

## Monsters

1

A short while ago, somebody might have told you that money made the world go round. They were half-right. It did make it go round, but it also started speeding it up so that people lived in fast-forward mode like jerky little puppets: wake, food, transport, work, work, work. You can sleep when you're dead. Money for meals. Money for travelling. Money for living and dying. Money made from trees and money made from thin air, gambled with, breathed like smoke.

Money made the world spin so fast it spun off its axis. Money doesn't control the world anymore because a new currency is creeping in, and it comes many different forms. But the main ones are strength, stamina, and ruthlessness.

Only two of those can be developed in a gym, so here I am – Tanya Reyno, 27, three-year Nutragym member. Nutragym has seen an upsurge ever since the second financial crash of 2021, when people en masse began realising that their society was melting away like snow. Where before you might only see 7 or so people at 6am on a weekday, now you'll see 70, using any available space they can to push their muscles to new levels. If you ignore the rising sense of dystopia, at least you can be thankful that all the machines connect kinetic energy as electricity to the grid.

Sometimes in the gym, you'll notice a larger woman, straining with all her might on the treadmill but eventually collapsing to the side, puffing, devastated. And you'll feel eyes flicker rapaciously and perhaps make out a murmur that goes round the place, something of a prayer, a eulogy spoken over her heaving, living body. The last grace that humanity has left: the ability to say goodbye to something they'll later rip to pieces.

I've decided what I'll be already, when it comes. When the snow has fully gone and we're stripped to our bare bones. When we turn on each other like wild dogs in the darkness. I'm too small to be a Fighter, too full of grief to be a Thinker.

I'll be a Runner.

It's not necessarily long-distance running. With the temperatures as they are, balefully rising all the time, it's short, sharp sprinting I'm focusing on. Getting what I need and then getting away from things – people – quickly. So today, my routine is centred on strengthening my glutes through weight-lifting and then I'll focus on good sprint technique and then I'll try not to collapse to the floor sobbing about how this is happening. It's a fun routine. Existential crisis never gets old.

As I walk over to the weights rack, once again I feel the settling of eyes on me, feel them slice through my skin, scoring my muscles, my posture, my grit. I lift my chin, eyes dead ahead. These silent assessments have been happening for months. I know that secret alliances are being formed, that the groundwork is being laid for the formation of tribes, collections of Fighters, Thinkers and Runners working together to amass as much as they can for themselves when it all really goes to pieces. But I don't want in. Is it really so defeatist to say that I'll survive as long as I can, and then when the time comes, quietly and penitently allow my body to be swallowed by the parched earth I've suffocated?

Anyway. Deep breath. Firm grasp. Weights to shoulders and now we go down, down, down, up. Back straight. Glutes squeezed. Breathe. Again. The gym is raucous with grunting, clanking, yelling, shuddered breathing. And down for three. The cacophony of humans pushing themselves to their biological limits is terrifying and awe-inspiring in equal measure. And up. About 5 metres to my right, a towering monster of a man, glossed in sweat from beard to toe, finishes bench-pressing 120kg, slings the bar to the floor, and lets out a primeval roar that ravages its way through the pounding room. It worms its way into the depths of my stomach. Involuntarily, my head drops between my legs, nauseous with fear. *Pathetic*. And breathe.

As I slowly come up, my eye is drawn to a mass of hair about 10 metres in front of me, a soft gold, almost too striking to look at. A broad-shouldered woman, Grecian muscles strict and sharp in plain black gymwear, faces away from me. Her eyes, chasm-black, coolly appraise me in the reflection of the mirror in front of her. I can almost feel the hostile energy crackling out of her. Then slowly, archly, she runs her tongue over her lips.

