

Visit the American Museum of Natural History in New York on the right day, and somewhere among the many buildings and exhibition halls you might discover our next author leading one of the tours. Paul Berger first appeared in last July's issue of F&SF with his earthquake story "Subduction." This new tale mixes science and fantasy in a similar way, and was also inspired by the material he shares with museum visitors.

The Mantis Tattoo

By Paul M. Berger



AT DUSK THE BATS COME flying out of the porcupine den, which means the porcupine is awake and stirring. Nudur sits with his spear in his lap, watching the sandy bank. It is an old and very clever porcupine, and he forces himself to wait very quietly. He nods approval as next to him Bialo mutters the spell that will make a burrow-dweller careless and forgetful. It takes shape and the breeze carries it down the hole.

Nudur is long overdue for a decent kill.

Out across the savanna, the giant hyenas greet one another with yelps and chortles. They are still some way off, he notes, but if they strike the old mammoth trail the two hunters used and catch their scent, they could be here in no time. Giant hyenas hunt in packs, and they weave a net of panic before them as they run, and each is large enough to carry away a grown man. Right now, Nudur is very aware that he and Bialo are not yet quite full-grown.

"He's a crafty one, all right," Nudur whispers. "He knows if he waits a bit longer we'll have to leave. We should move back."

The youths creep downwind and flatten themselves against the warm earth.

The porcupine emerges, black and dusty and nearly as big as the hunters waiting for it. It pauses between steps to scent the air with its blunt snout, holding its heavy quills half-aloft so they don't rattle.

Nudur sprints across the gap. Before the porcupine can turn back into its hole, he thrusts his spear into its side. The flint point catches it on the shoulder and the beast skids sideways until it fetches up against the bank. A moment later Bialo is alongside him and rushes to jab his spear into its flank. Neither places his point well. They lean all their weight onto their shafts while the porcupine, who wants to hold on to life very badly, thrashes its barb-quilled tail and snarls. Then the sandy wall it is pinned against crumbles away so that the porcupine tumbles and comes off their spears. In the half-light Nudur can see a flash of its backside as it trundles off into the brush.

All Nudur's plans hang on returning home with a prize tonight. He is ready to take his rightful place among the men as a strong hunter, though so far events have conspired to prevent that from happening. Besides, there are two or three girls in the tribe who will be ready for husbands soon, and he will have to make sure he is on their minds.

In his frustration and desperation, he does something improper. He takes up his bow and shoots the Simple Death at the fleeing porcupine. The slim little arrow strikes; soon they can hear the porcupine's struggles and labored breathing as the poison ruins its blood. When they find it, it is already dead.

Bialo is not nearly as pleased as Nudur is.

"The Simple Death is only for big game, or for the very strong," Bialo says. "A porcupine is peaceful and slow. A true hunter respects that, and uses his spear, or uses his hands to dig him out of his hole." Nudur is familiar with every word Bialo says; it is a quote from their lessons. All boys are taught the steps in preparing the Simple Death and the proper way to wield it. "Also, it spoils too much of the meat. This was lazy." Bialo can't help being good, even when he tries.

"Ah, but you're thinking about it wrong," Nudur tells him. "We did use our spears. He was wounded, and he was running where we couldn't follow. The hyenas would have gotten him if we didn't hurry. So this was the only way."

For a moment it looks like Bialo wants to accept this assertion, but then he asks, "What would Uncle Dido say to that?"

Uncle Dido doesn't have a speck of patience for Nudur's sophistry. "So we'd better not tell him about it," Nudur answers with an easy grin.

Bialo sighs. They have been friends all their lives, and Nudur knows exactly how far he can press his loyalty.

"You always have the best cutters," Nudur says. "Lend me yours."

From the pouch of treasures he keeps around his neck, Bialo hands him a double-edged chert blade as long and slim as a finger. Nudur pauses to admire it, then kneels and cuts the arrow free. He also slices away a generous portion of flesh around the wound where the poison might remain. Bialo's perfect knapped edge goes through the flesh as if it were wet sand.

"There," Nudur says. "Safe to touch, and no one at home will guess it was an arrow wound. It's like it never happened."

The dead porcupine snorts and lifts its head and rises to its feet.

"Hear me, boy," it says in human speech. "The Fathers of Man are returning. Seek them." Its cleft lips flap around its great orange incisors to form the words. "Seek them and guide them to their rightful land."

The porcupine collapses back into the dust. The youths freeze, wide-eyed.

"He was talking to you," Nudur says quickly.

"Oh, no," says Bialo. "He was definitely talking to you."

THEY JOG HOME through the deepening twilight, without the porcupine. Nudur had contended that what the tribe didn't know about it couldn't hurt them, but Bialo insisted on leaving the spirit-touched carcass where it lay. He was so adamant that Nudur had begun to doubt his own argument, and relented. Besides, the hyenas were close.

"This is very, very bad," Nudur says.

"No, it is very good," Bialo assures him.

"Maybe that was Vulture?" Nudur says, without much conviction.

Bialo shakes his head. "You know there's only one who speaks through the dead."

"Leopard might choose me — you saw how he watched me the last two times we went stalking. Or Crocodile. He could have eaten me when I was a boy and ran into the river, but he spared me."

