

Madeline Jane Miigwan Johnson

The Xtremely Radical Ride of Blood Keith & The Fallout Boys (excerpt)

On clear days, you can sort of hear the sound the sky makes. It's the sound of the cold space between the dirt and the vacuum whirling around itself. It's the kind of sound that sorta makes you think, hey— it's gonna be alright.

It was that kind of day. Big empty blue sky up there. Roar of the world, far away. A man was halfway to sleep by the dry riverbed. He liked to warm himself on the smooth black rocks like a snake. He imagined painted turtles probably sunned there, back when there was water. If you squinted your eyes really hard, the man might look like a painted turtle— a painted something, at least. He was tattooed head to foot. Maps and symbols, animals and names, faces, mantras, weapons, skulls.

There were little whitish scars all over, too, like hundreds of paper-cuts on his arms, legs, and chest. A lay person might assume he'd survived some kind of unusual torture. Perhaps that wasn't far from the truth. They were stretch marks. The kind you get from the sort of muscle growth which only comes from a workout regimen so grueling it legally counted as unusual torture.

Upon his forehead, huge letters, was his name:

BLOOD KEITH

The tattoo was new. Skin was still red and sore. He'd only been named within the week, and he was still becoming accustomed to using it.

Blood Keith couldn't fall asleep wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted, like some people. He had to be in his own bed with all the lights out. Ever since he was a kid. This quasi-nap by the riverbed was something closer to meditation. The smoke and filing metal and trash of the camp got into his head. Every now and then it was good to come out and just lay naked on a warm rock, you know? Nothing weird about that.

The other thing about the sky is that, on a clear day, it's almost like a blank TV screen. You can project whatever you like up there. Babies spend a lot of time staring at the sky, getting carried around in those baskets, looking up. They sense, perhaps, the presence of a parent carrying them, but they see that big blue expanse up there, and maybe, Keith thought, that's where God comes from. The wailing roar of the sky. The sense of being carried by a familiar force. The swaddling comfort of predestination.

That all changes, of course, when you start walking around on your own, and keeping your eyes on the path ahead. You make mistakes. You end up in places you never meant to go. You end up getting BLOOD KEITH tattooed on your forehead.

Whatever memories Blood Keith projected onto the vast blue sky didn't last up there long. That was because, on this day, at this moment, a piece of the sky was falling.

The object, which was tiny and flat and shimmery like a fish, rocketed through the stratosphere in a straight line from whatever arcane origins a thing such as it had into the exact space Blood Keith's face currently occupied. He heard it before he saw it. The whistle of this little thing shrieked over the peaceful roar of the sky, and then there was a flash of light on metal, and Blood Keith understood something very sharp was coming at him very fast, and made the very sane decision to roll out of the way. He rolled off the black rock and into the riverbed,

hitting the ground at the same moment as the object rammed through the rock and cracked the whole thing in half.

Blood Keith rubbed at new cuts and scrapes. He sat up in the dry riverbed, incredulous. He looked up, panning for any more falling sky chunks, and climbed back atop the rock to discover that the thing had torn right through his pants. He'd been using them as a pillow. Now he could use them as scrap fabric. Maybe in some kind of cute collage of all the ways he'd nearly died.

The object, which was embedded in the splintered rock, was platinum and rectangular with odd little buttons on one side. It looked like a TV remote. From space.

Blood Keith reached into the rock crevice and wiggled the mystery object free. He wiped off the dust and turned it over in his palms. It was heavier than it looked, like a gold brick. But it felt hollow as well. There were slits in the sides, long and marked with little metal grooves. The buttons had little letters on them written in some odd, jagged alphabet, consisting of sharp but concentric angles twisting on in one another.

“Jeez,” said Blood Keith. “Maybe it’s a bomb,” he guessed to himself as he started pushing all the buttons. “Maybe I shouldn’t be pushing all these buttons.” But nothing happened to him.