It's like I've been electrocuted. My hands flurry to the weights rack once again, rashly picking heavier ones than I've ever lifted before. Down, down, up, down, down, up, down, up. My throat is on fire, singed by the burning look still coming from the mirror. I gasp; my lungs heave; my quads scream. Adrenaline races through me as my cells buzz. Innumerable downs and ups. And then I collapse, sweat slithering down my torso, panting raggedly. Momentarily, I close my eyes and as I shut out the artificial light of the gym, all I can hear is the rushing of my blood through my ears.

When I eventually open them and gingerly get to an upright position, the woman is gone. I've probably become a target for yet another Fighter. Great. With a heavy weariness, I wipe myself off the floor and drift over to my bag. As I yank the zip, I notice a tiny piece of paper resting on top, inscribed with a few words:

The gate, highlands, 11pm tonight.

And at the edge, I make out a symbol of a snake, a dagger plunged through its head, and words on the shaft: *Tlaloc watches*.

## 2

While others are ferried to and from the gym via automated electric pods to avoid the choking heat, I run the 10k back home every evening. As my feet begin to hit the worn pavement made from reconstituted plastic waste, I take in the tower blocks containing sardine-like humans, crammed sky-high. With low-lying islands being eaten up by the sea, refugees flood into the city in their thousands every day, eyes wild, homeland lost. There is no room for the luxury of two-storey houses here.

At the very least, the buildings are swathed in greenery, plants and grasses adorning every vertical surface, solar panels on every horizontal one. Show kids the grey concrete tower blocks we used to have, and they'll cry out in disgust, "how could humans have lived in those?" I normally say that we didn't live, we only survived. The grasses help with the pollution, make heat levels somewhat lower, and give the eye something appealing. They also provide a small place to grow fruit and vegetables, as sprawling allotments were voted an inefficient use of land by the people's assembly a few months back.

I should be focusing on how much my legs ache but all I can think about is that note and that woman. I'm almost certain the note is from her, as no one else at the gym has ever paid me that much attention before, but that could be a wild extrapolation. I also have no idea what that note means. Is it a meeting? Is it some sort of elaborate trap? Maybe this woman means to kill me. The dagger certainly doesn't seem the friendliest of communications tools. But it's also the first time anyone outside of my immediate family has reached out to me in years.

Knowing full well my history will probably be tracked, I raise the underside of my wrist to my mouth as I run: "Alexa, what does 'Tlaloc' mean?" I feel the subtle buzz of electrical connections zipping through my body as a cool female voice sounds in my head.

"Tlaloc is a member of the pantheon of gods in Aztec religion. As supreme god of the rain, Tlaloc is also a god of earthly fertility and of water."

Interesting. We could do with some earthly fertility.

I continue the jog home, staggering up the stairs to our small apartment where my mum, 15 refugees, and I live. Dad is in Kiribati, helping his people evacuate their inundated homeland. He's a good man. We're probably not going to see him again.

I nearly kick down the door in lazy exhaustion and chuck my bag onto the floor. Alerted by the clatter, my mum shuffles out of the kitchen, gaunt and sallow but still weakly smiling. She pulls me in for a sticky hug, her contributing pickled-vegetable-smothered hands, me contributing sweat. Unleashing me, she rests her hand on my head. "I thought you were going to be late for the ceremony, darling."

Drat, the weekly Forgiveness Ritual.

"Uhhh mum, I could really do without it today. Something's come up."

"It'll only take a moment, poppet, promise." Her hand curves around my face, eyes beseeching me. Reluctantly, I agree. Instantly her face lights up, and her delicate frame is animated with movement as she bustles towards the doorway of the next room.

"Arnav, Eshe, come for the ceremony, please!" I hear the scrambling of small limbs across furniture, and almost instantaneously two kids – from Indian and Ethiopian refugee families, respectively – screech through the doorframe. They bound into the room and kneel beside each other facing the window where the sunlight streams in, playfully poking each other while bowing their heads. I pad over and join them, emitting a slight groan as my legs bend beneath me. My mother waits until we have all finished fidgeting, and then with pondering gravitas, moves in front of the window, blocking the sunlight. Voice low and trembling, she whispers, "Long ago, longer than it should've been, we knew. We were stealing time from our children. We were casting a shadow over their futures."