Nudur once knew a man who had been claimed by Crocodile. The open, toothy maw had given the tattoo down the side of his face a rakish air, and the girls had admired it.

"I think that crocodile had just fed and you were too small to be worth the effort," Bialo says.

"But I'm going to be an important hunter."

"I think you will be very important, but not as a hunter. He would not have spoken to you if he did not choose you."

"Why me?"

Bialo shrugs.

This is big news and it may very well ruin Nudur's life if he doesn't handle it with discretion. He's concerned that Bialo might be too open-hearted to grasp the importance of a nuanced tale.

"Just let me have some time to think about what this means," he says as they squeeze through the compound's thorn fence.

"Of course," Bialo says. "You should think about it carefully."

Though Bialo must not have private contemplation in mind, because he sees the tribe seated around their fires and calls out with glee, "*Mantis chose Nudur!* Uncle Dido! Mantis chose Nudur! He spoke to him through our porcupine!"

The women start to rise to greet them, but when they see the youths are empty-handed they return to their spots with sour looks. Then Bialo's words sink in and their faces light up.

"Eh? What nonsense is this?" Uncle Dido stands and glares at them with his one good eye.

"We killed a porcupine," Bialo tells him, "and he was dead, but then he stood up and spoke to Nudur like a Human Being. Then he went back to being dead."

Dido grabs them each by an arm. "Come with me. Now." He drags them behind a hut where they won't be heard. "Is this some sort of game?" he demands of Bialo, who, the whole tribe knows, has never quite mastered the concept of lying. Bialo shakes his head.

Dido turns to Nudur. In the flickering light, the frog tattoo that

surrounds the shriveled void of his bad eye twitches and kicks its legs. "What did he say to you?"

The look Nudur gives Bialo could nearly skewer him, but he knows Bialo is right, so he describes to Dido what happened, omitting the arrow for the time being.

The old man slaps his thigh. "Oho, that sounds like Mantis, all right!" he cries. They have never seen him so happy before. "At long last — Mantis!"

Nudur's heart sinks.

Mantis can be a mantis, or a dead animal, or a man, or anything else he chooses. He is the trickster, and he hails from the place where form has no weight or meaning. All the best stories are his, and he shares them only grudgingly. Mantis likes a good laugh at the expense of someone else's pride. He always has a plan. He gets distracted by lusty girls. He never makes a fair deal if he can avoid it. And he likes to stir things up just to see what comes of it.

Mantis is what makes the Human Beings stand apart from the rest of the animals, and he is what gives them their edge. Without his gifts, their fragile bones would be scattered across the dry soil of the savanna. But he has not chosen a man to wear his sign for a generation, and for those years the Human Beings have had to scabble to survive.

Mantis is more than half mad, and he makes a famously fickle spouse and friend; the man who serves him sits in a place of honor, but he sits alone, and no self-respecting woman will take that man for a husband.

Nudur, however, fully intends to marry (the sooner the better) and he has an exhaustive list of all the things he hopes to do with his wife once he finds one.

"But that bit about 'the Fathers of Man' — hmm," Dido says, half to himself.

"Is that important?" Nudur asks.

"Perhaps. But knowing Mantis, it also might not be. He might just want to see what we do. The Fathers left us long and long ago, back in the days when Mantis won this land from Fanged Lion."

Everyone knows by heart the story of that great bet, and how Fanged Lion in his arrogance mocked the challenge of little Mantis to all the world, and thus ensured his own exile when Mantis bested him through

cunning rather than strength. Fanged Lion was shamed, and the Fathers are long gone. Now there are only a handful of scattered tribes of Human Beings, hunting alone and nearly starving on the wide plains.

"But why would they return?" Dido muses. "Have they come back for us? Do they have more to teach us?"

The boys have nothing to add, and Dido makes a dismissive noise and returns to his seat by the fire.

The sunlight is seeping through the thatch walls of the little hut by the time Nudur awakes, and he keeps his eyes closed and stretches. Nudur's mother has already gone out. Perhaps it is not too late to find another patron, a strong and straightforward one that the girls will like. He'll go out on a proper quest — he'll leave this morning — and he'll be sure to return with evidence he has been chosen by someone more suitable, even if it requires some enhancement. He will grab a bite to eat and then slip out of the compound. He lets his eyes drift open.

"*Yahh!*" he cries, and scuttles backward on his sleeping mat.

Hanging on the wall over his face, swaying subtly as if blown in a breeze, is a mantis. The insect's pale green body is luminous in the gentle light. No matter how Nudur moves, in the deep globe of each eye, a single pinprick spot like a pupil appears to follow him. With a twitch, the mantis cocks its triangular head and considers him.

"Not me," Nudur whispers. "You don't want me, Uncle. I wouldn't be good for you.... You want Bialo. He's very clever. I'll bring you many fine offerings if you don't choose me."

The mantis delicately shudders atop its grass-stem legs, its head and thorax bobbing with lungless laughter.

"Nudur, are you awake?" Bialo calls from right outside. "Come see this. It's wonderful!"

"Remember — not me," Nudur whispers to the mantis, then calls back, "I'm coming!" He steps outside.

