

PLANE SCAPE
TORMENT



PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

A NOVELIZATION

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Editing and revision by Logan Stromberg.

Prologue

Few things can match the fetid stink of the Hive.

The factories and workhouses belch sulfurous fumes, black and yellow, to paint the air in a sickly mist that almost obscures the city of Sigil on the other side of the sky. A torus-shaped city, a guide- no, a mimic had explained to you long ago. A city folded in on itself, curling around the flatulent smoke that would make a Clueless' eyes water.

Then there is the stench of the homeless, pressing in on each other in the alleyway, trousers worn to rags and bared skin coated in patches of filth. It is the smell of sweat and unwashed flesh, sour and rank and thick enough to burn your nostrils. The dirt (at least, you hope it's dirt) caked on their skin made thin slabs and flakes where one body pressed against another, too apathetic to move, too mad to care if one of them in that pack had died. Mad, truly, if rubbing shoulders with a corpse is normal before the Bleakers could usher the vagrants aside and let the Dustmen take care of the dead. Once, you had dropped coppers where you could. Dropped them right before those hopeless eyes that stared off into the distance with a mute determination. Quite possibly the only eyes that wouldn't brighten with avarice at the clinking of coin.

And then there are the fumes of the Lower Planes, drawn in with the wake of the hulking demons and devils that roam the streets, bumping into angel and elemental alike without a word. The stench of burning flesh and brimstone follow them wherever they go, and they walk everywhere in sight. It is as if nothing matters in the City of Doors for the weak to be without a hand in aid and for mortal enemies in race and faith to sit down for tea or debate the finer points of philosophy in the middle of the market. Or perhaps it is just the shadow of the Lady. You shudder at the thought.

It was the stink of oil and metal, of sweat and filth, of fire and sulfur that hang over the Hive, thick as if you were wading through butter. It had stung your throat and blinded even you once. It made you retch. A paladin, in plain chain armor of bronze walks past, eyes wide with a perfumed kerchief against his nose. A newcomer to Sigil, obviously. You silently commend him for not vomiting. Yet, at least.

Truly, few things can match the stink of the Hive.

You rarely walk these streets nowadays. They're too dangerous by far and what profits you could find here wouldn't be worth the risk. But an old friend had bidden you to come and visit, and you felt compelled to do so, if only out of nostalgia. A true windbag of sorts, but he had always put a good spin on things over a pint of fine wine and a large meal.

You had waited in the marketplace for a good hour, plucking at plump Elysian plums and dried mushrooms from the Outlands. One merchant had dragged in a hulking beast of a fish from the Elemental Plane of Water itself, it seems, and sold cuts that seemed far too fine for the Hive dwellers.

You sigh. An afternoon ahead and here you are in the middle of this throng, rather exposed and not feeling quite safe from trouble. You eye the Harmonium guards here. Three. More than sufficient to keep the peace, but still, you would feel better at the Clerk's Ward.

Nothing to be done, then, you take the first street that would lead you back to your apartments, an irregular zigzag road whose corners are punctuated by the knifelike corners of buildings, walls patched with razorvine.

Even with your mind wandering your gaze freezes on one small corner, a door tucked away and squeezed tight between two larger shops. A small, dark hole-in-the-wall part of the Hive you had never noticed before. Perhaps it is newly built, but the plaster is cracked and thick veins of razorvine spiderweb across the walls on either side of the portal, which itself was not much wall. A weathered sign hangs askew above the door.

How odd.

The double-doors swing open as you nudge in, and the crisp smell of smoke and spirits greets you, somehow clean compared to the air outside. A lesser malodorous evil, it is quite refreshing and for the first time today you take a nice, deep breath.

The tavern is much larger than it seemed from outside, spanning fifty paces at least, and tiered along two levels. A marilith, bare-breasted yet bedecked with jewelry, looks up to you. Four of her arms work with glasses and bottles, clinking against each other delicately with a known and practiced skill. One of her hands wipes down a trickle that spilled down the glass she was pouring into, while another holds onto a chain.

The chain leads down to a collar around the neck of a leashed man with dusk-gray skin and smoky hair. His dour frown and creased face speak of infernal ancestry, a cambion perhaps. He crouches on the floor in ancient rusted armor, polishing a mug and scowling at you.

The marilith smiles upon your entrance, "Well there's a new face. I'm Shara Six-Blades, and I've got a stock of spirits to put anything under the table. If you need anything just ask."

You give the innkeeper a polite nod and gesture towards a bottle of Baatorian Black Brew. It's been a while since you've had a good mug, and you lick your lips delicately in anticipation of the heavy, smoky ale. The ebony liquid hisses as it sloshes thickly into the mug and Shara Six-Blades gives an expectant nod. Surely if you could handle Baatorian Black Brew, you've earned a good cut of respect in her eyes.

The patrons of the Tavern are a mishmash crew, the norm for any such gathering in Sigil. A woman in worn leather armor and dusty brown rags balances an obsidian-tipped spear in the crook of her arm while licking the inside of her mug greedily. At the table across from her sits a group of three swordsmen, with fine gray coats and hats suited more for nobility. Each one had a slight curl at the corners of their lips, as if in considering what mischief to commit.

You almost give a start when a strange pattern flows across a metal column on the other side of the tavern. The colored shape of a man, flowing along the surface like a moving mural. It is a two-dimensional creature, apparently, in the shape of a handsome young fellow in a yellow coat slashed with red.

A thick gray fog curls around one table tucked away at the corner, apparently unoccupied. The glasses resting there, though, are full of a bubbling blood-red brew that pulses angrily and swirls with flecks of black shadow. In the next instant, one of the glasses begins to empty itself as tendrils of mist curl into the liquid. You blink in surprise.

"I recommend you stay far from those guests, visitor," Shara Six-Blades says to you with a wry smile, "While I rarely let their kind into my tavern, they once... took care of a few troublemakers that were beyond my skill. I give them a free round of Abishai Blood Beer now and again in gratitude, but it'd

be wise to be wary around their sort."

You are about to inquire further when a boisterous, silvery voice cries out.

"Attend, kindly ones! I sing a song of laughter and tears, of war and peace. Of a man who bound himself to life so that he died by his own hand! I sing of one who tread into the planes of the damned seeking his salvation, who sought to destroy himself so that others may live. I sing a song that has made the angels weep and furies mourn: I sing a song of," he pauses, "The Nameless One."

You turn to face the stage, and a beautiful, golden-skinned angel sits there on a crooked stool, his iridescent wings unfurled and one arm upraised. A lyre is tucked under his arm at the broad silver sash at his hips, encircling the waistline of a pair of billowing snow-white trousers. He gently pulls it up and plays a quick and mournful tune, and with that the deva lends another dramatic pause, heavy as a hundredweight, the last note resonating through the tavern and instilling a great hush over the mismatched crowd.

"Aye, and which 'Nameless One' is that?" a gruff voice suddenly comes from the corner, though you can't quite see who said so, "Is he the same one as the Man-Without-a-Name, perhaps? Or is it He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Known?" A great many roars of laughter fill the bar, from bubbly fey giggles to serpentine hisses and gruff roars, as well as a strange tinkling sound you can't quite identify. Those with heavy mugs bang them on the tables while those with the more delicate glasses clap or slap their knees.

"Or perhaps he sings of The One Whose Being is So Terrible That Thinking of Him Makes One's Head Explode?" another voice cries out to more laughter. A young woman this time, with blossoms in her hair and a dress that looks to be sewn from rose petals.

"Wha? who is that?" a man next to you asks. A humanoid candle of sorts, his head is wreathed in flames that leave his clothes untouched.

"I... have heard of this Nameless One," a hoary voice intones. This time, a man standing behind a bar, his long, thin fingers gripping papers written in a fine hand. His face is long and pale, wrapped in a strange hood that makes him look as if head and body were one, like a large egg. An accountant of sorts, you believe, "I have heard... legends of one who once walked the Planes, one undying, abandoned by Death herself."

"You sing of the One of Many Deaths?" the woman with the spear asks, holding her mug close to her breast. Her voice is fierce and challenging, the sneer loud in her words, "I have heard of one tale, uttered by a drunk as he lay in a stupor. He spoke of one served by men and women both, using them as tools and cast aside when overworn or broken."

An imp, cocking its head from its perch on a seat back looks up. A small sack is slung over its small shoulder, "He Dies Many Can One? Fossils wrack and age of all good man, good man, so I taste and burn!"

The deva smiles and nods, "I sing of all of them, and none, good friends. I am Oudilin Ovariis, bard and collector of histories."

"Myth, more like!" the first gruff voice shouts again, and you see a short humanoid leap up onto the table. A dwarf, you've heard, some sort of burrowing creature. Still, it seems shorter than it has been described to you, "A thousand fairy tales and rumors are told every day, in this rat-piss corner of the City alone! Just another coffer of dung, I say!" A murmur of agreement flows through the crowd.

"Dung?"

"DUNG! Dung TWICE!"

"Ah, but--"

"THREE TIMES!"

The deva gives a short pause to let the fellow calm down. The dwarf is panting, and near foaming at the mouth best you can tell, "What is your name, good friend?"

"I be G'mir!"

Another pause.

"G'mir? G'mir the Midget Dwarf? Rager and barbarian? The one who slew the Arch-Demon Lord Gulathomon after being tossed into battle?" the spearwoman asks. You have a feeling that G'mir was "tossed" into battle quite literally.

The stumpy warrior glowers and gnashes his teeth at hearing his less-than-flattering title.

A placating hand from the deva holds off any more argument as he lays the harp on the stool, and in the other palm a small brown square appears in motes of white dust. He raises what now looks like a small book to the air, a strange pointed symbol seared into the cover. The cured leather is well-worn, flaking here and there and stained with no small amount of blood. Yet it is bound together with fine precision, pages lining up neatly.

"And what be this?" G'mir scowls.

"This," the deva says with a gesture and a smile, "is your dung. The lost journal of The Nameless One."

"BAH!" a now-familiar voice growls, "That's ridiculous. Are we to trust a tattered old tome as evidence for a man who lived countless years ago? Proof that a whisper of a legend be true?" The crowd murmured in agreement with the Midget Dwarf. Though mostly unbelieving, not a one is paying attention to anything else now.

Oudilin gives a golden grin, "We devas, though strong in the faith, have not abandoned reason in exchange, friend dwarf. I had myself acquired this volume from an old mentor who served Kylae, a Goddess of Law. He, in turn, acquired it from an old sage, who had stolen it from the Private Library of Solten the All-Seeing. All had claimed this to be the true journal of The Nameless One. Still I was skeptical, and traveled far to the silver-spined city of Noronde, where a thousand seers each with a thousand eyes divined its origins. I flew to the Citadel of Lem'Faal to meet a child initiate with the ability to read visions by touching an object. I descended to the burning shores of Baator to speak to the Pillar of Skulls. All have verified this to be true."

Another long stretch of silence follows the deva's speech as the doubtful are converted. After all, if one could not trust the word of one of the host of heaven, who could you trust? Still, stranger things have been found in the Planes than a lying angel.

Sitting at the bar, you notice Shara Six-Blades pouring another goblet of wine, and a wench takes it up to replace the one Oudilin drained.

The dryad from earlier nods, "True or false, it does make a compelling tale. After all, we need not believe it to enjoy it."

With the murmur of agreement rising and falling, Oudilin gives a respectful nod, "Then I shall begin."

Chapter 1

The dreams came first.

Dark dreams. Bleak. Half-remembered visions of sorrow and shade best left forgotten. Somewhere there is the distant squeal of metal on stone, of a door opening, of something heavy being wheeled slowly into a lightless room.

From far away, it seems, there is the smell of harsh chemicals and coppery blood. The icy caress of bare metal. No, those are the senses of someone else, some dim ghost whispers.

How can the void have a voice? How can darkness pour out a vision? But still that cold, lonely horror that grips me is, perhaps, a nightmare of sorts. I don't remember the last time I dreamed, but I suppose this is something like it.

A flicker of purple light, an obelisk with countless names etched into its obsidian surface.

Another flicker, and a hundred skulls resting on shelves turn to face me. Human skulls, animal skulls, the skulls of demons and angels alike, all behind a curtain of mist that blurs my vision. They stare at me a moment. Curious, mocking, and accusing.

Fire. Pain. Agony. The love of a mourning woman. So much PAIN. Enough pain to slay a city, to break a world into endless weeping.

Love.

So soft. A shy girl, once, but with a fire in her breast. She abandoned something to come with me, sacrificed everything to see me smile. And a tender caress may have repaid her a thousand times, in her eyes. I tore her from an old, soft life and planted her in this rough and dangerous wandering, but she willingly follows. She was my burden.

But did I love her?

Wait....

This isn't real!

This isn't REAL!

A hundred accusing fingers, a thousand. TEN thousand! The dream spirals out of control, the visions slipping into a black miasma that binds it all in a valley of tears. Demons, shadows, and slaughter. So much blood. Rivers of blood. Enough to wash the Styx crimson.

I feel my skin peeling, my flesh writhing as scars paint themselves to me. I do the only thing I could do:

I scream.

But even nightmares have their small mercies, perhaps. The panic and terror melts away into a flash of blue, a tinkling of soft bells. And a woman, a familiar woman, giving me a glance with crystal blue eyes. Her silver hair and azure tresses ripple in an unfelt wind.

Her eyes close, and she turns away from me quietly, those soft chimes fading in the distance as the world grows dark again. Her back is turned to me as she vanishes from sight. That single glance, so full of sorrow, so live with anger, is the only thing she gives me. Cold as the winter storms and smooth as frosted glass. The only thing she is willing to give.

And it all slips away.

And I rest.

Chapter 2

".....hhhhhhhhHHHHhhhhh....."

That ragged wheeze that was my first breath was no way to start a day.

My body was numb when I awoke, my skin cold and clammy, and my muscles were stiff like that of a corpse. It was a terrible way to wake up, wholly unnatural. A wombless birth.

Those twitchings of my fingers and shifts of my legs told some addled part of my brain that I was, in fact, alive in a way. My eyelids flickered, and slowly a warmth spread into my limbs. I felt the first dull beatings in my chest as my heart kicked into gear.

I gave a soft moan and rolled over. My back ached from the cold metal slab I had been laid on, and that first breath I spoke of did its work to jump-start my senses. The smell of metal, the stink of preserving fluid and formaldehyde, and the scent of blood and flesh were like a cheese grater against my senses. The lighting was dim and my vision blurry, but here and there I could hear the shuffling of feet and the creak of dry joints.

And that's when that slow horror began to grip me.

Zombies. I was surrounded by the walking dead. My breath froze in my lungs and I could taste the rotting flesh on the air. I froze, hoping they didn't see me.

"Hey, chief. You okay? You playing corpse or you putting the blinds on the Dusties? I thought you were a deader for sure."

I looked up to the voice, and gaped as I came face-to-face with a floating skull, gray-green eyes rolling in their dry sockets. I took a moment to sit up and slide off of the slab. His voice was strangely comforting, and his crooked grin, which he somehow managed without lips, took away the tension.

"Wh...? Who are you?" My throat was dry, and my voice came out in a bit of a rough croak.

"Uh... who am I? How about you start? Who're you?"

I rubbed my temples, "I... don't know. I can't remember." The croak lessened a bit, but my words still came out rough and deep, a bit of a rumble sounded in my chest. Perhaps this was just how my voice was supposed to sound like.

"You can't remember your name? Heh. Well, NEXT time you spend a night in this berg, go easy on the bub. Name's Morte. I'm trapped here, too."

Great. So apparently I got stone-drunk the night before and now I don't remember anything. Suddenly what Morte said registered, "Trapped?"

The skull bobbed in a nod, "Yeah, since you haven't had time to get your legs yet, here's the chant: I've tried all the doors, and this room is locked tighter than a chastity belt."

"We're locked in... where? What is this place?"

"It's called the 'Mortuary'... it's a big black structure with all the architectural charm of a pregnant spider."

I shook my head and almost chuckled, "'The Mortuary?' What... am I dead?"

"Not from where I'm standing," I didn't bother to point out that he had no legs to stand with, "You got scars a-plenty, though... looks like some berk painted you with a knife. All the more reason to give this place the laugh before whoever carved you up comes back to finish the job."

I look down at my arms and legs, gray and covered with puckered slashes, layered one on top of the other so thickly I was amazed I still HAD skin. I winced, "How bad are they?"

Morte floated around me and I tried not to twist to keep him in sight. It was a bit annoying to have a head just bob about as it wished, "Well... the carvings on your chest aren't TOO bad... but the ones on your back..." he paused, "Say, looks like you got a whole tattoo gallery on your back, chief. Spells out something..."

"Tattoos on my back? What do they say?"

Morte chuckled, "Heh! Looks like you come with directions..." he made a

sound as if clearing his throat, "Let's see... it starts with..."

'I know you feel like you've been drinking a few kegs of Styx wash, but you need to CENTER yourself. Among your possessions is a journal that'll shed some light on the dark of the matter. Pharod can fill you in on the rest of the chant, if he's not in the dead-book already.'"

I mentally filed away the details. So I guess maybe I wasn't drunk after all. But why did the hell did I allow whoever left me this message carve it on my back? And the name seemed unfamiliar. "Pharod...? Does it say anything else?"

"Yeah, there's a bit more," Morte continued, "Let's see... it goes on..."

'Don't lose the journal or we'll be up the Styx again. And whatever you do, DO NOT tell anyone WHO you are or WHAT happens to you, or they'll put you on a quick pilgrimage to the crematorium. Do what I tell you: READ the journal, then FIND Pharod.'"

I shivered as I became suddenly and acutely aware of the scores through my flesh, "No wonder my back hurts; there's a damn novel written there. As for that journal I'm supposed to have with me... was there one with me while I was lying here?"

Morte shook his head- skull- er, himself, "No... you were stripped to the skins when you arrived here. 'Sides, looks like you got enough of a journal penned to your body."

I was thankful someone at least left me some clothes. The kilt, sash of bone, and boots were comfortable, but not enough to block out the cool chill of the Mortuary. Ugh. A mortuary. I tried to ignore the fact that I was surrounded with bodies in all stages of dissection by focusing on another subject, "What about Pharod? Do you know him?"

"Nobody I know... but then again, I don't know many people. Still, SOME berk's got to know where to find Pharod... uh, once we get out of here, that is."

I nodded, "How do we get out of here?"

"Well, all the doors are locked, so we'll need the key. Chances are, one of

the walking corpses in this room has it."

"Walking corpses?" I had avoided looking at the zombies until now, and out of the corner of my eye I took notice of them shuffling about, light, dessicated limbs moving in an obscene dance, clumsy fingers at work preparing the bodies.

Morte turned to follow my gaze, "Yeah, the Mortuary keepers use dead bodies as cheap labor. The corpses are dumb as stones, but they're harmless, and won't attack you unless you attack first."

I was hesitant to do what Morte half-suggested in that, "Is there some other way? I don't want to kill them just for a key."

Morte cocked his skull in a sort of a shrug, "What, you think it's going to hurt their feelings? They're DEAD. But if you want a bright side to this: if you kill them, at least they'll have a rest before their keepers raise them up to work again."

That certainly wasn't terrifically reassuring, but it would have to do. His nonchalant treatment of a violent course was oddly comforting, "Well, all right..."

The skull grinned, "Well, before you do that, arm yourself first. I think there's a scalpel on one of the shelves around here."

Suddenly aware of how vulnerable I was, I nodded, and sat up to search around for anything useful. Whoever I was, I certainly wasn't a man of any great moral standard if I felt at ease stealing and murdering. The shelves of stark grey granite, mottled here and there with black stains over the years, held precious little that seemed useful. Jars with old bandages, many bloody and stinking with pus, parchments, bottles of brine and preservative, and even a jar of cat knuckles sat on one of the shelves.

Cat knuckles? How barbaric.

I shifted things around, hoping no observant eye would notice if the jars were moved, and found on one table a faint gleam of metal in this dull, blood-hued light.

There was a happy clicking noise behind me, "All right, you found it! Now, go

get those corpses... and don't worry, I'll stay back and provide valuable tactical advice."

I goggled, "Maybe you could help me, Morte."

"I WILL be helping you. Good advice is hard to come by."

"I meant help in attacking the corpse."

"Me?" he shied away a little, "I'm a romantic, not a soldier. I'd just get in the way."

I pointed the scalpel at him. Not really threatening, just a gesture of emphasis, "Look, I don't want to do this either, but it was your suggestion in the first place. Now gimme a hand."

Morte's jaw snapped shut and he stared at me a moment, "Fine, fine. I'll go for the knees or something."

One after the other I checked the zombies wandering about, until I came to a blue-green-skinned corpse sagging in a corner, one hand closed tightly in a fist. I bent down for a closer look, and there it was, a small, twisted key in a grip so tightened with rigor mortis and preservative that it looked like I was going to have to kill it after all.

Murmuring an apology of sorts, I stood for a moment, scalpel in hand, until I was ready to strike.

In one quick slash the thin, papery skin along the zombie's belly was sliced open, and a few lumpy organs, stiffened with the embalming process and loosened with rot, spilled out of it. Much less than I expected, thank the gods.

With that, a small white globe barreled past me and cracked against the zombie's chest, and the creature toppled over with a groan before it struck.

"Whoa-ho! That thing was stiffer than a randy satyr at a bacchanal."

I was already kneeling over the remains and prying the fingers open, glancing about to see if anyone was alerted. The remaining zombies continued on with their own business, while the doors remained locked and

closed.

With that, I used the rags the zombie was dressed in to wipe off the black ichor from my hands and the scalpel, then headed to the door. With a twist and a click, we were free.

As we continued down the rooms of the Mortuary, Morte nudged close to me, "Pssst... Some advice, chief: I'd keep it quiet from here on - no need to put any more corpses in the dead book than necessary... especially the femmes. Plus, killing them might draw the caretakers here."

"I don't think you mentioned it before..." I looked him in the eye, again very much aware of the danger I might be in, trapped in this charnel house, "who are the caretakers?"

"They call themselves the 'Dustmen.' You can't miss 'em: They have an obsession with black and rigor mortis of the face. They're an addled bunch of ghoulish death-worshippers; they believe everybody should die... sooner better than later."

I shuddered, but then a subtle hint of what he said hit me, "Wait, before you said something about making sure I didn't kill any female corpses. Why?"

If he had eyebrows, they would've climbed up into his forehead as he stared at me slack-jawed, "Wh- are you serious? Look, chief, these dead chits are the last chance for a couple of hardy bashers like us. We need to be chivalrous... no hacking them up for keys, no lopping their limbs off, things like that."

"Last chance? What are you talking about?" The little revelation then was a sudden, small, squeamish jolt.

"Chief, THEY'RE dead, WE'RE dead... see where I'm going? Eh? Eh?" Morte's teeth clicked as if in anticipation.

I paused as the jitters I had about the Dustmen quickly drained from me, "You can't be serious."

Morte turned sideways a bit, cocking his head. For someone without skin or body, he was certainly doing his best to express himself nonverbally, "Chief, we already got an opening line with these limping ladies. We've all died at

least once: we'll have something to talk about. They'll appreciate men with our kind of death experience. I wouldn't mind sharing a coffin with some of these fine, sinewy cadavers I see here." He grinned.

I sighed and rubbed my temples. I should've stayed on my slab this morning.

Chapter 3

As of this writing I still cannot believe I gave it a try.

"So, uh..." the zombie stood swaying unsteadily, "doing anything later?" As expected, it gave no response.

Morte nudged my shoulder, "Psssssst. You see the way she was looking at me? Huh? You see that? The way she was following the curve of my occipital bone?"

"You mean that blank-eyed beyond-the-grave stare?"

Morte's eyes bugged out a little, "Wha- are you BLIND?! She was scouting me out! It was shameless the way she WANTED me."

I chuckled, "Wanted you to go away, maybe. She was obviously too distracted by ME to pay attention to some stupid bobbing head with a big mouth."

"You? Yeah, right!" Morte clicked his teeth for emphasis, "Trust me, chits beyond the grave don't care about all that 'physicality' and 'I've got a body' and 'I'm all scarred and tough-looking.' They want guys with SPIRIT. That's me, chief. You? Corpses like YOU are as common as a copper."

I waved him away as we walked further down along the rooms. By now the corpses no longer fazed me... too much, at least. As in the first room I searched the shelves of this one for anything useful, and spied a musty old book.

While Morte eyed the zombies I flipped through it, skimming the protocols and procedures with receiving corpses, and flipped through the listing of bodies. There were thousands, tens of thousands, each with a short description. I turned to the most recent entries, but curiously, the last page had been taken. The paper still had a fine edge, as if cut.

Nothing to be done here, I opened the door and saw a huge book in the center of the third room. It was eight feet tall, at least, with worn yellow pages and tattered, aged leather stretched across its length. Behind it sat an old man, his skin wrinkled with a trace of yellow, like old parchment. Charcoal-gray eyes lay within his angular face, and a large, white beard flowed down the front of his robes. I gave a start.

He didn't seem to notice me in his work, steadily scratching at the book with a large blue quill. His breathing was irregular, yet his occasional coughing did nothing to interrupt his transcribing.

"Uh... greetings?" I said nervously. Given the heavy grinding of the metal door he must have noticed me by now.

"Whoa, chief! What are you doing?"

"I was just going to speak with this scribe. He might know something about how I got here." That, and I thought we might as well take a chance and hope brute honesty wouldn't get him to call the guards.

"Look, rattling your bone-box with Dusties should be the LAST thing-" a violent coughing fit interrupted Morte's chattering, dying down after a moment into his normal ragged wheeze, "And we especially shouldn't be swapping the chant with sick, half-deaf old Dusties. C'mon, let's leave. The quicker we give this place the laugh, the bet-"

Before Morte was able to finish, though, the scribe's gray eyes flickered to me, "The weight of years hangs heavy upon me, Restless One," he placed his quill in his lap, "...but I do not yet count deafness among my ailments."

I stuttered in response to his cold, admonishing voice, "Er... uhm. Could you please tell me where we are? We seem to have gotten lost, and... uh..." I trailed off.

"As always, the question. And the wrong question, as always. You are in the Mortuary, Restless One. Again you have... come..." before he could finish, the old man broke out in a fit of coughing. It took a moment for his breathing to resume its ragged wheeze, "...this is the waiting room for those about to depart the shadow of this life, where the dead are brought to be interred or cremated. It is our responsibility as Dustmen to care for the dead, those who have left this shadow of life and walk the path to True Death."

His voice dropped in concern, "Your wounds must have exacted a heavy toll if you do not recognize this place. It is almost your home."

"You..." I swallowed nervously, "You seem to recognize me. Do we know each other?"

Dhall nodded, "I am Dhall, a scribe, a cataloger of all the shells that come to this Mortuary," he gave a slight bow, but the movement suddenly sent him into a bout of coughing. He continued when he was able to steady himself, "But know you? I..." a bitterness touched his voice, "I have never known you, Restless One. No more than you have known yourself. You have forgotten, have you not?"

I nodded.

He sighed, "Then I fear you will never leave this shadow of life."

"You said that before: what exactly do you mean, 'Shadow of Life?'" This place felt real enough, and despite my scars I walk, breathe, and I could feel my heart beat, and already I was beginning to feel a bit hungry, despite the grotesque surroundings.

"Yes, a shadow. You see, Restless One, this life... it is not real. Your life, my life, they are shadows, flickerings of what life once was. This 'life' is where we end up after we die. And here we remain... trapped. Caged. Until we can reach True Death."

I put a hand up to my chest to feel the strong, rhythmic thudding there, as if to reassure myself, "What makes you think this life isn't real?"