She raises her arms, thin though they are, so that all of our faces are covered in her darkness. She intones:

"In greed, I consumed. In selfishness, I stole. In apathy, I killed." She pauses and places a quivering hand over her heart. "In ignorance, I birthed." Tears, as fresh as the first day the rituals begin, begin crawling down her sunken cheeks. "Though our

Mother birthed us and gave to us the fullness of her bounty, we crushed her and raped her. We sucked her goodness from her breast. And now she is angry and her dust calls for justice.”

“She demands the lives of my children. My children who-” her voice becomes strangled. “...Who did nothing to deserve her ire. Who were born into a world ravaged by the selfishness of others.” My mother bends down and prostrates herself at our knees and stretches her palms out flat on the ground. We dutifully rest our hands on her head. She breathes in deeply. “I ask for forgiveness, though I deserve none.” She repeats this 10 times, every sentence more choked and clogged with tears. Arnav, Eshe and I all rise simultaneously, and my mother takes hold of mine and Arnav’s ankles. It is our turn to respond. “We give you forgiveness, though you deserve none.” I repeat it monotonously, my mind on other things. I wonder how many other young people across the city secretly find the ceremonies irksome. Ritual seems a poor substitute for action.

Either way, for better or for worse, it helps my mother. I see the guilt eating into her bones every day. All three of us hook a hand around her elbows and help pull her up, Eshe softly wiping the tears from her eyes. She smiles bleakly at us and then starts pottering towards the kitchen again. I call after her, “Mum, where’s the gate for The Highlands?” Contrary to former history, The Highlands are not areas in Scotland, but elevated fortresses for the elite to live in, towering above our settlements, safe from sea level rise.

She turns, head cocked. “Past the old biomass energy centre... why?”

I shrug, the epitome of nonchalance. “Just heard people chatting about it at the gym.”

She faces me head-on. “Whatever you heard, don’t go there.”

I go for the double bluff. “Well, now you’ve told me where it is, I’m totally going to go. Sounds like a riot.” I grin cheekily, hoping it’s read as a joke.

There is a pause. I fight to maintain truthful eye contact. Her face softens a touch. “I’m serious. Just don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, Tanya. I love you.”

“Love you too, mum. I’m going to see if anyone in the block has any surplus potatoes today. I’ll be back later.”

She nods and beckons me in for another hug, squeezing my shoulder a little tighter than usual. I kiss her on the forehead, chuck a jar of pickled carrots in my bag, and then I’m out the door.

It’s particularly warm tonight, the pitch dark a stifling blanket of obscurity. I don’t often stay out at night for obvious reasons. As much as day has its own challenges, the sun is cleansing. At night, the murky, messy savagery that has been ominously accruing throughout the day comes out to play, creeping in the dark, unfettered, unpoliced.

Last week, it was discovered that the son of a former banker had bought a small shoulder of some animal on the black market. Buying anything with carbon coupons is difficult enough, but meat is strictly illegal and immoral under assembly decrees. He was pulled out of an alleyway by an old man who just happened to be walking by who spotted him. A crowd appeared in less than 5 minutes, and the boy was torn limb from limb. Then I watched as two young women wrapped his legs in some old fabric, salivating, lugging them off into smoky darkness.

You see flashes of movement in the murk and pray you find wolves instead of humans.

It's nearing 11pm. I've been walking on eggshells for about 2 miles. I can vaguely make out a large, rectangular building on my right, which must be the old biomass energy centre. I daren't use a light to check. My shoulders hunching, my eyes begin flicking more vigilantly as I tread past softly. I squint. Out of the gloom, the outline of The Highlands looms several hundred metres above me, becoming ever more solid, more severe. It stretches away from me to either side, about a kilometre in diameter, walls smoothed and white, emitting a faint glow. I've heard that only 100 people live here.