And there is Bialo standing next to Uncle Dido and all the other uncles, and the rest of the tribe is lined up behind them in two rows, making an aisle to the hut that serves as the men's house.

"Congratulations, Nudur!" Bialo beams. "It's your Claiming Day!"

"Why wait when you've clearly been chosen?" says Uncle Dido.

"Through you, Mantis will walk among us again." Somebody begins to sing, and everyone joins in.

Before he can talk his way out of it, Nudur is led with a firm hand on each arm and given his tattoo.

NUDUR IS JOGGING north, alone, crossing the plain with quick, short strides. He is on the mission Mantis set for him.

His face hardly burns anymore. He now carries Mantis's mark, in bone-needle dots of ochre red and ash gray that run down from his right temple to his jawline. The tattoo depicts Mantis standing upright, a man below and a mantis above, his spiked arms raised in warning or benediction.

Nudur is seeking the Fathers. When they left, countless generations ago, they had gone north. It stands to reason that if they are returning, that is the direction from which they will come, and he's been looking for some sign of them.

He is lonely. He wishes he were hunting with Bialo. He wishes he were anywhere else. He wishes Uncle Dido had let him take his bow with him.

"Not this time," Dido had said. "The Simple Death is a tricky thing. You could brush against it and not even realize it until you touched your face or your food, and then it would be too late."

"I'd never do that."

"That's exactly what I said once," Dido had responded, tapping his empty eye socket. "You do not carry it alone, and you do not carry it among strangers."

It has already been several days. Nudur has not been lucky about finding food along the way, and he reckons it may be time for him to take something from the small bundle of supplies he is carrying. The exhaustion and the hunger are putting swirling spots in his vision and making him doubt some of the things he hears and sees.

Atop a termite mound near the trail, two jackals are copulating with great vigor. The male is small and mangy and gaunt. Off in the distance, a fine healthy male nosing about a dried rib cage in the dust catches sight of what they are doing and freezes in dismay, ears pointed and one foot

lifted. As Nudur passes the mound, the little male finishes with a long, whining yelp and leaps down to trot through the grass just off to his side.

Nudur throws a stone at it. The jackal dodges it effortlessly.

"Hey now, boy," it says. "You want to be showing more respect to your betters."

"Oh," says Nudur. "You."

"I suggest you speak more civilly than that." The voice is suddenly severe and unforgiving. "You bear my mark, and that's forever."

Nudur swallows his pride and approaches the jackal, which now sits with its black tail curled across its forefeet. "Good evening, Uncle Mantis," Nudur says. "I hope all is well with you."

Mantis-the-jackal grunts. "That's more like it. If you keep heading north along this track another few days, you'll see them."

"Thank you."

Mantis dips his head, just barely.

"Uncle, I have a question," Nudur says.

"Yes?"

"When I find the Fathers, where should I take them?"

"Ah. You'll know the right place for them after you meet them. Just remember, this land isn't theirs anymore. It's for the Human Beings — and Mantis."

"Yes, Uncle."

"And it might interest you to know, that boy you hang around with is following you."

"Bialo!"

"I suppose that's him. The boring one. It's a wonder he has survived this long on his own. Don't wait for him."

"Thank you, Uncle. May I ask another question?"

"You may."

"Why did the Fathers leave us?"

"Ah. For the answer to that, Nudur, you must look into my eyes."

Nudur leans forward and peers into the jackal's golden-brown irises.

"Closer, boy."

Nudur takes another step, until he and the jackal are nearly nose to nose.

Mantis lunges and snags the packet of dried food from the band around

Nudur's waist, then jumps clear and darts off into the bushes. Nudur takes a step after him, but he can already hear the jackal's light footsteps receding.

"Is that an answer, Uncle?" he calls.

But the only response is Mantis's yip and chuckle, muffled by the bundle clutched in his teeth.

There is a camp with many fires at the base of a rocky cliff. Nudur is lying flat on his belly, watching. It is nearly the size of his entire tribe, well over a hundred people. The folk he can see are different — they are taller than the people he knows, and much, much broader across their shoulders and torsos and through all their limbs. They have wide cheeks, and none of them has any chin to speak of. Something about the lazy way they conserve their great strength as they sit together reminds him more of a pride of lions than a tribe of Human Beings.

If he approaches them too abruptly, they are likely to tear him apart before he can explain himself. Even hailing them from a distance is a risk.

What would Mantis do? Mantis, the cocky bastard, would probably find a spot just at the edge of earshot from the camp and start telling a story, with only a tree stump or a boulder for an audience. It would be one of the big stories about how he snuck the sun up from the underworld, or how he rescued the rain from the wicked grandfather's sack. The strange people would hear it and leave their campsite and become curious, and every time they were ready to pounce out of the shadows onto Mantis, there would be another exciting twist in the tale and they would wait to hear what happens next, until daybreak came and they decided to make him part of their clan.

As it happens, Nudur is a terrible storyteller. There has never been a story he didn't ruin in the telling, and he detests speaking in front of more than two people at a time.

But the hand of Mantis is guiding him, so he stands and clears his throat, and says, "Once — "

And then, of course, he is tackled from behind.

