulding her into 'the girl who never loses'. Until she lost *him*, murdered by Religious rebels.

What she especially likes about that scene is the slightly damp feel of her father's skin against hers. He'd been sweating, genuinely worried. Proof that he'd loved her, although he used to keep that kind of thing to himself.

But Indrani can't afford to wallow in childish triumphs. These days she spends far more time poring over the events leading up to the moment when she was shot down over the surface of the world. Somebody - *Say it, Indrani,*

say it: the Commission, the rulers of the Roof, her supposed friends and allies – somebody had tried to have her killed. She can't understand that, but even stranger is the fact that they later changed their minds and went to enormous lengths to rescue her instead. 'We'll take you back,' they had promised. 'We'll allow your savage to live. Just come home ...'

The answers to that riddle lie hidden deep amongst the 42,601,850,100 images that make up her life, or in the terabytes of sounds and smells, or the recordings of everything she has ever felt ... All she has to do to save herself and those she loves is to dig it out.

Impossible, of course. More chance of a blind woman tracking down a single grain of rice on the surface of the world. Indrani cries sometimes at the thought of it. She never cried before leaving the Roof, but she's not 'the girl who never loses' any more. She has killed intelligent beings and eaten their flesh. She has suffered enough horror to realize how fragile happiness is, how eager the universe is to take it away.

So she keeps searching, always searching. And meanwhile the Commission, her pursuers, draw ever closer.

1. THE DESERTER

THE GLOBE HOVERED no more than two man-heights above the injured Stopmouth. Indrani hung out of the door, blood on her chin, one hand stretching down towards him.

‘Promise me you’ll come back,’ he said.

‘Of course I’ll come back. I’ll find seeds for us to grow so nobody ever has to volunteer again. I’ll find weapons to fight the Diggers. And I’ll never leave you after.’ Her voice broke into a sob. ‘Never.’

Stopmouth woke with a groan. *I’m dreaming.* And he was. The usual awful dream.

Sweat drenched his body, and all the wounds he’d suffered the day Indrani left ached as though fresh. He missed her. He missed her *so* much. But in his sleep he never got to relive the great times they’d spent together. He only ever saw her leaving. Night after night.

A fire hissed and popped beside him. All around were the moans and whimpers of his poor little tribe, still trapped in sleep. Stopmouth paused. Were they usually this noisy? He shook his head and grabbed a handful of pounded moss to mop away the chill of his sweat. As he raised his neck to wipe it clean, he chanced to look out of the window, and froze.

I’m still dreaming.

Stopmouth’s heart began to pound in his chest. Beyond the circle of firelight lay only darkness. *Wake up, fool! Wake up!* The sky was completely black, with no lights where the camps of the dead should be. None at all. As

though the Roof itself had disappeared and taken his Indrani with it.

He stumbled over to where the window should be, heart racing, his lips moving to childhood prayers. But even as he reached it, the grid of tracklights came on all at once for as far as the eye could see.

He waited for something more.

‘Oh, go to sleep,’ somebody groaned at him. It sounded like Kubar, his voice rough at the best of times. ‘We’ve a big day tomorrow.’

Of course. The dream was always more vivid on nights like this.

A single big risk might win his vulnerable tribe a bit of breathing space, might even guarantee survival for generations to come. He’d need his rest. They all would.

He listened. Perhaps it was his imagination, but the fearful sounds of nightmare seemed to have died down already.

* * *

‘Liven up, Stopmouth!’ An elbow nudged him in the ribs and Rockface’s foul breath exploded over his face in a cloud.

‘Pay attention, hey?’

‘Sorry, Rockface.’ Stopmouth blinked. High above him the panels of the Roof glared with intense blue light. Once he’d believed the dead lived there – his ancestors and those of his enemies. ‘I was just—’

‘I know where you were, boy. The whole tribe knows.’ Near them, in the shadows, other hunters pretended to be watching the streets, not listening as the big man scolded their young chief. The sisters Sodasi and Kamala whispered to each other, casting sidelong glances at them. Big, twitchy Vishwakarma struggled to keep still.

‘Indrani’s been gone a hundred and fifty days, but we’re still here, hey? And we need you, especially for the next

tenth.'