Blood Keith had once known a handful of people who might be able to decipher this language. Eager, brilliant scientists who had once been his friends. Perhaps one of them would have even known what this object was, or where it came from— or at the very least, would have been able to track the trajectory of its fall to some celestial source. But Blood Keith didn’t know any of those people anymore. Most of them were dead.

Greatshaman Gatorbreath would find this interesting. Blood Keith knew he'd need to take it back to her sooner or later. He was obligated. She would interpret this as a sign from the gods, probably of the coming of a messiah and the salvation of their people. Gatorbreath was the smartest person he knew. She knew tech, and medicine, and was probably the last bastion of common sense that the tribe had. But she was also a nutjob. Queen of the nutjobs. Nutjob shaman of a nutjob tribe. Blood Keith's tribe.

He tied his black shirt around his waist and gathered up the sad scraps of what had once been his favorite and only pair of pants, and walked through the dead field all the way back up to the camp.

The Skullcrusher tribe had put down temporary roots in an old military training camp. Heaps of burnt scrap were shoved against all the fences as a preventative measure against dust and ash storms. Street signs painted with the Skullcrusher logo— creatively, a hammer crushing a skull— stuck out around the perimeter. There were rib cages and human skulls out there as well, dressed in bondage gear and impaled on pikes. Blood Keith had helped his compatriots unearth these skeletons from the layers of ash and dust that blanketed the training camp when they first arrived.

Blood Keith approached the big front gate, a chain fence with old boards nailed over it beneath two empty guard towers. He knocked on the fence, sending shivers rippling all across it, like chimes. A small slide-away window opened up in the wood. A foul-looking mouth appeared in that window, with silver teeth and snakebite piercings on both lips. A deep voice hissed,

“Who da man?”

“Fuck the man,” Blood Keith replied. The gate opened.

“Welcome back, Blood Keith,” said Gut-shredder, locking it shut behind him. “Lookin’ good.”

“My pants got destroyed, man.” He unfurled the fabric so Gut-shredder could see. The left leg and entire groin region had exploded into loose threads.

“Shit, man, you bust one hell of a nut. Up-top.” He high-fived Blood Keith.

“No, it was this,” Blood Keith passed the space remote to Gut-shredder. Gut-shredder turned it over a few times in his clawed gloves. “It fell from the sky. Outta nowhere. I gotta bring it to the Greatshaman.” Gut-shredder frowned. He, like every member of the Skullcrusher tribe, had his name tattooed in the middle of his forehead. GUT-SHREDDER. The letters wrinkled as he arched his brow.

“Can’t bring anything to the Greatshaman right now, my dude. She’s in the Soup.”

“They’ll let me in.”

“Nuh-uh.” Gut-shredder passed the space remote back to Blood Keith. The little bald man cracked his neck and stretched his back. Gut-shredder’s tattoos were all of wolverines and tanks, barely hidden under a too-tight sleeveless denim vest with massive shoulder pauldrons. They were made of solid steel and probably gave him serious back problems, but he wore them all day anyway. “It’s serious. They got the red light on. She’s been in there since breakfast time and the red light hasn’t gone out.”

That wasn’t good.

“I gotta see her. She’ll want to see this asap. I don’t care how stoned she is.”

“Go ahead and try, my dude. It’s your funeral.” Gut-shredder waved Blood Keith away and went back to playing Mario Kart on his security camera feed, under his blue tarp.

Blood Keith walked past the armory, the cook-pit, Snakemilk Jake's workshop, and a bunch of little tarp-tents that people had set up all around. Skullcrusher mothers and grandmothers taught little Skullcrusher children how to weave net traps from chopped-up aluminum cans. Auntie Coyote, with her spike-studded collar and greying half-shaved dreadlocks, was cooking something in a great big pot with four younger girls, who were all clearly only just old enough to get their first nipple piercings. They eagerly skinned and chopped up the rat carcasses Auntie had strung up days ago to hang. One rubbed the meat slices with Industrial Seasoning while another fried them in large batches on a scrap metal slab over a huge cook-fire. Auntie shoveled the cooked meat into her cauldron. The heavily spiced, pungent aroma of fried rat stew wafted across the campsite. The odor was objectively upsetting, but also upsettingly mouth-watering. Blood Keith surprised himself when he realized he'd learned to enjoy rat meat. Just one of several surprises he'd endured after joining the Skullcrusher tribe.

