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JS

BOOK III

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PROLOGUE

The air was hot, laden with the heavy scents of decay and mold. Black clouds of insects—tiny as gnats, but with a sting that made Karrell gasp—swarmed around her face, drawn by the sweat that trickled down her temples. She pulled a fold of her cloak across her mouth and nose to screen herself from the insects, but the fabric tore away in her hand. The acidic rains had rotted it, leaving it thin as pockmarked gauze. She cast the scrap of fabric aside, too weary from her trudge through the jungle to care if it was found by the demon that was searching for her.

She glanced up through foliage so thick it was almost impossible to see the mottled purple sky above. Vines wove through the

branches overhead, giving the jungle canopy the appearance of a vast net. The stems of the vines coiled down the scabrous tree trunks like snakes, past clumps of gaggingly sweet-scented black orchids whose roots curled like shriveled white fingers.

Things moved through the jungle canopy above: dark, flitting shapes that startled her, then disappeared before her eye had a chance to fully register them. Their muted cries and sibilant hisses filled the air.

How long had she been fighting her way through the jungle? She had slept five times since escaping the cage the demon had kept her in since drawing her into the Abyss, but “nights” that strange plane were artificial ones. The sky was unchanging. It brooded, neither fully dark nor fully light, but somewhere in between, a perpetual almost-dusk.

Where *was* she? Whatever layer of the Abyss it was, she had been there several months, long enough for her pregnancy to make her slow and heavy, long enough for her to be dangerously close to the time when she would give birth. When those first labor pains struck, the demon would discover the truth—that it didn’t need to keep her alive after all.

Karrell was no longer its prisoner, and she had to fend for herself. She was hungry all the time—the children were growing bigger inside her each day—but it was hard to find food she was certain was safe. The fruits that grew there were overripe, soft with bruises and rot, and the lizards she’d been able to catch had flesh that stung the tongue with its acidity. She worried, with each mouthful, whether she was doing harm to her unborn children. The only other option, however, was starvation. She had tried to summon a creature of her homeland—some

small animal that she could kill and eat—but her prayer had failed. Wherever she was, it had no connection with her native plane.

She pushed her way through ferns that dusted her hands and arms with pale yellow spores, and vines whose curved, fang-sharp thorns left scratches in her flesh. With each step her feet crushed wide-leaved plants sticky with foul-smelling sap. The ground underfoot squelched as she walked. Spongy and soft, it was made up of layer after layer of dead and rotting vegetation, dotted with puddles of putrid water. In a normal jungle, she could pass without leaving any trace, but the Abyssal vegetation conspired against her, leaving behind a trail of footprints and broken branches that even the most unskilled tracker could follow.

She stopped at a pool ringed by foul-smelling yellow plants whose stalks were papery with peeling skin. Picking a wide leaf, she curled it into a cone and used it to scoop up a little of the scummy green water. A pass of her hand over the makeshift cup and a quick, whispered prayer turned the water clear. She drank thirstily, closing her eyes and wishing she could blot out the oppressive odor of decay that pervaded the place. Another scoop of water, another quick prayer, another drink—it still wasn't enough to quite slake her thirst, but she dare not cast the spell a third time—not there.

The jungle reacted to her prayers. A vine snaked toward her along the ground, brushing against her ankle with feather-soft tendrils. She jerked her foot away, tearing free of the vine, then rose to her feet and continued on her way.

She glanced around. Which way? Did it really matter? The jungle looked the same no matter which direction she went in. There were no landmarks, no trails, no bodies of water large enough to be

called a lake. Months before—the first time she'd escaped—she had climbed as high as she could up a tree and bent back its branches so she could see out over the jungle. The view hadn't been encouraging. As far as she could see in any direction, there was nothing but unbroken jungle, green and matted from horizon to horizon—nothing that suggested a way out.

As she walked, something tripped her: a root that had humped up out of the spongy ground like a living snare. She stumbled forward, landing on hands and knees with her fingers in a brackish pool of water. The acid in it stung her skin; she wiped her hands furiously on what remained of her cloak. Then, hearing a slurping noise just ahead, she froze.

At the far side of the pool, no more than a half-dozen paces from her, through a screen of vegetation that hung like mottled green lace from the trees, a pale-skinned creature the size of a large dog lifted its head from the surface of the pool and sucked a purple tongue back into its small, sharp-fanged mouth. Squat and hairless save for a strip of matted black hair down its bulbous belly, the dretch had a round, bald head set on a thick, blubbery neck. It blinked tiny eyes, listening. Then, slowly, its head began to turn toward her.