'Of course, of course.' Stopmouth gripped the Talker in his hand, a piece of magic from the Roof that hid his stutter from the others. He could feel himself doing it, though. It happened most when he was nervous or simply ashamed. Before he could pinpoint the cause, something moved in the shadows and everybody jumped.

Stopmouth hissed, 'Vishwakarma, no!'

Just in time.

'Sorry, Chief.' The man's warped spear pulled back from the throat of a scout, a boy barely tall enough to reach Stopmouth's shoulder and too young to realize how close he'd come to death.

'They're on their way!' said the boy, panting hard.

'Fourleggers?' asked Stopmouth.

'Yes, yes! A trio of them.' The boy gestured into the alley behind him. 'Just one trio.'

Everybody smiled. These beasts always hunted in multiples of three. Had the ancestors wished the tribe ill, as many as nine might have been out there at once.

'Yama's leading them here now.'

Stopmouth nodded and signalled *Silence* to the others. Everybody knew what he meant. Fourleggers had hearing so good they'd be able to tell that Yama was alone and limping. From now on, anybody talking could spoil the plan and jeopardize the future of the struggling human tribe. There weren't enough of them to survive. Stopmouth had always known it. Sooner or later, one too many of his people would be hunted and eaten, or die in an accident, and their numbers would just collapse in a matter of days. It was always the way, always.

This lot would have been extinct already had it not been for the arrival of Stopmouth, Rockface and Indrani. The little group had saved the bigger and had, in return, been granted a home. If only Indrani had stayed. If only he could see her lovely face just one more time ...

Rockface nudged him. Drifting again. Not allowed, not today. He had to get control of himself. He bit his lower lip hard enough to bleed, then stepped out carefully to where he could see the plaza, glaring in the unforgiving light of the Roof.

A moment later, he spotted the hobbling figure of Yama, moving as fast as his recovering injury would allow him. The boy was arrogant, but there had never been any doubting his bravery – he'd volunteered for this job. 'What if their ears are good enough to hear if someone's only *faking* a limp? They'll be looking out for trickery, but there's no hiding my scars, is there?'

As he ran, Yama never once glanced towards any of the places where his comrades hid. *Good man*, thought Stopmouth. The boy was learning at last, praise the ancestors.

Mere heartbeats later, the shadows stirred in the alleyway that Yama had just fled. A voice the human ear should never have been able to detect said, 'Hunting needs silence to listen.'

'No,' said another 'voice' translated by the Talker, 'hunting needs speed! It flees alone.'

'This one heard two of them,' insisted the first.

'Two, yes, but one strong enough to escape. Another is abandoned to us and waits only for our claws. We must not refuse it by delay.'

Stopmouth's eyes had adapted well enough now to see three Fourleggers, snouts pressed together in the shadow of a wall. They made no sound at all, but the Talker brought him what might have been their thoughts, or a language all of smells. Who knew? His hated brother, Wallbreaker, might have figured it out, but Stopmouth had escaped him long ago and hoped never to see him again.

From the alley through which Yama had run, a rock crashed to earth, and somebody cried out as though in pain and fear. The Fourleggers immediately separated and

surged towards the source of the sound, all claws on the ancient road, spraying dirt and moss with each step. Vishwakarma stood up too soon, but the beasts scattered enough rubble to mask the sound. Stopmouth waited for the last of them to disappear into the alley. Then he shouted, 'Now!'

Humans emerged from hiding in every part of the plaza. Almost half the able-bodied men and women of the tribe were out today – a terrible, terrible risk. But this was to be no ordinary hunt; no mere search for food. They had bigger plans than that.

With the help of the ancestors, the Fourleggers would find that their limping prey had reached a dead end. He had climbed a rope ladder and pulled it up after himself.

'In,' shouted Stopmouth. 'Everybody into the nets! Use your clubs, not the spears! Clubs!'

And that was when everything went wrong.

A great *crack* rang through the air, followed by screams of terror from the people he'd placed on the roofs surrounding the alley. One whole house slowly curved itself over, like an injured man bending down. Then it fell in an explosion of dust and flying splinters.