Snakemilk Jake's workshop gave off a different kind of upsetting aroma. Snakemilk Jake sat in a blue-and-white striped lawn chair in front of a tall tarp filled with scrap metal and junkyard treasures of all kinds. A plume of horrid, choking black smog poured out a hole in his ceiling. The skinny stoner was the weaponsmith, mechanic, and tech expert of the tribe. He was as brilliant as he was stupid. He always smelled sour, and he looked like a goblin with his big eyes and second set of teeth. He waved to Blood Keith, knobby fingers moist with engine grease, and spat on the ground. Blood Keith waved back.

"How's she treating ya?" Snakemilk Jake called. He was referring to the hoverboard Blood Keith had received upon his Naming, which Snakemilk Jake had crafted.

“She’s a beaut,” Blood Keith laughed dutifully. He sounded like some kind of east coast dad all of a sudden.

“She handle OK? You tried the rocket pedal yet?” Snakemilk Jake sipped from a green can and wiggled his bare toes.

“I haven’t uh— taken her out, much, yet.” Blood Keith hadn’t tried using the board at all. He was afraid it would combust. It looked like it was held together by prayer. He was pretty sure that Snakemilk Jake had cobbled it together fifteen minutes before the Naming ceremony from old microwaves. “But I will!” He lied, so that he could keep walking away.

“Let me know!” Snakemilk Jake called back after him.

Interacting with Snakemilk Jake always left Blood Keith with the feeling like he’d stepped in something rotten. There was some nasty quality about the man that Blood Keith couldn’t place. You know how some people are just like that? Like you meet them and instinctively know they do something weird like taking regular dumps in other people’s laundry.

Blood Keith made his way to the main gymnasium, leftover from the army days. It was guarded by two burly lesbians with spiked and dyed mohawks, Baphomet and Punchfucker.

“Hey guys, I gotta get in to see the Greatshaman. It’s an emergency,” said Blood Keith.

Punchfucker shook her head.

“Nah, she’s in the Soup right now. Can’t get in,” she said, “not till she’s done anyways.”

Blood Keith passed her the space remote.

“This fell from the sky. It’s a sign from the Gods. Nearly killed me.”

Punchfucker barely glanced at the object and passed it along to Baphomet, who tried pushing the buttons.

“Wonder if it goes to something?” Baphomet said. “Think I’m changing the channel on some big TV somewhere?”

“Knock it off, dude.” Punchfucker said. “Like, it’s probably just trash. Space trash. But if it’s dangerous you shouldn’t mess with it. Blood Keith, you’re gonna have to wait a while. The light’s been red all day. The Bishop says she’s been seeing signs.”

“What kind of signs? End time stuff again?” Blood Keith took his space remote back.

“Where are your clothes?” Baphomet asked.

“Space trash,” Blood Keith replied, and showed her his destroyed pants. “This thing shot down from the sky and ruined ‘em. Split this giant rock by the river in two. Barely missed me, by the way. I’m was very heroic.”

“That raises more questions than it answers. Were you not... *wearing* the pants when it...” Baphomet mimed a missile shooting to the ground and exploding.

“*Obviously* he wasn’t, or else he’d be a bloody torso,” said Punchfucker.

“Don’t judge me,” Blood Keith said. “Are *your* pants always on your body? It’s only weird if you make it weird.”

Punchfucker rolled her eyes, Baphomet nodded in agreement.

“Space trash isn’t an emergency. Come back in an hour. She might be finished then,” Punchfucker turned the conversation back to business. She was a mean and loyal guard dog, definitely the kind of person you wanted on your side, and almost impossible to bribe. Baphomet was not.

“I’ll throw the next deathbowl match,” he said to her. “If you let me in, Baphomet.”

Baphomet’s grin grew huge. Punchfucker scoffed.