The person on top of him is easily half again his own weight, and pins him completely with no effort at all.

"Hoyy! I caught him," the person shouts toward the camp. The voice is like a low note from a bone flute. "I have him. He is a boy. But."

Someone calls back, "Bring him here. Bring him, if you caught him!"

Nudur is lifted to his feet. "Do not run," his captor says. "If you run, I will catch you again. And I will hurt you, if you run." A grip like an eagle's talon around his upper arms propels him toward a fire.

The Fathers come to the edge of the firelight and look him over, and sniff him.

"It is one of them," a big man says. "I will talk with him."

The man is a head taller than Nudur. If he has all the same bones as a Human Being, then each of them must be twice as wide and anchor twice as much muscle, even in his fingers and toes. He is very ugly, but not cruel-looking. His forehead seems hacked from rock, and his eyes are shadowed by brows that stand so far out an arrow shaft could balance across them. The top of his head is low and flat. He has no tattoo. It is strange to see that none of them does.

The one holding Nudur releases his arms and he turns to see it is a girl. She dwarfs Nudur and she is no less ugly than the other, but undeniably a girl. Nudur realizes that of course, some of the Fathers would have to be women, and maybe the rest of the legend shouldn't be taken quite so literally either.

"Will you sit and talk with me?" the tall one asks courteously. He speaks with a strange accent that puts Nudur in mind of wind through leaves, and stones knocking together. The girl and the others move to a respectful distance from them.

"I am called Whistle," the Father says. It seems to Nudur that Whistle's face naturally relaxes into a broad, fleshy smile. It makes a warm, gentle expression. Nudur finds it reassuring.

"I am called Nudur."

"I have seen ones like you before," Whistle says. "We are not the same, I think."

"We are the Human Beings, and you are the Fathers of Man," Nudur explains.

"Ah, no. We are the People, and you are the Ones Who Stayed Behind."

Nudur supposes that is a matter of perspective. "Can you tell me, please, why did you go away?"

"That was long and long ago," answers Whistle. "The hunting was no

good here, so Fanged Lion led us north. We followed Fanged Lion far north to a different place, and the hunting was very good there." He pauses and assesses Nudur with a sidelong glance. "Now we have come back, and we see that you are still here. You stayed. But. You have become very strange."

"We stayed because Mantis wished us to," Nudur explains. "If we have become different, that is because it was necessary in order to make a life here."

"Mantis does not come among our people."

"I can teach you all about him," Nudur offers. Perhaps that is the task that has been set for him. But Whistle shows no inclination to learn then and there, so Nudur asks, "Why did you return to the plains after all this time?"

Whistle nods slowly. "The North has become cold. Some of us do not like to live in the cold and hunt in the cold, so we left and walked south to our old home. Most of us stayed, because they have become different, too — strong hunters in the snow. Our children have grown strange to us. Not as strange as you. But. They are too strange, so we have returned."

He looks Nudur over. "I think we are the Ones Who Do Not Change. The ones around us always change. But. Fanged Lion is glad we are in this place again."

"Can you tell me about Fanged Lion?" Nudur asks.

"There is little to say," Whistle answers. "Fanged Lion is hungry, so he hunts. One day he will eat the world."

"Are there any stories about him?"

"Fanged Lion does not have stories," Whistle tells him.

A great hunter who tells no stories — that's the patron Nudur would choose, if the choice were his.

Throughout the evening, Fathers return to the camp in twos and threes, both men and women, all ages. Each of them carries a fine fresh kill draped over their shoulders. They use thick stabbing spears in close combat with large game that a Human Being could only hope to stop by using the Simple Death.

A hunter even bigger than Whistle approaches a fire, and Nudur can see that his forearm is broken and bent at a jagged angle. He holds out his

arm to an old woman, and without a word she grasps his wrist and tugs. The big man winces as the bones pop back into alignment, then wiggles his fingers and grunts.

He joins Whistle and Nudur. His name is Fever.

"That is excellent hunting," Nudur says. "You will have a great feast tonight."

Fever doesn't appear to grasp his meaning.

"No," Whistle says, as if it is obvious. "It is not enough for him. It is never enough for us. We are always hungry, always."

"But. We know your folk are great hunters," Fever tells Nudur.

"We are?" Nudur is baffled.

"Oh, yes," says Fever. "We have watched you, though you do not know it. And we have seen."

Whistle shouts, and the girl brings him a slender bow and a few small arrows, copies of a Human Being's gear. She sits down next to Nudur, close enough that her thick shoulder sometimes gently brushes his. She has wide, soulful eyes.

"We know that when your folk hunt with these flimsy little things, you put a power into them and you can kill any beast. But," Whistle says. "Not us."

In his wide hands the bow looks like a delicate toy. He nocks an arrow and shoots it across the fire into Fever's thigh. Fever howls, then grins and plucks it out and hands it back. Clearly there is no poison on the point.

"Before a hunt, the magic of Fanged Lion makes our arms strong to drive a spear fast and deep. But. It is never strong enough to give even one of your little arrows the killing power."

"I can explain," Nudur says. He reaches for the bow, but Whistle places a great hand on Nudur's head and holds him at arm's length.

"No. You are deadly. Who knows what you would be able to do, here in our camp, if you touched this bow?"