Stopmouth saw the three beasts coming straight at him out of the cloud, running on all fours. Or trying to. One of them held a forelimb clear of the ground, and blood from a scalp wound dribbled over its eyes. Stopmouth knew it would have to dodge him to get away. He took aim with his club, but the wounded creature chose to smash into him instead, knocking him flying and tumbling with him to the ground.

'The pain!' it howled. But it scrambled to its feet before any of the humans could react, and only slingstones caught up with it after that. None struck home.

'Help me,' somebody said from the caved-in alley. Other groans were audible now as the stone settled down.

‘I’m cut,’ said Vishwakarma, blood streaming down his face. ‘I think ... I think ... Oh, by the gods, by the gods, don’t eat me, please don’t ...’

‘Where are you, Vishwakarma, lad?’ Rockface’s breath was so bad, Stopmouth could actually smell him walking past. He reached the stricken Vishwakarma, a knife held behind his back. But he wouldn’t have to use it. Even from the ground, Stopmouth could see that the wound was little more than a scratch. Others might not be so lucky. At least two had fallen from the roofs where they’d been stationed.

Rockface left Vishwakarma and walked back to the plaza, his back hunched over a little so as not to aggravate some of his old injuries.

‘Ha!’ he shouted.

‘Get everyone together,’ Stopmouth told Kubar. ‘Find out if anybody’s missing.’

Rockface was peering at something on the ground, one hand resting on a pile of rubble, the other pressed against his back, as if he feared his spine were about to force its way out into the air. His face showed only triumph, however.

Stopmouth crouched beside him and saw a small pile of rust-coloured scales smeared with sticky black blood.

‘You want a live one, hey, Chief? Just able to talk?’

Stopmouth had a bad feeling about this. The big man was calmer since the injuries that had nearly stopped him hunting. Several times, in despair he’d volunteered the flesh of his body to feed the tribe, but small numbers and the battle for survival against the Skeletons had made food plentiful enough, so no such sacrifice had yet been necessary. Now he was almost back to his old cheerful self. A guarantee of trouble.

Stopmouth reached a calming hand towards the man’s shoulder, but it was already too late.

‘Come on,’ said the grinning Rockface. ‘We can still catch it, hey? Come on!’

‘Rockface! Wait! We have to—’

But the big hunter had lost his hearing and was loping off after the trail of blood. Had it been anybody else, anybody at all, Stopmouth would have let him go, never expecting to see him again. The adults of the tribe had grown up in the Roof and knew little of survival before they’d met him. He’d drummed it into their heads again and again that a lone hunter was little better than a free meal for the first pack of beasts to pick up his scent.

He turned to the others. ‘Vishwakarma! There’s nothing wrong with you. Now, get up. Sodasi, Kamala, Kubar – you know what to do. You’re the scouts. Get everybody home in one piece. No hunting, no trouble of any kind.’

He didn’t wait for an answer. Rockface had already disappeared from the far side of the plaza. Stopmouth took off after him. As he ran, he checked his knife and sling. Apart from these, all he had was a club. There was no time to fetch a spear.

He heard his friend shouting from only a few streets away and picked up the pace. His leg hurt a little, and the shoulder he’d dislocated the day Indrani left would probably trouble him for the rest of his life. Yet it felt good to run by himself again, with no pack of inexperienced and clumsy hunters to slow him up. Buildings whipped past and his feet slapped over stone or sank into moss with a scatter of insects.

But then he ran round a corner to find the three beasts, one injured, two unscathed, standing over a fallen Rockface. Humans weren’t the only ones capable of ambush.

He knew his friend was finished. In the old days, before the dozen injuries that plagued him and with his Armourback-shell spear in his hand, Stopmouth might have dared this fight with a slim, slim chance of success.

The best he could do now would be to flee, because the moment Rockface was dead, the two healthy Fourleggers

would come after him. They were strong enough and hungry enough to drag a pair of full-grown humans home to feed their people.

‘Go!’ shouted Rockface, his voice hoarse. ‘Go!’

‘I can’t,’ said Stopmouth. He knew he had to run – he was the chief. He was *supposed* to run. Nothing else made sense.