"What makes you think this life is real?" he countered bitterly, "Look inside yourself. Do you not feel something lacking?" He shook his head, "This is a

purgatory. There is only sorrow here. Misery. Torment. These are not the elements that make up 'life.' They are part of the cage that traps us in this shadow."

Torment. The word seemed to cling, cutting the air with its barbs, and a vision of blood and fire, of a pointed metal symbol flashed in my mind for an instant. I shook my head and tried to steady my voice, "I think your fatalism has gotten the better of you. Those elements are part of life, but not the whole of it." I hoped. I certainly could not remember the last time I laughed, sang, or fell in love.

"Passions carry weight," he said disparagingly, "They anchor many to this shadow of life. As long as one clings to emotion, they will be continually reborn into this 'life,' forever suffering, never knowing the purity of True Death."

"So... you have a plan for escaping this cycle, I assume."

Dhall cleared his throat, "Kill your passions. Strip yourself of the need for sensation. When you are truly cleansed, then the cycle of rebirth will end, and you achieve peace." He turned away to stare into the distance, "Past these shells of ours, past the Eternal Boundary between death and 'life,' lies the peace that all souls seek. Non-existence. A state devoid of reason, of sensation, of passion," He coughed, "A state of purity."

A chill ran up my spine, "Sounds like oblivion."

"Is it worse than remaining in this shadow of what life once was? I think not."

I looked to Morte, who was opening his jaws in a yawn, before I faced Dhall again, "I've been told that the Dustmen want me dead."

Dhall sighed, "We Dustmen are a faction, a gathering of those of us that recognize the illusion of this life. We await the next life, and help others on their journey." He gave me a sad, level look, "It is said there are souls who can never attain the True Death. Death has forsaken them, and their names shall never be penned in the Dead Book. To awake from death as you have done... suggests you are one of these souls. Your existence is unacceptable to our faction."

Had I really been dead? Was Dhall saying I was immortal? My new existence was quickly filling with questions and uncertainties. As annoying as he was, I wished Morte would say something. A joke to ease things. "Unacceptable," I mouthed the word as if it were foreign, "That doesn't sound like it leaves me in a good position."

"You must understand. Your existence is a blasphemy to them. Many of our faction would order you cremated... if they were aware of your affliction."

"You're a Dustman," I bit my lip at stating the obvious, "But you don't seem to be in favor of killing me. Why not?"

"Because forcing our beliefs upon you is not just. You must give up this shadow of life on your own, not because we force you to." He looked about to break into another fit of coughing, but managed to hold it in, "As long as I remain at my post, I will protect your right to search for your own truth."

I nodded gratefully, "If that's the case, is there anything you might tell me about myself?"

He shook his head sadly, "I know scant little of you, Restless One. I know little more of those that have journeyed with you and who now lie in our keeping." My mouth dried at those words. I had journeyed here before, companions at my side who were now dead. Dhall sighed, "I ask that you no longer ask others to join you, Restless One- where you walk, so walks misery. Let your burden be your own."

The warning struck hard, but I had to ask, "There were others who have journeyed here with me? And they are here?"

His eyes widened, "Do you not know the woman's corpse interred in the memorial hall below? I had thought that she had traveled with you in the past..." his throat seized as he approached a coughing fit, but he caught his breath, "Am I mistaken?"

I paused, digging through the cobwebs in the back of my head, looking for an answer. None came. "Where is her body?"

"The northwest memorial hall on the floor below us. Check the biers there... her name should be on one of the memorial plaques. Mayhap that will revive your memory."

"Thank you for your help..." I paused, "You seem ill. If there's anything I can do to hel-"

He waved off my offer with a gnarled old hand, "I am close now to the True Death, Restless One. It will not be long before I pass beyond the Eternal Boundary and find the peace I have been seeking. I tire of this mortal sphere..." Dhall gave a ragged sigh, "The planes hold no more wonders for one such as I."

"Are you certain? There might be some way I could help you." I should've known it was foolish to press.

"I do not wish to live forever nor live again, Restless One. I could not bear it." I shifted awkwardly, but there was nothing left to say, "Well... I wish you well, Dhall. Thank you for your help."

As I turned to leave, I heard him speak, "Know this: I do not envy you, Restless One. To be reborn as you would be a curse that I could not bear. You must come to terms with it. At some point, your path will return you here..." he coughed one last time, the sound rattling in his throat, "It is the way of all things flesh and bone."

I wondered if I would ever stop shuddering since being tossed into this bleak, bizarre world. I needed a shower. A bath. Something to rinse the acrid smell of blood and dust from my body, wash clean the grimy tang of death.

Morte and I wandered the halls, daring to search where I could, prod what I might, in the hopes that it would help me later. His chattering presence gave boldness to my hands, like an insistent childhood friend daring you to take that extra step at the risk of getting in dire trouble. Not that I remembered my childhood.

One zombie, however, caught my eye. He stood at the front of a table, facing a wall. There was no body in this room, no shelves or desks. There was no task to perform. Yet it stood there, wavering like the feather of a wounded bird caught in a cold autumn breeze. Pinned to its chest was a note. I plucked it from him, the nail loosening and widening a small gouge down its flesh.

I froze at what it said.

Chapter 4

It was the page from the Mortuary's receiving log. In the middle of a long list of bodies were scrawled these words:

1155q: 5th Night: Scarred Shell

Cause of Death: Indeterminable (Scars do not appear to be cause of death — shock trauma?)

Collector: Pharod — 8 commons paid

Possessions logged: First Dross, Thirteen commons

Middle table, receiving room.

By the rest of the descriptions, the corpses I was laid next to were ancient, possibly less than skin and bone. "Morte, take a look at this," I held the note up to him.

Morte's teeth clacked slightly as his eyes darted across the page. His way of mouthing the words, I guess. "Wow. 'Scarred?' Either someone's flattering himself or the Dusties have a knack for understatement."

"No, look! It says my Collector was Pharod, whatever that means."

"Yeah, I saw that, chief. Huh, looks like something funny's goin on with the bodies. Seems like you aren't the only guy to die twice."

I read over the note again. When I saw "scarred" and "Pharod" not two lines from each other I had skipped over the rest. Morte was right, though. The Dustmen were receiving bodies that had already been prepared or had died once again. Perhaps it was related to my plight, but for the moment I couldn't afford to concern myself with such matters.

The next door creaked ominously as I pushed it open, the squeal of metal on metal piercing the air. Then it hit me.

The stench. The nauseating, sickly-sweet smell of rotting flesh mingled with the rich, coppery tang of blood. I looked to my side and retched.

A pale corpse lay on the slab next to the door, arms uplifted just slightly in

rigor. The skin of his chest had been peeled and stretched back with small rusted hooks. Someone had split open the chest cavity and hadn't yet removed the organs.

The saliva in my mouth thickened, and I turned away, stumbling to the door and gagging.

"Uh... you okay chief?"

I spat a couple of times before I answered in a wet croak "Yeah... yeah I'm fine..."

"Good, 'cuz we're not alone."

I looked up quickly, stomach churning and head swimming, cursing myself for being all too oblivious of the dangers that I was facing as a trespasser. Who knew what this guild did to interlopers? Considering their trade involved dealing with the dead, I was quite confident I didn't want to find out.

A young woman stood beside a slab in the middle of the room, dressed in drab, dusk-gray robes. A wild mane of unkempt earth-bronze hair barely swept over her shoulders: the collected filth that was the result of neglect had caused it to stick out in all directions. The Dustman was turned away from me, her arms moving in a quick, intricate pattern focused entirely on the task before her. I paused, waited, and counted the seconds before she would say something.

It took a minute to realize that I had entered unnoticed, despite the initial commotion. Slowly, quietly, I slinked over towards Morte, keeping a wary eye on the Dustman. At a good angle I saw that she was dangerously pale, her slight frame emaciated with the flesh about her cheeks and neck sunken and gray. Then her hands came into view.

She had been intent on dissecting the corpse in front of her, sliding her palms along its bloodied chest. As I got closer, the flicks of long bloodstained talons couldn't be more apparent. Her scissorlike fingers darted in and out of the corpses' chest cavity, slicing skin and parting sinew as surely as any knife.

It's rather amazing how quickly a body can adjust to these surroundings, as a

more academic side to me kicked in and curiosity bent me over to whisper to Morte.

"What's wrong with her hands?"

"Eh... she's a tiefling, chief. They got fiend blood in their veins, usually 'cause some ancestor of theirs shared knickers with one demon or another. Makes some of 'em addled in the head... and addled-looking, too." A soft ripping sound punctuated the last few words as the tiefling tore a hunk of liver from the body and placed it in the urn beside her.

There was nothing to be done, then, and quite content with my luck I motioned Morte to follow me away.

A clicking sound from behind me halted us in our tracks, "Hst! You!"

I turned around to see her pointing a bloodied talon at me, bits of gore and bile trickling down her palms. She cocked her head as she took me in. If her talons weren't odd enough, her eyes were a rotting yellow, with small orange dots for pupils. Within a flash the look on her face turned from surprise to irritation. She frowned.

"Uh- hi?" I said lamely.

She didn't seem to hear me, and instead leaned forward, squinting, as if she couldn't make me out right. Mad and near-sighted, definitely to my advantage.

"You," she clicked her talons, then made a strange motion with her hands, "Find THREAD and EM-balming juice, bring HERE, to Ei-Vene. Go- go- go." Her voice was a hoarse, moist hiss.

If she thought I was one of the zombie servants, I might as well play the part for now.

Finding some thread and embalming fluid didn't involve much more than sifting through the cupboards for a few minutes. When I returned to Ei-Vene she was back at work slicing the corpses' chest open rhythmically, peeling off strips of skin and stripping muscle from bone. Slice, strip, peel, slice, strip, peel. The pattern was familiar, but I couldn't quite remember wha-

A prickling sensation tingled along my scalp, like a few ants crawling inside my brain. Then ten ants, then a hundred, and suddenly my vision was swimming, blurring, until...

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*A freshly-slain corpse was spread on the dissection table, rigor mortis making a mockery of its smile; the number '42' had been stitched onto its scalp. The zombie was lying on a slab, and I had just finished stitching up its chest. I had placed something inside, something that may prove useful if I come this way again...*

*Hopefully this investment might prove worth more than the trouble I had to go through. Still, not my fault the idiot tried to mug me. Might as well make it useful. Now all I had to do was fake the paperwork and the Dustmen would take care of the rest.*

*I leaned over the handsome young man's face, now taking on a blue-gray hue, and whispered into its ear... 'Keep these things safe and wait for my return...' The voice echoed. MY voice...*

*I crossed my arms in front of my chest then, and as expected, the corpse does, too. After a moment, its hands fall back to its sides. Excellent. It's working. Now to get those papers...*

~~~~~

The vision faded... and I was watching Ei-Vene's hands making their stitching motions once more. I shook off the last bits of the vision, a memory, I was sure. I had been in the Mortuary before.

I tapped Ei-Vene's shoulder gently, and she looked up with a frown. "Dum zomfies." She clacked her taloned fingers together impatiently, then made a stitching motion with her fingers. "Thread and embalming fluid."

I held out the items dumbly. Without missing a beat, Ei-Vene snapped the thread from my hands and hooked it around one of her talons, then began sewing up the corpse's chest. She then took the embalming fluid, applying a layer to the body. I was about to turn away when she had just finished. A quick worker.

A smear of cold blood and embalming fluid dragged along my shoulder as Ei-Vene tugged at me, spinning me around to face her. She clicked her talons, and to my surprise, she extended her hand and dragged her claws along my arms and chest. It tickled numbly through the puckered half-healed skin.

"Uh, it's not that I'm not flattered, but..."

Morte snickered, "Heh. Looks like you've got a new friend, chief. You two need some time together, or...?"

"Stow it, Morte. "

As she traced my body, it suddenly occurred to me that she was examining the scars. Ei-Vene withdrew her talons, clicked them twice, then bent forward and examined some of the tattoos on my chest. "Hmmp. Who write on you? Hivers do that? No respect for zomfies. Zomfies, not paintings." She sniffed, then poked one particularly prominent gray slash along my belly. "This one bad shape, many scars, no preserfs."

Her talons hooked into the thread I brought, and lightning-like, she jabbed another claw into the skin near that big slash. However I got it, it must've been fatal. Probably spilled my guts into the street, too.

Aside from the sudden shock of getting stabbed with a talon, it felt barely more than a pin-prick. The sensation was curiously painless as Ei-Vene began to stitch up that long, unhealed wound.

When she finished, she sniffed me, frowned, then stabbed her fingers into the embalming fluid. Within minutes, she has dabbed my body with the fluid... it was slick, cold, and my skin tingled where the harsh preservatives were smeared, but strangely enough, it made me feel better somehow.

Morte seemed to wince at that, "This may be the second time in my life I'm thankful I don't have a nose. "

Ei-Vene put on the last touches, nodded, then made an awkward shooing motion with her talons. "Done. Go - go."

"Wait a minute," I made the motion of a key turning with my hand, "I need an embalming room key. Do you have one?"

She leaned forward, looked at the hand motions, then sniffed. I mused over how she was beginning to resemble a dangerous cat, with her talons, yellowed eyes, and propensity for scent. Her hand darted into her robe, then emerged, a key hanging from her wickedly sharp index finger. She flicked it to me with surprising dexterity. 'Bring back when done. Go - go.'

With the key to freedom clenched in my fingers, we hurried to the nearest door, zombies our only companions. The Mortuary was deserted here, an empty shell itself filled with mainly wandering husks. Those few sparks of life that were here seemed dim and faded... Dhall for one, and Ei-Vene, one failing in body, the other fractured in mind. The bleak existentialism of their philosophy gently pressed down on me, cold and oppressive.

This is but a shadow of life...

A rat squeaked. Well, at least something here was still survived for survival's sake.

The stairwell was gated with shiny iron bars, as if newly installed. An odd contrast to the rust and blood of the rest of this place. As I approached, key in hand, I found my eyes darting to the stairwell upwards.

"Uh... chief? First floor is down."

There was that sense of familiarity again, a slight prickling crawling along my scalp, "I think I left something..."

"Chief, don't go crazy on me here. If you'll take a look at me I don't have ANY HANDS! Can you at least open the door? Chief? Chief? Oh gods dammit..."

Morte's curses and insults faded behind me as I made my way upwards. Then it ended with resigned sigh as Morte floated up to join me.

Actual furnishings made for a refreshing sight on the third floor of the Mortuary. Even a house of death still needed something more mundane, if at least for respite from the tang of blood, flesh, and formaldehyde. The floor was cobbled with green stone, the walls still cold iron, but softer, somehow. More muted.

I didn't exactly expect gardens through the door, but the stark contrast still

surprised me. A wave of hot air blasted in my face, and with my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, the flames of the crematorium were blinding. The flames within that grand chamber roared with the fury of a sun, crimson as blood, and I was momentarily entranced. Terrified, but entranced.

"You there! Hold!" cried a voice.

Damn.

The Dustman that walked up met me with a stony gaze, his unkempt blue-gray hair a short and wild mane that framed a dead-gray face, "Are you lost?"

I had to keep him talking, or he might alert the guards, "No, I'm not lost... I just need some help."

"If you are not lost, what is your business here?" He eyed me suspiciously.

I had to think quickly, "I was here for an internment, but there seems to have been a mistake."

"Who was being interred? Perhaps the services are taking place somewhere else in the Mortuary."

I nodded knowingly, "That could be. Where are these other services taking place?"

He gestured quickly, annoyance marking his voice, "Several internment chambers line the perimeter of the Mortuary. They follow the curve of the wall on the first and second floors. Do you know the name of the deceased?"

I stumbled a little, and made a mental note to get better at lying. I pulled a simple mash of syllables out of the air, "Uh... Adahn."

"That name is not familiar to me. Check with one of the guides at the front gate... they may be able to direct you better than I," the Dustman replied, shaking his head.

I thanked him and turned to leave, only to face an annoyed Morte, "You know, chief, I'm just starting to like you, so do us both a favor and don't put

your own head on a pike until get out of this place, at least."

I shrugged, "Hey, I'm immortal, remember?" As strange as it sounds, that was something I was certain of. Perhaps it was an instinct, or a memory of my flesh; it had been slashed, cut, crushed, and torn, abused beyond all imagining, yet here I was. I looked back at the raging inferno of the crematorium. I might even survive that.

But Morte was right. No need to get cocky, now.

I explored the place, passing even more bodies, these wrapped and prepared for incineration. There were just as many zombies here, but more Dustmen. Many more. Every other corner I turned a Dustman stood within sight. I held myself confidently, striding not too quickly, lest I come across as an intruder. If any asked, though, I was sure I could talk my way out of it.

There must've been some clues to my origin, and so I entered the southern chamber, a small library or perhaps a storage room. "Morte, quick, give me a hand with these shelves."

"Sure, chief. I'll just thumb through those books with my fingers. Should I dance a jig while I'm at it?"

"Just shut up and look for anything interesting."

A few crystallized drops of blood, a rag, and a wrinkled old report were the result.

"Contact the necromancer responsible for Raising contractual worker 42. I know he's examined the skeleton before, but I am certain that the initial Raising of the body was warped. The worker still responds to commands, but when it has completed a task, it resumes pacing in the same circular patters as it did before."

Dhall recently informed me that worker 42 exhibited that same walking pattern when it was a zombie decades ago. There may be a soul echo in the marrow, or the skeleton's age may have caused the magic animating him to decay. One of the Initiates suggested it may be following an order issued by a higher-ranking Dustman in the past, but I have found no records of such an order."

Worker 42. There it was again... and it was still here.

I found the corpse making a circle around the center of the floor, as the note stated. It was old, all the flesh had rotted away, and the bones were yellowed and brittle with age. The number "42" had been chiseled into its forehead, its bones and joints were wrapped with leather straps to hold it together, and a black smock was draped over its body.

I tilted my head, "I have to ask: Why the smock? I mean, it's not like you have anything to be modest about." Morte chuckled.

At the sound of my voice, the skeleton suddenly straightened, crossing its arms over its chest, its fingers hooking into its ribcage.

"Uh..."

The skeleton's arms dropped to its sides.

"Uh... hello? Do you remember me?"

The skeleton crossed its arms again.

"Would you cut that out? His arms are going to break off," Morte snapped.

Enough. I mimicked the gesture, and in response, the skeleton dropped its arms to its sides. The leather cords securing the skeleton's torso snapped, and the ribcage folded outward like a pair of double doors. I couldn't explain why, but a sudden urge came over me to reach inside the ribcage.

I slid my hand inside, and an unsettling feeling of my hand being somewhere else came over me. An extradimensional space had been built inside this thing, probably when it was first made. Probably made by me. I shivered a little, but explored, and my hand bumped against something hard, about the size of a fist and attached to the skeleton's spine.

I pulled. It was stuck.

I tugged a little harder, harder still, bracing a hand against the skeleton's clavicle, when suddenly the object snapped from its base. The sudden release threw me off balance and I stumbled backwards. The skeleton wasn't so agile: its light frame flew away from me and shattered against the floor, sending bits of bone and joints scattering. His skull bounced once,

twice, before it rolled and came to a rest next to a mute zombie.

I looked down at the object in my hand, a simple black lump of iron. A piece crumbled off, then another, and with a long hiss the metal evaporated, leaving behind a strange dagger, a handful of coins, and two more crystallized drops of blood. Blood charms, I now knew... vital life force locked into a solid form.

"Uh... I say we get out of here before anyone notices."

"Yeah," I gulped, tucking the dagger into my belt. This was enough exploring for now. It was time to escape the Mortuary.

Chapter 5

There was no time to waste. Luckily I had the self-control to keep together and brush myself off casually, and the few Dustmen that glanced my way didn't pay me any mind. Odd what you can get away with if you just keep your back straight, head high, and face blank.

Morte whistled a merry tune. That's right, just keep it casual.

I descended the levels of the Mortuary, the choking fumes of smoke and char giving away to the iron-sharp tang of blood and formaldehyde, and that faded behind to the musty smell of a tomb. The air was still stale here, but it could've been an autumn breeze to me by now.

Even here the halls of the Mortuary were guarded by the dead: four large skeletons surrounded a central chamber, swaying stiffly as I passed. My presence didn't register to their dull senses, and I passed without consequence. Certainly it would be a bit more... comforting... to hire real guards, but then again, free labor is free labor, and the silence of the skeletal sentinels allowed peace for the Dustmen's meditations.

A flicker of blue from one of the side chambers caught my eye, and my head

whipped around to face... nothing. I blinked. Perhaps it was my imagination... it was a misty blur after all, perhaps something in the corner of my vision.

But still... throughout this building there had been nothing but the dying hues of crimson and earthen brown, laced with black and touched with the occasional glint of metal scalpels. Blue was worth investigating, if only for a few minutes.

“Chief, where are you going? The entrance is this way!”

“One minute, Morte, I think I saw something here,” walking into the memorial hall.

“Gods damn it, can’t you just stick with the tour group for-” his voice ground to a halt.

The chamber was dim and drab as all the others, yet the metal and stone were softer somehow, more gentle. The sharp planes and worn, rough walls in the rest of the Mortuary were the carvings of a careless hand and the design of a cruel mind. The other chambers were concerned with function rather than form, and were rough and sharp with age.

But here, the chamber was clean and well-kept. The stones were polished smooth to a tender softness, and the last trailing wisps of incense from the braziers gave off a sweet aroma, exotic as winter blossoms. No doubt the braziers would soon be cleaned and refilled. Lamps surrounded the marble tomb, elegant, with no expense spared. Yet it still possessed a certain humility that spoke of a loving hand, one that still wouldn’t let go.

The plaque simply read, “Deionarra,” a name that was hauntingly familiar.

The air suddenly grew cold.

“You...” the icy hiss seemed to resonate throughout the entire chamber. The flames dimmed, the incense snuffed out and the last dying wisps of sweet smoke snaked through the air. I looked around, trembling, the chill finally touching my bare skin.

A blue and white mist unfolded on the steps to the tomb, and a cold fog billowed outwards as a woman’s visage coalesced before my eyes. She was

strikingly beautiful, with long, white flowing hair cascading down her pale shoulders. Her gown stirred in an unfelt breeze, soft and blue as the winter sky. Her face was smooth, tender, and where tranquility should have been was a twisted snarl of fury.

"You! What is it that brings you here?! Have you come to see first-hand the misery you have wrought? Perhaps in death I still hold some shred of use for you..." Her voice dropped bitterly, tinged with both self-mockery and want, "...my Love."

I goggled. "Who... are you?" The mist surrounding her was cold as frost.

The anger vanished from her face, replaced with pleading as the spectre leaned forward, her hands outstretched, "How can it be that the thieves of the mind continue to steal my name from your memory? Do you not remember me, my Love?" Her voice grew desperate, "Think... the name Deionarra must evoke some memory within you."

That itch along my scalp pricked at me. I worked to embrace it, snatch it, pull it up by the roots, but to no effect. One thing became clear, though. The ghost was indeed familiar, "I think I feel the stirrings of memory... tell me more. Perhaps your words shall chase the shadows from my mind, Deionarra."

Deionarra's voice was jubilant, "Oh, at last the fates show mercy! Even death cannot chase me from your mind, my Love! Do you not see? Your memories shall return! Tell me how I can help you, and I shall!"

"Do you know who I am?"

"You are one both blessed and cursed, my Love. And you are one who is never far from my thoughts and heart," she replied softly, she looked up, her eyes crystal blue, "The nature of your curse should be apparent. Look at you. Death rejects you. Your memories have abandoned you. Do you not pause and wonder why?"

"Memories aside... and assuming death has rejected me... why is that a curse?"

Deionarra shook her head sadly, "I do not doubt your ability to rise from the dead. I do believe that every incarnation weakens your thoughts and

memories. You claim you have lost your memory. Perhaps it is a side effect of countless deaths? If so, what more will you lose in successive deaths? If you lose your mind, you will not even know enough to realize that you cannot die. You shall truly be doomed."

I felt it then, deep within. Whereas my flesh was painted over with countless scars, layers upon layers of them, the wounds within me were less apparent. There was a hollowness there, in the back of my mind, in the center of my chest. It was as if there was a rough cut in the very essence of this vessel, and when I poked through, a yawning void stretched on the other side, terrifying and endless. Somewhere, somehow, my soul was bound to my body in unbreakable shackles. The true horror of my immortality hit me then, and I looked up to the spirit, "'Countless deaths?' How long has this been going on?"

"I do not truly know. Except that it has gone on long enough," Deionarra's voice was cutting. She was saying I had to die, "I know that you once claimed you loved me and that you would love me until death claimed us both. I believed that, never knowing the truth of who you were, what you were." Her eyes slid away from me, skirting around the forbidden.

"Then what am I?" the frustration made me hoarse, "What am I, Deionarra?"

"You... I... cannot..." She suddenly froze, and she spoke slowly, carefully, as if her own voice frightened her. "The truth is this: you are one who dies many deaths. These deaths have given the knowing of all things mortal, and in your hand lies the spark of life... and death. Those that die near you carry a trace of themselves that you can bring forth..."

As Deionarra spoke the words, a crawling sensation welled up in the back of my skull... and I suddenly felt compelled to look at my hand. As I lifted it up to look at it, I could SEE the blood coursing sluggishly through my arm, pouring into my muscles, and in turn, giving strength to my bones...

"Wh..."

And I knew, Deionarra was right. I suddenly remembered how to coax the dimmest spark of life from a body, and bring it forth... the thought even now both horrifies and intrigues me.

I almost reached out to touch the tomb, to try to undo what injustice was done to this poor spectre, but I knew in the back of my mind it was impossible. Yes, she was linked to me, somehow, I could feel the conduit through which I could pour back her essence, share a spark of my life to revive her. But her body lay too cold, too distant from me when she died. The channel had been severed, and only a vestigial remnant remained.

"The Eternal Boundary separates us, my love. For now and forever," her voice was saddened. Perhaps she knew what it is I just tried. "It is a barrier I fear you shall never cross, my Love. It is the barrier between your life and what remains of mine..."

Distant footsteps echoed down the hall. I tensed, then looked back to her, "Deionarra, I am in danger. Can you guide me to a place of safety? I shall return as soon as I can to speak to you again."

"In danger?" Deionarra looked concerned. "Of course, my Love. I will aid you any way I can..." She closed her eyes for a moment, and an ethereal zephyr passed through her body, stirring her hair. After a moment, the zephyr died, and her eyes slowly opened. "Perhaps there is a way."

"I sense that this place holds many doors shrouded from mortal eyes. Perhaps you could use one of these portals as a means of escape."

"Portals?" I blinked.

"Portals are holes in existence, leading to destinations in the inner and outer planes... if you could find the proper key, you could escape through one of them."

"Key?" I was thoroughly confused. The footsteps were coming nearer.

Deionarra looked down the hall as well, "Portals will reveal themselves when you have the proper 'key.' Unfortunately, these keys can be almost anything... an emotion, a piece of wood, a dagger of silvered glass, a scrap of cloth, a tune you hum to yourself... I fear that the Dustmen are the only ones who would know the keys you could use to leave their halls, my Love."

The footsteps faded away. I breathed a sigh of relief. Then again, I could always claim I came here to pay my respects to Deionarra if I were caught.

I shook my head, "Thank you, Deionarra, I'll do my best to find one." I turned to leave.

"Hold a moment," she circled around, floating to face me. The cold air billowed about her and I shivered, "I learned much when I traveled with you, my Love, and what you have lost, I have retained. I have not divulged all that I know to you. My sight is clear... whilst you fumble in the darkness for a spark of thought." Her eyes were bright now, eager, willing to help.

I smiled in gratitude, and she seemed elated. She still loved me, then, more deeply than anything. Dhall was right. Passions bind us to this plane, and if Deionarra were ever to achieve peace, I must either join her, or she must learn to forget me as I have her, "And what is it your sight sees that I do not?"

"Time itself relaxes its hold as the chill of oblivion slowly claims us, my Love. Glimpses of things yet to come swarm across my vision. I see you, my Love. I see you as you are now, and..." Deionarra grows quiet. Her face grew placid, expressionless, and her eyes shut as if she were in a trance.

"What is it? What do you see?"

"I see what lies ahead for you. It ripples through the planes, stemming outward from this point. Shall I speak of what I see?" she intoned.

"Tell me. Please."

"First, I require a promise. Promise you will return. That you will find some means to save me or join me." I hesitated a moment, suddenly skeptical. True, perhaps I needed to die, perhaps I needed to set things right. Footsteps echoed down the hall once more, but it wasn't panic that drove me. I centered myself, grew calm, and looked Deionarra in the eye to make a vow.

"I swear I will find some means to save you or join you, Deionarra."

She nodded, smiled, more than satisfied, "This is what my eyes see, my Love, unfettered by the shackles of time..."

"You shall meet enemies three, but none more dangerous than yourself in your full glory. They are shades of evil, of good, and of neutrality given life

and twisted by the laws of the planes."

"You shall come to a prison built of regrets and sorrow, where the shadows themselves have gone mad. There you will be asked to make a terrible sacrifice, my Love. For the matter to be laid to rest, you must destroy that which keeps you alive and be immortal no longer."

Deionarra's eyes snapped open, and her face grew desperate again, pleading, her torment plain, "I know that you must die... while you still can. The circle must come to a close, my Love. You were not meant for this life. You must find that which was taken from you and travel beyond, into the lands of the dead."

I nodded, "Thank you. Farewell, Deionarra."

"I shall wait for you in death's halls, my Love." She smiled, but there is only sadness in it. She closed her eyes, and with an ethereal whisper, faded. The mist cleared.

"You back with me, chief? You kind of drifted out on me there." Morte's sharp voice was a sudden jab that brought me back. He sounded nervous.

"No, I'm fine. Do you know who that spirit was? "

Morte's eyes widened a moment, then he cocked his head casually, "Eh? Spirit? What spirit?"

"That spectre I was talking to. "

Morte turned away from me and looked down the hall, uninterested, "Look chief, if you're going barmy again now..."

"The woman in the blue dress, surrounded by cold mist," was I going mad?
"Her name was Deionarra."

That got Morte's attention, "You were rattling your bone-box with some woman? Where?" Morte looked around, excited. "What did she look like?"

"She was right on top of the bier. Didn't you see her?"

His grin was a little too wide as he spoke, somehow, "Eh... no, you just kind

of drifted out for a bit there, just stood there, statue-like. I was a little worried you'd gone addled on me again."

I blinked. Somehow, I couldn't believe what Morte was saying. The mist was as real as I could tell.

"No, I'm fine... I think. Let's move on,"

I shivered one more time as I walked away.

Chapter 6

My stride down the empty halls of the Mortuary lacked my earlier confidence and vigor. The conversation with Deionarra still echoed through my head. Those crystal blue eyes were downcast in wistful remembrance, or burned into my own with an ardent fury. They gazed into mine with a soft pleading that I never leave her again.

Dhall was right. Torment walks wherever I go.

Again I was lost in my thoughts, oblivious, and a small, wiry frame bumped into mine. The Dustman was startled, then backed away with a low hiss.

"Oh! Uh, excuse me," I apologized lamely.

"Greetings..." he took me in, making a slight bow. His eyes were oddly bloodshot... no... rather, they seemed to have a naturally red tinge to them. A few flickers of crimson and he had eyed me up and down suspiciously. It looks like he wasn't going to let me off without an explanation. "I am Soego. How may I..." he twitched as he analyzed my scars, testament to a thousand wounds that should have killed any other man, "I'm sorry, sirrah, are you lost?"

I put a bit of confidence and charm into my voice, "No, I'm just visiting one of the memorials."

His eyes narrowed in suspicion and gleam red in the fitful light of the torches, "I do not recall admitting you. May I ask what you are doing here?" His voice carried a bit of that odd hiss again. A tiefling, perhaps?

I gave a sad smile, "I was here to pay my respects to an old friend earlier. I'm ready to leave, but I seem to have gotten turned around. Can you help me find the exit?"

"Why... of course," Soego nodded hesitantly, as if only half-convinced. The corner of his mouth twitched, "These halls can be confusing to some visitors. No harm done, but you are not permitted in the Mortuary after nine bells. Let me open the front gate for you."

We made our way to the exit. Soego walked with a strange, nervous gait, his hands quivered a little as he unlocked the door with a bronze key, then motioned me out. Morte happily floated past, but I looked to Soego, yet not wanting to call attention to his blood-red eyes, "If I may ask... are you all right? You look... tired."

Soego managed a weak smile, and the corners of his mouth twitched slightly, "I have recently taken ill... minor fevers, nothing more. Sometimes they make sleep... difficult."

"Anything I could do?" I offered.

He shook his head, "No, no. Thank you for the concern. I will endure," he frowned slightly, "Is there something else you wanted?"

"Do you know someone named Pharod?"

"Pharod? Of course I know him," he scowled, and his eyes gleamed red, "A ghoulish man. No respect for the dead, and even less for the living. He is a scavenger. A Collector."

"Collector?" I was reminded of the note that stated Pharod as my 'Collector.'

Soego nodded, "Collectors make their living gathering corpses and bringing them here to the Mortuary. We then make sure the bodies receive a proper burial."

“So if a Collector found a body... mine, for example... they might have brought it here and sold it to you?”

Another nod.

Then I knew this Pharod after all, “So this Collector, Pharod... do you know where I could find him?”

He sneered, as if disgusted by the idea of associating with a Collector, “I know he resides in the Hive, the slums outside the Mortuary, but I do not know exactly where. Some of the other Collectors may know, if they'll talk to you.”

“Hey chief! You gonna rattle your bone-box all day or are you coming?”

I gave Soego a polite smile, “Thank you, Soego. I hope you feel better.”

He nodded and closed the gate behind me as I caught up with Morte.

“Chief, welcome to the center of the Multiverse.”