"That power comes from Mantis," Nudur says. "He taught us how to make the Simple Death."

"So that is a thing that can be learned?" Whistle and Fever are suddenly intent, and the girl looms over him.

"Yes...." Nudur suspects he may have said too much, and he tries to redirect the conversation. "Mantis sent me to you to help your people,"

he says. Whistle raises a heavy eyebrow. "I can help you find a land where you may make your home. If you like green jungle where little elephants run like deer between the trees, I can take you to the west. If you like the seashore, where you can gather up a feast's worth of shellfish every morning, I can guide you to the east. Tell me what will suit your people best, and we can leave tomorrow. And when we get there, I will teach you about the Simple Death."

When they get there, perhaps they will like their new home so much they will forget all about the Simple Death. Or maybe Nudur will be able to slip away before he is forced to reveal the secret. Either way seems to Nudur like a plan befitting one who carries Mantis's mark.

Whistle smiles his big soft smile.

"That sounds very nice. But. What suits us best is this place. Fanged Lion led us here. I think we will stay where Fanged Lion led us and make the plains our home."

Nudur strongly suspects that these Fathers will not make good neighbors.

"But. We would be very happy to have your help. If we had the secret of the Simple Death we would never be hungry again. And a person who gave us that secret would be our friend always, and would have the best of everything. The best food; the best sleeping spot; the best woman."

The girl smiles down at Nudur. Her teeth are nearly as broad as his fingernails.

"My name is Puddle," the girl says.

"She is very sweet, and she is a strong hunter," Whistle says. "And she would be very kind to a man who helps us."

Puddle puts her arm around Nudur's shoulders.

"But," Nudur says.

Though it could be worse.

"Let me think about it," he says. "Maybe Mantis will show me what he intends."

Puddle leads him away to the spot where she sleeps. Nudur doesn't quite know how he feels about this; he is all alone, and he can't tell what Mantis wants him to do. What he knows is that each time she mounts him, she makes a rumbling sigh that sounds just like the old trickster is

chuckling at his expense. Though it *is* a chance to try a few things from his list, despite the threat and her size and her strangeness.

They are a strange people. Nudur recognizes all their tools, but they have nothing so fine or so subtle as Bialo could make. They prefer to hunt big game, and they use only their stout stabbing spears — they have no bows, nor any weapons that are thrown. They love beautiful things, and they put colors on their skin and their garments, and they braid bright feathers and bits of polished stone into their long hair, but they have no art beyond that. Puddle is fascinated by his tattoo. He explains it several times and she nearly gets it, but ultimately she just cannot see how the dots on his face can be a creature, or even a spirit.

It is not necessary for them to depict their god. Nudur can sense the presence of Fanged Lion in each of them, infusing the air of the camp. It is behind their strength and their hunger and their intensity. When they surround him, there is a low rumble like a growl at the edge of his mind, though he doesn't know if he feels it through his bones or through his heart.

If they ever laugh, Nudur has not heard it.

Before dawn, the Fathers who will be hunting prepare to leave the camp. They line up silently in front of the old woman, who stands by her fire at the base of the cliff and tips a bladder bag into their mouths, one by one. After they have had a swallow, they make fierce scowls, or strike each other and shout, or roar right into each other's faces. Whistle and Fever clash their heads together like goats, then run off into the savanna as if they can barely contain their own strength.

"What is that drink?" Nudur asks.

"Lion's Rage," Puddle says, holding his hand. "It is magic that makes us powerful before a hunt."

"I'd like to try that." He strides forward, but Puddle is still gripping his hand, and she hasn't moved, so he is nearly yanked off his feet.

"You cannot," she says. "That is only for hunters, and you will stay in camp, so it is not for you."

"Will you go?"

"Only after you are finished thinking."

"I want to leave camp."

"When you are finished thinking."

She walks back to their sleeping spot, drawing him along behind.

"Have you decided yet?" Whistle asks the moment he returns from his hunt. The head and forequarters of a zebra are slung around his shoulders.

Mantis has declined to respond to Nudur all day, so Nudur improvises: "Mantis says it is not the right time yet. First, we should find you a better home. Then I can teach you the Simple Death."

"Ah." Whistle smiles his broad soft smile, then nods to Puddle. She cuffs Nudur on the side of his head and sends him sprawling to the ground.

"*Mantis says,*" repeats Whistle. "There is no Mantis here. Fanged Lion has returned. And Fanged Lion wants you to teach us now." He kicks Nudur in the ribs.

They beat Nudur methodically and thoughtfully, taking care not to cripple him permanently. When they have finished, they roll him over onto his back, and though his vision is starred and blurred he thinks he sees the zebra carcass that Whistle has dropped stick out its tongue and wink at him.

NUDUR IS CERTAIN now that the Fathers do not intend to share the plains. If not for their fear of the Simple Death, they would already have displaced the Human Beings and taken all their hunting grounds. Fanged Lion has never forgiven Mantis.