“Don’t you dare. You wouldn’t forsake the glory of an honorable fight for—“

“*Fuck* yes. Make it look real,” Baphomet clenched her fists in excitement. “You gotta make it look super fuckin real for my mom. She comes to all my matches. She always bets against me. I want her to see what it feels like to lose.”

“Jeez,” said Blood Keith. “Yeah, of course.”

Baphomet squealed and did a little hop, her many chains and guns clinking together as she did. Punchfucker just scowled at the two of them as Blood Keith went past.

“Don’t blame me if the bishop executes you,” she called as he walked down the hallway. The door closed behind him. Punchfucker had a thing for Baphomet. She wouldn’t stop him.

The gym was completely dark. Black as pitch. The kind of black that feels like oil as you walk through it. Greasy, heavy. Silent, though. And empty. He heard the echo of his own footsteps and judged where to walk from that, sort of like how bats see, but way worse. He followed the sound of low chanting.

Down one hallway, turn a corner, down another. It was like a labyrinth. He imagined there were probably drinking fountains, maybe old corkboards, benches— the type of stuff in gym hallways. He couldn’t see any of it, but it was probably there. He knew he was getting closer by the thick smell of incense, layered with other, more occult smells. He could hear the sound of chanting.

The darkness lifted. A thin, red light gleamed around the next corner. As he turned, he saw its source— an old streetlight, disembodied from its post, gleaming ruby in the darkness. Next to it stood the Bishop. The thin old man glanced Blood Keith’s way, and turned his gaze

back to the shadows in front of him. He wore a black turtleneck and duster, and around his neck hung a bronzed lizard fetus. He had a thin white goatee, and only modest neck tattoos.

“You need to leave.” The man had a grave, deep voice. Blood Keith stepped toward him.

“The Greatshaman needs to see this,” he said. He held up the mystery thing.

“The light is red. You know what that means. Whatever the problem is, it can wait.”

“I can help.” Blood Keith offered.

“She didn’t ask for you to help.”

“Why is she in there alone?” asked Blood Keith. “You should be in there, at least.”

The Bishop made his mouth into a line.

“It’s my job to be out here. What happens in the Soup is shaman business. I guard the holy texts. I don’t overstep my bounds, and neither shall you.” Blood Keith walked toward the door behind him, from which wispy smoke drifted. The Bishop gestured to his handgun in its holster. “If you touch that door, I will shoot you,” he said. Blood Keith pushed the door open anyways. The Bishop did not follow him, nor did he draw his weapon.

The room was filled with smoke and steam and thick red light the color of cherry coke. This fog swirled around him, liquid-like, and made him sweat. The chanting he’d heard down the hall was loud now. It was the low, wailing howl of an old woman, only vaguely formed into words, and barely separated by breaths.

It really was like a soup, that fog. He breathed it in, drank it into his lungs. He wasn’t in there for long before it started to make him feel light. The Greatshaman had been in here all day.

He found her laying splayed out on a yoga mat in the far end of the room. It had once been a weight room, but all the equipment had been taken and smelted into weapons and armor,

and now it served as the Greatshaman's door to the spirit world. The key which unlocked the door to the spirit world was drugs. She was a strong, broad old woman with more piercings than Pinhead. Her body and clothes, a simple black silk ritual robe, were slick with sweat and condensed vapor. Her chest rose and fell heavily as she sang into the smoke.

"Hey, man, are you okay?" Blood Keith asked.

She stopped her chant. He briefly worried she'd just died.

"Water," she croaked. Blood Keith found an orange Gatorade cooler full of water in the corner, and poured some into a metal cup. The room was hot as hell. A sauna. That was something people always said. *It's a sauna in here!* Blood Keith had never been in a sauna, but he supposed this is what one was like. Large hot plates boiled perfumed water and psychedelic mushroom extract to steam in the air, and bundles of incense sent black streams of heady smoke up in clouds around the old lady. He brought her the water and pushed it to her lips. She didn't open her eyes, but drank it down thirstily, and then called for more.