~~~~~

*Worming like blind maggots through a carcass of stone and iron, the inhabitants of the Mortuary went about their tasks. Many paused, suddenly uneasy, and for a moment few dared to tread the halls of the second floor.*

*Dhall, perhaps one of the oldest and most hardened of Dustmen beneath Factol Skall himself, looked towards the southern preparation room. The scratching of his quill ceased, as he wondered whether that bleak new void that just appeared had come to claim him.*

*Ei-Vene's stitching paused, blood and ichor trickling down the thread in misty red pearls. Her dead-yellow eyes squinted, curious of this new thrumming resonance of death and decay.*

*The key was suddenly cold in Soego's hand as he twisted it in the lock. Looking upwards to the floor above him, he caught an ancient, musty scent. It was a familiar smell, something he came across every day in the Mortuary. But to have it so close, like the brush of a dark mother's talons, unseen and*

*yet keen as a razor's edge... Soego twitched nervously.*

*In the memorial halls, a blue and silver spectre wrapped her arms about herself and wept, shivering. It wasn't the cold that forever surrounded her. It was a familiar terror that she knew, that hunted and hounded, always seeking revenge with black claws and smoky gray tendrils. There was a cold rage behind that placid, shadowy surface, with hate as deep as the depths of the sea. Deionarra wept at how helpless and useless she had become.*

*And somewhere outside in the Hive, a stranger walked with his whistling companion. He was just happy to escape one danger, oblivious to the darker one that followed him.*

## Chapter 7

The lurid yellow light cast over the city, though bright enough for the peak of the day, was muted, dull as an ancient knife. The heavy smell of smoke and burning oil assailed my senses. The stench was thick enough to wade through, but somehow my eyes barely watered, my lungs seemed somehow used to the filthy air.

I shouldn't have looked up.

The streets followed a steep curve upwards on either side. The city curled in on itself so that the buildings were wrapped around the sky. I could make them out in the distance. Self-encased as it was, the stench and the fumes of the city had nowhere to go, and the dirty air was trapped, poisoning the sickly-looking populace that wandered the streets. I felt a little dizzy. It wasn't the fumes.

"Multiverse?" I mouthed as we wandered the streets, "Where are we?"

"Just be glad a Clueless berk like you has a mimir like me. Here's the chant: Sigil, the City of Doors, is the center of all planes of existence. Portals lead in, portals lead out, apparently to everywhere. Now if you wanted to- oh hey!"

Morte whistled at a passing prostitute. I sighed. Perhaps a real metaphysician could help me instead.

The Mortuary was definitely less repulsive on the outside. It was a dome of stone and metal, low and menacing, walls windowless. Surely the Dustmen couldn't let any light in, even with a noontime glow as cheerless and sickly as it was. Black spiky buttresses radiated from the center in a thorny crown, and the cobbled stone all about its surface gave the Mortuary a scaly, reptilian feel.

"Well, Morte. I guess this is where we part ways."

He chuckled, "Ha! Without me, a berk like you would get himself stabbed and strung up in the Mortuary again ten times over before he knew to stay on the other end of the knife. And who'd help you then?" He was right, as much as it annoyed me.

"Are you sure you want to be traveling with me?" I asked hesitantly, "You heard what Dhall said."

"What, that old laryngitic sack of wrinkles? Come on, if he isn't totally barmy or senile he's half of both," he didn't face me; much of his attention was on the streetwalkers of the city. Still, he chirped out bits of information here and there as we walked down the street. "This here's the Hive. It's a den of scum and villany and you don't want to associate with any of 'em- oh hey, babycakes! Care to jump my bones?" The lack of lips didn't stop Morte from whistling.

At the outer gate, a figure in a ragged cloak and cowl stood hunched over, eyeing the passerby. His clothes were filthy, but somehow I knew he was neither vagrant nor pickpocket.

A Collector.

"Hey there."

"We really gotta talk about your standards, chief."

The cowed figure stood hunched just outside the Mortuary gate. His face was obscured by the shadows of his hood... what little I could see was his chin, covered with stubble and what appeared to be a foul green and purple

rash. The rash seemed heaviest around his neck, fading as it crawled up to his chin. Given the horrors I had witnessed since I woke up, I was unfazed.

He didn't budge at my greeting. There was a moment of silence before he responded in a high-pitched voice that sounded more suited to a girl of ten years than a man. "Hai?"

"Uh... who are you?"

"Pox I am, hai."

"Uh... Pox?" An odd name, but fitting.

"Mother and father named me, wished a pox-on-first-born, a curse given, came true, it did, hai."

"Yech." Again my eyes were drawn to the purplish-green rash covering Pox's chin and neck.

"You're a collector, then? Do you know someone named Pharod?"

Pox nodded stiffly, "Hai, Pharod. Collector, big, name has weight, casts long shadow, it does, hai."

Excellent. "Do you know where I might find him?"

"Hai, in the Hive here, he is. Someswheres, hai."

"Can you be more specific?" my foot tapped impatiently. I hoped not everyone in the Hive was as addled. Meanwhile, Morte was catcalling some of the prostitutes. I hoped not all my friends were as addled, either.

"Hai, someswheres in the Hive, he is. Pharod hide, he does. Very hard finding, he is. Not worth finding, he is."

I could tell Pox wasn't going to volunteer information, "Not worth finding? What do you mean?"

"Hai, many hates him, other Collectors, even. Sharegrave hates him, not like Pharod at all, hai."

“Sharegrave?” I blinked.

“Hai, Sharegrave big name, carry weight, casts long shadow, he does. Tell Pox what to do, he does.”

“Would your boss... this Sharegrave... know where Pharod is?”

“Hai, Sharegrave knows darks, he does. Know Pharod-a-hiding, he does. Sharegrave in Ragpicker Square, many blocks west-o-here, hai. Say Sharegrave that Pox send you, tell him, Sharegrave become Sharecopper-with-Pox he will, hai.”

“All right. Thank you, Pox.”

“Hai. Good to see you again, hai.”

I spun around, eyes wide, “Wait, you know me?”

“Hai. Pox know many time. Help sneak into Mortuary.”

Considering the effort to get out, I wondered why and how I got in. “But... how?”

Pox unpeeled his arms from his robes, revealing a rusted dagger in each of his rash-splotched hands. With a blur, the blades cut two lines across my throat. There was no pain, oddly, just the quick press and slash of metal on flesh.

“Hrgh!” Shocked, I reached my hands up to feel my throat, blood gushing and trickling down my chest and hands with each beat of my heart. Oddly enough I was curious as to how it could be so painless if the blades were so dull as to leave such jagged skin.

My body tumbled backwards, twitching. It became more difficult to move my limbs as they became heavier each moment. My heartbeat slowed. In the distance I could hear Morte crying out, teeth clacking, Pox squealing in terror.

As my vision faded to black the last thought on my mind was of awe: at how beautiful the sky was, a ceiling of streets, avenues, and buildings misted by gold and gray.

## Chapter 8

The first time around wasn't easy, and neither was the second.

My heart beat fitfully at first, pumping cooled blood through my veins, feeding my stiffening muscles. A guttural groan welled up from my throat and my first breath clogged in my mouth like cotton. I gagged, an odd itch tickled the back of my throat. With a cough the gore that that had trickled into my esophagus spilled from my lips.

The world swam into view, a hideous shade of sickly yellow and gray, and I rolled over, spitting and retching.

"Hai, Scarred One well, hai?"

"Ugh... I feel all stiff," I grunted. I didn't feel like talking much more.

"Damn, chief. Looks like that crazy old scribe wasn't kidding. You just keep on coming back like a Baatorian heat rash. You're invincible!"

And then I vomited.

"Yech. I don't suppose a meal of Avadorn sea figs brings anything to mind? Jolt your memories any?"

I spat out a wad of thickened blood-bile-saliva, "Shut... up, Morte." Spit. Spit. "Ahh, good. At least we're getting somewhere with the memory." When I looked up, Pox was looming over me as well, nursing a wounded arm, "Morte, please tell me you didn't..."

"Sorry, chief. Just saw him- er... her- uh. Pox here just tore your throat open. How the hells did you expect me to react?" I stood up stiffly, my mind still foggy and mouth still tainted with the salty metallic tang of blood. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Pox scuttling away. I filed a mental note into the back of my head to apologize to Pox later. Maybe.

I quickly recovered and continued exploring Sigil with a new wariness in my veins. The bleak wonders of the city were made all the more awe-inspiring standing against the throng of dust-kissed citizens. They walked the streets with shoulders slumped in a weariness of the world, eyes dark-rimmed and tired of the harsh life of the Hive. Yet there was a hardness about these

people, an iron-thorned air about the populace that had been tempered into them from a harsh, unloving life.

The spike of obsidian stone that caught my eye stirred something in me. It seemed familiar, like an echo of a forgotten dream. Even from a distance I could tell the surface was marred with countless small scratches, but still it glistened somehow in the sickly noontime light.

I eyed the Dustmen at the entrance to the monument warily. Even though I was no longer on their territory, and even though they were focused on their chanting, I needed to be careful around them. I was an abomination to them. If there was one thing to remember, it might as well be that.

“Oooommmmm...”

“The True Death awaits...”

“We all seek solace in final rest...”

And there it stood, jutting from the ground, a black stone dagger veined with white and gray and tattooed with countless names. I stepped closer, reading a few. Mishar Akelrun, Pathfinder Garen, Sumali, Fair Farallah, Xixvada the Weeping. Nothing. None of the names etched into the stone meant anything to me. I groaned, cracking my forehead against the cold obsidian.

Two things came about from the moronic act. First, it hurt like the Nine Hells.

Second, a voice piped up behind me, “Hideous, isn’t it?”

I looked up to face a man of middle height and years. He was stout, with a thick, bullish neck. His shoulders were hunched, as if a great weight were pressing down on them, and he stared at the monument impatiently.

“I dunno, I think it catches the eye,” Morte idly floated about, reading names from the surrounding walls, “Kinda like when an inch-long splinter lodges in someone’s bum.”

“What is it?”



The man looked to me, eyes wide. Apparently they were naturally large, gifting him with an unsettling gaze. "It's a tombstone for the Planes." He scoffed. "Graveyards of names are scratched on that rock. Can only hope my name's the one that'll split this stone in 'twain." He pointed at the base of the monolith. "'Quentin,' right there, hammered in just hard enough to send the whole damn thing crashing down."

I ran my hand along the cold stone surface, "The Dustmen."

"Aye," Quentin smiled ruefully, and gestured, "The Dusties scratch the names of the dead on the monument here, and on the walls of this place. Not enough space by my reckoning, but no matter. They do their best. Can barely read half the names."

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Quentin shrugged, "Reading the new arrivals. Try and find a new one every day, try and remember if I knew 'em, nothing more."

I turned about, taking in the countless etchings, "And the Dustmen record all the names of the dead on this monument? All?"

"Aye, they scratch 'em on this rock... and scratch 'em on the walls in this place, too." Quentin scoffed. "I don't know why they take the trouble to take a counting of the dead... the Dusties have more care for the living."

Morte snickered, "Well they aren't exactly drinking from a full glass, the Dusties."

Quentin nodded, "Aye... y'know about the Dustmen mourners that come to this place? They aren't mourning the dead, see, they're mourning the living. You can barely get a word in them edgewise without 'em asking to mourn some poor living berk for ye."

Another name. Noradya Kalik Avadal. The name was etched into a small corner, covered with so many other names that it was almost unreadable. Idly I wondered if I knew her, sometime in the distant past. "But why do they mourn the living?" I muttered to myself.

Quentin overheard, "You got me there, cutter." He shrugged. "Might want to put the question t'them. Seems to me the dead are thrice-worth the pity

of any poor sod living in this pit.” He nodded at the monument. “Every name on there is blest in my book, it is.”

That ache again: that small, infinitely deep hollowness in my soul, dwarfing the void where my memories should have been. The dull ache in my chest was an old wound, I knew, but it came from no knife or spear. I closed my eyes, mentally probing that rough-edged slit, dipped a bit in, and found that terrible, yawning void again. Grander than the tallest mountain, darker than the deepest sea.

My eyes snapped open, and I slid my hand along the stone with a newfound reverence, the scratches rough under my fingers. Perhaps one day my name would be laid to rest here.

“What’s in a name, anyway?” I huffed.

“Nothing special, I say. Just something the innkeeper hollers at you when he wants your tab paid,” Quentin sighed.

I wanted to believe him.

I left Quentin to himself and circled the memorial slowly, reading names here and there. There were too many to count, but hopefully something would trigger my memory.

“Chief, you just got out of a Mortuary and you’re wandering around in a graveyard? Why don’t we check out a bar or something? There’s this place down several blocks that serves the best-”

“I think I remember this place,” I interrupted, only half-listening to Morte’s chatter.

“Why can’t you reminisce at a brothel or a bar or someplace fun?”

I chuckled, “Maybe we’ll try that later, Morte.”

The Dustman standing in the corner had been staring at me for a good while. Despite the crooked smile was frozen on his face, his eyes were as dull as stones. His right arm was shorter than the left, and he kept it tucked to his side, as if cradling a small child.

I approached him, and his eyes slid over me. "Name." The way he spoke the word, it sounded like the tolling of a bell.

"I... I don't know."

"No name, no name, can't help you." The Dustman spoke in a curious sing-song voice. A morose moan or a hoary whisper would've better suited him. His crooked smile and tone somehow made his presence all the more eerie. "Need to give a name if you want to see where it's died."

"Oh."

"Given a name when you're born, give it back when you need it no more. Death-of-Names, Death-of-Names." His eyes swam across the monolith, then the walls of the area. "Buried many names here, Death-of-Names has. Tell me a name, I'll show its grave."

There was only one name I could think of, "Deionarra."

Death-of-Names' eyes rolled to the back of his head, then popped back. With a wild gleam, his eyes ran across the walls of the monument, scanning the names at inhuman speed. He then pointed at a section of the wall. "Buried."

I knelt down at the spot he was pointing at. Chiseled into the black stone, in tiny cramped writing, was the name, "Deionarra." It was almost lost beneath the sea of names around it.

I ran my fingers along the lettering reverently, quietly. No, it didn't bring back any memories.

Without any answers at the memorial, I left and continued wandering. Just outside, I spotted a woman, terror plain on her face. In her eyes, there was something hauntingly familiar, something that I knew was linked to myself.

I gave chase.

She slid through the crowd with practiced ease, dodging and ducking. A passing cart nearly crushed her as she darted away, and in the end I lost her around a corner. Did she recognize me? Perhaps. I wish I knew.

For the most part the denizens of the Hive brushed me aside or ignored me. There were few kind words traded in a dilapidated warren as this. This wasn't to say the citizens were unfriendly, most were simply plagued enough by their own troubles without having to worry about a scarred, nameless stranger and his smart-mouthed skull. A few mentioned the madwoman running about, a Clueless who had gotten lost, whatever that meant. I just knew that I had to find her.

Those less helpful threatened to gut me.

One old woman practically spat in my face as I tried to get my bearings.

She screeched about her lost husband, her son, and both daughters, raving madly before she shoved me aside and stomped off in a fine old temper. There was loss about her, I could smell it.

In every corner of the Hive there was pain. There was the tender sorrow of lost youth and loves. There was the harsh tang of hopelessness. There was the oppressive shadow of death. Death and decay saturated the air and the dust; it was planted with each brick and whispered with each breath.

What is that old saying, again? Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink?

Swamped in the rough grime of the Hive, one man in colorful clean robes of blue and violet stood out like a lantern at midnight. He wandered about in a confused daze, frustration carving runnels in his face. I approached him, seeing perhaps a kindred spirit lost in this confusing city.

As I approached, he looked up hopefully and called out in a high voice: "Craddock... good sir?"

"What?" I felt like I was punched in the gut. Was this my name?

"Eh..." His hopeful expression died as he studied my face, and my own hope wilted with it. "A thousand apologies, good sir, if I have given offense." He gave a slight bow. "I am called Baen the Sender, third child of Dai'Baen the Sender. I am one of the many runners in the employ of the House of Senders."

I smiled nonetheless. It was terrifically refreshing to see someone carry

himself so well and so politely here, “No apologies necessary, Baen. Are you looking for someone?”

“A thousand apologies for troubling you with such a trivial matter, but I seek Craddock, an overseer in the Hive...” Baen looked like he was in pain. “But alas, he eludes me.” He looked at me hopefully again. “Could it be you have you heard of such a man?”

I shook my head, “I’m afraid not. I’m... a bit of a first-timer here myself.”

Baen gave a deep sigh, perhaps one that was a bit melodramatic, “I am bound to deliver a message to him, and as yet, fortune has chosen not to favor me...”

“Anything I can do to help?”

Baen face lit up like a lantern. “Oh, fortunate day for Baen and the House of Senders! Any assistance you could provide would be most welcome! If you can find this Craddock and pass along the message, I shall see to it you are paid for your troubles.”

“All right, what’s the message?”

Baen recited the message almost like a mantra: “The shipment must be in Curst by the third-day or there will be a penalty.” Baen frowned. “I am told that Craddock will know of the 'shipment' to which the message pertains.”

I repeated the message twice in my head before I was sure I had it down. Memories or no, the void that was left behind meant there was plenty of space to fill, “If I see Craddock, I will pass along the message. Is there anything you can tell me about him before I go that might help me find him?”

“He is said to be a giant of a man, stern of features. That he is an overseer in one of the Hive marketplaces. Alas, I know little else than that, good sir.”

I nodded.

Baen bowed. “Thank you, sir. Should fortune favor you and you are able to bear the message to Craddock, be so kind as to return and tell me of it. I will see to it your efforts are rewarded.”

A flicker of movement caught my eye. That woman, the one who first fled at the sight of me. I ran after, shouting a quick goodbye to Baen and feeling a bit guilty that I couldn't show him the same courtesy he had to me.

"Chief, wait up!"

## Interlude

"By Moradin's beard, what BE this tripe!?" G'mir growls, "Chattering with ghosts? Yammering with blood-eyed Dustmen? Getting scolded by old women!? Just last week I pissed at the base of that black eyesore of an obelisk and yer tellin' me the most vicious killer the Planes spat out was fiddlin' and sobbing over it like a wee girl!?"

"Pike it, berk!"

"Aye, shove it up yer bone-box!"

One of the three gray-coated noblemen sitting in the corner stands up, one hand proudly crossing his chest. A member of the Covenant of Swords, you've heard from chatter nearby, a foppish but skilled trio that cleared the streets of Sigil more out of a sense of adventure than virtue.

"We, the Covenant of Swords, have heard no such thing, friend dwarf! The Nameless One was a man of skill and cunning, who skimmed the Planes, saving damsels and vanquishing demons and devils alike!"

"Don't be ridiculous!" This time, Scii-tavakis, the dust-covered elf wielding the obsidian spear, "He was smarter than that. No, the Nameless One was an opportunist who knew when to take advantage of a debt, and knew better still how to trick people into such bindings."

"Me own great grandfather, Valakai the Heartslayer, knew this man!" a black abishai snorts, "He was a mere madman who scuttled into the

streetcorners like a rat, I've heard, nothing more, nothing less."

"A sorcerer whose might could've challenged the gods!"

"No, a warrior of brutish strength and skill!"

"A sneak-thief who stole the Tome of Forbidden Knowledge from right under Factol Hashkar's nose himself!"

"He was a priest of Aoskar, I swear it's true!"

Oudilin's lips are pressed tight as he raises an eyebrow, plucking a few strings. The thrumming resonance that emits soothes the crowd, and quickly the clamoring voices snap silent. "I am merely telling the tale as it occurred, good friend," Oudilin addresses the dwarf, "The Nameless One came from humble beginnings, scratched and scraped his way to the legend he has become. I'm afraid that some falsehoods have become intermixed with the truths. Quite a few, in fact, and those few facts that survived have fragmented."

"At least they aren't as boring as a Guvner's lectures," G'mir growls.

"Ah, but think of this," Oudilin smiles over his winecup, "This shows that the Nameless One had walked these same streets as you have, had been patron to the same taverns, perhaps even sat at the very seat you're currently hopping about on, good dwarf. Now as I was saying, the Nameless One pursued his quarry upon recognizing the glint in her eyes. He followed in the hopes that she might reveal his true nature..."

## Chapter 9

My muscles pumped and my tendons strained as the broken-down buildings flew past me. The woman was experienced in running, I could tell, no matter how hard I laid my boots against the pavement she was still five leaps ahead of me. My lungs were burning already.

Morte didn't have such corporeal limitations.

It was still a little unnerving to see a skull barrel past me, jaws open. Morte's teeth bit into the woman's shoulder and she shrieked, spinning about and stumbling to the ground.

"Don't hurt her!" I tried to yell out, but it came out as a ragged wheeze.

I caught up in a few quick strides and grabbed the woman's wrist. There was no blood along her shoulder, thankfully, just a few teeth marks.

I caught my breath, "Calm down... please."

The woman was tough as nails, her face twisted in a snarl. She was haggard, wrapped in rags. Her hair was disheveled and dirty, and her complexion was extremely dark. Burns covered her arms, and her right hand was a fused lump of flesh... it looked melted, like wax exposed to a great heat.

"What issit y'wanta me? Let go of Ingress! Let go!" The woman's accent was thick, and it was difficult making out what she was saying.

"Do you... do you know me? I noticed-" she was shaking her head.

"Don't know... don't know scarred man..."