And Mantis has led Nudur into an impossible situation and abandoned him. Nudur may bear Mantis's tattoo, but he no longer cares about the task he was given. Since he first met Mantis, every move Nudur has made has been too slow or too weak or too foolish to succeed. It might even be that this whole mission on behalf of the trickster is nothing but a nasty trick played on Nudur himself. It's a terrible thought, but it would be better if he died here than if he sent invasion and disaster to Uncle Dido and his mother and everyone he knows.

Puddle keeps Nudur captive throughout the day, and Whistle and Fever beat him at night. Fever in particular looks disappointed that Nudur buckles in the face of what must be no more than a typical day's wear-and-tear for him. Nudur curses Fanged Lion under his breath with the strongest curses he knows. Then he remembers who put him here, and he doubles them all and curses Mantis.

Puddle brings him water and a bit of meat now and again. He doesn't touch it. He has become resigned to dying this way. He just wishes it would not take so long.

But then one morning his friend Bialo stumbles into the camp. He looks around at the Fathers, wide-eyed.

They are on Bialo instantly, and they drag him to Whistle. Puddle tightens her grip on Nudur, and he keeps his eyes on the ground. He tries to act like he has never seen Bialo before and doesn't care what happens to him.

"Nudur!" Bialo cries. "Are you all right? I thought you might need some help so I came looking for you."

"Hello, Bialo," Nudur says around his bruised jaw. "That was not a good idea."

He sees that Bialo has received his tattoo as well: Weaver-Bird, patron of men who build and work with their hands. It is a good match for him, and it would have given him a good life, if he hadn't come here.

"Your friend?" Whistle says. "So you must know the secret, too."

"No," Nudur says quickly. "Mantis speaks only to me. This one belongs to someone else. He's no use to you."

"Is that true?" Whistle demands.

"Yes, I was chosen by Weaver-Bird," says Bialo, as simple as ever. He tilts the marked side of his face up to demonstrate. The pattern there has no meaning for Whistle, but he watches Bialo's eyes closely and sees it's the truth. At least there is that small reprieve.

Bialo is about to open his mouth and Nudur is certain that he will ask what secret Whistle means, but Whistle speaks first. "That one is ready to die, so he is not useful to us," he tells Bialo. "And you do not know the secret. But. You are his friend, so maybe you can still be useful."

He throws Bialo to the dust, and Fever and two other Fathers pin him there. Their bodies hide him from Nudur's sight, but something they do makes him scream.

And scream, and scream.

Nudur can't cover his ears tightly enough.

After a while, Whistle walks up to where Nudur is sitting and tosses a bloody pucker of meat in his lap.

It is a square of flesh surrounding a nipple. Nudur knows it was excised using Bialo's own perfect chert blade.

"No more," Nudur says, fighting down the bile. "I'll teach you."

"Good," says Whistle. "Tell us the spell, now."

"It's more than a spell," Nudur says. "It is something you make, like Fanged Lion's drink. But you don't have the ingredients here. I'll have to show you how to gather them."

Whistle considers. "We will walk." He gestures to his entire tribe, and they all stand. "We will leave and walk together, and you will teach us all. You will teach us or we will drop pieces of your friend behind us for the hyenas as we go."

"We will have to go north to find what we need," says Nudur.

"No. I think we will go south." Whistle smiles his big soft smile. "The way you came."

They are marching south, and Nudur rarely sees Bialo. The entire troop is hunting for the ingredients Nudur describes.

First comes the brown-striped gourd. These are not rare, but it must be the brown-striped, because that one adds its spirit to the mixture prepared inside. Once the tribe knows what to look for they come across several vines, and now every member is carrying his own gourd. It occurs to Nudur that if they each intend to prepare their own batch, it would result in more poison than the tribe could hope to use in a lifetime.

They march south, back along the trail that Mantis set for Nudur. At night they camp, and Nudur cannot speak to Bialo because they are held far apart. Each morning Nudur watches the tribe take communion from Fanged Lion's potion, then he struggles to match their pace for the rest of the day. Sometimes Puddle has to drag him.

Nudur stops the tribe at a cluster of bitter-berry shrubs.

"But," Whistle says. "We eat those berries when our stomachs are vengeful. There is no great magic in them."

"For this," Nudur says wearily, "it's the roots we want." The entire tribe watches and copies him as he grinds a bit of the root and mixes it with spit in his gourd.

They march south, and now they are in the hunting grounds Nudur has known since he was an infant. The familiar sights do not comfort him.

He is looking for the final and most important ingredient, the narrow beetles that live on the stalks of plants in soft, marshy soil. The living

beetle is harmless, but something wicked it hosts inside its body is released when the beetle is crushed. However, this is not the season for floods, and the Human Beings' hunting grounds around them are hard and dry.

"It is the wrong time for narrow beetles," Nudur tells Whistle at the end of a day of searching. "We will have to wait until spring."

"You will have to think of something else," Whistle responds.

A moment later, the sound of Bialo's screams fills the evening. Nudur bites his nails and thinks frantically.

There *is* something else they can use, an ingredient that the lore says is far more potent even than the narrow beetles. But he can't imagine how they will get it. Just the idea of trying makes his hands clammy.

It is a relief when Bialo's cries end abruptly, and Nudur feels awful about that. Fever stalks over, looking frustrated.

"Your friend feels pain too strongly," he says. "Even more than you."