There is a slight breeze blowing away from the elevated fortress. I stop in my tracks. An unmistakable smell of older times on the wind: fried cow. Clearly, the rules that apply to us do not apply to The Highlands. Sniffing, I feel simultaneously repulsed and ravenous, following my nose to what I can only assume is an entrance. This is made particularly obvious by the fact that "The Gate" is written in mocking black letters on the façade. Clearly, the inhabitants feel protected enough from the outside world that entrances don't even need to be hidden.

I hear the crunch of approaching footfall and instinctively crouch with my back to The Gate, slipping my hand into my bag. My finger curls around the trigger of my taser, stolen a few months ago at one of many protests. Gold hair gleaming dully, the woman from the gym comes into view, this time wearing a patterned flowing skirt and black t-shirt. Trembling, I bring out the taser and grip it with both hands, aiming at her chest. She smiles and raises her hands. When she speaks, her voice is low and surprisingly gravelly.

"I'm glad to see you don't trust anyone. That's good. You shouldn't." Keeping one hand up, she reaches down to her belt and unhooks three daggers. Raising an eyebrow, she points one at me. "Now, either we can tear each other apart, or we can talk about why we're both here." Cautiously, I lower the taser and she obligingly puts her daggers away. Maintaining distance, she sits cross-legged opposite me before pulling down the neck of her t-shirt to reveal a tattoo lodged below her collarbone: a snake with the dagger through its head. Without quite knowing why, I mutter, "Tlaloc watches."

She grins like a cat. "Yes, he does." She shuffles forward. "I'm Gudrun. You are Tanya. You're a Runner, an exceptional one." I don't bother asking how she knows my name; information is a wrist tap away. "We've been tracking you for several months. We want you to join the Order of Tlaloc." She pauses, waiting for my response.

"Uh... what *is* it?"

"You haven't...? Oh, ok. A while back, we tried to fight climate breakdown through creating mini oases, eco-communes out in the wilderness, but the land fought us.

Our Mother Earth is dust, no longer merciful and generous with the birthing of grains and plants, but vengeful and closed up, tight-lipped and bitter. We struggled on but we had to return to the city for food, even that chemical-infused crap.”

Her eyes lock onto mine, gravitational and inescapable.

“The land cries out for blood. The blood of those who caused this, those in The Highlands. In sprinkling the land with their sacrifice, the land will forgive them their crimes and return to its original natural bounty.”

With a sudden boldness, I retort, “Um, I don’t think that will work. We need to solve the problem with technology.”

Gudrun leans back on her hands and tilts her head, amused. “Oh yeah? How well has relying on technology alone worked out for us humans in the past? How well does it continue to work while we’re out here in hell, scraping by, while those fuckers loll around all day with nothing to fear?”

My mouth shuts and I lower my petulant eyes. Gudrun continues. “Thinking technology could save us made us excuse all sorts of moral wrongs. It made us into gods. But we need bigger gods than ourselves now.”

I think of the Forgiveness Rituals that my mum does. I think of how nothing has changed because of them. Pulling a loose thread at the bottom of my shirt, eyes lowered, I mutter, “Kind of sounds like revenge to me.”

With stateliness, Gudrun rises to stand. “Maybe it is. Maybe it isn’t. But thinking about things scientifically only gets you so far. This earth is singing her song to us. There are stories she can tell you that science can’t. And we’ve been ignoring her too long.”

She offers her hand to me as I remain crouched, back arched. “So, what do you expect me to do?” I say, staying still. Without missing a beat, Gudrun lowers her voice, and speaks with almost holy reverence. “Run the perimeter of The Highlands.” I must look confused because she goes on. “We’ve never been able to see this structure the whole way round. Cos obviously, this “Gate” isn’t for them or anyone. It’s their idea of a joke. We want to know how to get in, to get to the rich, ecocidal bastards inside. But everyone else has been too slow.”