He brought her four cups before she finally opened her eyes and sat up.

"Blood Keith," she said to him. "I was looking for you this morning. But you'd gone away."

"I went to sit by the riverbank, and think about some old stuff. Sorry."

"You should have waited until breakfast to go down. I could have used your help." She grimaced, and took another deep, long gulp of the water. "The devil is here."

"I saw the light," Blood Keith said. "Everyone says you've been in here all day."

"All day, eh? How long has it been, then?"

"It's almost suppertime, man."

“Shit,” Greatshaman Gatorbreath laughed. “I’m so stoned right now.”

“You need to get out and go breathe air.”

Greatshaman Gatorbreath grabbed his arm suddenly. She was sweating bullets, but her hand was cold as ice.

“The devil walks beneath us. Upside-down. He’s trying to turn himself right-side-up. Like a great big tick on the world’s back.” Tears welled in her eyes. Blood Keith sat down next to her, and grabbed her other hand. She closed her eyes and wiped her tears away, calming down.

“Blood Keith, will you chant with me? We’ll finish this up and go get something to eat.”

Blood Keith agreed, and they both closed their eyes, and inhaled the Soup. Blood Keith knew the words by heart.

*“Ash, protect us. Ember, empower us to protect ourselves. Death, let us not fear as we walk your path. War, bless us with your glory. Bounty, draw us to you. Mystery, may we know you. Darkness, may we find ourselves again. Great haunted cosmos, we are the hungry ghosts of a world not yet dead, and we live as vessels of the unquenched vengeance of the unliving good against the unjust. Evil cannot walk here. We have taken this place back for the ghosts. We have taken this place back to haunt it. Evil cannot flourish. Evil cannot stand. Evil was mankind’s master, but we are not mankind. We are transcendent. Begone.”*

Greatshaman Gatorbreath was crying again. She collapsed into Blood Keith’s strong arms. Not in a romantic way. It was just a fact that Blood Keith’s arms were incredibly strong.

“Did it work?” Blood Keith asked.

“No... No... No, it’s still here. But,” the shaman sat up and sighed. “We might as well quit. I’m starving anyhow.”

Blood Keith put out the incense fires and turned off the hot plates. His head was swimming. He was more than a little buzzed by the time he and the shaman made their way out into the hall, and they both cracked up at the Bishop's exasperated frown.

The sun was low in the sky when Auntie Coyote rang the dinner bell. They served the Greatshaman first, then Bandit Chief Gorelust, then the Bishop, and so on and so forth until the laypeople got their serving of spicy rat stew and veggie mash. Punchfucker tapped his shoulder in the serving line. He jumped, and saw her smirk when she turned around. She was the only Skullcrusher taller than Blood Keith, broad-featured, built like a human tank, with a deep scar over one eye that she once told him she'd gotten while trying to rob Satan himself on the road. He believed her. She passed him a bundle of patchy leather and denim.

"From Baphomet," she said, and suddenly glanced away. Then she coughed and spat. "She says you'll need 'em for the fight, because you need something to piss through when she makes you cry."

Blood Keith unfurled the bundle.

"Wow! Jeez!" He said. New pants! "These are beautiful!" He slid them on underneath his makeshift kilt, untied his shirt, and pulled it over his torso.

"Used to be mine," Punchfucker said. "Baphomet also told me to tell you we can tailor 'em for you if there's too much crotch space, because of your small you-know-what. Those were not her exact words."

"She does understand that I'm throwing the match as a favor, right? Maybe save the trash talk for the ring, and lay off the dick stuff somewhat?" If the Skullcrusher tribe could get through

one day without bringing up his dick, or anyone else's dick, or pussy, or whatever genitalia, he'd be able to die happy.

“Bribe. Not a favor. But I'll tell her if it makes you uncomfortable. And, seriously, though, I can tailor those if you need to. They might be baggy on you. I got thick legs. That's what they used to call me back when I was Civvy. Thick Legs Melanie.”