"Let me tend to him," Nudur says. "If he dies, he is no good to you. And if he dies, I am no good to you."

Whistle grunts, and Puddle guides him over to where Bialo is lying.

Bialo looks like he has been trampled by something with sharp hooves. He is limp, and his chest is caked with old dried blood hardened with dust. His face and hands are swollen and mottled with bruises. Nudur washes him as best as he can with cool water, and eventually his eyelids flutter open.

"Hello, Nudur," Bialo says, and smiles. He is missing teeth on one side of his mouth

Nudur helps him drink, with exaggerated motions that hide his whisper. "Bialo, if you called upon Weaver-Bird, would he help us?"

"I don't think so," Bialo whispers back. "Weaver-Bird only speaks to me when I am working with my hands."

"Then why are you smiling?"

"Because you are here," Bialo answers, "and Mantis is with you."

"I am not so sure of that."

"Of course he is. Why would he go through the trouble of choosing you just to abandon you so soon?"

Nudur shakes his head. He doesn't have the heart to say what he fears — that Mantis lost patience with his resistance and his incompetence and forsook him days ago.

"You do have a clever plan to escape, don't you?" Bialo says.

"Yes, of course I've got a plan," Nudur lies. He leans even closer and, barely speaking, breathes into his ear, "Bialo, how would you get into a hive of demon bees?"

They are the one thing he can substitute for narrow beetles.

"Demon bees?" Bialo is horrified. "Has your head gone soft? Why would you want to do that?"

"I think they have something I need."

"That's stupid," he hisses. "Nothing can face demon bees. Remember that time we ran from a swarm, and when we went back we found those antelope that were just skeletons, picked clean? Disturb them and they'll turn on you, and kill anything they come across."

With that, Nudur sees his plan. It's crude, and it certainly lacks the finesse of one of Mantis's schemes, but it is simple and solid.

As if forgetting to hush his voice, Nudur says, "You're wrong. I don't think it's dangerous at all."

Even louder, Bialo insists, "No, it's madness! You'll get yourself killed, and everyone else along with you!"

"Keep your voice down!" Nudur warns him.

"Enough!" It is Whistle, and he spins Nudur around to face him, hard. His eyes under their thick brows narrow into even darker shadows.

"I know how to get the final ingredient," Nudur tells him.

"That is good," Whistle replies. "You will go in the morning, and Fever and Puddle will go with you. But. The rest of us will stay far away, so that you do not lead us all into a trap."

That's all Nudur wants.

They are an easy hike from home now. Nudur knows exactly where to find what he needs. He has been afraid of that spot all his life.

The demon bees are as dangerous to face in their fury as hyenas — more so, because when a pack meets a swarm, it is always the pack that goes running. Sometimes when their hive is threatened, or sometimes for no reason at all, the swarm strikes out as a single roiling mass, a great fist borne on the wind, and all creatures flee from it, or die where they stand.

Fever and Puddle flank Nudur. They are crouched behind a hillock at the edge of the bees' domain — a flat, broad circle, barren except for brown

shaggy grass, with a single limbless dead tree at its center. The bees have surrounded their home with desolation, and they patrol it. The air is filled with a hot, constant, dangerous droning. A few zip past their ears, venturing out in twos and threes or returning to the hive. As each bee shoots by, Nudur's scrotum shrivels in response to the deep, angry warning buzz. They are as long as his thumb, and their bodies are golden, speckled with glossy black. The tree shimmers, but not with the heat; the trunk is alive with crawling, swarming bees.

"You want us to catch bees for you?" Fever asks, nonplussed.

"Not the bees," Nudur says. "Their children."

Fever grunts. "Ah, yes. There will be power in that."

Nudur is carrying in one hand a big ember wrapped in a smoldering piece of sod. The only way to get near the bees is to use smoke and a song-spell to make them drowsy and bewildered. Nudur knows the song.

Fever takes the ember from him. "Sing it," he says, and steps into the dead circle, wreathed in gray smoke.

In his other hand Nudur holds the bundle of tree bark that they will use to wrap the sticky, squirming bee nursery.

"I need both my hands free for this," Nudur tells Puddle. She accepts the bundle, which means she must release her hold on him. He crawls a few paces away and stands. He begins to chant the bee lullaby, waving his hands in gentle, intricate curves, and the breeze carries the spell to the tree. He sees it contract around the hive. The bees are fierce and they resist, but he can feel them growing a little more gentle.

The spell does not really require his hands, but that is part of his plan.

He will sing and put the bees to sleep. Fever will approach them and reach his arm deep into the tree, past the combs where the honey drips, past countless drowsing warriors, to the inner sanctum where the blind larvae feed and grow, each tucked into its own tight cell.

At that moment, Nudur will change his song and sing of urgency, and threat, and anger.

The swarm will awaken and leap up against the invader. Fever will die — maybe not quickly, but that, Nudur would argue, is something he is owed. Puddle is strong, but she is heavy-footed; he can probably outrun her over a distance, and he knows every path and hiding spot in this territory. He will run home and warn the Human Beings before the Fathers back in

their camp realize anything is amiss. His people will be ready with their quick little arrows, and he will lead the strike —

Fever has his broad arm shoulder-deep inside the tree, blowing smoke into the hole and muttering something to himself, his brows knitted in concentration.