I knew then. That familiar gleam in her eyes wasn't recognition. It was something I knew that shined in my own. There was the same confusion, the same fear. I was as lost in this city as she was, a foreign intruder prodded and sliced, burned by the chaos and the dangers of Sigil. My throat still itched.

There was a mad gleam in her eyes, "Y'wanta me t'leave? NOT leaving this city, so I'm not. I can't, tried, it's not a city, it's a prison t'everywhere."

"A prison?" It was beginning to seem like everything I said was a question.

"They also call Sigil 'the Cage,' chief."

"There's Worlds, there's..." the woman's eyes gleamed madly. "...planes that be sinking sands, fields thirsty nettles be, sightless worlds where y'limbs



are given life and hate, cities of dust whose people are dust and whisper ash, the house without doors, the Twilit Lands, the singing winds, the singing winds..." she started to sob quietly, but she seemed all out of tears. "And shadows... the terrible shadows there be."

Shadows... a chill ran down my spine.

I let go of her arm. Now that she was talking I knew she wasn't going to run. "Where are these places?"

"Where'z? Where'z them places?" She flung the lump of her right hand in an arc, gesturing at the cityscape. "They'z all HERE be. Doors, doors, here to everywhere."

"Portals..." I whispered, remembering Deionarra's words.

She squinted at me, then nodded. Her teeth started chattering. "Tell you, I will: Beware every space you walk through or touch in this thrice-cursed city... Doors, gates, arches, windows, picture frames, the open mouth of a statue, the spaces 'tween shelves... Beware ANY space bounded on all sides. ALL these're doors t'other places."

She gripped me with her intact hand, fervently warning me, "Every door has a KEY it does, and with this key, they show their true nature... an arch becomes a portal, a picture frame becomes a portal, a window becomes a portal... all eager t'take y'someplace ELSE. They steal you away..." She raised the lump of her right hand, "and sometimes what's on th'other side takes part of you as a TITHE."

"And the keys can be anything, I've heard. An emotion, a piece of wood, a tune you hum..." I remembered Deionarra's words.

She nodded, "The keys, the keys number as many as the doors of this city. Every door, a key, every key, a door." Her teeth started chattering again, as if she was cold. "A key is anything. It may be an emotion, an iron nail held 'tween y'second and fifth fingers, a thought thought three times, then thought once in reverse, or it may be a glass rose. Can't leave... can't leave..."

I held out a hand, tried to comfort her, "How did you get here?"

"From..." She seemed to calm slightly, and her eyes took on a thousand-league stare. "Came from a place else from here, almost a life-ago, hummed a tune by a glade with two dead trees that had fallen together. A brilliant door opened in th'space 'tween the crossed trees, showed me this city on th' other side... I'z stepped through, ended here."

"Can you get back?"

"Tried!" She tried to sob again, but no tears came. "Tried! ALL doors here lead to OTHER places." She shuddered and gripped her melted right hand. "Went through thrice-ten portals, some a-purpose, some a-accident, none a-them right. Can't find way back..."

I glanced at my own scars. Half of them must've come from my own blind explorations into these portals. I suppose I was lucky, then, that I was immortal. My flesh healed quickly, the itch was already gone from my throat.

"There must be a portal that can take you back. You can find it if y-"

"Can't even leave here! This square! And there, th'place of death behind th' gate waits for me!" She pointed at the Mortuary behind the gate, then turned back to me, her face desperate. "Can't go anywhere in this city!"

A moment of silence passed between us as I tried to digest what she was saying, "You can't go anywhere? What do you mean?"

"Anythin' could be a door. Any arch there, any door here, could be a portal, don't know the key, could get a-sent t'another horrible place...' Her teeth started chattering again. "...got t'stay way from the closed spaces, all could be doors, could have a key on me, an' I not be knowing it..."

Another short silence, "You... you're afraid to go through ANY door or arch because it might be a portal?"

She nodded, her teeth still chattering.

"How long have you been afraid of this?"

She squinted. "Since the last time I walked through th' last portal, th' place where m'hand..." She stopped. "Since m'tenth Turning... I'm in me fourth

tenth Turning that, now.” Her teeth begin chattering again.

“Thirty years? You haven’t walked through any door for thirty years?” She had been lost since she was a child, three decades stolen from her. Ingress had left everything behind; her family may even be dead by now, “If you got here, there must be a portal that can take you back. It’s only a matter of finding it-”

She smiled. Her teeth weren’t chattering because she was cold... they were moving around inside her mouth, her gums twisting as the teeth shifted about. They rose and receded as I watched, chattering as they rattled against each other.

“Uh...”

She hissed at me. “Only takes ONE portal you steps through a-a-accident, t’drive th’ FEAR into you. I went through thrice-ten, lost m’hand, burned m’flesh, and lost m’sense.” She looked at her feet. “N’more, n’more.”

“I’m sorry... if I can find some means to help you, I will. Farewell.”

As I walked away, she was still staring off into the distance, thinking about a glade from her childhood where two dead trees had fallen together.

## Chapter 10

The light was waning as I wandered the streets, the once-golden glow melting into a bleak rust-red. The cooler air took some of the bite out of the smog, and my stomach rumbled a bit. That’s the funny thing about sicking up, I suppose. Right before you spill your guts onto the streets the last thing you want to think about is food, but after you clear the bile from your tongue you’re hungry as the next hideously scarred amnesiac.

I sifted through the makeshift belt pouch I had made with a rag and some string. A couple coins, some bandages, a few charms and a knife I had stolen

from the Mortuary. I suppose I could peddle some of this off for a little money, but was it enough for a room and a meal? Well, the meal I could skip. If I fell asleep in the streets I'd be storing shivs in my kidneys, and if I vomited after reviving like I did the last time, well, that's a waste of a meal.

Those few Hive dwellers that were still about were heading home, and only one or two were kind enough to point me to where I could stay for the night, "Just follow Bedlam Run all the way and they'll care for you, cutter."

A large, roofless tower stood at the end of the street, the lanes peppered with decaying houses and madmen wandering in rags. The sour smell of sweat and unwashed skin thickened the air whenever one of the vagrants walked past.

The Gatehouse, they called it: a semicircular, roofless tower flanked by multiple wings whose entrance was a gaping maw toothed with pillars the thickness of a man's height. No, I corrected myself, not pillars. They were the bars of a gate, each five feet thick. In the back of my mind I mused over what they were trying to keep out with this monstrosity. Some things perhaps are better left unknown, but to someone who didn't have any memories, that was probably a limited category.

I walked between the bars and into the central court, where a few hundred others waited for admittance. There were the young, the old, the weak, the mad, all with the same dullness in their eyes. The flickers of hope had been drained from them, and the best they could wish for now was a bowl of soup and a night's stay here.

They couldn't possibly house everyone in the courtyard, much less feed them. I shifted uneasily, looking over the desperate poor waiting for their chance at entering. Some may have been waiting here for weeks for their turn for a bowl of soup and shelter.

I turned around, "Come on, Morte. We'll just have to sleep in the streets for the night."

He clicked his tongue, "Yeah, not like we could get in anyways."

"You poor sod. What did they do to you?" a gruff voice accompanied a taloned hand on my shoulder.

I turned to face the speaker. His skin was a moldy green, eyes slitted and yellow. The man's features were sharp and distorted, almost monstrous, and the fierce horned helmet was adorned with an array of tribal charms and a small helmeted symbol on the front. Despite this, however, there was a kindness in his eyes, and a hint of the same madness that I had seen in a hundred other faces here.

He eyed my scars, "Come in, fellow. We'll give you a place to sleep and a hot meal. The Bleak Cabal will treat you better than the other denizens of the city have."

I smiled, "Thank you kindly, sir, but I can take care of myself."

The man gave a muted chuckle, but there was no real humor in it, "I know a Clueless when I see one, cutter. And I recognize good men, too. You and your companion can be my guest, even if just for tonight. My name's Lhar, Factol of the Bleak Cabal."

Factol. The word was a title of some sort, probably important, but Lhar tossed it to me as if it were a scrap of a word no different than any other.

"You're a kitten in a den of lions, Clueless," Lhar continued as we walked through the double doors to one of the wings, "most of the people in that courtyard can fend off the dangers of the city at night far better than you can. No offense meant, of course, you look to be someone who's survived his fair share of dangers."

"Not as often as I'd like, I suspect," I added dryly.

"Let me guess. We sit through a one-hour presentation and get a brochure before we get to the grub."

The corners of my lips twitched in a half-smile, "Do you even need to eat, Morte? I mean, well..."

"You sure know how to rub it in, chief."

Lhar chuckled again. It was an empty sound, "Aaah this is a nice change. Most of the charges combined aren't nearly as lively as you two. And no, our faction doesn't usually preach, unless you're willing to listen."

The dining hall was set up with rickety wood tables and benches, and the few people milling about wore aprons and set up piles of bowls and plates, ceramic and metal clinking against each other. The smell of the cooking was greasy and rich, which was appetizing enough for me as hungry as I was.

Dhall's dry lecture on Dustman philosophy came to mind, then. "I've been wandering in this city for a few hours, and I know too much about things philosophical and not enough about things practical."

The bowls were mismatched. Lhar had taken a decent bronze one, and a grumpy-looking elf slopped a ladleful of pasty white gruel for him, then laid a piece of fatty bacon atop. I picked out a small, humble saucer, with enough chips in the edge I could've used it to cut my bacon slab. I wasn't as hungry as I thought.

"Ah, but this is Sigil, my friend," replied as we sat down, "Philosophy is practical. Ideas, thought, even simple belief can shape reality."

"Then what do you believe in?" The pasty white gruel was relatively flavorless, though some roots and tubers had been mashed in. For the benefit of the older, toothless vagrants, I imagine. It was slimy against my tongue.

"Absolutely nothing," Lhar said. There was a tone of finality about it.

"Nothing?"

"Oy, chief. Trust me. You don't want to talk to a Bleaker. There's a reason they're called the Madmen, you know... er... with all due respect, Factol," Morte gave Lhar a polite nod.

Lhar ignored it, "Think about this, cutter. There's a thousand faiths out there. Ten thousand. Hells, the planes are infinite, there might as well be an infinite number of faiths and beliefs and values. But not a single one has claim to the dark of it all. It's not that people haven't tried, or that people aren't smart enough. Countless have quested for the ultimate meaning behind existence, many of them brilliant, more than a few absolutely barmy."

I nodded, "If the best a thousand of the finest minds can do is bicker over what the true meaning of it all is, what makes us think there IS a true

meaning?"

Lhar pressed the bacon slab into his bowl with a spoon, "Exactly. See, we of the Bleak Cabal know the multiverse makes no sense. We accept it. You don't see us running around trying to convert reality to some sort of order like the Guvners, or break it down to chaos like the Sinkers. We don't try to force reality to obey our arbitrary whims like the Sign of One," he snarled as he mentioned that last faction, "Plenty of people try these so-called philosophies, and many see past the words and realize how empty they are, how hollow and self-deluding. The Bleak Cabal is the refuge of the outcast, the sanctum of those the other Factions have failed."

I looked down and was surprised to see the bowl was half empty already. Idly I picked the slab of fatty bacon up with my fingers and began chewing. The salt and the grease were therapeutic somehow. Nourishing. "So you reject all the other factions because you respect the truth behind it all, that there is no meaning to reality."

"And therein lies the risk of madness," Lhar said. He dabbed a piece of bread into the bowl. They served bread? Where did I miss that?

"Then why should I live, then? Why should I die?" The words were still odd on my lips. That I needed to die. "Why do anything if there's no meaning?"

"That's up to you, cutter. It's the burden that we all must carry: that we are responsible for our own fates; that we must struggle with our own madness," he leaned forward, then, a half-smile on his face, one that looked almost genuine, "But you didn't need to chase after some grandiose ideal to turn around and try to walk out of here to give room to someone else, did you? A fancy philosophy didn't compel you pick the smallest bowl so you could leave more for others, either." Gods damn it he made me sound like a sap. A pat on the head and a sweet for being a good boy? I toyed with the idea of socking him in the face.

I licked the last of the gruel from my fingers. It tasted awful, but I was oddly hungry for another bowl, "I suppose not. Then again, a merciless world is what breeds the need for mercy in the first place, and a hopeless city is the perfect font for hope." Ugh. Maybe I should've gotten a crack in the jaw myself. Swallowing a few teeth would be the perfect remedy for the martyr complex these guys seem to spread.

Lhar picked up his own empty bowl and stood, “Look inward for meaning, cutter. It’s your only salvation. But until you find it, would you like seconds?”

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It wasn’t the hard pallet that was set out for me, or the ice-cold sheets against my skin. Hell, I doubt it was even the fact that this was the first time I slept, as far as I could recall.

Running around in the center of the multiverse without any memories drives a bone-deep weariness in you. It’s the kind of weariness full of the screams and aches of tired muscles, where a full belly and creaky bed are divine respite from the day’s madness. There was enough madness for a lifetime.

Morte snores, by the way. He tries to deny it. After all, he doesn’t have lungs or a nose. I have no idea how in the hells he can float, whistle, or even talk, so I have no idea how he can assume snoring is impossible for him. A couple of pillows helped solve that problem, though. He doesn’t need to breathe. I think.

Ever since I learned of my immortality I had wondered what I should do now. I’m unnatural, Deionarra had said. I’m an abomination, Dhall had said. The cycle of life and death had been broken, a wrench had been thrown in the machinery of reality by my existence. Yet as far as I could tell, the multiverse churned on just fine without me. Why would I need to die?

No. I just needed to find my journal, talk to Pharod, and I’ll decide what to do from there.

When I managed to drift off to sleep, the emptiness was waiting for me. Imagine the dim light of the world slowly receding, the touch of your rough blankets fading, the fitful glow of the blue-violet sky outside growing dimmer. Your senses abandon you bit by bit, until the darkness claims you.

There is nothing.

That black emptiness, infinitely vast, was the gaping maw of raw oblivion yawning before me. It absorbed my mad screams, gave nothing to thrash against. A soft prison, it was, with no walls to pound, no boundaries that would give me at least the hope of breaking free. Was this True Death? Was this the terrible secret hidden in the mind of a Bleaker? No, it was a part of

me, I knew. It was that same terrible void that stretched past that rough-edged cut in my essence. It was the darkness that stretched between stars, the black vastness that would exist at the end of time. It was the hollow chasm that I could only caress before recoiling in terror.

If only I could full it with my screams.

When my eyes opened the glorious golden light of day was bleeding through the violet-blue sky, turning the sky white with a hint of azure wherever it touched. Morte had somehow rolled out from under the pillows I stuffed him under, snoring away happily. I couldn't have been happier to endure it.

I sat up, disoriented, a little dizzy, but too afraid to go to sleep again. No, I would just write. Detail my journey. It would help take the edge off of that terrible, dreamless void.

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A few copper commons had been left for me on a rickety nightstand. I scooped them up. A short conversation with a clerk to tell them the tiny bedroom was now clear for another and I was gone.

The way Sigil curled in on itself no longer caught my eye, nor did the sour smell draw more than passing notice. Odd how quickly one could adapt to even the strangest, most noxious of things.

I had avoided the stranger, less savory characters in the city as of yet. Well, aside from Pox. The Hive dwellers that meandered between tasks had little to say and offer, perhaps the more eclectic figures could offer more. They'd be more likely to deal in the secrets of the city, the "dark" of it as they say here.

The clang of metal on metal, a rhythmic hammering, drew me to one corner of the Hive. It emitted from a tall, twisted metal structure, with no real function that I could perceive. It was scaled with small bronze plates, and twisted black vines curled about it from top to bottom. At the base, however, was a tall creature with a shock of white hair. Its skin had a greenish cast, and a pair of goat horns protruded from its forehead. It was dressed in long flowing robes and appeared to be floating slightly above the ground.

“Greetings.”

The creature turned to face me and a series of symbols appeared around its head. The symbols had a slight glow about them, and they just... hovered there.

“Oh, for the Powers’ sake! Piking dabus,” Morte clicked his tongue with annoyance.

“What’s wrong?”

“He’s a dabus. They ‘speak’ in rebuses, these annoying word puzzles. If you don’t know what he’s saying, then we better find a native or some other way to communicate with him... if we want to. An annoying bunch. My bet? They can speak, they just would rather piss everyone else off by trying to puzzle out what they’re saying.”

“What’s a ‘dabus?’” I had gotten used to asking questions, and Morte seemed perfectly happy to answer. Funny how he was perfectly patient with me but would lose it at a few word puzzles.

“Chant is they’re janitors for the Lady of Pain. They float around breaking, fixing and patching up Sigil according to her whims. They’re worse than corpse flies.” Morte sighed. “You can’t swat ‘em though, or the Lady’ll get... upset.”

“And... who’s the Lady of Pain?”

Morte suddenly looked nervous, “Eh... she runs this city. You’ll know if you see her: She’s got these blades around her face, she’s about the size of a giant, and she floats off the ground, just like these guys.” Morte nodded at the dabus, who was looking at us both. “Nobody knows much about her... she doesn’t speak much. All you need to know is that you don’t want to make her angry. If you see her, my advice: run.”

The dabus waited patiently, its hands tucked into its sleeves. A series of symbols materialized above its head, then they vanished and a question mark appeared.

I asked the dabus several questions, trying to get a feel for the rebuses that appeared above its head. It was extremely patient throughout our

'discussion,' giving easy sentences to translate. After a few minutes, I started to get the hang of it... it felt like I had done this before.

I tested myself with the basics, "Who are you?"

The dabus inclined his head slightly, and a stream of symbols haloed that white shock of hair. <I am a dabus.>

"What are you doing?"

A batch of symbols appeared above the dabus' head. <I attend to my duties.>

"Can you tell me about the Lady of Pain?"

A lone symbol appeared above the dabus' head. This one showed a metallic androgynous mask, with blades coming out of the sides. Just looking at the ghostly image made me uncomfortable. Perhaps it was unwise to ask about her, but I needed whatever knowledge I could.

"Uh... not quite what I expected. Do you happen to know Pharod? The Collector?"

<No.>

Well, that was a wash. At least I can speak dabus now.

## Chapter 11

The day was a little hotter than earlier, the light beating down on the both of us. The air wicked away the sweat that trickled down my body; it would've been dipping and pooling in the puckers and scars of my skin otherwise. Perhaps that was why I went about in a mere loincloth.

I was still seeing symbols and rebuses for a little while after I left the dabus,

blinking one eye, then the other to clear my vision. For the moment I allowed Morte to lead the way as we meandered about the city. He led us to the shade of a building.

I should've expected this.

The harlot was a tired-looking woman dressed in a tight leather bodice and leggings. The odor of cheap perfume surrounded her like a cloud, and her face was covered with a mask of crude make-up. She smiled as she saw us approach. "Why doncha stay and chat wit' me a bit, love?"

"Morte..." I snarled out the side of my mouth.

The woman looked coyly at me and shifting her weight, placing both hands on her broad hips. "Now ye look ta be a blood who's lost something. Mayhap I can help ye find it, cutter?" She smiled slightly.

Morte piped up eagerly, "What good fortune! We probably lost what we're looking for back at your kip, miss."

"All I'm missing is a journal, madam," I said dryly.

"Eh?" She seemed confused. "What're ye about?"

If I was going to talk to the odd and outcast of the city, I might as well start here. I changed the tone of my voice, gave a smile light enough that it couldn't have been mistaken for that of a lecher, "Actually, I'm not missing anything, though I do need some information."

Morte scoffed.

"I'm not a tout..." She frowned with a pout, then rubbed two fingers together. "Unless ye've got something ta pay fer my time."

I leaned in close, spreading my arms a bit, giving a confident, friendly grin. "How much?"

She eyed me up and down, smiling, then gave a pleased giggle, "Oh, fer a handsome basher like yerself... "Three coppers'll be enough t'loosen me tongue. For information, mind you." I laughed. She licked her lips, then frowned. "Other questions of a deeper chant'll cost ye more, though."

I nodded, "Sounds fair. Here's three commons." The coins clinked falling into her palm as I realized the first thing I had ever bought now was from a whore. I almost laughed out loud.

"Aye, then." She slipped the coins into a pouch, "Now..."

Might as well start with the general questions, "What's of interest around here?"

She put her hands on her hips and pouted. "Depends on yer interest, cutter."

I was uncomfortably aware of how light my pouch was, "Well, I could always use some work."

She laughed. "Ye're asking me? What, ye thinkin' o' becoming one o' the Sisterhood are ye?" She nearly buckled over in laughter... the screeching was similar to a drunken harpy's. Eventually, the gales of laughter subsided, and she took a deep breath. "Ye're... ye're a rich man, ye are."

By the powers! I needed something to scrape the vision of myself spreading my legs for someone out of my mind. I caressed the void again, chill, horrifying. I slipped past the rough-cut edge, touching pure oblivion itself. If I probed any deeper it might've devoured my soul, destroyed my essence, leaving me a mindless, doomed shell.

Ah, much better.

I focused on something else, and my chat with Lhar came to mind, "What about the factions? What do you know of them?"

She smiled knowingly. "I jest... 'serve' ... the factions, love. I don't deal with them."

"Not even the Dustmen?"

"The Dustmen don't behave like Dusties in my arms, love." She scoffed. "Those bashers speak so much 'bout death, yet they don't say much when they's with me, y'see?"

“Well... I am looking for someone named Pharod.”

“Pharod?” the sly smile was wiped from her face, “Now that’s one o’ the greater darks, love. If ye be wantin’ t’know about that blood, that’ll be thrice the coppers of a normal asking.”

Nine coppers clinked into her palm. The pouch really was getting lighter.

The harlot gave my coins a once over, then shrugged and pocketed them. “What ye be wantin’ t’know about ol’ Pharod?”

“At that price, anything you can tell me about him.”

She shrugged. “Chant is he’s a Collector boss. Has a whole bunch o’ bloods in his shadow.”

“And where can I find him?”

She looked off into the distance “Now, no one knows fer dead sure, but if I were ta suggest a place, love, I’d say Ragpicker’s Square, a big ol’ heap o’ rags and trash three blocks due west o’ the Mortuary... all the Collectors stake their kip there. Chances are, Pharod’s got his kip there, too.”

I nodded, “Thanks for the information. Farewell.”

Morte circled around to stop me, “Wait, chief, can you spot me a bit ‘o coin... it’s... eh... been a long time, it has.”

I paused for a moment, the roiling questions in my mind froze to a snap. “I’m not even going to ask how you intend to accomplish this.”

The woman broke in. “It’s twice the cost fer the mimir... or any other degenerate.”

I had heard that word before, “Uh... ‘mimir?’”

“Mimir’s a talking encyclopedia. That’s me, chief- hey! ‘Degenerate?!’”

The woman grinned, revealing two rows of dirty teeth. They were splotted black and brown, one or two rotted to nubs.

I winced inside. My mind was still a bit in shock and my tongue slipped, "I see. Well, don't sweat it, Morte. From the looks of her, I'm probably saving you from dying twice."

The prostitute snarled, her face twisting in fury, "May a pox shrivel yer innards! Ye have the stink and fashion sense of a goatherd, and ye're twice as ugly!"

Morte stared, hypnotized, as the harlot let loose a stream of obscenities. At the end of the verbal avalanche, Morte was silent for a moment, then turned to me. "Wow, chief. Got a few more taunts for the ol' arsenal." He turned back to the harlot, who was catching her breath. "I'm also in love."

We left, "And you think we need to talk about my standards?"

He chuckled, "Oh come on, chief. The best you've eyeballed here was a shuffling corpse and a rash-ridden hermaphrodite. I'd like to see you do better."

That's when I saw her.

She was a striking girl, her hair rust-red and short-cut. Her leather armor was a tight, form-fitting piece laced up the middle to show an ample bosom. She met me with tight-pressed lips which quickly twisted in disgust, her eyes widening with shock.

"Ach! I've never seen somethin' so ugly, I've not!"

The girl's right arm was covered with a series of interlocking plates that looked as if they were taken from the skin of some creature, and a horned shoulder piece protected her left arm. Oddly enough, she had a tail, which was flicking back and forth as I watched. I was a head taller than her, but she looked up to me with a scowl, her pretty eyes full of venom and vinegar, "Pike off."

She turned away, then, ignoring me.

"Uh... hello," I said awkwardly, "Who are you?"

"Smooth, chief."

The girl sneered, then made an obscene gesture with her tail. "I said pike off, yeh clueless sod," the words came out curled in a thick accent.

"Hey, easy," I said, holding up my hands in a placating gesture, "I just had some questions."

She eyed me warily, a glint of... something in her eyes, "Aye? And what is it yeh want?"

"I, uh..." I paused, "I can't help but notice that you have a tail."

"Do I now?" the girl's eyes widened in mock surprise as she looked at her tail, "So I do! An here I was thinking that it was a trick of me eye. My, aren't yeh a sharp cutter?" She bared her teeth, "Why don't yeh piss off ta whatever hole yeh crawled out of and leave me be?! Me nor me tail is for trade, jig?"

A tiefling, then. She certainly had the temper of a fiend, "All right... I was just cur-"

Morte piped up happily, shooting his tongue even as it salivated at the curve of her breasts. For someone who's made mostly of mouth and stem, I was quickly learning that Morte had more mouth than anything, "It's just as well neither you nor your tail are for sale. You couldn't squeak out a living with 'em, anyway."

"Uh..."

She turned pink with fury, hands shooting to the knives strapped to her milk-white thighs, "What are yeh about, yeh blighter?! Say it again!"

"He didn't say anything," I shot a hand out to try to grab Morte, but he floated just out of reach.

"Yeh, that's right, cutter. Rein in that mimir of yers," she calmed down visibly, though still wearing that scowl.

I sighed. I might as well get down to business, then, "I'm looking for someone named Pharod. Do you know where I can find him?"

"Aye, I might. I might say more if yeh sweeten th'question, aye?" She clicked



her tongue and rubbed two fingers together. "Jink-jink, aye?"

"Jink-jink?"

"She means money."

"Oh."

"Aye..." She glanced at Morte, then shrugged. The girl's temper was quite fickle, "What the skull said. Hard coin."

"All right. How much?"

"How much is it ta yeh t'know, aye?" She studied me, then folded her arms. "C'mon, I haven't got all day, I haven't."

The harlot had needed nine gold for her answers about Pharod, and that took a little charm on my part. I smiled again, standing up straight, confident. My words were like honey, "How about ten? If your information's good enough, it could be more."

"Aye, all right then..." Some of the tension in her melted and she pocketed the money. It was gone so quickly, I had no idea where it vanished to. "Look for him in the Alley spireward from the Mortuary... that's ta the south an' west of the Mortuary, aye?"

I nodded, "South and west of the Mortuary? Thanks, and farewell."

"So... where to now? To find Pharod, that is," I asked Morte as we walked down the street.

He sighed, resigned to the fact we'd be getting straight to business, "The alley south and west of the Mortuary right? Just like the tiefling said."

I shook my head, "I know, but the harlot said we could find Pharod at Ragpicker Square, due west. So did Pox, now that I think about it."

"Come on. Are you gonna trust a common streetwalker and a plague-bearer or are you gonna trust gams-and-melons squeezed in leather there?"

I thought about it. There was something about the tiefling, the way she

stood, the way her eyes widened just slightly at the name 'Pharod,' "Hmm. The girl did seem somewhat... interesting."

Morte's grin seemed to split wider, "See? Gams-and-melons it is."

"I thought you said she was ugly."

"I say lots of things."

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Age-old smoke and char, the slightest whiff of it was on the air. An old, burned-out building stood square on one side, rusted old walls on the other, squeezing the street into a narrow alley. A few unkempt thugs stood to one side of the street, leaning nonchalantly. One flicked a knife in the air, another was idly cleaning his nails with the tip of a dagger.