Blood Keith glanced around and eyed a junk pile nearby. He hopped out of line and grabbed a rubber electric cable, which he tied through the belt holes around his waist.

“Got a belt,” he said. “They fit great! Baggy is the style now.” He beamed at her, and her lip twitched uncomfortably. There was mutual understanding that this was the nicest thing that Punchfucker had ever done for Blood Keith, and that it had nothing to do with Baphomet.

“I'm gonna make a fortune betting against you,” she said.

“You're a chill dude, Punchfucker,” Blood Keith patted her gargantuan shoulder.

Blood Keith explained exactly what had happened to the shaman over dinner. They ate in her sleeping tent, along with the Bishop, and to Blood Keith's dismay, Snakemilk Jake.

“What do you think? Not a bomb, is it?” The shaman said, pushing all the buttons.

“Nah. This metal, whatever it is, looks tough. Probably'd survive an explosion. It survived the fall,” Snakemilk Jake replied.

Greatshaman Gatorbreath slept in the only real tent in the fort— authentic North Face from before the Big Boom. It was orange and white, and the sacred symbols of the Trash Gods and the Ghost Gods were painted on all the walls. Gods of the here, and gods of the beyond.

Totems and herbs hung from her ceiling, made from old CD's and glass bottles and other pretty things. The four of them fit quite comfortably in there.

The Bishop stroked his goatee.

“It's not a piece of satellite. This language is not one I recognize. None of the old cultures built things that looked this way.”

“New, then.” Blood Keith said.

“Maybe.”

“I don't know what this thing could be, my friends,” said Gatorbreath, “but its coming here and now cannot be a coincidence.”

“The red light,” said Snakemilk Jake.

*The Devil walks beneath us. Upside-down. Like a great tick on the world's back.*

“Our crops are failing. Our hunters catch only rats. Our raiders return empty-handed, or not at all. Our mothers give blood instead of milk. The Devil is here for us, and there is no chasing him away this time. He'll claim us in the end this time.”

“Gatorbreath—“ the Bishop sighed.

“Shut up. The Gods have sent us this thing. It came from the sky, you said, Blood Keith. The domain of the Ghost Gods. The Ghost Gods sent this to us. To you.”

“The Ghost Gods have it out for me, I guess. If I hadn't moved in the last second they woulda sent it straight through my skull.” Blood Keith said.

The shaman nodded.

“The Gods don't fuck around.”

The Bishop spoke up. “Listen, friends. If we accept that the Gods have sent us a holy artifact to act as the conduit of our salvation, we acknowledge that the Fifteenth Chapter is at hand.”

“I’ve been saying the End Times were coming forever,” said Gatorbreath.

“That means that a Messiah has been chosen. But we have identified no Messiah. It’s certainly not Blood Keith.”

Blood Keith was offended. But he said nothing.

“The problem with prophecies,” the shaman said, “is that they’re never clear until they’re over. I care about the here and the now. And we’ve been given an artifact, here and now. It’s our sacred duty to chase its purpose. Snakemilk Jake, are you sure you have no idea what this might be?”

“Yup. No screws, no seams, looks like some freaky god-shit to me.” A glimmer appeared in his creepy eyes. “But I do know about a guy who might know. Blood Keith, you know him, too. Vester Vick, out in the wasteland. He’s a legend. Out of his mind. Bad sort of dude. You know him, right?”

“I knew him,” Blood Keith said through his teeth. “Back when I was Civvy.”

“If anyone on the planet knows anything about this thing, it’s Vester Vick. But we’re gonna have a helluva time getting him to chat. No one’s seen him in years— meaning, really, nobody who’s gone to see him ever came back to tell about it.”

Blood Keith didn’t doubt that. Sylvester Vick had the kind of theatrical insanity you only ever saw in old horror movies. Blood Keith was a little scared of him the entire time they worked

together, and always suspected he'd go full Batman villain when left to his own devices for too long.

"I guess I could try to talk to him," Blood Keith said. The Greatshaman nodded.

The Bishop suddenly snorted.