One of the creatures looming above Rockface pulled back its arm, the claws aimed right at the fallen hunter’s neck. Stopmouth would never get there in time. He swung the club above his head, thinking it might put the Fourlegger off long enough for him to make one final suicidal charge. The two other beasts had gone back onto all fours in preparation for just such a move. Their jaws were working as though they could already taste his flesh.

‘Stop!’ said a voice.

Everybody, man and beast alike, froze. Stopmouth realized that the words had been made almost entirely without sound and that only the Talker had allowed him to hear them.

He turned slowly.

‘Oh, you’re for it now, boy,’ said Rockface.

Another trio of beasts waited behind. The creature to the fore looked smaller than any Stopmouth had ever seen before: barely the height of a tall man as it reared up on its hind legs.

It said, ‘Fine soup needs human bones.’

Stopmouth raised his pathetic club. The pair of Fourleggers guarding the speaker tensed for violence, but it ignored them and fixed its gaze on the human’s weapon.

‘A sheathed claw does not kill well.’

‘It’s just a club,’ said Stopmouth. ‘We wanted to capture one of you alive. To talk. We’ve tried talking to some of your hunting parties before, but they either chase us or run away.’

It seemed to regard him carefully, but with beasts, who could tell for sure?

‘Magicians that can talk to all things ...’ it said. ‘Perhaps the flesh of your snout might give me and my sisters such power?’

It stepped closer to him. Stopmouth could see the slight sheen of its scales. By day they were red, and often the creatures made themselves easier to track by shedding them when they ran or scraped up against a wall.

It was so close now that the hunter knew he could strike its skull. His heart beat fast, and faster still when two clawed hands swept out to clasp his shoulders while Rockface gasped and cried out, ‘Hit it! Why don’t you hit it?’

The creature pressed its sticky, pungent snout up against his dry one. It said, or maybe whispered, ‘The little magician needs to talk well to save its bones from the soup.’

Stopmouth took a deep, ragged breath. The up-close stench of the creature tickled the back of his throat and made him dizzy. He hoped it didn’t feel the same way about him.

‘We want an alliance,’ he said. ‘We will stop hunting you if you stop hunting us. However, we will exchange our dead for yours. Even better, we will co-operate with your people in hunts. We are not as strong as you, but we run faster. We build good traps. We will allow your kind to hide among us when they are being chased. We—’

‘Very well,’ it said. It stepped back. ‘The scaleless ones will be our sisters.’ As it spoke, its pointy snout waved from side to side. Stopmouth jumped when it touched him again, the claws scratching his shoulder.

‘New sisters make a gift of blood. Come.’ The Fourlegger wounded in Stopmouth’s ambush limped towards them.

‘Eat this one to make your sisters strong. Her bones carry power. Her seventh mother lived beyond the Roof in a nest all of metal.’ It waved a claw at the fallen Rockface. ‘Alliance needs an offering from your family now.’

It waited. In the distance, Stopmouth could see the furthest panels of the Roof begin to darken. Right above his head, a Globe, the flying machines of Indrani’s people, hovered, watching everything he did. *Are you in there?* But Indrani would have been helping him if she were, Stopmouth knew that much.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, a human hand. He smelled a new stench now – that of rotting human teeth.

‘It’s time for me to go, hey? Tell the children ... Tell them —’

Stopmouth shoved his friend’s hand away. ‘No!’ he said.

‘Don’t be a fool, boy. You know what has to happen, hey? I’ve gone beyond my time as it is.’

‘Alliance needs blood,’ agreed the beast leader. ‘Blood. Our sister for yours.’

That’s the way it had always been when Stopmouth was growing up. The Tribe exchanged its old and its injured for food to keep the rest going, and it was a great honour – the greatest the Tribe had to offer – for somebody to give themselves up, limping but proud, to the needs of the future. The new tribe of poor hunters had yet to learn such vital habits.

‘My back has never been right since the Skeletons,’ said Rockface.

Stopmouth looked back at the Fourlegger leader. ‘The alliance needs blood,’ he agreed. ‘But not human blood, and not the blood of Fourleggers.’