A particularly ugly one, hair swept up in a crest like a rooster's, approached me with a cocky stride. Puckers and slashes lined his face, a good long cut under his eye had been a hair away from blinding him.

"Greetings, stranger. Looks like you're in Darkalley Shiv territory now. Looks like you've got a purse that could use some lightening. You better pray it's got enough," his unfriendly grin was full of yellowed, grimy teeth. Likely these people knew Pharod.

"I need to talk to your leader," I said.

He cocked his head, "Rotten William? Aye, I'll let you talk to him as soon as you let me look inside that purse."

"Er... no. Pharod."

The man just smiled.

"I think we'll just be going now," I gestured to Morte to back up.

"Nay, nay I don't think you'll be doin' that, cutter..." the thug lunged at me, and with the soft, thick sound of metal sliding into meat he slid a dagger into my belly. I stared dumbly at him. He blinked, then whistled. With that piercing call his friends leapt in, sliding out from the shadows and corners.

A solid punch in the face staggered him as he chipped a couple more teeth. I whipped out the green steel knife I had slid into my belt, and lunged.

The thug was quick on his feet, spinning about to crack me in the side of the head with a fist. I felt a sharp pain in my kidney, and snarled as I spun around and slashed blindly. The rogue gaped, not expecting me to still be standing. It hurt like the nine hells, but my body was used to pain. Hell, I would've been surprised if half my nerves were still intact.

The tip of my blade punched through his temple by sheer dumb luck, sliding six inches into his head. It rocked a couple of strokes as I tugged it out, the teeth and barbs near the handle had caught on the bone. It stirred his brain to mush, and I tore it out with a cracking sound and a spurt of blood and goo.

My skill with the knife was decent, but the thugs poured in one by one, surrounding me. Surrounding Morte.

“Morte! Get the hell away from here! Just run!”

Another thug fell, crimson spurting from his throat, fountaining in multiple small wounds. Morte spat the blood from his tongue, “What, chief? You think I’d leave you?”

“Just GO!” and then a blade found my heart.

“Hghlllth!” that iron tang was becoming all too familiar as it spilled from my lips. I fell, back arched uncomfortably over the mugger I had just killed. The spines of his armor dug into my back uncomfortably, the wounds in my chest and belly ached as the warm life-blood poured out of me.

In the distance I heard Morte’s fading shouts, the yell of the gang as they chased him. Slowly the pain faded, the world grew dim.

I coughed, the words spilling from my lips in a whispered croak.

“Damn it...”

Chapter 12

That familiar sensation of warmth thickly pumping into my cold veins was the first thing I felt as consciousness slowly flooded into me. My joints creaked and cracked, my limbs ached, and countless spots along my flesh itched as the wounds knit shut. The final stages of my unnatural healing would no doubt leave more scars.

Then there was the chill of metal against my back, the rank stench of blood, flesh, and preserving fluid. There was the cold air of the room that kissed my now-warming skin.

Gods damn it. Back in the Mortuary.

"Hey, chief," a familiar voice piped up. Relief washed through me that Morte was still here. Relief, then memory, then anger.

"Morte, I told you to run. You could've been killed!" I croaked. I spat out the last vestiges of congealed blood.

Morte chuckled, "Hey, guess I'm a fighter after all. A fantastic fighter, really. I stood my ground, you know, there were thirty of those filthy thugs around me, and you were yelling something, trying to shoo me away. But no! 'I'll save you, chief! I never abandon a friend!' You should've seen it. I dove into the crowd and bit off their heads one by one, and..."

I put a hand up to stop him, feeling those itching spots across my body, "Ugh, what happened after I went down?"

"Oh, I ran like the Lady was after my ass. When I came back it looked like they were too pissed off about the guys we delivered to the Dusties to really loot you. They just stabbed you a bunch of times."

"That explains a few things," I grunted, still aching from the hundred or so wounds, and slid off the slab slowly.

"Yeah, but I've got some bad news, Chief. I snuck around a bit, and it looks like our old blood-eyed pal is gone. And frankly, I don't quite trust the other Dusties."

I blinked, "So we're locked in again? Oh that's just bleeding great."

"Good news is I scored us a couple of dates with a couple of those grey-skinned gals. Zombie Worker #11 and #91. I think they're sisters."

"Morte..."

"We have so much in common-"

"Morte!" I hissed, "Can we just try to get out of here?"

We made another round about the floor, trying to pick up any tools to help with our escape. I sifted through logbooks, picked at a few odds and ends, sighing. A few charms were scattered about here and there, a bit of gold, but no keys or information of real importance. I knew I was trapped again. Until I came across him.

The corpse looked much like any other, but his skin was fresher, his gait a little more determined and less awkward. The number "821" was carved into his forehead, and his lips had been stitched closed. The faint smell of formaldehyde emanated from the body, musk and pungent. And yet...

I walked up to the creature, "So... seen anything interesting going on?"

The zombie blinked in surprise, "Eh? Wut?"

I crossed my arms, "Why are you disguised as a corpse?"

The 'zombie's' eyes grew wide, and he tried to respond behind stitched lips; he had a peculiar half-frightened, half-angry expression plastered on his face. "Hoo YU? Wut yu wunt?"

Let's just say I had woken up in a bad mood today, and I wasn't going to take any cheek right now. Except maybe from Morte, "Why don't you tell me what you're doing here before I call the guards." I leveled a piercing gaze at him.

The zombie's expression crumbled. "Nuh-nuh-no! Dun't cull th' gards!" He looked frightened. "Muh-muh-me spy un Duhstees, say wut I see. Nuh-Nuthin' more."

I furrowed my eyebrows, and the muscle in my forehead twinged. Gods, did they try stabbing me through the skull too? "Spy? For who?"

The zombie fell into a frightened silence. He seemed unwilling to say anymore.

"C'mon. Who are you watching this place for?" I pressed.

"Hold on..." Morte sounded surprised. "This berk must be an Anarchist. Heh. Posing as a zombie's got to be a first for those addled sods."

"Anarchist? Are they another faction?"

Morte nodded, "Anarchists... they're a faction that wastes their time peeping on authority figures and looking for ways to tear down anything that stinks of order or control." Morte snorted. "The Anarchists think every berk across the Planes'll be free and happy to seek out their own 'truth' once the establishment is burned to the ground. They want to establish a new order -- no order at all."

I tried to work out the logic in my head, but found there was none, "That seems pretty... contradictory."

The zombie was watching us both fearfully as we talked. He was still silent... but something in his expression told me Morte's guess was right on the mark.

I turned to the zombie, "The Anarchists, huh? That who you're watching this place for?" He turned away from me, starting to glance around fearfully.

I gave him a reassuring smile. After all, I knew what it was like to have to hide from the Dustmen, "Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me. What have you seen the Dustmen do, anyway?"

The fellow visibly relaxed, "Nuthin'. They do nuthin'. Can't find nuthin'. Dead, dead, juhst dead people, Duhstees do nuthin'." Even bored to tears, his eyes narrowed in conviction. "Still I watch."

"I don't suppose you know Pharod?"

"Fuh-AROD?" The zombie frowned briefly in thought. "Me... heer he live in

Hive somewhere.” He shook his head. “Not know where.” He frowned again. “Dushties vare-ee mad, thay not LIKE Fuh-arod.”

The man certainly didn’t have many friends. I needed to know more, though, if I was going to meet him, “Why don’t the Dustmen like Pharod?”

“He’s a collector. Bringz deaderz to Mortuaree, sellz ‘em to Dustmen. Bringz LOT uf deaderz. Dushties not know where he getz deaderz. Think he’s puttin’ berks in deadbook.”

I raised an eyebrow. It was hard to parse his words through those stitched lips of his, “What?”

Morte was always happy to fill in the silence, “He’s saying this Pharod berk has been selling a lot of deaders... corpses... to the Dustmen. Sounds like this Pharod’s been selling so many deaders that the Dusties think he’s been putting Hivers in the dead-book before their hour’s up... y’know, killing people.”

I considered that note I stumbled across my first hour here. Seemed like something truly odd was going on with the man. I couldn’t wait to meet him. I sighed, “The guy sounds like a saint. What about Soego? Can you tell me anything about him?”

The Anarchist grunted, “Guide. He at Mortuary frunt door. Wut yu wunt wi’ him?”

“What do you know about him?”

He shifted his weight and his lips narrowed, threatening to pull the stitches, “So-ehgo. Actz strange, not Duhstie, not Anarchizt, eyez changed...” he shrugged. “Likez ratz. Strange.”

Rats? What? “Well, what do you know about Dhall?”

He shrugged, “Scribe. Old. Yellow.”

I chuckled, “Well, that’s all there is to him, I suppose.” Something came to me then. Deionarra. She had mentioned portals that I might escape through. “Do you know a way out? The portals?”

The zombie nodded. "Yu wunt out, go tuh arch on firzst fluur, nurthwezzt ruum... Yuh need fungur-bone, shape of crook..." He held up his index finger and bent it into a crook. "When yuh have key, guh to arch, jump ta sucret cryp and ken escape frum here. Secret escape route." He nodded eagerly. "Yuh can rest there."

"Ah, one problem, chief," Morte said quickly, "There's a memorial service going on right now on the first floor. Some high-up berk kicked it. There might be some guests coming in and we'd get spotted easily."

"I could always lie my way past them."

Morte looked me up and down, "Yeah, but you hardly look dressed for the occasion. I mean, come on. The bone sash? The demonhide kilt? That's so last century."

I paused, turning back to the zombie, "How did you get to look like that?"

He grinned as far as he could, lips parting slightly to reveal just a bit of yellowed teeth, "Me gud at duh-guise. Me ulso gut scars. Me wuhr lots of embalming fluid. Me make GUD zumbie." The Anarchist giggled through stitched lips, then tapped his head. "Duhstees stuh-pud."

Morte rolled his eyes, "Yeah, they're the stupid ones all right."

The sarcasm was evidently lost on the zombie, who nodded eagerly. "Stuh-pud Duhstees. Me make GUD zumbie."

I winced, "Doesn't that hurt?"

He looked at my scars. "I ask yu same question. Me, it not hurt much." He pounded his chest with one fist. "Me TUFF."

I grinned, a horrible idea forming, "That disguise is pretty good. Can you disguise me as a zombie?"

He looked me up and down for a few moments, mumbling to himself, then nodded. "U-huh. Me need jar uf embalming flew-id." He pointed at the scars on my chest. "N' some needle and thread."

A little more rummaging amongst the shelves and I was able to come back

with what he needed, as well as a handful of coins for myself.

“Here you go.”

The zombie took the items from me and set to work. I tried to hold still. First came a set of the worker’s robes, stinking of blood and formaldehyde.

“I can’t believe you’re going through with this,” Morte shook his head in disbelief, “How barmy are you?”

I shrugged, “Pretty barmy, I suppose.”

A mask of bleached leather covered my head, making it look skeletal and grotesque. A layer of embalming fluid was liberally applied to my body, then several of patches of my skin were stitched up to grant a bit of a patched-up look. Working from my feet upwards, the zombie threaded the needle through my scars, then finished off the disguise by stitching up my lips. I winced a bit at the needle and thread as they pierced the tender skin, but the zombie’s fingers were deft and quick. I sucked the blood from the tiny wounds.

“Hey, can you make the stitches on the lips any tighter?” Morte piped up.

“Stuw vit, Murte-”

The zombie held up his hand. “Curful! Talk pulls stitches out, ruin diz-gize. Zumbie no talk. Yoo got to talk? Talk slow, curful.”

I tried again, slow, careful, “Mmph... mmm. I... understand.”

The zombie frowned. “Diz-gize wun’t last long... um-balming fluid dry up, stitchez fall out.” He examined me again. “Prob-lee not last ouside Mortuaree. Uhnd no running! Yoo run, yoo ruin whole diz-gize.”

I nodded, “Fanks.”

I feel so pretty.

Chapter 13

Odd how simply dressing up and acting like something else can give you such a unique perspective on things. I shuffled, let my limbs flop about, and wavered back and forth like one of the walking dead. There was a certain monotony to it, dull yet peaceful, even as Morte whizzed past and clicked his tongue in annoyance.

“Come on, chief. You’re slower than molasses at a Frost Fair.”

At the pace I was going, the stitches were already tugging at my skin and threatening to break. Shuffle, walk. Shuffle, walk.

Yu wunt out, go tuh arch on firzst fluur, nurthwezzt ruum... Yuh need fungur-bone, shape of crook... the anarchist had said. Finger-bone in the shape of a crook. Got it. An idle hand on one of the stiffening corpses’ digits, a little tug, a snap, and there was my key.

Morte was right. Of the guests that milled about all of them were in the finest of clothes. Blue and red silks lit up the Mortuary as far as the eye can see, with splashes of green here and there. The Dustmen’s eyes must’ve ached terribly after being so used to the dull grays and browns.

I ambled past, circling about them and headed to the northern chambers.

Shuffle, step. Shuffle, step.

Morte floated next to the arches. His jaw widened in an exaggerated yawn, showing me how annoyed and bored he was. I really have got to meet other people.

I pondered silently for a few moments, wondering how this was supposed to work. Ingress had implied that all I needed to do was carry the key with me, but I took the fingerbone in hand anyway, holding it up to the arch. The embalming fluid was drying. The stitches began to tug at my flesh a little harder.

I shuffled a little more quickly to the next arch, and a soft susurrant emanated from the hollow space in the wall. The space there twisted with a low roar of wind, warping into a spiral of blue and violet to reveal a dark,

hollow room on the other side. I gingerly put one arm forward, my finger passing through that hole in space. I expected it to tingle as my finger passed the thin plane that separated this part of the multiverse from the next, or perhaps a gentle tug. There was, however, nothing that I could feel other than the slightly warmer air of the room beyond and a soft rush of air.

I braced myself.

A moment after I stepped through, the portal winked out of existence behind me.

“Mpppfghhh!” I moaned, and immediately pulled out the green steel knife from my belt and slit the stitches in my lips. I panted with relief, licking my lips as a string of pent-up curses caught in my throat.

I looked around as I plucked the last bits of thread from my lips and similarly undid the stitches all over my body. The alcove I found myself in was dimly lit by an unseen light, with but a single sarcophagus in the center of the room. The thing looked like a solid block of stone, and I wondered whether it truly housed a corpse. Was this a small tomb? A memorial? A set of footprints in the thick layer of dust was a sign that one person, at least, had visited within the past century or so.

The glint of coin had caught my eye immediately. A small pile of coppers weighed down a small note.

Upon inspection, I saw that the note has been written with remarkable penmanship upon the finest parchment:

Vaxis,

If you are reading this, then you have undoubtedly failed in your task and have been forced to use the escape route I arranged. I told you that your little disguise idea was ridiculous. In any case, you'll need to lay low for a while. The Dustmen may be deluded, but they are not fools, and they will certainly seek retribution for our intrusion. I've left you some coins. Use them to secure a hiding place in the Hive, preferably in Ragpicker's Square. The Dustmen will be unwilling to look for you there.

Once you have secured a new hiding place, I have a new mission for you: find out where Pharod is getting those bodies he's delivering to the Mortuary. It's apparently causing the Dustmen a great deal of upset, and I wouldn't mind knowing myself. Reports are that that stone-faced

Dustman at the Gathering Dust Bar -- Initiate Emeric, I think the fool's name is -- has been sending out finders to try and mark Pharod's movements. See if you can find out how far along he is and hinder his efforts until we know more about Pharod's activities. I don't want Emeric finding out something before we do.

- Penn

The mystery of Pharod's wealth of corpses, once a minor footnote on a sheet torn from a logbook, had grown to become a real problem, it seemed. I felt a little guilty about pocketing the coin, but this Vaxis seemed like he could take care of himself. Frankly, I needed the cash more.

And yet another name. Emeric. Perhaps I should meet this man.

I sighed in relief as the hot air of the Hive kissed my skin. The stench was present as always, thick and noxious, but I breathed it in deep. It was rich in its own way, and it wasn't as if the fumes were going to kill me.

"Well, here we are again, chief. Let's explore the city without you keeping knives in your fleshy parts this time."

I flicked the knife in my hand, and the blunt end cracked against my wrist awkwardly before I could catch it. I was comfortable with the feel of the blade, skilled enough in its motions, but I had come to realize that the people I was up against were stronger than me, faster, and I was neither brutish nor quick enough to take on the multiple enemies I might face.

"Morte, I'll need something more powerful to defend myself with."

He tilted in a shrug of sorts, "It'd be tough to find a good sword hereabouts, but a stout piece of wood, a bone wrapped in rags, a sliver of metal. Take your pick, chief."

I gazed at the sky, breathing in the strange, abstract wonders of the city, "Looks like I'll just have to be more careful then. Let's try heading west now, like Pox and the harlot suggested."

Buildings patched in black and green weedy vines passed by us. As we walked through the Hive, the citizens seemed even more forlorn, dirtier. Each citizen's eyes were more vacant, more forlorn. The houses barely deserved the name: little more than crude huts of patchwork wooden

planks and sheets of metal. Those not consumed by the vines were covered with worn, dirty tarps to keep the cold out.

Curious, I reached a hand out and touched one of the vines. The stem was triangular, with a sharp edge to it, and the leaves were stiff and just as keen.

“Ouch!” I pulled my hand away and started sucking on the cut in my knuckle.

“Razorvine, chief. Some old sod brought it in from the lower planes thinking he could grow it on the walls of houses to deter burglars. Heh. Too bad he didn’t know it spreads faster than the clap. Can’t burn razorvine, and if you cut it a stray branch might swing out and take out an eye. The dabus have a hell of a time pulling the stuff out.”

I nodded, adding another thing to the quickly growing list of ‘things to never touch in Sigil.’

A few of the citizens were kind enough to point out the direction of Ragpicker’s square. As we got closer, though, each person I talked to wore clothes that were a little more ragged, the stink of sweat and unwashed flesh was a little stronger. Further in, the eyes of each citizen glinted a bit more with the spark of madness. It was like the Gatehouse again, but this time without the hope of a warm bed and a bowl of hot soup.

And then we arrived at Ragpicker’s Square.

Chapter 14

My nose wrinkled at the sour stench of sweat, thick and clinging as if it had been wiped up with a damp rag and left to mold in a box under the hot sun for a week. A rodent, its head throbbing with exposed pink brain matter, scuttled over my boot. I took short, shallow breaths, filtering the air with my teeth. It helped a little, but I could taste the grime still.

Here and there a Collector wandered. One with a wheelbarrow near-filled, fresh limbs hanging from the planks. Others squatted in the garbage in their ragged rust-brown robes. It slowly dawned on me how easily that umber hue could mask the filth and blood that stained the cloth.

One such Collector wandered past, muttering to himself. His eyes were sunken and dark-rimmed, but they glinted with a touch more sanity than the others here.

Not wanting to touch the man, I stepped in his path instead, "Greetings."

"Someone comes ta speaks ta Nodd, speaks ta Nodd, aye..." He suddenly broke into a fit of hacking coughs, then nodded to himself.

"I have some questions," I said politely.

He nodded. "What?" He sniffed, then squinted at me, then Morte. "Jink. Ye wants t'know sumfin -- jink. Aye, jink-jink."

I already had a couple of coppers in hand for this, and I dropped them in an outstretched palm, still moist with the juices of whatever he handled recently.

"Jink fer Nodd, jink-jink." He mumbled for a moment, hiding the copper coins away in the folds of his robes. "Ask, Nodd tries ta answer, aye." He coughed for a bit, spitting something off to the side.

"Do you know of a man named Pharod?"

Nodd looked frightened and started to shake his head. "Pharod, Pharod, Pharod... What? What 'bout him?" He frowned, then shook his head, as if he was not sure he should've been speaking to me.

I spat. The air here was filthy. I was no dainty lass, but I sorely wished I had brought a perfumed kerchief with me. Morte made a face. "Do you know where I can find him?"

The Collector shook his head, then mumbled. He glanced quickly at me, then began to murmur again to himself. It sounded like he was uttering a prayer against evil. "Nuh-nuh-not here. In Square..." He frowned, as if unsure how to explain it. "...but not in th' Square." He shook his head again, then

coughed.

"Well that was remarkably useful. I do wonder how we ever could get anywhere without yammering to these addle-coves, chief."

"Be patient, Morte. Tell me about this area, Nodd."

He pointed to ground, nodding. "Th' square, Ragpicker's Square, trash everywhere, aye, Sharegrave's square."

Morte clicked his teeth, "I think I've made my point already."

"Pox mentioned him, too. What can you tell me about Sharegrave?"

"Sharegrave's shadow long, falls over Nodd, it does, aye. Nodd gives some a' his jink ta Sharegrave, Sharegrave tell others in his shadow: 'watches out fer Nodd,' aye." He sniffed, nodding slowly.

"Eh... eh..." He shook his head, coughed, then resumed his nodding. "Ye'd ask a' Nodd, aye, Nodd'd ask a' ye... question fer ye, aye..."

Fair enough, I suppose. I kept an eye on his hands in case he was going to stick me like every other shady creature I met, and I didn't relish dying and having my corpse dragged through this disgusting square.

"Nodd has a sister, aye, Amarysse. Ah-mahr-eece... lives in th' Hive, away from here, away from th' Square. So long, long ago Nodd was separated from his sister, taken away..."

I began to wonder how long I could hold my breath. Pretty long, I suppose, "You've been separated from her and you'd like me to find her?"

"Oh come on, chief! Are you going to run errands for every sap we come across in this city? We're going to spend half our lives fetching and chasing after lim-lims at this rate!"

I shifted my weight and didn't quite look Nodd in the eye. Morte was right, much as I'd hate to admit it.

"Ye don't know her?" He shook his head sadly for a moment, chewing his lower lip. "If ye sees her, if ye does, tell her Nodd, her brother, worries

about her, aye, he does, he worries."

"Why don't you go find her?" Morte could barely keep the annoyance out of his voice.

"NO!" Nodd covered his head with his arms, mumbling to himself. "Nodd... Nodd can't speak right no more, he can't, nay, an' he smells a' corpses an' th' dirt a' the Square, Ragpicker's Square... NO!" The outburst sent him into a fit of hacking coughs.

I looked up at him, "What happened to you, Nodd?"

Nodd sniffed, looking at the ground quietly. Finally, he began nodding to himself, speaking softly: "Nodd was young, aye, he was, an' started hearin' voices, tellin' Nodd 'do this! do that!' Bad things, bad, like chewin' on Nodd's fingers..." He held his hands to his face, revealing old bite-scars beneath the caked-on filth. I winced and hoped he quit that habit by now. Ugh.

"So Nodd's parents takes him away, they does, puts him in a dark place, a Winged Tower, where they pokes needles an' hooks in Nodd's head... voices stop, aye, they do, but Nodd can't think right, can't talk right. Nodd escapes the place, he does, wakes up in th' Hive, aye."

"Where is this winged tower?"

"Dunno, dunno. Bad place, bad!" He shook his head violently, clutching at his temples, before resuming his usual nodding. "Nodd wakes up, there's Collectors, aye, Collectors pokin' at Nodd, sayin' 'Look! Not a deader, deader he's not! Takes him back, takes him!' An' they takes Nodds back, they does, back ta th' Square. So long... years, long years ago."

"Morte, we have to help him."

He growled behind his teeth, but in the end Morte relented, mumbling, "As much as I like ya, chief, don't expect me to mop after your bleedin' heart too much."

The Collector smiled crookedly, the corners of his lips twitched, "Nodd thanks ye, he does, Nodd thanks ye. Amarysse was pretty, so pretty, lives in th' Hive, now. Fair skinned, she was, hair like jet, an' always in blue, blue... she was always in blue..."

I left Nodd to his head-bobbing and shuffling, wandering past the broken-down huts here that barely deserved the name. Sharegrave. If he was in charge here he might know where we could find this Pharod, the squirrely bastard.

Sure enough, I came across the front porch of a (marginally) well-kept kip. It was snarled with razorvine to deter intruders. The Collectors at the door glanced at me, their hands at their knives, but they held back, if only by a whisker. Their gazes darted back and forth between me and one bone-thin thug pacing back and forth.

Tall and lanky, the pale, grim-looking man exuded authority despite his gangly and somewhat awkward frame. A good portion of his left ear was missing; what little that was left was a ragged mess of scar tissue, as if the ear was bitten off, rather than cut. His narrow, shifting eyes - almost mere slits - looked clever... and dangerous.

"Greetings."

He spat out a reply and glared at me, "I don't know you, berk. What do you want? Answer quick, before I call in some men to make quick work of you."

"Are you Sharegrave?"

He scoffed, and looked at me incredulously. "Berk, who I am is the second thing you should have known before you stomped your shivved-up, corpse-looking self in here."

I blinked owlishly, "What's the first thing?"

"That I hate visitors, and I loathe strangers. You're both." He sneered and tapped his finger to his temple. "Figure the rest out on your own."

"Calm down. I don't mean any harm," my voice was smooth as spun sugar, but still he snarled in my face.

"Oh, you don't say! Well, that makes it all piking better then, don't it? Now, I'm going ask you one more time before your arse hits the street - possibly in several pieces - what do you want?"

"I'm looking for a man named Pharod," my jaw snapped shut the moment the name slipped.

The tension in the room suddenly rose, and Sharegrave's glare sharpened to a razor's edge. His lips were tight as he spoke "Now, what a funny thing to be asking about. What do you want to know about old blood Pharod for?"

I could see Morte floating towards the door. Might as well be honest, "He has some things of mine, and I want them back."

Sharegrave was silent for a moment, then cracked a smile. "He steals from us all, doesn't he, whether we're living or dead?" He chuckled.

Morte was still edging away. I fixed my gaze on Sharegrave, though, "What do you mean?"

"Our main source of... living... around here is the dead. You follow?"

I nodded, "You're a Collector."

"Aye, that's right." He looked at me as if he was considering something. "Now, there's only so many deaders at any one time. My bloods and I can only gather so many. If somebody else is gathering deaders, that's that much less junk that goes into our pockets."

"I heard that he's been finding quite a few bodies."

Sharegrave nodded, "The rub is that that he's found a mother-lode of them. Now, I haven't heard of any massacres in Sigil." He frowns, tapping at his chin. "So I'm quite interested in knowing where all the deaders are coming from."

"I could find out for you, if you'd like," I offered cheerily.

He raised an eyebrow, "Oh, aye? And how would you do that?"

"All I need to do is find him. Let me worry about the rest," I shrugged.

"Hmm. Heh. You got it; I'll even give you one hundred copper commons for your trouble. Go up on the platforms, follow them to the North and West, and you'll come to a gate that leads to Pharod's bolt-hole. Getting in and

getting the information is your deal. And if anyone asks, you don't know me, and we never had this talk, hear?"

Morte sighed and shook his head as we left.

"What?"

Morte floated in front of me and looked me in the eye, "You know, chief, it probably isn't a good idea to make promises like that before we know the whole deal. You'll be wearing a braided rope necklace by being too helpful."

Mmh. Perhaps he was right.

A sharp, bitter scent pierced through the stink. It was partly woody, partly fragrant. There was the smell of burnt paraffin, the sweetness of good wood-smoke. Strangely, I was reminded of fresh-cut greenery, and the rank scent of newly budding sap.

Fresh herbs? Here? I couldn't quite believe it.

Curiously, I approached a hut that actually looked habitable. Straight wooden planks were tied in a circle with metal wire, like the sides of a barrel, while the a banged-up sheet of metal, perhaps once the section of a wall, served as a roof. The steps to the door creaked as I walked over them, dark and brittle as they were with age. These planks were more accustomed to a lighter step.