"So we're all onboard with this, now? We're sending Keith, an outsider, to bring a holy artifact from the Gods to his old capitalist, heathen, opportunistic bosom-buddy, who will *certainly* steal it for himself, and use it to build bigger bombs and worse plagues and, and, wipe out the rest of us all with his hubris?"

"We've been over this, Bishop," said Gatorbreath.

"I stand by my words. I swear, I'm the only one around here who cares about the sacred texts at all anymore." The Bishop unzipped the tent, grabbed his dinner, and stormed off.

Gatorbreath rubbed her temples.

"Snakemilk Jake, could you give us a moment?" She asked. Snakemilk Jake bowed deeply as he took his belongings and went back to the mess hall with the others.

The shaman motioned for Blood Keith to hold out his tin cup. She poured him some brown boozy drink from a big canteen.

"Don't mind him," she said.

"I try not to."

"Well, I do."

"I guess I do too."

Gatorbreath sighed and reclined into her bean bag, taking a long swallow from the canteen.

“He helped found this tribe. You know that.”

“Yeah.”

“His grandpa was a prophet. One of the original Five. In the time after the Big Boom, he was ostracized from the Civvies with the others for his loony talk. They all had to scrape by in the wasteland, petitioning the wild men and merc groups and canny caravans for disciples. The Bishop watched his family work themselves to death for everything the wasteskater tribes are now, and he feels that our Gods are his birthright. Lots of people waltz in here and join up, get named, etcetera, but Bishop feels like I’ve been giving you too much insider info on holy stuff too fast.”

Blood Keith drank from his cup. It tasted like old rum and bad wine.

It was true that Blood Keith had more or less stumbled into the Skullcrusher tribe and immediately became next in line to become Shaman. It had been about a year and a half ago that they’d pulled him out of a burning helicopter deep in the salt mire. Aunt Coyote had fed him cactus goo and mushed-up crickets through a turkey baster while Gatorbreath patched up his wounds and engaged in ritual healing to draw the poison out from his DNA, with the help of what passed as the tribe medic— a drunk old man named Trent Saw-Arms.

“It’s a good thing I have saws for arms,” Keith heard him saying as he’d blacked out that day. When he woke up on a yoga mat in a tent the next morning there were two messy “surgical” scars on his right and left sides. “We had to get your appendix out. I always forget which side that thing is on. Good thing God gave me two saws,” the old man laughed, and tipped a blue sedative pill into Keith’s mouth from one of his saw arms.

Even though he was an outsider, and a *scientist* at that, Gatorbreath had taken an immediate liking to him as soon as he got back on his feet. Eager to help out and repay his rescuers, Keith led them to the half-exploded laboratory he'd escaped from, and pointed them in the direction of the good loot. He'd had ulterior motives, of course. He always had ulterior motives back in those days. But those days had passed and he didn't want to think about them anymore. He was Blood Keith now, wasteskater, warrior, and apprentice shaman. Friend to the Skullcrusher tribe and loyal, honest, and true to those friends. Nothing that happened before mattered.

"He doubts my faith," Blood Keith said to the shaman.

"He doubts your allegiance. Faith has nothing to do with religion." Greatshaman Gatorbreath smiled, the deep wrinkles in her face creasing up like very fine fabric pulled through with a thread. She was beautiful in that way that very old people are beautiful, with scars and laugh lines and frown lines and all the years visible in their skin. "To the Bishop, the prophets and their flock are his family, they're his birthright. From his perspective, if you're not in with *him*, you're not in with the Gods. If he thinks his daddy wouldn't like the cut of your jib, the Gods shouldn't either. You waltzed all up in here and I gave you a mantle of honor before he could decide whether he hated you or not. From his perspective, you never earned the right to be part of his family. And there's greater changes going on in the clan, too, that he doesn't like—you know," Gatorbreath took another long swig from her canteen, evidently forgetting that Blood Keith had a purpose for being there, and sinking into comfortable gossip, "Different folk coming in, ways changing, old folk dying, people hungry and weak from the blight. He doesn't like that this thing that was supposed to be *his*, *his* family, is something out of his control now."