‘Don’t be a fool, boy, don’t—’

Stopmouth turned in fury, ‘I am Chief here, Rockface. You will not contradict me in front of our allies.’ He stared at the bigger man, noting the stoop of his back and the

many scars that puckered his tattooed skin. 'And you will stop calling me "boy".'

He turned back to the Fourlegger. There were three of its fellows before him and three behind. 'You may have any of our dead in exchange for yours. But this alliance will not be sealed with our blood, or the blood of your sisters. I will bring you *three* corpses of other creatures. I will bring them here in *three* days. If the flesh pleases you, you will bring three other beasts for us.'

He waited, sweat beading on his body, Rockface silent beside him. *And now, he thought, we die. Is Indrani watching this? Will she weep for me?*

The leader dropped onto all fours – they all did. Nothing had been said, or the Talker would have translated it. Together, with no signals that Stopmouth could see, the creatures ran off, each trio in a different direction.

'So much for your alliance, boy.' The hunter shook his head and left Stopmouth to go limping home with no weapons. He didn't even bother to retrieve the club he'd left lying in the moss where he'd fallen.

The young chief looked up. Only he and the watching Globe remained.

People cheered at the sight of Stopmouth and Rockface's safe return. The two men hadn't exchanged a word since their meeting with the Fourleggers. The older hunter shook off hugs of congratulation and made his way into Headquarters alone.

Kubar approached Stopmouth. If anything, the ex-priest was even older than Rockface, but it showed more in his gravelly voice than in his scars. 'Did you catch one?'

Stopmouth shook his head. 'It was them who caught us. We ... we spoke to them and ... they let us go.'

The man grinned, his teeth white and straight enough to belong to a child. 'An alliance then? No? What's wrong?'

'I was too ... I tried to be too clever. Like something Wallbreaker would have done. The beasts come in threes, you see? And they wanted to take Rockface ...'

Kubar made Stopmouth sit down and explain himself, always probing for more details. 'So,' he said at last, 'they ran away.'

'We lost them,' said Stopmouth.

'No,' said Kubar. 'They didn't attack you and they didn't say no to an alliance. We have to keep the pledge you made them and hope they don't use it as a way of trapping us. But I think it's good. I think you've done it.'

'I'm tired,' said Stopmouth, and stumbled away from the old priest. He pushed past other people who were babbling questions at him in their foreign language. He could understand more and more of it, but today, even though he had the Talker with him, nothing seemed to make sense.

Cool air inside chilled the sweat on his skin. He followed the sound of children's laughter, as he knew Rockface would have done. On the second floor of Headquarters, future hunters stalked each other between columns of stone and around piles of rusted metal junk that must have lain here for generations before the new tribe's exile from the Roof. Among the humans an infant Fourlegger played. The children had adopted it against Stopmouth's wishes. It could not learn the sounds of their speech and struggled to make itself understood by the adults. But it was for the sake of this small creature, and the fact that it had proven to be so compatible in its play, that Stopmouth had decided to try for an alliance with its people rather than the more human-looking Skeletons.

He approached Rockface, who had stretched out his body against a wall to watch his pupils. The young chief expected his comrade to growl at him, but Rockface never held a grudge for long.

'What you did was stupid, hey?'

Stopmouth nodded.

Rockface waved his hands towards the children. One of them held off three others with a tree branch while the infant Fourlegger circled on all fours to get behind him.

‘We can’t survive here without sacrifices, boy, and these people know nothing about such things.’

‘Rockface, you’re all I’ve got left. I couldn’t let them have you.’

The big man sighed and made a waving sound as if chasing insects out of his face. ‘It was my fight, boy. A man should charge, hey? At everything.’ He jerked a thumb at Stopmouth. ‘You, for example, you need to take another wife.’

Stopmouth sat up. ‘What?’

Rockface tried to rise with him, but grimaced and lay slowly down again. Then he sighed. ‘Without Indrani, you’re as much use as a burst skin. Moping about. Dropping slingstones at all the wrong times. Getting knocked over—’

‘She’ll be back, Rockface.’