The painted sign on the door was faded with age so that the letters were unreadable, but a list of prices had been etched into the wood. Midwifery, ten coppers. Poultices and wound-binding, six coppers. Leeches, five coppers.

I entered.

The good-sized hut was both home and shop. A bed, sheets threadbare but clean, sat at the other end of the room. Next to it an upright rack held herbs that had been laid out to dry, filling the air with a sweet woody smell. The stove where an old woman stood at was made of some sort of petrified wood, and a small pot bubbled with what looked like bits of fish and giblets.

The squat old woman looked like she had all the color bled out of her --

everything from her hair, to her shawl, to her robe - all were shades of gray. The only splotches of color on her came from several strange herbs, which were tied to her belt by their stalks. The herbs made a swsshhh when she moved, like a broom.

The door creaked shut, and the elderly woman turned and stared at me... and it looked as if the gray shades that blanketed her body extended to her features as well. Her hair was a wispy gray, and her eyes were like chips of granite. She frowned when she saw me. "And who might ye be, hmmm?"

I mulled it over, a lie at my lips, "Er- my name is Adahn. Who are you?"

With a sly cackle, she wagged her eyebrows. "Have ye not heard of Ol' Mebbeth then, the midwife of the Square? Have ye not now?" She narrowed her eyes, and her voice dropped. "Well, now ye have, fer I be Mebbeth."

"I noticed the pricing list. What do you do?"

"I set bones right, drive the cough outta the sick, yank out squealing, stubborn babes, mend cloaks or a rag or two, make cures and herbs and other such." She squinted at me, studying my scars. "Be needin' a cure or three, do ye then?"

"Cures?"

"Aye, ye be needin' some cures ta lookatcha. D'ye want ta buy some, do ye...?" Mebbeth glanced at the scars covering my body again, then shrugged. "Too late ta be askin' for them, I think."

I looked over to Morte. He was still a bit scuffed and scratched from our last encounter. Did he even heal? "Actually, we could use some healing..."

Mebbeth nodded. "Very well, then." She reached for one of the dried herbs at her belt, snapped it off at the stalk, then ground it in her callused palms. Small wisps of dust and pollen rose from her hands. She then mumbled to herself, then blew the dust into the air...

I took a deep breath as the gray pollen swirled around the room. I breathed deeply, taking the dust into myself, and less than a moment later, I felt strangely refreshed. Looking to Morte, he looked like he was freshly-skinned

from a corpse. Strange how that would be a compliment to someone.

"Thanks, Mebbeth. Before I go, I had some other questions for you..."

The midwife turned to stir her pot of stew, "Go on n' ask, then."

I was blunt, "Are you a witch, Mebbeth?"

Mebbeth turned to scrutinize me. Her eyes narrowed slightly, a flicker of fire in those pools of gray, "I say naught as to what I am and isn't, but whatcha be wantin' ta know so fool bad for that ye hound an' ol' woman, barkin' and sniffin' fer a juicy bit of gossip?"

I mused bitterly on how easily I was taken down by a band of thugs earlier. And by a rash-covered Collector before that.

"I want to learn about magic. Could you teach me?"

"What? Tooth and claw not good enough for you?" Morte snapped, "Need to just wiggle your fingers and breathe fire in the face of the Hive thugs to keep 'em from stealing your purse?" he scoffed at the mention of the somatic components needed for wizardry. Mostly things like that just glanced off of Morte, but I was beginning to find that on rare occasions he had a glass jaw when it came to hints of his own limitations.

Mebbeth laughed at us both. "Pah! I'm no teacher, no school-mistress all set up ta teach like them in the big Festhall! There's others somewhere I'm sure that'd spill the dark of it... ye'd be wastin' yer time with ol' Mebbeth, so ye would."

I smiled politely, "I don't agree. I think you'd have a lot to teach."

Mebbeth looked at me intently. "Oh, aye? Why do ye want to learn such things?"

Because I don't want my ass handed to me again by a gang of smelly thugs. "Because I may need it to solve the mystery of who I am."

After a moment, Mebbeth nodded. "The Art may help, it may not, and ye must not rely on it ta solve all o' yer problems." She sighs. "Child, it's most like only going to add another chip to yer pile o' questions..."

I bowed politely, a humble disciple before an aged midwife, "I understand. Will you teach me?"

"Pah!" Mebbeth shook her head. "One should make songs rather than make magick. Songs have more beauty. Magick's been made dull, common-place, soiled by the mob of people that have tromped through it... hmpppph." She squinted at me, as if she couldn't quite believe the situation. Few came to midwives and hedge-wizards for real knowledge. "I'll teach ye... but first ye'll need to do some things for me, ye hear?"

"Like what?"

"My legs aren't good fer walkin' about Sigil, and there's errands I'd have ye run. I need ye to fetch me some herbs from the market... it's spireward -- easterly and southerly from here -- in the Hive market. Here's a sample..." She took a black seed from her coat and flicked it to me.

I twisted the black seed in my hand... as I did, I felt a small bite, then a small drop of blood oozed from my thumb... there were tiny barbs on the seed, like teeth. Mebbeth snorted. "Careful with it... show it to one of the fruit merchants at the market, they will know what herbs ye seek."

"Very well, then. I'll return when I have the herbs."

Somehow, I had a feeling this would be a long, annoyingly drawn-out apprenticeship.

Chapter 15

There was no real need to ask around for an herbalist. In the southwest portion of the Hive there was a marketplace, a throng of traders and merchants who carried all sorts of odd wares from other planes. There, I knew, I would find my answer.

I was wary of the sharp-fanged seed even as it lay in my pouch. It had stung me once, and the prospect of carrying back a good sample of the needed herb would likely be a great deal more painful.

"Hey Morte, I don't suppose this seed is razorvine, is it?"

"Meh, doubtful, chief," he glanced at the buildings patched in the stuff, "Mostly people grow 'em from cuttings, not seeds, and it's everywhere. The old coot wouldn't be asking you to hunt for something that's worth less than a hemorrhoid."

"Well, it was just a thought."

A multitude of voices rose from the marketplace, a cacophony of hisses and growls, of gap-toothed men haggling bitterly over prices, or merchants yelling at the street urchins for snicking a tart or sweet. The few guards here were a mishmash group, with ill-fitting armor more piecemeal than not. They were a loutish bunch, poorly-paid and grim, but they were what the local traders could afford.

I turned to enter the bazaar, and caught the eye of an old, plump merchant. He had a worldly look to him, and his deep voice was gentle but confident. "Ah, hello there. Are you ready to sample some of the most delectable treats from across the Planes, my good man? Spend a copper, for the sake of your senses!"

His cart was arrayed with a fine collection of fruits and treats, small barrels brimming with bright red pearls and dull brown cubes, of flowers and breads, sweetmeats and a few casks of wine. My stomach growled, and it came to me that it had been a while since I've last eaten.

"Well... what do you have?" I asked, browsing his wares. Much of what he sold was unfamiliar to me.

The plump little man smiled, "All manner of delicacies to delight your palate, my good man. Arborean fireseeds, Gar-Bar root, Elysian pears, crimson lotus petals, Bytopian shepherd's bread, shiftspice from the chaos of Limbo, and sea-plums are what I have at the moment. Merely five coppers for a taste of anything you'd like."

Morte was salivating a bit too, "I was always partial to the fireseeds myself,

chief."

It certainly sounded exotic. I fished for a few coppers, "We'll try some fireseeds."

The merchant pocketed my coin and smiled, offering a small paper pouch of small, red seeds, "Don't swallow them; simply spit them out when they've finished tingling."

For each seed I popped into my mouth, I flicked one in the air to Morte who caught it with his tongue. The seeds, sweet and tasting faintly of cinnamon, became warm and tingled in my mouth... it took a moment for me to realize that they've actually burst into flame. Soon, however, the sensation died out and I spat them into the gutter.

We leaned back against a barrel as we idly finished off the seeds, and I mused to myself that it wasn't exactly polite for an apprentice to keep Mebbeth waiting. Then again, she probably expected this to take a while.

I crumpled the paper bag in my hands and tossed it aside, still hungry. "I think I'll have a Gar-Bar root too."

"Here," he said, giving me a couple of small brown cubes of what looked to be rubbery vegetable matter, "It is quite chewy... do not swallow it, but spit it out when it no longer has taste."

I popped one in my mouth and gave the other to Morte. The root, initially quite hard and difficult to chew, had a sweet, syrupy taste. Soon it became soft and gummy, and I found myself merrily smacking away.

I plucked the seed out from my pouch as I chewed and turned to the merchant. Perhaps he knew something, "Sir, Mebbeth, the midwife of the Square, needs some herbs sprung from this seed, here. Can you help me?"

The man took the seed, looked at it critically... as he pressed it between his thumb and forefinger, he winced, and a small drop of blood appeared on his thumb. "Ah! This seed's got a bite on it..."

"I noticed that. Do you have the herbs she's talking about?" I looked over his cart again.

He couldn't seem to take the eyes off the seed, "Lad, I don't know if there's anyone who has what your friend seeks... to be square, I've never seen such a seed before. You would need someone who cultivates seeds such as this, for I have none."

The flavor of the root died off at this point, and I spat the gooey, brown wad into the gutter, "Very well, then... where would I find such a person?"

"Don't know the dark of that, friend," he handed the seed over to me, "You'd be hard-pressed to find a gardener in the Hive..."