“What about the automa-”

“The automated pods are controlled by their technologies. They can just make them self-combust the moment they see them. Have you got any bio-integrated technology?”

I shrug. “Well, yeah, in my wrist.”

“Cut it out.”

I’m stunned. “What?”

“Here.” She shoves a dagger into my hand. “Cut it out. Now.”

I shake my head and laugh in disbelief. "I'm not doing that." There is a dreadful pause and I know she is sizing me up, seeing if she can beat me in hand-to-hand combat before I beat her in a footrace.

In a flash, she jerks up her foot. It connects with my wrist, sending lightning spasms through my fingers. I drop my dagger with a shout, and Gudrun whips out her two remaining daggers, holding one to my neck. The steel point stings. I feel the midnight breeze against the wetness of my blood.

"Let me rephrase. You will cut it out. You will join our order. You are our last remaining hope. I will not allow personal selfishness to get in the way of our cause." Neck straining away from the knife, I mutter through gritted teeth, "If I'm your last hope, your threat to kill me is meaningless."

Gudrun measuredly draws the knife away. "How right you are. Killing your mother, on the other hand, might hold more sway over you." I stare, speechless. She sighs and turns away. "Don't make me do that, Tanya. Just... do what's right. And failing that, do what's just."

My mind is swirling, obfuscated by the deafening darkness around us. I walk away and look up at the stars, blissfully removed, lightyears from a small overheating green-blue sphere rocketing through the chasm of space-time. Their job is to burn. What's mine? I sit. I feel the dust of the earth below my fingers.

Finally, in a barely audible voice, I stammer, "do you have anything for the pain?" Gudrun smiles simply, softly. "Nothing. But I can do it for you. If you want."

And though it feels like wading through treacle, I give my wrist over to her, quiet as a lamb.

4

The muggy warmth of the evening is fading as I tighten my laces, faintly spattered in the blood squirting from the mangled flesh on the underside of my arm. An odd, frightening euphoria passes through me. Words, almost swallowed in the heavy veil of imperfect memory, float into my mind: *you were made for such a time as this*. I stand and release a breath, feeling it judder as it blows through my pursed lips.

"Remember your pacing," Gudrun says as she affixes a body cam to my head on the side facing the wall, "you don't want to burn out before the end. Or they'll catch you. And probably kill you, I don't know. Their tastes might be more exotic."

"Fantastic," I mutter. She grasps my waist firmly, bringing me square to her, and stares directly into my eyes. "Blessed are you, Tanya. May the earth reward you. May Tlaloc be sated." She leans in and rests her forehead against mine, and I feel the veins pulsing erratically just beneath the surface of her skin, just about hear the catch in her own breath.

And then I'm off. Knees high, driving with the arms, speeding through the dark. Pangs of nausea swept over me in waves of cold sweat. It is deathly silent, excepting my footfall and rapidly increasing intakes of breath. In, out, in, out. Panic steals across my lungs, temporarily choking me. Got to keep running. The whiteness of the wall on my right flies by, keeping pace with me. It seems endlessly smooth, neither tell-tale openings nor signs of fracture from previous attempts to be found. How much

time has passed? I have no idea. My feet thud, my throat rasps. I am so loud. If only I could dissolve into the earth, stop this mania, the agony of my electric fear.

Then ahead of me, I hear the smallest clank. Did I see the wall shift? Could be nothing. It's better to believe it's nothing.

A crunch. I look down at my feet as I continue to speed past, and see the remnants of a shattered skull; human. Fuck. Keep running. Keep running. Burning starts spreading across my thighs, the night air whips past my face. This exterior all looks the same, I have no idea how far round I am, how far I have to go, how much more my body has to give at this maddening pace. It seems like a recurring nightmare and I am caught in an infinite feedback loop.