‘Oh, she’s a fighter. I’ll give you that. I can see her up there now, kicking all those beardy freakmen in their faces, hey?’ He laughed. ‘A great one. But she’s home now. She has food in her bowl, and who knows what else? She’ll come back or she won’t. But you ... These people need somebody whose eyes aren’t always slipping up to the Roof to look for her. They need you as yourself, not some boy peeping from behind his mammy’s legs.’

‘I stayed with the tribe, didn’t I? When Indrani left, *I* stayed.’

Rockface jabbed a thumb at him. ‘Get another wife and Indrani’ll be back before you know it! Get some children. That’s what you need. A boy of your own and, I swear by the ancestors, you’ll sacrifice anyone – me, Indrani, anyone, to keep him fed.’

Stopmouth tried to imagine another wife for himself. Or maybe more than one. There were women who

embarrassed him by brushing up too close against him in a narrow alley, or who followed him when he went onto the roof of Headquarters to look out over the streets and to be alone. Why would they do such a thing when the girls back home in Man-Ways had all but laughed in his face?

But it didn't matter. Every time he tried to imagine life with one of them, he pictured Indrani's return home. Sometimes he even laughed, imagining her chasing some unfortunate woman away with her frightening kicks.

'It's not just about me,' he said. 'Have you forgotten the Diggers?' Stopmouth could never think of the beasts without a shudder.

'Bah.' The bigger man waved his hands in the direction of the hills. 'Those monsters. We left them on the far side, hey? They couldn't tunnel their way through all that rock.'

But Stopmouth knew better, felt it in his bones. What if the beasts found a way to go around the hills? Or if they crawled over them by night? Less than ten days' journey away, the land groaned under the weight of their victims. Indrani would have to come back. The magic weapons she might bring from the Roof were all that would allow these children to grow up.

2. YELLOWMAWS

A FLASH OF Rooflight from the metal skin of a Globe drew all eyes. But only for a moment. Other things needed the people's attention more: the heavy shadows of ruined doorways; heaps of rubble where a hungry Slimer might rest for days without moving; the uneven patches of purple or red moss that hid sharp rocks and rusty metal spikes.

The small human tribe had long since eaten through their stock of dried flesh from the time of the Skeleton siege. Although their hunting had improved, the surrounding beasts had learned to be wary of them too, especially when they ran in organized parties. So finding three bodies, each from a different species, only to give them over to the Fourleggers, was a luxury they could ill afford.

Many went hungry, but none complained. These were the survivors now. They'd come through massacre and hopeless battle. They'd been banished from a paradise where the food never had to be hunted and never fought back. And still they lived. A little hunger was nothing to these people. In spite of all their clumsiness, their helplessness, their strange gods and customs, Stopmouth could not help but love them.

His people found the necessary bodies: a Slimer, pierced through the belly; a Wallhanger, brought down by a lucky slingstone before it could swing away; and some unknown shelled creature that had badly wounded Krishnan with a charge.

‘New beasts should be studied first,’ said Stopmouth to the sorry group that had brought the last one back. But he didn’t have the heart to be too tough on them. Tonight they would have to eat poor Krishnan, sharing his flesh amongst those in need of it. Besides, it was now day three and he had a promise to keep.

‘What if it’s a trap?’ asked Yama. The boy limped along beside his leader, while behind them, others carried the three bodies over their shoulders on poles. Guards moved in the alleys that paralleled this one. They had to be wary of ambush with so much flesh at stake.

‘They could have had me and Rockface,’ said the chief, ‘with no risk to themselves. They let us go.’

‘But they might want to finish us off all at once.’

Stopmouth smiled. ‘They won’t find us the easy prey we were when first they met us.’

Yama grinned back and waved his spear in the air. Still a child, for all the carnage he’d seen. ‘We’d take them,’ he said. ‘We could take anyone.’

Stopmouth said nothing.

Nine Fourleggers waited to meet them. The little one which had spoken last time was not among them, and none of the others would respond to anything Stopmouth said.

‘They’re insulting us!’ whispered Yama. ‘We should fight them now – it’s what they want.’

The beasts examined the corpses, licking them, scoring the skin with their claws and saying, ‘Hunger needs flesh.’

Finally each trio took up a body and left through the far side of the plaza.