Mebbeth sure put me on a wild chase, "Looks like I'll have to. Thanks for the help. In the meantime, can I have a bag of that Gar-Bar root?"

~~~~~

We made my way through the market, finishing off the Gar-Bar root piece by piece, too busy chewing to talk to the merchants. Sweets were never as tasty as the first piece, but still it staved off the hunger wondrously. Couldn't have been healthy, though.

In the distance, though, I noticed a man who fit a description I was given perfectly.

He was a huge man, watching the area with a tight-lipped frown and narrowed eyes. He was hunched slightly, as if bearing a heavy load on his shoulders. The unpleasant smell of sweat and dirt wafted from his clothes.

"Hey. You Craddock?"

"Mayhap..." He studied my face, as if trying to recall me. "If I am, what be it to ye?"

"I come with a message from Baen the Sender. The message states: 'The shipment must be in Curst by the third-day or there will be a penalty.'" My, I have a sharp mind if I could remember that. Perhaps I'll make a great mage yet.

Craddock's eyelids furrowed as his face turned pinkish, "By the hells! Can they be such fools that they think we can miracle it there?! All right then - yer message has found its way to the right ears, for all the good it will do!"

He turned around, yelling at the workers there in a fine old temper, "Come on, ye laggards! Ye halfwits! Is that Jhelai not here yet? That lazy scum-sucking dog had better be here soon or I'll-"

Craddock's face turned a bright red, and his face cracked into a snarl. "Argh! Damned be his name! May all the evils of the Planes hound his footsteps..." A blistering stream of insults, threats, and speculation about Jhelai's family roots issued from Craddock's mouth.

"Ooooooh!" Morte clicked his teeth together as Craddock built up steam... I could almost hear him taking notes inside his skull.

I left Craddock to his woes and wandered about the market. Peddlers waved their wares, shoved them under my nose, and a couple of the more bitter ones made rude gestures when I walked away chewing on Gar-Bar.

Those that seemed kind enough to talk a bit were still unwilling to help with my errand, or were a bit touched in the head. One or two were stone deaf to my questions, and I had to leave.

More than one merchant seemed desperate for a sale, but my pouch was a bit too light to spend any more. More than once I had to sheepishly walk away after glancing politely at their wares.

Still, it was heartening to see life go on. Here the misery of the Hive was attenuated by the bright wares and the lively trades, muted by the boasts of the merchants and wry smiles of the customers.

I cast my gaze around the city then. Hundreds of buildings, dozens of alleys, and the only things that thrived were razorvine and rats. Where in the Hells was I going to find a gardener?

## Chapter 16

These things couldn't be good for my teeth.

My jaw was aching from chewing, and the sweetness of the Gar-Bar was beginning to get ever so slightly nauseating. The gummy, sticky wad was clinging to my molars like glue, tugging at them with each bite. I idly probed my teeth to see if they had been loosened. Yeah, this was going to be my last one.

I held up another piece, offering it to Morte, but he shook his head.

"So Morte, what's your story, anyway?" I asked as I chewed.

"Me?" he turned his head, blinking, "Well, let me boil it down for you: when you've been as dead as long as I have... without arms, legs, or anything else, you spend a lot of time thinking, y'know? I figure it's been a few hundred years since I got penned in the dead book, but time doesn't really tally up the way it used to..."

"Yeah, I can see what you mean," I unconsciously popped another piece in my mouth. Damn. Why did these things have to be so addictive? I felt my jaw pop uncomfortably as I bit into the piece, and my head was starting to ache.

"...without the mortality thing pressing down on you," Morte continued, "all the days and nights kind of blend together. So you think about this, and you think about that... and the most important piece of wisdom I've learned over the past hundred or so years is this: There's a lot more obscene gestures you can make with your eyes and your jaw than most people think."

I laughed, and the gummy wad of Gar-Bar went down the wrong tube. I hacked a bit, coughed, and spat the gunk at the boots of a pasty-faced old chap that looked a good deal like Dhall. His eyes narrowed into slits at me, but the fellow merely muttered something and went on his way.

"You've got to be kidding," I choked, still clearing my throat and wiping a few tears from my eyes.

"I'm serious! Without resorting to insults or taunting, you can really light a

bonfire under someone just with the right combination of eye movements and jaw clicking. Drives 'em barmy!"

I nudged a molar with my tongue. Yep, definitely loose, "You've certainly got a knack for pissing people off."

"Hey I don't need a lesson in eloquence from a guy who's been speaking in one-sentence bits this whole time," he smirked as I raised an eyebrow to that, "I'll tell ya what, if you ever get beheaded and your skin flayed from your skull, I'll show you how it's done. I've got some real gems, chief- they'd drive a deva to murder, they would."

"You must miss your body, though. I mean, being able to walk and breathe and stuff."

Morte cocked his head in the way he did to show he was shrugging, "Some people get all depressed about death- they haven't tried it, of course- well, I mean, you did chief, but you still got a pulse. But one thing they never seem to realize is how it changes your perspective on things; it really makes you take a second look at life, broaden your horizons."

Speaking of which, the gold-lit sky was just beginning to fade into the hints of dusky copper. Now and again the hot air was parted with a cool kiss of a breeze.

Morte continued to yammer on through the Hive. It made for oddly pleasant company, him with that wry, chittery voice of his. Annoying company, yes, but I was glad he had decided to tag along, though I wondered when we would be parting ways.

"For me, it's pretty much made me realize how many dead chits are in this berg and how few sharp-tongued men like myself there are to go around- you spin the wheel right, and your years of spending nights alone are over!"

"Ugh..." I scrubbed my hair with one hand, "Morte, you've got to be kidding me. For one thing I can't imagine the sheer awkward mechanics of it (and I really don't think I want to), but it seems kind of, well..."

"Well?' Well what?" he snapped.

"Kind of shallow."

"Shallow?" he gasped, and reeled back as if insulted, "I'm not shallow. I just don't get caught up in all that philosophy and belief and faith wash that every berk from Arborea to the Gray Waste rattle their jaws about. Who cares? The Planes are what they are, you're what you are (whatever that is), and if it changes, fine, but things aren't bad the way they are- and I should know."

"I'm sure you do," I said dryly.

"Go on, then! Ask me some questions about the Planes, or the chant, or the people, or the cultures. When you end up like me- without eyelids, that is- you end up seeing a lot of things, and I can tell you almost everything you need to know."

"Until you spot the next harlot on the street, that is."

"Harlot? Where?!" he chirped, looking around for a moment. He then turned, cocked his head, and looked at me through the corner of his eye with a grin, "Just kiddin.' Seriously, though, it's like this: We're in this together, chief. Until this is over, I stick like your leg."

Cheered after being given the opportunity to do what he does best, Morte continued to chatter on as I listened. He spoke of races with thirteen different genders and the hundreds of ways that they copulated, of snake-women with no less than three rows of breasts, of religions in which the Goddess of Love slew her enemies by a sensual, mind-shattering dance. I was beginning to detect a pattern here.

Yet with all his experience, Morte couldn't say where we might find the nearest gardener. "Maybe in the Clerk's Ward," he said, "but not in this dump. I usually don't travel in such lowbrow circles as this."

As I've begun to learn, the Hive dwellers themselves were of little help. Most mumbled and went their own way, too busy with their sleazy, broken lives to help a stranger. Most laughed in my face at the mention of a gardener, but a Dabus seemed to consider that there might be one such person in the Southeast portion of the Hive.

Hoping to get some better directions, I tried talking to an elderly woman as I meandered towards where the Dabus showed me. "Excuse me, but I have

some questions that I...". She interrupted me with a curt "Hmph!"

"Excuse me?"

"I'll bet ye've got all *sorts* o' barmy questions! (*She mimics my heroic stance*) Greetin's, I have some questions... can ye tell me about this place? Who's the Lady o' Pain? I'm lookin' fer the magic Girdle of Swank Iron, have ye seen it? Do ye know where a portal ta the 2,817th Plane o' the Abyss might be? Do ye know where the Holy Flamin' Frost-Brand Gronk-Slayin' Vorpall Hammer o' Woundin' an' Returnin' an' Shootin'-Lightnin'-Out-Yer-Bum is? Sick of it, I am!"

I figured this conversation wasn't going anywhere, so I politely said goodbye and walked on to find someone more friendly. I had struck up a quick conversation with a Bariaur, a creature that was half-ram, half humanoid, when I noticed the glint of metal out of the corner of my eye.

"Oi, lads. Lookit wot we have 'ere."

The Bariaur slipped out of sight as I coughed awkwardly, I turned to face the thugs that had approached me. "I don't suppose you'd take a half-eaten sack of Gar-Bar root to leave us alone?"

The thug at the front of the line pulled his lips into snaggle-toothed, yellow grin. Another behind him licked the blade of his dagger.

I put my hand on my knife, "I guess not."

I stepped aside as the first thug attempted to stick me, and as he stumbled I brought my blade into the middle of his back. With a gurgle and a spurt of blood, he fell over as Morte tore out a second one's throat with his teeth.

He spat the skin and blood from his mouth, "Did you see that?" he cackled.

Witnessing the quick carnage, one of the gang fled on foot as I grabbed the last thief's gawking head with both hands. A tug and a twist, and he stopped struggling with an oddly satisfying crack. The rogue slumped bonelessly to the ground.

"Well that was easy," Morte whistled, "Who needs that fancy magic?"

I cleaned my knife on the clothing of one of the corpses, "They weren't pouring out of the alleys this time. Come on, let's leave these to the Collectors." I checked their pockets for whatever I could get. In a world where people survived by scavenging, I couldn't be faulted for taking my share.

Without the element of surprise these guys were pushovers. In the back of my mind though, there was little comfort. I had seen hints of things far more bizarre, more terrible than I could know. There were the footprints of powers that made the Hive dwellers look like ants. Even though I was a proficient fighter, my mind was keener by far, and I needed to hone that edge of mine to its sharpest.

That sharp mind of mine, for example, recalled quite readily the description of a beautiful, jet-haired girl in blue.

Amarysse was a lovely young woman dressed in a tight leather bodice and leggings of faded azure, the gray-blue of a dying sky. She smelled faintly of cheap perfume and her face, though pretty, was painted with garish make-up. She smiled coyly as she saw me. "Seeking some company, love?"

Morte wagged his tongue, "Whoa! Good taste, chief!"

"Are you, by any chance, Amarysse?"

She stared at me silently for a time, then spoke: "I was called that, once, long ago. Who are ye?"

"I was sent to find you by Nodd, your brother. He's worried about you, and hoped I could tell him how you were."

Her eyes widened, "N... Nodd? He's alive? Where? Why didn't he come to seek me out himself?"

I scrubbed the back of my hand uncomfortably. I suppose the truth couldn't hurt so much, "I think he's ashamed. He's a Collector, now, living in poverty in Ragpicker's Square. He doesn't seem quite... right. In the head, I mean."

She nodded, "Aye, he was a bit touched, even as a child, when his name was Thodus. Oh, I've missed him so! Ashamed, though? Ha!" her smile made her makeup-smeared face clearer, lovelier, "Me own work's no more proud! Ah,

well, at least I'm doin' well fer meself - fer a Hiver, at any rate, eh? I must visit him, soon." She looked at me closely for the first time since I had spoken. "Are ye a friend a' Nodd's, or...?"

I thought about it for a moment, "Of a sort, yes. Why?"

"Could ye..." She frowned, biting her lip, as if considering something. "Could ye give this to him?" She stepped close to me and offered a pouch of what looked to be about one hundred copper commons. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Morte's jaw drop.

I bowed my head, "Yes, I swear I'll get to him."

She handed me the pouch. "I thank ye. Go speak ta Nodd fer me, an' tell him how I worry about him so!"

Morte's stare was burning into the middle of my back as we continued down the street, "Please tell me we'll be buying some company with that."

"Not our money, Morte. Besides, a good deed is its own reward." He clicked his tongue, disappointed.

We circled around this portion of the Hive, cleaner than Ragpicker's square though not as lively as the other streets we'd been. The smell of cheap ale and pipe-smoke wafted out from some of the doors, and at every corner a couple of thugs stood, keeping an eye out for targets. At the north end of this street, though, a tree had been planted.

It was a sad, sickly thing, brown-leafed with branches curled in on itself. It grew fitfully in the shade, poisoned as it was breathing in the foul stench of Sigil.

There was a tired-looking, sorrowful old man gazing at that ash-dead tree in front of him. He was mumbling to himself and tapping his chin, as if trying to figure something out. Occasionally, he shook his head sadly.

"Greetings."

He seemed momentarily startled as I interrupted his train of thought. He spoke in a calm, unhurried tone, but one full of sadness. "Oh... greetings to you too, friend. How's this day find you?"



Leaving out the corpses I left on the curb, I smiled, "It finds me well."

He smiled back, but sorrow still lay in his eyes. "That's good, friend. Hope your good fortune continues." He seemed about to turn back to the tree.

"And how's this day find you?"

He shrugged slightly and proffered a bit of a smile. "Fortune finds me well, though I'm saddened just the same."

"Why's that?"

He patted the tree beside him. "It's the trees, here, in the Hive. They're dying, friend- and no one cares." Seeing the look on my face, he held his hands up, as if to silence me for a moment. "It may not matter to some, but it's important to me. I feel it's a shame to see the last tatters of life and beauty in this ward left, uncared for, to die. That is why they call me Mourns-for-Trees. Can you understand that, friend?"

I looked to the tree, "Yes... you're right, it's a sad thing."

He seemed surprised, and blurted out: "Really? Oh! I mean, wonderful! Perhaps you would..." He paused, and seemed suddenly suspicious. He recomposed himself, speaking in his usual, slow manner. "In any case, that's good. I suppose you 'have some questions' for me, now..."

He had been about to say something, "No, not just yet. What is it you were going to ask?"

For the first time, the man seemed genuinely happy. Beaming, he explained: "It's difficult for anything to survive here... just look around and you'll see what I mean, friend. I'm not sure if it's possible for the trees to thrive here, even if they somehow were to get enough light and clean water..."

"Go on..."

He nodded enthusiastically. "But if enough people care... really want them to live... I just know they'll survive! They'll turn green again, and flourish!"

It sounded asinine, "What? That makes no sense."

He smiled knowingly, shaking his head. "You're new here, I can see that now. You don't understand how things work in Sigil, friend. Belief is everything here... everything!"

I had to admit to myself I didn't know much about Sigil, and nodded, "You could be right."

"I am right, I'm certain of it." A sense of conviction surrounded him like an aura; he seemed so unlike the man I first spoke to. "That's all I'd ask of you, friend... just care for them, hope for their recovery. In time, should enough people want it, it will come to pass. Can you do that for me, friend?"

"Yes," I said, looking at the tree, focusing on its well-being, on it flourishing, "I'll help."

"Excellent, my friend, excellent! I thank you... you've given me back my confidence, my purpose. Perhaps I can find others like you, who'll listen... perhaps we'll make a difference. What about your companion, friend? Would you speak to him on my behalf?"

"Morte? What do you think?"

"Huh?" he blinked, "Oh, yeah, chief, sure- whatever you say."

"I'm serious, Morte. Can you make the effort?"

Morte looked at me for a while, silently, then nodded. "Yeah, I can. If it's that important to you, I'll do it."

"Thanks, Morte," With that, I turned back to Mourns-for-Trees, "Well, I suppose you're the closest thing to a gardener in the Hive, then, Mourns-for-Trees?"

He chuckled, "Well, my interest in the flora of the Hive isn't limited to removing the razorvine, if that's what you mean."

I fished the seed out of my pouch, "I need some herbs sprung from this seed. Can you help me?"

Mourns-for-Trees took the seed from me and held it up to his eye. "What an

odd seed... are those teeth along the edge? Barbs, perhaps... where did you come by it, friend?"

"Old Mebbeth, the midwife of the Square, needs some herbs sprung from that seed. Do you know where I could get some?"

"No..." Mourns-for-Trees continued to stare the seed in his hand. "This is the only seed of its kind I've ever seen... I... ah!" He winced, and a spot of blood glistened on his thumb. "The barbs on it are sharp, indeed. Perhaps you should hold it."

I took it back, "Yeah, I should've warned you. Sorry." I stared at it contemplatively, "So you can't help me, either?"

"Unless you can make that one grow, I cannot... again, I've never seen a seed of its like before, friend."

"If we wanted it to grow enough, is it possible to make it grow?"

Mourns-for-Trees looked at the seed and nodded. "Perhaps... if you cared enough to see it grow..."

I held it in my hands, then, focusing on it, willing it to grow. I silenced that nagging voice of skepticism in the back of my head, planting all my attention on the black-barbed seed I held gingerly in my fingers. I prodded it gently with my mind, neither forcing nor urging.

To my surprise, there was a crack and the seed split, twigs splitting from its surface like fingers. Instinctively, I dropped the seed, but the talon-like twigs wrapped around my wrist and wouldn't let go.

"What the hells?!"

Mourns-for-Trees and Morte both stared at the barbed branches wrapped around my wrist, stunned. "I... think the barbs on those new branches would be more than enough for what your friend needs."

I shook my arm, trying not to move my fingers since I was wary of the thorns, "I hope she can get this damn thing off of me. Until we meet again, Mourns. Do you happen to like Gar-Bar root?"

## Chapter 17

A citizen or two glanced at me as I walked past, one arm ensnared in a twisting cage of thorns. Most of the Hive Dwellers, however, passed me by with a jaded nonchalance from years of seeing every oddity the Planes spat into the city.

I held my arm gingerly as I entered the hut. Upon hearing me approach, Mebbeth turned as I entered and gave me a skeptical eye. The corners of her lips quirked in a whisper of a smile. "Yer path brings ye back here, does it, child...?"

I lifted my arm, "I returned with those herbs you wanted... now maybe you can get this damned bramble-patch off my wrist."

"Is that so?" Mebbeth glanced at the barbs that surrounded my wrist. "If so, think it off, then."

I did so, willing the mass to unravel. Again, I did so thinking gently, urging with will but soft on force.

Creaking and snapping, the black-barbed branches unraveled themselves from and formed into a tangled ball of brush and twigs; it looked like a nest of dead black snakes. Mebbeth snorted. "Think it into a picture frame or somesuch, somethin' with more structure and less angles."

I nodded, and focused again. The branched ball creaked, the twigs bending and twisting until the branches had bent themselves into a small picture frame, two handspans on a side. Almost unconsciously, I imagine-shaped the barbs to the back of the frame so it could be hung from the wall easily... and, as an afterthought, I moved the remaining barbs to the inside of the frame so it could be picked up by the edges.

I looked up and grinned, surprised and pleased with myself, "How's that?"

Mebbeth stared at the frame for a moment, then cackled. "Ha! Square enough, it is! Good work, child, good work." She picked up the frame and scrutinized it. "This'll do nicely."

"Is that all you wanted it for?" I had thought she would be making a potion

or witch's brew or somesuch. While it was an interesting exercise, it was somewhat less dramatic than I'd hoped.

"Aye, well, this is enough..." She sniffed. "Aye, but there was one thing I forgot to tell ye to fetch when ye left last time, and it'll take ye back to the merchant square it will... look for the cloth-seller, Giscorl. He has some rags of mine that he was supposed to wash, and long has it been since I first asked him to do it."

My eyebrow twitched, "You could have mentioned that before I left..."

Mebbeth snorted, "Aye, blame an old woman's failing memory, why don't ye?"

A sliver of golden amber light filtered through a small crevice in the roof. And Mebbeth looked up with those pale eyes of hers, "Mayhap ye should leave it for tomorrow. These streets aren't safe for the likes of ye at sundown, and I'd hate to have me first apprentice gutted and laid out in the street for the Collectors just after his first task."

I agreed reluctantly, "Could I rest here?"

She nodded, "Of course, child. I have a mess of blankets in the corner that would serve..."

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It happened again that night.

Intellectually, I knew what dreams were. They were pictures of the mind, landscapes surreal and terrible. They were the loves and hopes of the living, and the respite of the downtrodden. In some ways I knew the nature of dreams as one might know the nature of a far-off land by reading about it from a book. In other ways it was like describing the colors of a field of blossoms to the blind or a grand symphony to the deaf. The taste of a dream eluded me.

There was only that terrifying void, as if I perched on the precipice between reality and oblivion.

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In the morning I left the hut with a bit of gruel in my belly. Mebbeth was a fine healer, but a cook she wasn't. Still, I couldn't complain, but the Gatehouse served better.

The floorboards creaked beneath my boots as I thumped down them briskly, the cool morning air prickling at my scars. A familiar hunched figure was just walking past.

"Nodd!" I cried out. He turned around.

"Someone comes ta speaks ta Nodd, speaks ta Nodd, aye..." He suddenly broke into a fit of hacking coughs, then nodded to himself.

"I spoke to your sister, Amarysse..."

A smile broke on his face, "Ye did? Nodd's so happy, he is! How's Nodd's sister? Tell him of Amarysse, tell Nodd, please!" His excitement set off a long series of hacking coughs. When he could finally speak again, he asked: "Is Nodd's sister still pretty, so pretty?"

I winced inside. I couldn't lie to him; he'd be rushing to see her soon enough, "Yes, she is. She's a... prostitute... now, in the Hive. She is doing well, and is worried for you."

That smile never faltered, "Nodd's so pleased ta know, ta know his sister is all right!" He looked as if he was going to cry for a moment, then swallowed hard. "Anythin' more, anythin' more she said fer Nodd ta hears?"

Morte grunted as I untied the pouch from my belt, "Yes, she wanted you to have these copper commons. She will also visit you, as soon as she can find the time."

Nodd's head stopped nodding abruptly and his jaw dropped as I handed him the one hundred coins. Beneath the dirt-brown hood, his eyes gleamed with joy. "Such wonderful news, it is, good, wonderful news, aye! Nodd thanks ye, and thanks ye again, and thanks ye a thousand times more, aye!"

"Fare well, Nodd. See your sister soon." I walked off smiling.

"You're such a sap, chief."

I felt a little guilty biting into the pear I purchased at the marketplace. After all, Mebbeth was kind enough to put a little more meal on the stove for us, and was patient enough when Morte complained about the slimy texture and lack of flavor. Perhaps it was the way I clipped him across the jaw that mollified her.

Still, the crunch of the pear was refreshing, and the juice burst sweetly on my tongue. There was nothing supernatural about the flavor, but it was perhaps the finest pear I ever had. I dropped a few coins into the merchant's hands as I bought another couple for the road.

"They are my favorites," the old merchant chuckled, "So sweet! Reminds me of my youth."

The cloth-seller Mebbeth mentioned was a spindly-looking merchant with a brush of gray and red stubble across his chin. He wore several layers of brightly colored robes, so much so that he looked like a flag with arms and legs. He was shaking slightly as I watched.

"Greetings. Are you Giscorl?"

"I, Giscorl." He bowed and spread his trembling hands. As he did, I noticed his hands and forearms were a twisted mass of black scar tissue... as if they were once badly burned.

"Uh... what are you selling?"

"Giscorl buy cloth." Giscorl voice ticked like a clock, flat and measured.

"Giscorl sell cloth, wash cloth, mend cloth and..." He gestured at his layers of clothing with his shaking hands. "...wear cloth."

I shouldn't have winced. My own arms were far worse off, after all, "Uh... how did you hurt your hands?"

Giscorl didn't seem to hear me; he answered only with his spiel, delivered in the same flat monotone: "Giscorl buy cloth, sell cloth, wash cloth, mend cloth and..." He gestured again at his layers of clothing with his shaking hands. "...wear cloth."

"I asked: how did you hurt your hands?"

Giscorl's monotone broke. "Giscorl b-buy cloth, s-sell cloth, w-wash cloth, m-mend cloth, and..." He gestured at himself again, but his hands were shaking so badly that he couldn't even finish.

I tried not to stare, "Uh... never mind. Look, I'm here to pick up someone's wash... Mebbeth... the midwife... Ragpicker's Square?"

Giscorl blinked. "Wash cloth?"

"Yes, Mebbeth... Ragpicker's Square?"

"Eh... rag? Picker?" He tapped his fingers, as if counting something. "I know. I remember." He held up a trembling finger, as if telling me to wait.

He returned with a flattened mass of green rags, thin as paper, yet so stiff they looked like they could double as wooden boards. The rags were so caked with a greenish-lime starch that they looked like it would take years of soaking to relax them.

I rapped the cloth with a knuckle, and a hollow clack was the response, "Uh... how many times did you clean these?"

"Giscorl wash cloth, starch cloth every fifth-day, wash cloth, starch cloth every fifth-day." His eyes flickered. "Giscorl wash many years. Always starch cloth on fifth-day. Giscorl's ritual."

"But they're ruined."

"Wash cloth. Is Giscorl's ritual." His voice was flat, almost zombie-like. "Must starch cloth every fifth-day."

"What's the point of doing it every five days when they don't need... oh, never mind, just hand them over."

When I returned, Mebbeth seemed lost in twisting the black-branched picture frame I made for her... she was squaring the edges and snapping off some of the barbed seeds on the branches. She suddenly noticed me at the door and set down the frame. "Aye, child?"

"I brought your wash... I think Giscorl was a little heavy on the cleaning



ritual, though."

She took the stacks of starched-green rags from me, and she examined them critically. "At least they won't tear." She sighed. "Or bend."

"What was with that cloth-merchant, Giscorl? His hands were all scarred. and he seemed... slow." I tapped the side of my head.

Mebbeth was still turning the cloth over in her hands, tapping it with her finger. "Well, child, sometimes one burns with the Art, and other times, the Art burns ye."

"Is that what happened to him?"

Mebbeth clicked her tongue. "Mayhap. There's somes for who usin' the Art is like breathing. They strolls about with pointy hats and stinkweed pipes... then there's hedge-wizards n' plane-touched gypsies n' fortune-casters n' half-seers n' midwives who flicker with the Art... them have a harder time of it."

"And Giscorl was one of them?"

Mebbeth nodded. "Aye... so to speak. In some ways, he's no different now than he was. Addicted to habit and ritual, he was." She set down the stiff rags; they clunked as she placed them on the floor. "Aye, now, there's one last thing I need from ye, child..."

I bit off the smart comment I had lined up and schooled my voice so that I sounded serious. Morte's cheekiness was brushing off on me, "Of course. What do you need?"

"Only this: I need some inks fer scribin' some ingredients in one of me cookery books. I'll need ye to fetch some from one of the merchants -- Kossah-Jai, be her name."

I nodded, only heaving a sigh when I was out the door.

## Chapter 18

The corpses of my enemies lay splayed about my feet. Blood trickled from my fist, dripping freely from the tip of my dagger and my knuckles to splash and mingle in the upturned dust on the ground. The handle of my blade was still stable in my grip despite the slickness of the blood. I stepped over a corpse, his belly slit open so that his guts sloshed wetly onto the worn pavement.

I searched the bodies, picking out a few copper rings and bracelets no doubt lifted from their victims. I pocketed those, part of me glad that they would no longer harm another. A rag, smelling faintly of rancid oil, sufficed to clean my hands. I offered it to Morte who was probing a tooth with his tongue to see if it had loosened on the thugs' armor.

"Eh, no thanks, chief," he spat, "You never know where those things've been."

Whenever I was ambushed by a group of thugs, most of the Hive Dwellers walked a wide circle about me. One man, however, gazed admirably as I dispatched with the rogues. Every inch of the man's skin was covered in a web of black lines; it was as if some artist chose to accentuate every crease in his flesh with a quill pen. The overall effect was such that even when his face showed no expression, he appeared to be frowning.

I looked up to him, "Greetings."

"This one has a name: This one is called Porphiron." The man's voice was like a gong; as he spoke, the lines on his face bent and settled into a series of spherical patterns. "This one would know: why do you address this one?"

"Well, you were watching me. I guess I'm a bit curious."

"This one would have you know: This one cannot answer your questions." The lines on his face twisted into angles, then split into a mess of scribbles. "This one has only recently stepped foot in this place of walls."

"All right, then. Uh, but I have to ask you this: why do those lines upon your face... move?"

"The lines show anger: Do you take offense?" The lines slowly straightened, forming into gentle curves. "No offense was meant: Will you accept the many apologies of this one?"

I smiled softly. Part of me wished I could adjust my scars like that, "No offense taken... why are you angry?"

"This one tells of event recent: Did you know this one was beset by three?" he looked at the corpses in disgust, "The three demanded an item of this one. This one feared an attack: What does this one do? This one surrendered the item."

I nodded, aware of the burning wounds patching my body that had yet to heal, "Well, you were right to be afraid. If there were three, then they might have killed you had you not given up the item."

"This one has been misunderstood." The lines on his face became angled, then smoothed into curves again. "This one did not fear being killed: This one feared killing the three."

I raised an eyebrow, "Well... if you could have killed them, why did you let them rob you?"

"This one walks the path of a warrior: Many weapons have walked with this one. The fist, the blade, the stave, the hatchet, the smiter: These tools are all known to this one."

"That's not much of an explanation... again, if you're a warrior with that much training, why let them rob you?"

"This one is forbidden to attack." The lines rippled across his face as he spoke, "If this one had struck at the three in anger: The vow of non-violence would be unmade."

"Vow of non-violence? You're a warrior and a pacifist?"

Porphyron blinked, "This one is unfamiliar with your speech: What is this 'pas-ivisst?'"

"Never mind. Why did you train so much if you are not permitted to attack another?"

"This one is of the Order of Erit Agge: We await the Final Days where all will be called to battle. The training and skills of this one: They are to be kept silent until then."

"In the meantime, you will let yourself be robbed in the street, without defending yourself?"

Porphiron bowed his head, "This one will clarify: The item is of value. The discipline of the Erit Agge is of greater value."

"Since you won't fight, any chance you could talk these thieves into returning your item?"

He scowled, "This one addresses the three thieves: What happens? The requests of this one are met with scorn: The three will not return the item."

Despite Morte's grievances, I was feeling helpful, "I could go see if I could get the item back for you."

"This one must ask: Would you bring violence to the three that have robbed this one?"

I shrugged, sheathing my blade, "Well, if they aren't smart enough to hand it over when I ask, things could get ugly."

The lines on the man's face formed into a series of overlapping ellipses. "If that is the message they understand: Then that is how the message may be conveyed."

"All right then. What is this item you've lost?"

"The item is this: A rope of black and red prayer beads worn around the neck. The worth of these beads is not measured in copper: The worth of these beads is measured in faith."

"All right then. I'll see if I can find this necklace. Do you know where these three thugs might be?"

"This one knows where the angry words were traded and the item lost: By the bar that burns inside? The three were outside the place: Dressed in

black and red."

"Three robbers, dressed in red and black, outside a bar that burns on the inside? That can't be too hard to find. Farewell."

That particular errand would have to wait. While sticking a blade through the soft, tender parts of a thug had its simple, brutish effectiveness, I could tell I was getting quite close to learning how to shoot fire from my fingertips instead. Less messy, and more efficient. That is, if Mebbeth could start teaching me instead of using me as an errand boy.

Kossah-Jai was a toothless old crone who reeked of fish and brine. Spying my approach, she gave me a wide, pink smile. "Fish, my child? Fish-heads, mayhap?"

"Child? Hardly."

"Oh yes, yes! But a child ye are, to my years! Hee-hee, youngsters..." her giggle was pitched and squeaky.

I leaned forward with a calm smile, "I believe you're mistaken. Take a closer look."

She shuffles up to me; the fish-stink was nearly overpowering. The old woman squinted at my face first, frowning, and then into my eyes. Only then did she recoil in surprise: "Oh, my! How many years have those eyes seen?"

I shrugged, "I do not know... how many do you think?"

"Don't know, don't know. Too many, I'd say. But no matter!" She leaned close, to whisper in my ear. "It won't do to rattle the passers-by; let's keep it our little secret." She resumed her normal tone of voice. "So: fish, my child? Hee-hee!" She poked me in the belly.

The old woman jabbed firmly, and had a bony finger. I rubbed my stomach, "What are you offering, exactly?" I looked over her cart.

"Why, fish, my silly child! Fish of all sorts - and fish heads, for those too short of jink for the whole ones. Teeny-tiny fish-heads! Hee-hee!"

I decided to humor her. The woman sure loved her job, "Where do the fish

come from?"

"They're brought to Sigil from all over the Planes, my boy! Would ye like some? I sell only the heads, should ye be short on jink..."

"Mebbeth said you sell ink. She sent me to purchase some."

"Ink?" She chuckled. "Nay, sir, I sells no ink, I sells just fish..."

"Are you sure? Mebbeth... the midwife in Ragpicker's Square... mentioned you specifically."

"Heh! Well, Kossah-Jai was me Dam's name, and me Grandam's name, so could be any of us... yet they're both in the dead book, so only this Kossah-Jai matters. No idea what's she on about... a midwife in the Picker's Square, ye say?" She thought for a moment. "Don't know her, I don't."

I threw my hands in the air, "So... you don't have any ink? Well, I can't say that's much of a SURPRISE. I swear Mebbeth is having me run in circles-"

"Now hol' on... yer midwife friend's not all wrong. I know how ye can get ink... but it may not be the ink ye're lookin' for... the ink I'm thinkin' of bleeds from the gills of a brogota-fin, it does."

"This brogota-fin... it bleeds ink?"

She frowned. "Aye... thing is, that fish's not for eating, it's gots a horrible taste, scalds the tongue... you can asks Meir'am, she pitches her fish-sell down the street a southerly way." She cackled. "She might's have one o' them fish ye needs on her pole..."

Delightful.

A broad-shouldered woman was shuffling amongst the huge beams lying on the street as I walked past. She kicked at the beams with iron-shod boots; every once in a while, she bent down and wrenched a nail from one of the boards with her bare hands. She held each one up, appraising it, then dropped it into a leather sling bag.

Damn, this woman was tough as an old boot.

I whistled, impressed. Morte quirked an eye, then wagged his tongue as if anticipating what those tough, callused fingers could do.

Upon noticing me, the woman straightened up. She was smiling politely, but from her stance and the way her hand rested close to the hilt of her weapon, I could tell she was ready for trouble. She was built densely, and one of her eyes has a milky film over it. "That's close enough there, cutter... what do ye need from me?"

"Er, I'm sorry. I just noticed you ripping out those nails. That's pretty impressive."

She pulled three nails from her sling bag, tossing them spinning into the air and catching them in her palm. "Aye. Iron Nalls, they call me." She dropped them back into the bag with a muffled clink.

I looked over the boards, riddled with rough holes. The wood inside many of them were still a pale yellow color, as if freshly revealed, "Why are you collecting the nails?"

"I sell 'em to a man, name a' Hamrys, in the Lower Ward. Maker of coffins, he is."

"Tell me more of this Hamrys."

"There's not much to say... he's a bit chatty -- he'll rattle his bone-box 'til ye're barmy, if ye let him."

I glanced at Morte, "I think I know what you mean."

"That's harsh, chief. "

She smiled, "Aye. He's a fair bargainer, though. He needs the nails, I need the jink, an' that's about as far as it goes."

"Where's the Lower Ward? I've been wandering around the Hive for a couple of days and I'd like to explore a bit."

Iron Nalls pursed her lips, "Eh... I used to know the way, I did, but the dabus have changed the streets 'round again. Don't know how to get there, now -- I'll need to chart a new path -- but I figure the dabus'll straighten things out

eventually."

"Does anyone else here scavenge nails?"

She grinned and shook her head. "No one was clever enough or had the will to do it before me, an' I've shoved off anyone who's tried to jump me claim since." She patted the long-bladed dagger hanging at her side lovingly.

"Your 'claim?'"

"Aye, that's what I call it! Honest labor's hard to come by in the Hive, an' I'm not about to let some soddin' piker peel me of me work. I've sent more than one berk runnin' an' howlin', holdin' their guts in... or off with the Collectors, if they were unlucky." Her dead eye gleamed maliciously. "The Hive knows this spot is Iron Nalls', it does."

With the glut of streetwalkers and thieves throughout the Hive, you really had to respect someone who did good, honest labor. In the back of my mind, though, I didn't think she could turn a trick if she tried, unless she was planning on beating the poor sod and robbing him after. She was rather blocky for a woman.

I had gotten so used to scars and wounds by now, however, that my tongue slipped carelessly, "Is that how your eye was ruined?"