Against the faint glow of the white exterior about 10 metres ahead, I think I see a small, rippling cloud, grey against its background. And then I'm blundering through it. But it's not a cloud. It's a swarm of about a thousand locusts, grotesque red eyes piercing the dusk. Their bodies ricochet forcefully off me like multiple bullets and I throw up my arms over my face, fending them off. My mouth, gaping open in exertion, starts to get plugged up with their countless squirming bodies, crawling over my tongue. In horror, I feel several bite into the roof of my mouth. With all my power, I suppress a scream and scrape my hand through my mouth to pull them out, spitting and shaking and stumbling.

Instantly, they fly away. Soundless. In the distance, I see the faint light of the city and moan. Though I scarcely know up from down, being swamped in fear as visceral as my straining muscles, I fight on. Nearly there. Come on, Tanya. The last 20 metres are run on legs made of little more than jelly as I round the corner, spot the biomass energy centre, and collide with Gudrun. She catches me before I fall, clasping my elbow.

For about a minute, I can't speak. And then I am laughing hysterically. I can't put a finger on what is pulsing through my veins, but it feels a lot like life.

## 5

Gudrun eagerly detaches the camera from my head as I flop on the ground, eyes to the sky, expelling thankfulness to the stars with every molecule of oxygen that enters my body. She walks off, playing the video back, black eyes utterly fixed on the screen. I roll over to watch her. She slows. Taps the screen a few times. Peers more intently. Stops.

"All good?" I call.

She turns to face me. By now, she is so far away from me that the darkness has almost swallowed her face, diving into the enclaves of eye sockets. "You've been bugged."

"Hah, good joke. Locusts, right?"

"No, you've actually been bugged. Look."

She extends the camera to me, and I take it, dragging the playback button to where I first saw the swarm. Gudrun stabs an interjecting finger to the screen, stopping the video on a closeup of one of the locusts. I have seen crude versions of these before,



micro-robotic bees meant to replace our own endangered, biological population to continue fertilising our crops. These locusts seem more terrifying sophisticated. At the moment the camera starts shaking where I attempt ripping the locusts out of my mouth, I see all their eyes switch from red to green. Mission accomplished.

I shake my head and back away. "You can get it out, though, right?"

Gudrun looks down. "I don't know this technology. This is new. For all I know, it could be directly connected to your nervous system. Dig it out and I might kill you."

There is a weighty pause. And then I say what we're both thinking. "You'll have to kill me anyway, if they've bugged me."

"No. No, absolutely not. They're not going to claim another innocent life." Vehemence charges her voice. "Not another."

I lift my shoulders. "I don't want to be a marked woman for the rest of my life, Gudrun. I value my freedom too much." She snorts, muttering something no doubt cynical about ideas of freedom. I sit down, resting my back against The Gate. Gudrun joins me. For several minutes, we ponder. Then I ask a question to the darkness.

"Do you think humans are innately good?"

She sighs. "Ah fuck. There's a question." She shifts onto her side and I do likewise, our bodies forming a cup. "I always believed the best of people. That's why I got into environmental campaigning in the first place, because I believed that people could change. And I believed that we were inherently good. I *did*, I believed we were inherently..." She breaks off, chest heaving.

"Do you not think we're good? Deep down?"

Gudrun sniffs hard and drags her arm across her face, dark eyes wide and wild, roving madly across the empty space beyond. And then she utters one syllable, simply, damningly.

"No."

Involuntarily, I reach out my hand, touch her cheek. The hotness of a single tear kisses the tip of my finger.

"Look, maybe we don't need to run from or fight the monsters inside The Highlands. Maybe the monsters are not in the banks, or under beds, or down alleyways. Maybe they're a little closer to home, a little more common, a little less evil. But I don't think you can defeat monsters with monsters. And I think we've been running from gods bigger than ourselves for a while, maybe for all time."

Gudrun says nothing.

"Tomorrow, maybe you'll kill me. Maybe I'll do it. Maybe I'll run away, though goodness knows where. But for tonight, can we just be human?"

A pause. The universe holds its breath. She nods. Lying down together, we fold into each other like wild dogs, peaceful in the dark.