‘That’s it?’ asked Yama. ‘Shouldn’t we even send somebody to follow them?’ The humans had yet to find the exact home streets of the Fourleggers.

‘No,’ said Stopmouth. Then he called out to all the hunters around him. ‘We come back in three days. Hopefully we’ll get to eat then. Come on. In the meantime we still need to hunt.’

The Fourlegger chief, if that was what she was, stood alone in the centre of the plaza before a small pile of corpses, laid neatly one on top of the other. Stopmouth was curious to see what they were, his mouth already filling with saliva as he imagined new flavours. The hunting hadn't been good lately and he'd forgone his rightful share in the hope that today there'd be no need to fight.

He wondered if he should lick the offered bodies and score them as the Fourleggers had done three days earlier; or if he should refuse to speak. He stepped closer, tummy rumbling with nerves and hunger.

He recognized the first body: a Skeleton. They'd become rare since their disastrous siege of Headquarters. *Delicious*, he thought. Sweet, milky flesh that tasted so much better raw. His stomach rumbled again. He felt weak.

'Hunger needs flesh,' he said, pushing the body to one side. Oh, how he wanted to slice into it now!

The second was a furry beast, its pelt wiry and probably very useful. Four pairs of limbs poked out on either side, and when he pressed fingers into them, he felt good strong muscle underneath. This would have been difficult prey for the Fourleggers and he smiled at the obvious respect they were showing to their new allies.

'Hunger needs flesh,' he repeated.

It was no easy task to pull the heavy beast off the last body in the pile, especially in his weakened state. But when he did, when he saw the last one, the heat of the Roof seemed to intensify, to beat down on his head hard enough to knock him over. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. An eyeless triangular head; a dull pelt riddled with holes.

He brought one shaking fist to his mouth. 'Where ... where did you find this one?'

'Your hunger has no need?'

'Where did you find it? Your sisters, I mean? Where did they get it?'

The Fourlegger looked straight at him, and he had no idea, no idea at all, what it might be thinking. The Talker couldn't translate its stance, its twitching snout, into anything he could understand. Finally it gestured towards the hills.

'She came with her sisters. At night. Hunger needs them, as hunger needs all flesh. Have you no need?'

Stopmouth stared down at the Digger corpse, beads of cold sweat running over his face. Indrani – she had to come back. Or they were all dead.

'Hunger needs flesh,' he heard himself say. The humans would have to take all the friends they could get. And it still wouldn't be enough.

'Are you mad, hey?' Rockface looked astonished, but there was a grin on his face too that grew the more he spoke. Blood covered him up to the elbows. His butchery class wasn't going well today. The wiry fur of one of the Fourleggers' gifts hid many tricky joints and sinews. Worse, Rockface's little students had been too hungry to wait. They laughed and dodged behind his back or out of reach of his arms until every one of them had faces smeared with tasty gore.

'You are mad, boy.' He sounded proud, and that alone should have filled Stopmouth with worry.

'She should have come back by now, Rockface. I mean, how long could it take to grab a few things from your house? It's not as if their weapons are very large! I've seen one, remember? The green-light thing I took from Varaha. But the destruction ... whole buildings ...'

'Ha! That little necklace toy does nothing now! I think you imagined it all.' Rockface suddenly moved to pull a giggling child off the corpse. 'Away from there, you scamp!' He shook her until she dropped the eyeball she'd tried to steal. 'Those bits are for hunters only, see?' Then he turned

back to his chief. 'The weapon was even more useless than the man who fell out of Varaha's Globe. Dead within days, but him we could eat, hey?'

'I think she's trapped up there,' said Stopmouth. 'She has enemies now, Kubar was saying. Lots of enemies. The holy ones didn't like her before and the chiefs don't like her now. At least, I think that's what he meant. Life in the Roof sounds so confusing!'

'They talk a lot of nonsense, boy,' agreed Rockface. 'Gabble gabble. Who can understand a word of it, hey? No, you're right. She's our Indrani and we need to go and bring her back. Provided she wants to come back, hey?'

'Of course she does!' shouted Stopmouth. Everybody stopped to look at him; the children covered their mouths with bloody little fingers.

Rockface patted him on the back. 'You're right, boy. Sure, sure.'