“You’re so smart.” Blood Keith drank from his cup, too. The lingering effect of the fog and the new effects of the booze mingled and swam in his brain. “I always look at you and think, ‘jeez, she’s so smart.’”

“Nah. Just old. You talk like an outsider when you get booze in you.”

“It’s good to be smart, man. I think it’s good. It’s not *bad* to think it’s good, man.”

“There’s more important things to be, among our people.” The Greatshaman closed the lid on her thermos and tucked it beneath an open copy of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. *Reese Witherspoon Tells it All!*

“What do you think, Blood Keith?” Gatorbreath asked him.

“About... which thing?”

Gatorbreath handed him the space remote. “All of it.”

Blood Keith pondered, and shrugged his massive shoulders.

“It doesn’t look terrestrial,” he said. “That was my first thought. My second thought was old military satellite piece or experimental aircraft— spacecraft— something. Maybe not even from above the atmosphere, it coulda exploded off some machine on the ground and gotten launched our way— that’s the most likely one. Explanation. These symbols, they could be Korean. I don’t know Korean. Or Tagalog. There’s actually a lot of languages I don’t know. All of them, except this one, actually. There’s no reason for me to believe that it has supernatural origins.”

“But you brought it right to me anyways.”

“Yeah.”

“As a scientist,” Gatorbreath said, “how would you suggest we proceed, when an unidentified flying object crash-lands in our midst?”

“As a scientist? A good one, or the kind I was?”

“Both.”

“If I’m trying to be a good scientist, I’d consult experts. I’d use every safety precaution at my disposal. You’d have to take radiation readings, test it for explosive elements, write down its mass and properties, and gather as much information as possible without damaging the object before going any further, if further analysis is required before we know its function.”

“Okay. And what if you’re being a Keith scientist?”

“I’d crack it open with a buzzsaw.”

Greatshaman Gatorbreath nodded thoughtfully.

“I think Snakemilk Jake is right. And you’re right, too. And the Bishop is right. The Gods have given you a breadcrumb trail to some kind of answer here— for better or for worse. At heart, you’re still an outsider. But I believe— and I’m right— that your spirit is a Skullcrusher spirit.”

That night, there was great jubilation as the Skullcrusher men, women, and children all gathered around the Slaughter Ring for an evening of blood sport. Gut-shredder, Trent Saw-arms, Lady Rabies, and Attila the Hunk faced off against a trio of giant mutant boars. The meat was deadly inedible, but it made for good gambling and better drinking. The firelights flickered red under the cloudy black sky overhead. Punchfucker and Baphomet pelted crushed-up cans at the gladiators, laughing and shouting crude insults in good jest. Blood Keith drank only plain water from his personal canteen, which he could keep in his brand-new giant pants pockets. He liked

the energy. He liked to fight. But he never liked to gamble. He'd gambled enough in the past, with more at stake than he had any right to risk, and he'd lost dearly.

The boars shrieked like men when Gut-shredder plunged his spear through their bloated yellow bellies, and pus spewed out onto the killing floor with the creature's oily blood. The Skullcrushers screamed and cheered with bloodlust and excitement, exuberant to be alive and breathing while the hulking monster between them bled out and died. Its rotten innards spilled into the rotten earth, back where they came from, where it all comes from, where it all goes. Mud. Dark, sulfurous.

When it was over, they shared the cold leftovers of their communal dinner, and the mothers and fathers put their children to sleep while the rest of them, the lonely ones, walked about the camp, picking things up, washing the pots, and watching for trouble. Blood Keith was among these. He walked the perimeter of the Skullcrusher fort, on the outside. He was on guard duty for the first shift this night. The sky did not seem so comforting anymore in the full dark, no stars. The roar of the wind sounded more like the roar of some terrible animal. He shivered and tightened his grip on his warrior's gauntlets, mindful of the wind in the dead grass ahead of him, and behind him the fading laughter of his tribe, backlit by the red light of the fires against the low-hanging clouds.