With a whisper, she cast a spell. Her arms became branches, her legs roots, her cloak-shrouded body the trunk of a gnarled log. Her bulging stomach took the appearance of a burl on the trunk, and her long hair transformed into green-leafed vines. As the dretch loped toward her through the pool, its knuckles dragging through the water, she saw it out of peripheral vision only, unable to turn her head. It moved in close, pushing its head forward to snuffle in her scent through mucous-clogged nostrils. Then

it sat back and cocked its head to one side. Extending a misshapen hand, it flexed a finger, revealing a dirty claw. With this, it scratched the bark of the “tree” it had just sniffed.

The scratch sent a spasm of pain through her; sap oozed like blood from the wound in her thigh. She remained motionless, trusting to her spell. The demon that was hunting her had sent dozens of small, stupid creatures out into the jungle to search for her, and she’d managed to avoid them all. Never before had any of them come close enough to touch her.

The dretch sat a moment longer, staring at her, sucking its claw. Its nostrils twitched. Lowering its nose to the trail she’d made, it loped away through the jungle, back the way she’d come.

When she could no longer hear it, she let the spell end, transforming back into human form once more. Blood trickled from the scratch in her thigh. She laid a hand on it, started whispering a healing spell, then thought better of it. Already the orchids above were reacting to the spell she’d just cast, sending a shower of tiny, waxy balls of pollen down on her. The pollen stuck to her hair, shoulders, and arms like a coating of pale soot, drawing first one buzzing insect away from the pool, then a dozen, then a swarm. Batting them away, she waded across the pond to mask her scent then fled into the jungle.

Some time later—long enough for her sweat to wash away the orchid pollen and leave behind a crusting of salt—she realized there was an opening in the trees ahead. Slowing to a walk, she approached it cautiously. The clear spot turned out to be a wide area of toppled trees and crushed undergrowth. It was almost as if a giant had stamped the jungle flat. Curious, she climbed over a fallen tree and

moved cautiously forward. Something had happened there—something momentous.

At the center of the smashed jungle she saw a large structure, entirely covered in vines. It looked like a rounded wall of black stone, its sinuous curves reminiscent of a snake. She stood for several moments, staring at it, trying to decide whether it was safe to approach. The wall was the only structure she had seen in this wilderness of swamp and jungle—perhaps it enclosed something significant, a portal out, for example.

Cautiously, she walked toward the wall, trying to peer through the foliage that covered it. Vines had grown up through the toppled trees on either side of the wall, knitting together across its rounded top. Once again, she was reminded of a net—a living net—each strand as thick as her thigh and deeply rooted in the spongy soil. As she drew closer, she could see that the wall was made from a shiny black stone—obsidian, perhaps. Curved lines had been carved into it that resembled the scales of a serpent.

She followed the wall, ducking under fallen trunks and tearing her way through the ferns and spike-leaved plants that had grown up since the jungle here was felled. She came, at last, to the place where the wall ended in a blunt wedge, the head of the snake. There was a circular patch of smooth stone on the side of the wedge, nearly as wide across as Karrell was tall. A door? Heart beating with excitement, she tried to shift the vines that covered it. She succeeded in tearing off a few leaves, exposing the circle on the wall, but the vines themselves were as rigid as steel bars and did not yield, even when she planted a foot on the wall and yanked with all of her strength. Panting, exhausted by her efforts and the oppressive heat, she contented herself with

tearing away the rest of the leaves. It was difficult work, especially with the last two fingers of her right hand missing—a legacy of her battle with the marilith—but she persevered. When a large space was clear, she pressed her palm against the stone, praying that it would open.

It did, revealing an enormous, slitted eye.

Startled, she jerked her hand back. “Ubtao protect me!” she gasped.

Even as the name left her lips, an angry hissing filled the air. Vines creaked as the mouth of the “wall” parted slightly, revealing the bases of curved fangs. A forked tongue strained to escape but could not, and the hissing intensified.

Realizing that she had just awakened an enormous serpent—its wedge-shaped head alone the size of a small building—Karrell staggered backward, stumbling over a fallen tree that sent her sprawling. The serpent blinked and strained against the vines that bound it, causing the ground to tremble, but it could not pull free. Its eye fixed her with a look of such utter malevolence that for several moments she was unable to breathe. Suffocated by a blanket of fear, she felt as if she were about to faint. Even bound, the serpent exuded power: raw, violent, untamed. It could consume her with less effort than a thought, could squeeze her between its coils until not even a smear of her remained. It hated her with a loathing deeper than death itself and equally cruel.

At the same time, Karrell sensed a terrible *need*, one that caused the serpent to plead, silently, with the one person who had responded to its call, even though that person served a god that was its sworn enemy.

Sobbing in a lungful of air at last, Karrell turned and ran, back into the jungle and the dangers it

held. She didn't care if the dretches found her, and delivered her to their mistress.

Anything was better than facing Sseth.