'I'm sorry,' said Stopmouth. 'I don't know why—'

'The only thing is' – Rockface stretched his arm out fully, or tried to; he grimaced – 'I'm not ready for a journey yet.'

'Rockface—'

'All the way to the mountains, hey? To the place where the world reaches right up to touch the Roof? That will be some sight. Some sight. Only the Traveller ever saw it before us, or so the old tales would have us believe.'

'Rockface ... listen ...' Stopmouth could tell by the way the big man wouldn't look at him that he already knew what was coming next. 'I need you to stay here. I need—'

Rockface threw his knives hard over the heads of the children so that they smacked into the walls. It was a moment before he could speak again, but finally he managed, 'If you think I'm ready for the pot, why didn't you just let the Fourleggers have me, hey? And save everybody a lot of trouble?' But the heat was already going out of him.

'This lot need you,' said Stopmouth.

The youngest girl of the group, Lali, gave the big man a hug. Some of the boys crowded in to pat him on his scarred and tattooed back.

‘I’ll bring her home,’ said Stopmouth. ‘I won’t risk anybody else to do it. And when I come back, I expect to find enough of you alive to make the return journey worth my while. Only you could make that happen.’

‘I’m not so good at the chief thing,’ Rockface mumbled.

‘Kubar can do that – they listen to him. You just keep them hunting. Don’t let them give up! That Digger the Fourleggers found ... that Digger ...’ He shivered.

In the dark, the whispers of his people seemed louder. Words drifted down from every rooftop, blessings and curses and tears; a soft blanket of sound, wrapping him in need, begging him to stay. Stopmouth stood at the mouth of the U-shaped complex of buildings known as Headquarters. The fixed eyes of every member of the tribe glittered like a second set of tracklights, watching him as though he were life itself. None of them spoke. Not even Rockface.

The chief didn’t want to think about their need and how it made him feel. He turned back to face Kubar, who would lead when he was gone.

‘You’re deserting us,’ said Kubar. ‘Do you know what that means?’

‘You don’t understand,’ Stopmouth said. ‘When the Diggers come—’

The priest growled at him. ‘Diggers! I’ve never seen these Diggers, except for one mouldy corpse riddled with holes. We have Skeletons. Yes, yes, I’ve seen them eating one of my cousins. And Slimers to drag children away in the night. Definitely Slimers. Real threats that never leave us and will kill us quicker than any number of imaginary *Diggers*.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about, Kubar.’

‘I know,’ whispered the priest, ‘that it’s just about your woman. The—’ He stopped himself before calling Indrani ‘the Witch’, but Stopmouth knew he wanted to. The Religious had never liked her, and not even those such as Kubar, who had been exiled from the Roof and sent to live here on the surface of the world, had changed their opinion. ‘You’ll kill us, Stopmouth. You’ll kill all of us. Your old tribe was barely getting by with generations of skills to call on and dozens of hunters as good as you are. We need you more than she does.’

‘You’ll have Rockface to teach you.’

‘Rockface!’ Kubar didn’t dare say more than that.

‘And you’ll have the Talker.’ Stopmouth felt a chill at the thought of leaving it behind. All his life he’d stuttered and stammered, until the magic device of the Roofpeople had made him almost as eloquent as his brother. He’d discovered that he loved to speak. And now he’d be returning to life as the butt of everyone’s jokes. But there’d be no people where he was going, not unless he made it to the Roof. And once there, he’d find as many Talkers as he needed.

‘The Diggers are real, Kubar,’ he said. ‘You’ve seen the body yourself. And they’re already making forays over the hills. What happens when they get a foothold on this side? I could stay here to watch you all die, or I could do something to help.’

Kubar shook his head. ‘You know nothing about the Roof, savage. Nothing! Down here you may eat us, but up there, it is they who will eat you. Fighting, rebellion, crowding. Ha! They will put you in a cage and laugh. Or they would if they had room for a cage. It’s changed since I was a boy, oh yes. I tell you, the Roof is no place for a helpless savage.’

‘You are calling *me* helpless?’

Kubar sneered – he actually sneered at his chief, the wisps of his moustache almost disappearing into the deep