

# World's marrow

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The old demon king was named Jael and he had a hunger for meat.

Chiefly he desired the marrow of the bone, and this he wished piping hot for he was wise in his gluttony. Dining with his court he always asked and asked for more and more marrow. Ostentatious in his power, this demon king bade his best hunters and arms men to provide for him the juicy bones of the greatest beasts—and he (always a he, for this was of a less enlightened age) who could bring forth the vastest bone of the rarest prey was favoured at the table and had Jael's ear for the night.

He had one among his number named Iblis, a clever young demon. Iblis was of little note and no heritage but they said even then that the gleam of cunning was ever in his eyes. This nobody came to court one evening dragging behind him with great effort the curving bone of a beast so great they had never conceived the like of it

in those days. It really put to shame those who had brought in mere whale carcasses. The rib was taller than Jael himself, and he was a big, fat 'un.

The demon king whooped with greedy delight and called for his cheflings to bring hammers and saws to slice the titan's bone open. As they worked, Jael asked the smirking Iblis where he had found such a lovely thing.

*"Do we not know the light is heat? The sun is the light that has fathered the fire in us, my lord! Listen not to this base one's heresy!"*

"As my Lord knows I am but a poor one. While your noble knights ride the plains and high countries on their steeds, chasing down elk, man and elephant, I am left behind. Some have said I and mine are dirt-poor, and so to win my lord's favour I have turned to the dirt to see what value lies therein. In the deep diggings I have done I have found this bone and many such like it."

Seeing Jael entranced, Iblis continued his game. "The earth's flesh holds many such offerings, my lord, and I felt it warm under my touch. There is a fire within it, my lord, such that I have not felt from even those times I have walked beneath the sun. Such a fire, my lord! Surely the heat in our hearts, veins and bones is drawn from the furnace of the world?"

"He lies, my lord!" The court cried, while the chefs hacked away at the great rib. "Do we not know the light is heat? The sun is the light that has fathered the fire in us, my lord! Listen not to this base one's heresy!"

But Jael was too intrigued by the talk of bones and hot flesh, ideas more palpable than the power of the distant sun. So when the bone was sawed through and revealed to have been dry and powderous, he refused his knights permission to slay the duplicitous Iblis.

Iblis sank to his knees and thanked the king for his mercy. He explained his blunder thus, "Surely, my king, this was merely too cold a bone and the marrow had long cooled and crumbled like dry frost. Should we dig deeper to where the earth's body is warmest we will find the bones where the juices flow hot. Such a feast we shall have, the likes of which were never seen in your halls!"

And that was enough to convince gluttonous Jael, though his court remained sensibly sceptical. Swiftly he announced the departure of the court to the deep mines. They would tunnel towards the deep heat below the sunlight.

The earth was cold at first but Iblis' critics were quietened as the rocks and bones they shovelled past grew in temperature.

Sweat was on every demon's brow and their fine robes were stained. The passages they dug were rank with body heat and earth heat and the damp of their labours. Many passed out from thirst and the closeness, but their hungry lord spurred the others onwards. The fallen were abandoned but not forgotten.

And all the while Iblis stood at the back, guiding their efforts while fanning himself with a peacock feather lent to him by the king.

"Where is this furnace, you knave?" The nobles hissed at him. "Show us the great fire that sired us. Oh, woe befall you for playing on an old king's simple appetites!"

"But we approach the fire, can you not feel it?"

The others told him in detail what they could feel, and he laughed.

Till finally they arrived at the great sea of flame at the bottom of the world, and all gasped. Old king Jael's eyes glowed yellow with wonder.

"Iblis, my boy! Truly this is a wonder! I feel my blood flowing hot and singing in my veins, for surely this fire is the true stuff of life?"

"Indeed, so, my lord. See how brilliantly the furnace glows. Brighter even than the sun."

"Who knew that such a dark place could hold so much light? But, my boy, we have not seen any bones for days as we dug. Where is that piping hot marrow that I was promised?"

Iblis smiled, and his eyes shone as well—but not with innocent wonder. "Ah, my king, how could you fail to see it? It stretches before us for leagues, and you praised its fiery glow just now! We have travelled into the very bones of the world and this is its marrow. Hot and flowing, just as you like it!"

That old fool Jael laughed happily and—beating aside his panicking court's efforts to subdue him—he lunged towards the magma with one cavernous mouth open. And as the old demon sucked and drank his fill his body swelled, blackened, hardened and rent apart with noxious vents of fire and sulphur. His faithful knights tried to pull at this vast, deadly body but the great heat caught and transformed them as well. Until the demon king and his court were frozen by fire into a great black formation of rock at the edge of that river.

Iblis, who had maintained a sensible distance, waited until the demon rock cooled. He approached with dainty step and placed the peacock feather in this lava flow that emanated from his lord's erstwhile arse. It burned.

And so it is that Iblis overthrew the demon king's court and set himself up instead. He was not a true liar, though. For he had it right that the light of life had come from the deep furnace and not the fire in the sky. He forbade study into this matter and did not divulge the resting spot of Jael. Curiosity was a waste of time.

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