Nudur must be light on the balls of his feet, ready to run. With a sweep of his arm, he changes his song to alarm and wrath, and urges the bees to arise. They wake and leap up.

Then there is a sharp cracking noise, like a great piece of wood splitting. The bees abruptly go silent. The sudden absence of their drone is like the ground dropping out from under Nudur.

A few moments later, Fever returns to the edge of the circle. In one hand he holds a broad piece of beehive packed tight with larvae. In the other fist, he holds a dripping chunk of honeycomb that he munches while he walks.

"Here you go," he says, and tosses Nudur the hive.

Fever plucks out a stinger or two between his fingernails while Nudur gapes. "Fanged Lion has strong songs, too," he explains, "and he bested the bees long ago. You have everything you need now, yes?"

NUDUR HAS NOT caught sight of Bialo for more than a day now, and he hopes his friend is still alive. The troop of Fathers is camped in a dry, sheltered riverbed, and each member has his or her own gourd-full of the potion for the Simple Death. The stink of the poison is in Nudur's nostrils, and the presence of Fanged Lion among them is as immediate as the thrum of a bowstring. They are a quick walk from his home, and their spears are ready.

"Mantis no longer walks with me," Nudur admits to Whistle.

"Your Mantis is afraid," Whistle says. "He has remembered the strength of Fanged Lion, and he is hiding."

"He was never anything but trouble, anyhow," Nudur tells him. "Do I belong to Fanged Lion now?"

"I think not," Whistle says with his soft smile. "You are too little and weak for him."

Whistle stands, and all around them the tribe of the Fathers stands

with him. A noise like a deadly growl shakes the margins of Nudur's mind.

"But," says Whistle. "Fanged Lion wants you to watch us now. You will watch us, and through you Mantis will witness our power. Because you have given us the magic of the Simple Death, and we will have it when we take back our land from your people. Your power will be our power, and we will drink it down even if it is very bitter, and then like you even our smallest blow will kill."

"What?" Nudur starts to say, "No, it's not that type of — " But then he realizes that Mantis may be with him after all, and it feels like a sky full of bees is pouring into his head.

He looks at Whistle, and at Puddle, and at the hundred enemies surrounding him. And it occurs to him to ask, with just the right amount of curiosity, "How can you be sure that the first one who drinks it won't use the power to get rid of his rivals in the tribe?"

The Fathers all go quiet, and Fever and Whistle eye each other warily.

"We are not so foolish," Whistle announces. "We will *all* drink it first."

The Fathers grin, and their smiles no longer seem soft and reassuring, but sharp-toothed and fierce. Around and between them, Fanged Lion snarls his urgency. Nudur looks away, but the tattoo on his face twitches, and he forces himself to meet Whistle's eyes. And just as they demand, Nudur bears witness while they raise their gourds to salute Fanged Lion as one, and all drink.

That afternoon, when he is done weeping and can bear to go back among them, Nudur searches the camp until he finds Bialo, and the two of them limp home together. Soon afterward, the whole village rushes out to look with wonder upon the corpses of the Fathers scattered along the streambed. (The big one is still breathing and he tries to crawl, but they end him with a heavy cutting stone; there is no honor in using the Simple Death against a weaker opponent.)

Bialo tells the story of the great trick Nudur played in order to save them all, and the girls' eyes shine, and the hunters dip their heads in acknowledgement. Uncle Dido says Nudur must not be as stupid as he looks, and that Mantis chose well, but next time could he try not bringing

the invaders all the way to the gates of the village before dispatching them? The frog tattoo around his eye leaps and dances when he grins.

Then the Human Beings return home, but Nudur remains behind to sit by himself because there are many things he is uncertain about. His people understand the chosen of Mantis must sometimes meditate in solitude. When it is quiet, the vultures come to investigate, and they hop from body to body. Sprawled about like this, the Fathers don't strike him as threatening any longer, just very sad.

"Nudur. Nudur, wake up, boy."

"I'm not asleep!" he insists. "Oh. Hello, Uncle."

The corpse of the old woman rises at the waist to address him. Alarmed, a dusty vulture raises its wings and dances away.

"So, it looks like you'll be a big man now," Mantis says.

"Uncle, why did you make me do that?" Nudur asks.

"You mean this?" The dead woman's arm gestures around her. "Are you sure that wasn't just your own quick thinking?"

"Did I make a terrible mistake?"

"No, you were right where I wanted you all along. This grudge between him and me has been going on for a long time now. The stakes just get bigger."

"You said I was supposed to show them the way to their rightful land."

"Seems to me that's just what you did. They couldn't have gotten there walking."

"Oh." Nudur watches the vultures squabble for a moment. "Is there anything else you want me to do now?"

"Learn to enjoy yourself a little," the corpse says. "I can't be bothered to talk to someone who's always so gloomy. And go home and help your people fill up this country until there's no room for all of their families and their stories."

"What then?"

"Then you'll spread out. Go north."

"North? But that's where the children of the Fathers are."

"You'll be ready," Mantis assures him. "I've got big plans for you, and like I said, the stakes will only get higher." ः