



The old and battered ship bobbed along one of the rivers which would eventually join up with the mighty River Jarlotte. To anyone taking much notice, it appeared to be abandoned and forgotten; a relic of some fishing community further upstream who had decided the vessel was beyond repair and had simply gifted it to the waterways of central Pangea. There was little evidence that it had once been an impressive ship which had sailed the open waters of the ocean with its sails billowing proudly in the sea breeze. All that remained now was a grimy, battered husk, a corpse floating its way downriver until it finally absorbed enough water to allow it to sink to its final resting place.

Except the ship was not quite as lifeless as one would think. For within the bowels of the ruin was a young life; a life which pulsed with an energy so exceptionally potent and powerful that it pulled people towards the banks of the river as it passed by. Those people, of all types, would stare at it with blank and darkening eyes, their mouths slackened and their features blank; that dark energy flowing into them and their own powers and energy floating out towards the ship with its famished young passenger. Once the ship had travelled out of sight of those people, they would shake their heads and wonder what they had been doing staring at the river. They would gaze at one another, noting the change of their eyes, the blackness which had filled their sockets, and they would share their understanding that they were now part of that power which had so innocently passed by them. It seemed so easy, so liberating. They would return to their settlements and towns, and they would commit heinous crimes upon their once-loved and respected neighbours, because it was what that

dark energy was telling them to do; for their master was coming. He was making his final trip before he would rise and bring order to the lands.

Still, the ship continued to float along its way south, and all around it, the darkness which radiated from its small passenger, still locked within the confines of his cabin with the rotting corpse of his mother as company, continued to spread like a virus. It finally came to the confluence where the smaller southbound river met the superior eastbound river, and there it picked up its pace as the powerful currents of the Jarlotte twisted it and turned it from one bank to another. It passed a small hovel which had not been cared for in many a year. Standing outside it was a hermit who had been spending his days waiting for this moment. His eyes had already faded to black and his mind had already been liberated by another who had passed by some years ago. As the ruined ship passed him by, Mandrake inhaled the energy which radiated from it, feeling an energy that filled his veins and sharpened his vision. He has come, he thought, he is rising.

The ship continued to bounce along the rough waters of the Jarlotte until it was caught in a separate current, which forced the vessel into another river running south once more. Every town and village it passed through was consumed by that same dark energy, and the people rejoiced in their newfound freedom. The lush, rolling landscape began to change the further south the ship travelled. Through scrubland, moors, marshes and forests it went, whilst its little passenger waited patiently for the time when the motion of the ship would finally cease and he would step out into the world. The land rose and fell; mighty trees rose up on the banks and they grew thicker and thicker, their branches beginning to interlink and block out the hot sun. Strange animals watched the ship with indifference, their sharp and beady eyes wary of the power which was pulsing from it.

At the river's end was a large and green lagoon. It was deep within the jungles which lined the Great Desert and ran from coast to coast across the body of Pangea. There, no light was allowed through the thick canopy and many of the creatures which dwelt there were blind and savage, always looking to consume and destroy. It was in this lagoon that the wrecked ship was washed. Half of it was finally beginning to sink beneath the gloopy green waters, which were teeming with hungry, scaly creatures with ravenous mouths and sharp, and sometimes poisonous, fangs. The ship drifted lazily towards a beach of stones and black, muddy sand, where it finally ceased its motion and lay still for the first time since it had been plunged from the great falls.

Silence fell over the lagoon, as if all of the creatures who lived their miserable lives there could sense that something far more powerful than any of them had just arrived. The algae-covered water was still as a mill pond, and the silence continued. There came a cracking, crunching sound as several of the old and beaten boards to the port side of the ship began to bulge outwards and splinter. Then that strange bulge exploded, sending some of the more curious creatures scattering and skittering off to hide behind the rocks and the trees. The air seemed to throb with a deep and powerful energy which made the still surface of the lagoon shimmer.

A hand appeared, pale and small, a boy's hand. It clasped the edge of the hole in the side of the ship, and then the other hand appeared and grabbed the other side of the hole. A head appeared—pale, gaunt, a mop of golden blond hair looking completely out of place in that bubble of darkness within the trees. A few of the hungrier predators licked their lips as the boy climbed cautiously out of the hole in the side of the ship. He was naked and filthy and, at first glance, completely vulnerable. A crocodile tensed its muscles, ready to be the first to make a meal out of such easy prey.

The boy stepped on the muddy beach, his feet sinking slightly. He looked at his new surroundings, exuding an air of nonchalance and calmness which made the crocodile think again about its strike. The boy looked around, a slight smile upon his pale face, and then turned back to the vessel that had transported him thousands of miles from the place where he had been cast away. He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed in the hot and damp forest air. Then he raised his hands above his head, and a great bolt of white-hot energy blasted from them, burning through the thick canopy and rising high up into the overcast sky. The watching creatures, now terrified by what they saw, fled the area as fast as they could.