Nalls' face turned hard. "None a' yer business, berk. Why? Would ye like a matchin' wound for yer collection?"

I smiled, "No, that particular one's not quite 'me.'"

She laughed heartily. "Aye, an' I don't think ye have much room for another scar, besides!"

"True enough, Iron Nalls. Well I'm on an errand, so it's been fine meeting you. "

When I rounded the corner, the faint, oceany smell of fish greeted me. The cloying scent stung sharply against the dry, dusty air of the marketplace. An old woman stood silently by the wall, staring off into the distance. She seemed to be unconcerned with the flow of traffic around her, and clutched a wooden pole from which dozens of small fish dangled.



"Hello."

"Oh... 'lo, sir." She squinted at me for a moment, trying to discern my identity. For a merchant, she seemed unusually unconcerned about buyers. "Oh my! 'Ere I was, thinkin' ye one o' me regular customers." She proffered her fish-pole. "Tuna, sir? Mackerel? Sea cucumber?"

"Sea cucumber?' Aww, now you're just making that up," Morte eyed the pole.

I waved away a little brown squiggly thing, moist and shaped like a large, lumpy black pickle, "No fish, thanks. I had some questions..."

"Hrmm..." Her mouth pressed down into a tight-lipped frown, and she stared off over my shoulder.

I turned around to look at what she was staring at. I could see nothing of interest behind me. As I turned back to the old woman, I caught her looking at me... she looked away quickly, resuming her staring off into the distance once more, as if gazing into the past.

"What? Do I look familiar to you?"

"I doubt she'd miss a tall, gray-skinned berk scarred up and ugly as sin."

"Goodness, no!" She paused for a moment. "Aye, ye do."

"Have you seen me before, then?" I couldn't keep the urgency from my voice. A link to my past, any past, would be rare indeed. I had been wandering this huge city for a couple good days now and to find someone that recognized me, even if it was an addled memory, excited me. Such luck!

Her words were cautious, "I think... ye, or a man with yer very likeness, sir. T'was so long ago."

"Tell me..."

"Well, sir, ye see... me sight's not so good now, t'wasn't back then, neither. But I thought I saw ye walkin' past with a small group trailin' along behind ye."

"What did these people look like?"

"It's hard to say, sir... t'was so long ago, and ye walked by so quick-like. But I remember, now, the way ye held yer head up... there was a woman followin' ya, tryin' to stop ye. To get ye to turn around, speak to her... but ye pushed her away."

Deionarra... a chill breeze whisked across my chest, as if the name had caressed me. I had to work a bit of moisture in my mouth, "What happened then?"

"Beautiful woman, she was... looked so sad, so angry, all at once. She stood there for a moment, then followed along behind ye just the same, hustlin' to catch up."

A group? "You had said there was a group? Who else was there?"

She shrugged. "There was at least two other gentlemen with ye, sir... the only one I remember too clearly, though, was tall, thin. Reeked of bub, he did; I smelled him from across the way. Looked like he hadn't bathed in ages, too. He followed ye close, he did, an' never said a word. Acted like the woman wasn't even there, even when she bumped against him, tryin' to stop ye. That's all I remember, sir."

I dropped a handful of coins into the woman's palm, "Thank you. That was most informative."

She smiled, "Oh, my! Why, thank ye, sir, most kindly. May the Lady's shadow pass ye over."

"Now, have you heard of a Brogota-fin? I was told it bleeds ink from its gills."

She blinked, then nodded. "Aye, that fish... that fish is a strange one, it is. Not many have heard of it and less'd want to eat it... difficult to kill, and even in death, it still seems to live. Not many want to latch their teeth around somethin' that still writhes."

"Do you have one?"

"Aye... but the ink, ye'll need somethin' to carry it in. Have ye a bowl or cup,

perchance?"

My hands still searched my belt, even though I knew I had nothing, "Great... I'll go look for one, then I'll be back."

A quick trip to one of the merchants at the marketplace got me what I needed. The young lady didn't ask for coin: the battered tankard wasn't something she could sell. It was covered in dents, and the handle looked like it was about to fall off.

"Uh... this looks like it was used on someone's skull." She just smiled slightly.

Meir'am nodded as I presented the sorry mug and plucked a fish from her pole... it twitched as she grabbed it, then started lashing about as she began to twist it like a rag. She wrung it until bluish-black ichor began to trickle from the fish's gills. When your tankard was almost full, she relaxed her grip and threw the twitching fish into a sack at her side.

I smiled, "Thanks, Meir'am. Good business to you."

"Aye, ye as well."

As I turned, I bumped into a man in long black robes and a pale face. I tensed instinctively. He looked to be one of the same people in the Mortuary, a Dustman, but unlike them, this man looked confused and was glancing about. When he spotted me, he raised his hand to attract my attention.

Well, as long as he couldn't call the Mortuary guards on me, I should be fine.

"Can I help you?"

The man seemed relieved that I was speaking to him. He bowed slightly. "Thank you for hearing me, traveler. I am known as Ash-Mantle, one of the Dustmen sect. I was wondering if you could direct me... I don't know the area very well, and I'm looking for a certain establishment, a bar, that those of my sect frequent. Do you know of such a place?"

I raised an eyebrow, "'Sect'? Don't you mean 'faction'?"

The Dustman nodded. "Well, yes, faction, I meant faction... sect, faction,

they are much the same thing, really... do you happen to know of this bar that my faction frequents?"

I had a hunch this fellow was hiding something, "Well, I'm afraid I can't help you there. But I'm curious, could you answer some questions?"

He nodded. "Your request is reasonable."

"Can you tell me a little about the Dustmen?"

He paused for a moment... then nodded. "It would be my pleasure. We... the Dustmen... recognize this life for what it is: an opportunity to experience our passions before the next life. We sift through the dust of our past lives for meaning before the next."

I coughed, "Uh... that is an unusual view for a Dustman."

The man blinked. "Well... I am not a common Dustman."

I shifted my weight as the awkward silence hung between us. If I knew more about the Dustmen I could perhaps gauge what was wrong, but until then I had best leave it alone, "Well, perhaps I should be going then."

The Dustman nodded and gave a final bow. "Thank you for your time."

I was about to turn away, when I suddenly had a feeling that something was amiss. Suspicious, I glanced at Ash-Mantle again, just in time to see him tucking something into his sleeves... it looked like something of mine.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?!"

The man looked at me innocently, but I saw him tense up. "I'm sorry?"

I snarled, "You're no Dustman. You're a pickpocket."

His face was calm, expertly placid. For a moment he looked like he was about to respond with a denial, but quick as a whip he leapt and took off running.

"Hey! Get back here, you rat!"

## Interlude

"And thus did the Nameless One give chase. His quarry-" Oudilin coughs, clearing his throat as another tavern wench takes his cup away to refill. "A moment, if you please," he gestures to the crowd, and they part as he steps down, "The Golden Gates beckon."

You hide a smile with your mug. You had heard many a bard in your time, and few needed to pass the 'Golden Gates' so soon, as Oudilin said. Quite unprofessional. Then again, downing five ales would do the trick for anybody, even a Deva. It also answers some questions about the workings of an angel's body.

The crowd murmurs as he leaves, discussing the journal brought to life in an angel's words. Looking around, you find to your surprise that the odd smattering had grown considerably. The tavern had slowly filled over the telling, and few had left in the meantime. Each stool and chair had been filled, certainly not enough for the growing line of customers who found themselves having to sit on the edges of tables or lean against the walls.

The bowl of salted fire crisps you had been nibbling on had helped to work up a good thirst. Alone, they were mildly spicy, but a good handful of them left tongue and lips searing. The nip of sea salt added a sharp contrast that most found mildly addicting, and Shara Six-Blades is quickly replacing the bowls across the bar and ordering more to be placed on the tables.

The cambion crouched on the floor and chained at the neck merely scowls and polishes his mug. It looks to be the same one he was working when you first entered. If he doesn't stop soon, he would be taking off he finish.

You find your throat aching for a drink, and your mouth watering for another crisp. Ah, such a clever trap!

Shara Six-Blades is quick to pour you a glass of the hevala nectar you gesture to. Well watered, of course: the stuff was tooth-achingly sweet and thick otherwise, fit only for children who had a neverending hunger for sugar. The stuff is soothing on your tongue, sweet with a flavor reminiscent of summer peaches and blueberries, freshly plucked and still damp with the morning dew.

You pop a crisp in your mouth.

"Fascinating tale, truly fascinating. Though, of course, some parts must certainly have been woefully embellished," a strong, stern voice mutters next to you.

You look up to a face framed in a spiked red helmet and a body in matching armor, as scarlet as a sinner's blood. He is fresh-faced and smooth-skinned, either a highly competent fighter to be so unmarred or a new recruit. "The Harmonium," he continues, "sends its regular patrols through the Hive. So many gangs of cutthroats and thieves- and in broad daylight! Impossible."

The woman in worn leather armor and dust-covered rags, Scii-tavakis, smiles over her mug. It is a toothy, unloving grin, "Oh? And I suppose you're here to keep the peace, aye?"

The Harmonium guard stands up proudly, "Aye. My officer had heard an unusual gathering here in the Hive, and I was diverted from my patrol to keep an eye on things."

The woman chuckles dryly, holding her body like steel even as she leans back. That spear in the crook of her arm seems as if it had seen plenty of use: the wood just past the obsidian spearpoint is stained a deep red, blackened with age. She is a coiled snake, ready to strike, "I have been in this unusual city for a while, Hardhead. The usual patrols in, say, the Clerk's Ward consists of three to five. Where are your companions, Hardhead?"

The young officer scowls and shifts uncomfortably, looking the warrior up and down as if considering whether he could arrest her, "I- believe they should be here any moment now."

The pale-faced Scales-of-Three stops counting the coins behind the bar and looks up, staring at the small crowd as if he may need to step in and mediate. As the young Harmonium guard relaxes, however, the Rilmani sets his wooden gaze back on his task.

"No need for that, Mikon," Shara Six-Blades says to the Harmonium guard, "You know I have little tolerance for violence, unless it suits me. I can put down any fight, near enough."

"Be... wary," Scales-of-Three intones in his hoary voice, "In a throng such as

this... balance... is in order." With that, he spoons a pile of coin into a small pouch and scribbles in a ledger, "Now we stand at the tip of a precipice, steep and high. Our foothold is slippery, and the fall would be fatal indeed. Balance..." he mutters.

Shara clicks her tongue, "The only balance I'm worried about is the precarious situation with the Black Knot Ale." She dangles a set of keys before Scales-of-Three, "Go to the warehouse and roll in four fresh barrels. I'd been saving that stash for next month's Festival of Serpents, but with this sort of business..."

The Rilmani blinks in his egg-shaped robe, "But- the ledgers-"

"The coin's still flowing," she snaps, "And at this rate we'll be down to the last dregs in half an hour. Now get going and bring another twelve tins of those crisps, as well."

As Scales-of-Three scurries off, Shara Six-Blades looks to you with a smile, "A good worker and steady accountant, but such a preachy fellow. I don't suppose you'd be thinking of lunch about now? Cook is going to have a hard night ahead of her, but we might as well keep bellies filled while throats are wet."

When Oudilin returns, a good-sized cut of venison is set before you, slathered with a steaming gray sauce and peppered with mushroom slices. A bit more rich than you are used to, but you had skipped breakfast in your haste to meet your old friend. The smell of spice and grease was alluring.

"Now," Oudilin's piercing voice cuts the chatter quickly, the sudden silence ringing like a brass gong, "As I was saying, the Nameless One's quarry, though a poor Dustman..."

## Chapter 19

Ash-Mantle may have been a sorry excuse for a Dustman, but he ran on his skinny little legs with the skill of an experienced thief. He dodged past Hive dwellers who didn't spare a second glance for a fleeing rogue, and bumped into a man carrying a basket of soft, purple fruit. Flinging the fellow behind him, Ash-Mantle spun nimbly on his feet and fled. The basket flew from the man's hands, scattering the soft pear-shaped bulbs across the ground.

They squelched underfoot, slippery as lard, and I nearly fell as I skidded forward.

"Morte!" I yelled, "Quick!"

"Chief?!" he cried back, and with one flailing hand I grabbed onto him by the jaw.

"KIEF?!"

I swung.

"AIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!"

Morte spun through the air as he flew, whirling like a pale white top as he spiraled towards the false Dustman...

And whizzed past his ear.

For a split-second my breath caught, until I heard a pitched, girlish scream. Ash-Mantle's hands flapped as he slapped at Morte, who now clung by his teeth to the man's rust-brown mane of hair. When he spun and tugged, Morte came free with a mouthful of stringy brown, flecked with bits of blood and flesh that had torn from the man's scalp.

"Give back what you stole!" I snarled, grabbing a fistful of his robes.

He looked at me calmly, as if about to comply, "With pleasure." With that, he slid my own dagger deep into my belly.

I looked down to the torn flesh and blood trickling around the wound. It hurt



like the nine hells, but a gut wound like this was a slow death if fatal, and with the right doctor it rarely was. I looked him in the eye as pure horror made his pupils shrink back.

I grunted as my hands wrapped around his skull, "That tickles."

With a quick twist and a satisfying snap, Ash-Mantle's scream cut off in his throat, the dying moan a mere whistle that echoed in his windpipe.

Morte cracked his jaw, "You're a real class act, chief."

"I'm really sorry, Morte," I looked over to the corpse, "It's just after all those thugs... no one should have to deal with this stuff. I'm sorry." The guy certainly didn't deserve to die, necessarily. I mean, all he did was steal from me. And stab me with my own dagger.

It was something I had to remember if I was to find my way in this world. Sometimes, it is true; one had to kill in order to survive. Death is a faculty just as true to life as breathing or eating. But when someone appeals to convenience rather than necessity... I stared at the corpse.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well. It's not like I use my noggin' for anything else," Morte muttered.

My stomach growled, "Come on, I'll buy you lunch."

A foul-looking man nearby was quick to notice he'd caught my attention; in moments he was upon me, hawking his 'wares.' He carried a long wooden pole; dozens of skinned and cooked rats dangled from it, swinging like plump, fleshy fruit. As he spoke, he gestured to them with a broad, filth-encrusted hand, smiling a yellowed, snaggle-toothed grin all the while. "Oye, cutter, 'ow ye doin' there? Wot sorta deeee-licious ratsies is ye interested in this fine day?"

"Oh by the Powers, chief. Why can't we ever go somewhere nice, huh? Like the Topless Dryad or Mammy Marm's House of Many Mams," his voice was jokingly cheerful, but there was still a bit of bitterness at our current poverty.

"I really don't think we have enough coin for those places, Morte," I sighed,

"When in Sigil-

I gave the man's wares another look.

Each rat had been skinned and gutted, their feet and tails removed; they dangled from the pole by hooks punched through their necks. As I examined the various manners in which they've been prepared, I noticed their heads were slightly misshapen -- a bulbous knot of bone protruded from each cranium, covered in whorls that gave them the appearance of brain tissue.

"Those are strange-looking rats."

"Ah, ye've got a keen eye there, cutter! All I sell is brain vermin, I do... I'm sure ye'll find they've got a much richer flavor than yer usual rat. Quite nice, really!" He proffered them to me once more, waving the pole before my face enticingly... the rats swayed to and fro, hooked like tiny sides of beef.

"Brain vermin?" Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

"Aye, cutter, brain vermin. Foul creatures, they are. Now, yer normal rats, they just eat stored goods an' multiply, spread disease an' all that... a nuisance, really, no more. Yer cranium rat, though -- brain vermin, wot I go after -- they're just trouble. When ye get more than a 'andful a' the little pikers together, they start to get smart on ye... sometimes real smart."

Those bony whorls caught my eye again, "They become more intelligent?"

"Sure as I'm standin' here before ye, they do! If I ran across any more than two score of 'em, I'd flee for me case like that..." He snapped his fingers, to emphasize the point. "...I would! Ye get that many of 'em in a pack, why... why, they gets smart as a man, they do!"

He leaned in close, "Here's my best advice for ye, cutter... if ye're bent on catchin' brain vermin, stick to small packs. A dozen or so, at most. But I'll tell ye..." He stepped close, his breath fetid in my face, and spoke in a hushed tone: "Ye run into more than that... more than a couple dozen... ye run like ye're in the shadow of the Lady!" He backed away from me again.

I stepped away as well, "Why? What is there to fear?"

"Sorcery, cutter... sorcery! Ye gets enough of those lil' fiends in a space, they

gain all sorts a' odd powers! Make a basher's brain pour out 'is ears, they will! Downright frightenin'... it's just wrong, I tell ye. That's why Sigil's so eager to be rid of 'em... the bounty, an' all."

The word was music to my ears, "Bounty? Someone pays for rat's tails?"

"That's right, cutter! There's a berk in the Office of Vermin an' Disease Control, name a' Lort, who pays a bounty on 'em. A copper a 'ead -- er, tail -- it is, ey. But they gotta be brain vermin, they do... not just ordinary rats."

"Tell me more about this Lort fellow."

"'Is name's Phineas. Phineas Lort. Think 'e was some sorta 'ighup, he was, put down by 'is rivals an' stuck 'ere in the arse-end a' Sigil. The berk sits in there alone all the night an day, it seems, waitin' fer folk to bring in tails an' payin' them the bounty. Ye know the best part? Poor sod must be allergic to rats, 'cause he's always got a 'uge rash goin'! Ho ho! Powers be praised I ain't that fella."

"Put down?" Any idea why that would happen?"

"Well, 'e's right chatty, 'e is -- 'e'll rattle 'is bone-box fer hours on just 'ow smart 'e is an' the like. Mayhap that's got somthin' to do with it." He shrugged.

I chuckled, "I think I can handle that."

"So," he grinned, "Think ye'll be willing to try a gool 'ol ratsie? They's fine eatin' they is!"

"I think I'd rather eat offal," Morte retched.

I winced. Perhaps Morte was right, "Er. Another time."

Creeden shrugged and went happily on his way."

"Don't think that a hot meal is gonna make us square, chief. I expect some prime attention from a gal later."

I dipped a hand into my pouch, gauging how much we had, "Well, I'm afraid it won't be Mammy Marm's, but I'll see what we can get."

Two steaming bowls of stewed offal later, we were headed to Mebbeth's to hopefully complete my training.

When I returned to the hut, Mebbeth was tugging at the mass of greenish-lime starched rags I had brought from Giscorl... she seemed to be purposely fraying the edges, as if to peel them apart somehow. When she heard me approach, she turned. "Aye, child?"

"Here's that ink you wanted."

Mebbeth took the tankard of ink from me, then sniffed it. "Prime ink, fresh it is, aye..." She nodded at me. "Ye've done well, child. All I've asked. Now, I ask ye again: after all ye've seen, do ye still want to learn the art?"

I smirked knowingly, "Yes. After all, the guiding goal of your errands was to test my persistence, was it not?"

Mebbeth smiled, then nodded. "Yes... mayhap, child, mayhap."

"And that's not all; you knew who I had to see to accomplish each errand, didn't you?"

Mebbeth nodded again, slower this time. "Mayhap, child, mayhap... iffen so, what did yer senses tell ye about them?"

I ticked off the points on my fingers, "Mourns-for-Trees showed me that my beliefs affect the world around me, Giscorl taught me that ritual is a wasted effort if the purpose of the ritual is ignored, Meir'am taught me that no matter how much I think I know, there is still much I can learn from another's eyes."

Mebbeth was silent for a moment, then she walked slowly over to me and touched me tenderly on the cheek. "Oh, child..." She sighed. "Ye will be a master sorcerer one day, ye will. Ye have the knowin' of it, yet... ye've come to Ol' Mebbeth for help, ye have. What could a midwife teach such a one?"

My hand was warm and gentle against her shoulder, "Much, Mebbeth. I want to learn all you have to teach."

"So ye'll walk the path then..." Mebbeth paused. "Well, first things firstly:

jest havin' the knack for the Art isn't enough. Ye need some means of givin' it focus: usually 'spells.' The spells are usually in a book. So the Art demands ye have a spell book or its like a-fore ye ken cast spells. Ken ye read?"

I shifted, "I think so."

"Then let's test it, ken ye read this?" Mebbeth drew forth a small tattered card... it looked like a recipe.

As I gazed on it, the writing on the recipe swam before my eyes, each symbol twisting out of focus whenever I tried to read it. Almost instinctively, I relaxed my eyes, allowing them to take in the page all at once... and the symbols suddenly bled together: the recipe listed measurements, ingredients... it appeared to be some minor divination.

I looked up to Mebbeth, "This is a minor divination, isn't it? It looks like it's a spell that allows the user to see the 'nature' of an item... to see whether it's enchanted or not."

Mebbeth's eyes widened and she took a step back, recoiling in fear. "Who are ye to test Ol' Mebbeth so?! Are ye some fiend?"

I stepped away from her, "No... well, not to my knowledge. What's wrong?"

"Well... not expectin' it, was I..." She nodded at the recipe, clutching her chest. She took a deep breath then plucked it out of my hand. "What ye see, it's written in the language of the Art. If ye're not a mageling yet, it should be all-a-swirl-jumble of mish-mash." She snapped her finger. "Yet, clear as crystal, ye pluck the sense of it right up. Mayhap ye tell Ol' Mebbeth why that is?"

That odd itch crawled along the inside of my skull again, "I think I may have known once, but forgot... seeing the symbols just jarred my memory."

"Or else a natural gift, ye may have... no matter, no matter, ye've just shaved seasons off of yer learning, ye have." Mebbeth harumphed. "An I'd been lookin' fer someone to handle the chores around here, I had..."

I grinned "If you need help with anything around here, you can still ask... it's the least I can do in exchange for you teaching me. Just, er... will I be going to the marketplace again?"

"No, no, don't worry yerself about that..." She frowned. "Well, ye ken read spells well enough, but spells are no good to ye without a book to put them in..."

"Do you have one?"

Mebbeth glanced around the hut, and then she caught sight of the black-barbed picture frame I made. She picked it up carefully and studied it. "This'll do."

"That thing? It's just a frame."

"Ah, but so are ye, child..." Still holding the frame, she picked up one of the starched rags I got from Giscorl. With a yank, she pulled off the greenish starched surface film; it fluttered in the air like a wispy bit of cloth. "Whatever Giscorl uses in the wash, it works better than curing, stretchin' and stonin' does on a normal rag. Can't afford parchment, I can't..."

"Parchment...?"

She took the starchy film and pulled it over the black-barbed frame, latching the rag's edges onto the hooks around the frame until it looked like a small greenish-black painter's canvas. "It's missin' something..."

"Well, it needs something painted on it."

She nodded. "Aye, or written on it..." Mebbeth took the tankard of ink I'd given her and set it down next to her. She dipped one of her fingernails into the tankard, then drew it out, mumbling to herself. Still mumbling to herself, Mebbeth began to scratch symbols onto the frame, one by one.

"All's done." Mebbeth stood, drying her ink-stained fingernail on her robe. She tilted her head, regarding the strange, framed page in front of her. "A page fer yer spell book, it is." She gestured towards me and I picked it up.

"Inside yer spell book are yer recipes... yer 'spells'... if you will. As long as they sit in the book, though, they're jist words." She tapped her head. "The Art demands ye pluck the magick out of the book and put them in yer attic... yer head, a-fore ye ken tap their power."

"Go on..."

"Ye put them in yer attic by studyin' 'em, memorizing them. Ye usually need ta rest first a-fore ye ken do this, though. Any questions?"

"No, Mebbeth."

"Oh, no questions, eh? Well now, ye should have questions! Ye know all's about how to memorize spells do ye? Yer a sharp one! Ye sure don't need any more of Mebbeth's words all-a-gobblin' up yer precious time... yer a master sorcerer already!"

I put my hands up defensively, "Forgive me, Mebbeth. I meant no questions on what you'd said. Please explain how to memorize spells."

"Hmmp. All right then. Here's the dark of how ye memorize the spells: Pick the spells ye want to stick in yer head from yer spell book a-fore ye goes to sleep. When ye wake in the morn, they'll be buzzin' in yer head like flies, ready ta be let out."

I ran my hand along the picture frame, "How many spells can I cast?"

"Ye ken cast only one, mayhap two spells a-fore needin' to rest again... as a tiny flitting mageling, there isn't much room in yer attic. So's use yer spells wisely until ye get wiser in the art. As yer power increases, ye'll get more room in yer attic for spells."

"All right... go on..."

"Ye ken only cast spells ye've memorized. So if ye want to use the Art to say, Mend somethin' twice, ye need to memorize the spell... how many times?"

"Twice."

Mebbeth nodded. "Aye, twice, right enough."

"How can I get more spells?"

Mebbeth shrugged. "Keep yer eyes and ears out for learnin' - even common folks might have some minor magicks to teach. There's also scrolls, recipes, books and even some stranger items that have spells inscribed on 'em. If ye

find one, just examine it close and copy it into yer book if ye want it. I ken also show ye more spells if ye return, especially when ye've a little more o' the planes in ye."

"I'd appreciate it. Thanks."

"A-fore ye go, child, ye'll need some magicks for ye to whet yer appetite..." Mebbeth rummaged in her robe, then pulled forth three small recipes, which she passed to me. "Ye should copy these into yer book, so they ken go into yer attic as soon as possible..."

"Thanks, Mebbeth."

"Wait... there's more..." Mebbeth fished a tiny bundle of black cloth from her apron and unrolled it, producing a pair of amber earrings. "These'll protect ye on yer travels, child... I no longer wear them meself, so go ahead an' take them."

"Thanks again..."

"All right child -- don't tarry here any longer. One such as ye has other ways to spend one's time rather than hang around Ol' Mebbeth."

I gave her a warm smile, "Now, come on, Mebbeth, you're not old."

The corners of her lips twitched into a smile, and she blushed pale, bringing her fingers to her lips "Pah, ye flatterer! Yer tongue is so lined with silver it'd shame a Baatezu! Get ye hince!"

I bowed to her, "Thanks for everything, Mebbeth."

"Pah! Ye ken thank me by not playin' the addle-cove with what've learned. The Art's damned many a fool who sought to bend it in ways the Art weren't meant to bend. Now get along with ye!"

"Farewell, Mebbeth."

"Well well, finally a fancy-pants mage, eh? Good for you, chief. Though honestly, I think we still need a bit more manpower. I think I feel a tooth coming loose."



I grunted in agreement, looking over the recipe cards. Hmm. Chromatic Orb? Blood Bridge? Identify? Sounded interesting, "We'll need to make a friend or two, Morte. It's time to go barhopping."

## Chapter 20

I had been wary of this corner of the Hive ever since I fled from the Mortuary.

I had remembered seeing a tavern here right outside the Mortuary, but the stylized skull that was the symbol of the Dustman faction had driven me away. But now that I needed a few more traveling companions either for a blade or for a hand to help drag my corpse off so that I could revive in safety, I was left with little choice.

After all, what were the Dustmen going to do? Kill me?

A zombie stood swaying not fifteen feet from the entrance. The filthy-looking corpse was in sad shape; its shoulders were slumped, and one of its legs was broken, causing it to lean to one side. Stains covered it from head to toe... judging from the smell and the texture, the stains ran from rotten fruit to mud and bird droppings. To add to the indignity, graffiti had been carved into its body, and several notices had been nailed into its chest, back, and head. An undead bulletin board.

I winced, "I thought I was in bad shape. Don't all those nails hurt?"

The corpse stood silent.

Despite the many stitches, the corpse's rotting skin was peeling in several places, revealing long stretches of muscle and bone. My guess was that the zombie was frequently used as target practice... the fruit and mud stains aside, some of the tears in the skin still had rocks and bits of glass lodged in them. One wicked-looking cobblestone was still embedded in the side of its head.

Might as well do a favor.

I grabbed hold of the cobblestone and pulled it out of the corpse's head. Traces of brain matter and rotting flesh slowly dripped from it... it looked like whatever was in its head turned to ooze long ago.

I looked the corpse over.

A number of the leaflets had been ruined by rain, but some of them were still legible.

*"To Those Hive Citizens Wishing Gainful Employ with the Most HONRIBLE and JENROUS Sigil Government: Inqwire Forthwith at Office of Vermin and Disease Control to help stem playge of brain ratz. BOUNTIEZ PAID! Copper Given for each rat tail brought. (Tails must be ginuine and from rat only. No cat, dog or fiend tail acceptd.) Office several streets SOUTH AND WEST of Mortuary Gate, in lower Hive. Ask for Official Inspector-in-Charge, the RESPECTED PHINEAS T. LORT, XXXIX."*

Hrmn. It was just as Creeden had mentioned.

Someone had posted a bill of fare for the "Gathering Dust Bar," but the bill of fare couldn't be read, as the words 'SMOLDERING CORPSE BAR' had been scrawled in charcoal over the bill.

"Smoldering Corpse Bar?" I muttered. Could it have been the bar where Porphiron had been mugged?

The zombie immediately jerked its left arm upwards and pointed far to the southeast. A moment later, the arm fell back to its side with a THUMP.

"Huh. It even gives directions."

"Reminds me of a job I once had." Morte seemed embarrassed. "Well, I mean... without the arms."

I chuckled and continued reading.

*"PUBLIC NOTICE: By the Order of the Judiciary Council and in Accordance with the Citizenry of Sigil, Let it be Known those Defacing a*

*Registered Servant of the Dustmen, either by Graffiti, Malicious Attack, or by Posting Notices, will constitute FELONY ASSAULT and the Perpetrator will be Answerable for the Vandalism of Said Servant." - By Order of The Hall of Speakers -*

*"WANTED: Able-bodied person willing to investigate a matter of the utmost importance to the Dustman cause. Will offer suitable compensation upon successful completion of said task. Interested parties inquire with Initiate Norochj, Gathering Dust Bar."*

"Looks to be good jobs, Morte."

"Yeah, ones that actually pay. You know, more than a nice stroking of your conscience," He tilted in the air, intrigued, "We could make a few hundred commons from that Dustie one... if you're barmy enough to deal with 'em, that is."

As an afterthought I glanced over the graffiti. It ran from obscenities about the Dustmen to slogans glorifying what appeared to be local gangs. One piece of graffiti caught my eye... someone had carved the name "Pharod" on the corpse's left arm, then slashed an "X" across it.

"Pharod?" I whispered.

As before, the zombie jerked its left arm upwards and pointed far to the west... and downwards. I waited, stunned, until the arm fell back to its side.

"He's... under Ragpickers square?" I didn't expect an answer, though a nod would've helped, "The guy must've burrowed deep in there. No wonder he's so damn hard to find.

The walls of the Mortuary were rust-red. It was the shade of metal aching with the weight of centuries, a body ever dying but never dead, ever rotting but never renewed. The sharp fumes of formaldehyde had been rich in the air, the floor speckled with blood and bodily fluids lazily wiped away, leaving a grotesque blush to the stone. The shelves and tools had been as dust-covered as the Faction's namesake.

Here though, the Dustman architecture, of shattered bricks stitched together with mortar, showed a new side to death. The floor was laid in a pattern of razor-sharp stones of a mourner's blue-gray veil. The tables and counters were dull in the pale light of the bar, polished as they were. Where

the Mortuary was the wet crimson slosh of gore on cold rusted slabs, the Gathering Dust Bar was the icy touch of the grave. The air was chill and dry, moreso than the Mortuary itself, if that was possible. Again that shiver crawled up my spine.

Perhaps I simply needed one of those thick gray robes.

The Dustmen here sat quietly at their tables. Those few that were talking hunched over their plain clay cups and muttered in hushed tones. For some reason the air seemed thicker, muting noises to a dull whisper. An enchantment, perhaps, to protect the peace and solitude of the bar patrons.

Much like in the Mortuary, zombies served the Dustmen here. With shuffling, awkward steps they meandered back and forth, laying down cups with fingers worn down to bone and dusting tables until they were spotless.

A spindle-thin man in dirty black robes sat at one table. His stiff black hair sprang forth from his skull like a crown of spikes, and his leper-white skin was drawn sharply across his skull. He was frowning into his drink and mumbling to himself.

Might as well start with him, "Greetings."

The Dustman looked up, blinked once, then looked me up and down, studying me. As he gave me the once-over, he took one of his spiked locks and pointed at himself with it. "Norochj. Initiate. Dustman. Guard."

I jerked a thumb towards the entrance, "I'm here about the posting outside."

The Dustman looked me up and down again. "Many troubles have I. Help can you. A mausoleum awakes, the dead walk, the dead disturbed, the Dustmen disturbed. Find out what disturbs the undead, and copper coins will I pay."

Anything that pays the bills. "Very well. Where is this mausoleum?"

Norochj nodded. "Mausoleum by Dustman memorial. Go north and west from black monument, go to arch and a semi-circle over your heart with this finger this make." He wiggled the index finger on his right hand. "To the mausoleum, go you will."

There was no rush. Curious as to what the Dustmen had on tap, I strode towards the bar. The zombie behind the counter lazily.

"Er. I'll have what's most popular here," I said.

"Anything alcoholic for me, thanks," if Morte had eyelids he would've winked at the corpse, "So where're you buried, beautiful?"

I rolled my eyes and sipped from the cup the zombie handed me. It was tea. Cold tea, weak and bitter as if drawn from the dregs of leaves that had been re-boiled every day for a week. The bitterness was dull like the edge of a worn dagger, but there was an unusual body to it that I couldn't quite place. I couldn't see myself taking a second sip.

"Excuse me, do you have any honey?" I asked.

"Shh. Chief, I might be able to get a little meat in motion here."

With a sigh I turned away, giving the brew another taste. Perhaps it'd grow on me.

A woman harrumphed beside me, "Looking for something with flavor in a Dustman's bar is like looking for a loophole in a baatezu's contract."

I looked over to see an elderly woman who, in turn, blinked and stared at me, "La, look who's come a-calling on Sere today... death's dearest son." She looked me up and down, then shook her head in disbelief. "By every Power and its mother, boy... what crypt did you crawl out of?"

I smirked, "Well, the crypt was losing its charm, so now I'm looking around for the right place to die. Know of anywhere?"

To my surprise, she barked a laugh that rattled my ears. "Ha! Not here... unless you want to die of boredom." She pointed to my cup then raised her own, "Three-Ashes Tea. Stuff calms the mind, helps in meditation. Me, I just like the taste."

"Is something wrong?"

Sere grimaced, "Tchhh. Someone pinch your sense and your sight, boy?" She

waved her hand around the bar. "Look around. What do your eyes tell you?"

I cocked my head, "A bunch of fun-loving Dustmen, drinking happily and conversing merrily, celebrating life to its fullest."

"You've got a clever tongue there, boy... mayhap your tongue is cleverer than you are?" Sere squinted at me, then snorted. "That'd explain the scars."

I looked her in the eye, ""But it doesn't explain why a Dustman is standing here ridiculing other Dustmen. Care to answer that one? Are you a Dustman?"

"A Dustman? I s'pose." Sere sniffed. "Tchhhh. I've seen enough sand pass through the hourglass while wearing these robes. This body's almost ready to pay the ferryman." She chuckled, but there wasn't much mirth in it.

"Are you afraid of dying?"

"Course I am, boy! Who isn't?" She frowned and glanced around. The words didn't prick any other Dustman's ears. Perhaps there was some sort of ward after all, "Well, except Dustman. They're not afraid because they've been swallowing so much of their own bat droppings over the decades they've blinded themselves into thinking that death is some kind of 'release.' Tccchhh."

"You don't sound much like a Dustman."

She shrugged. "I guess the Dustman robes don't fit me as well as they used to."

"So what sparked this crisis of faith?"

She shrugged. "Life, I s'pose. It... eh..." She frowned. "Ha! Never you mind. I won't bore you with the niggling details."

"I'd like to know, actually," I said with a smile.

"Oh, would you?" She looked at me skeptically. "Tchhhh. How old you take me for, boy?"

The wrinkles in her face ran deep, and her skin had grown pale and blotched with age, "Old."

She snorted. "Well, you're wrong. I'm really old. Now, I've spent most of my long years teaching Dustmen. I've seen many Dustmen whelps grow within our order, taught them the ways of the faction, kept the faith, preached the tenets of the faction..." She frowned. "...and so on and so on. No questions. No doubt. This life was merely an antechamber that led to the True Death."

"What happened?"

"Well... a half-month back, I went sick with the fever." She sighed. "I thought it was the end. It... eh, it rattled my cage."

"How?"

Her face became as stone. "There's something about having your faction members circle around your deathbed like a pack of pale-faced ghouls, nodding and agreeing that your suffering and dying is all for the best. 'Oh, Sere is so fortunate! She shall soon be relieved of the burden of life!' Burden of Life? That's when it struck me..."

She paused to take a sip from her cup. "There's something..." A queer expression came over her features. "...addled about not appreciating your life. The Dustmen keep saying that life is misery and suffering... is it? That we should be happy to pass on into oblivion... should we?" She shook her head. "Questions, questions... and precious few answers."

"It doesn't sound like you believe in the Dustmen philosophy anymore."

"I suppose I have got a swarm of doubts all buzzing in my skull." She rubbed her temples. "Hard to get them all to be quiet sometimes. They need to be fed some answers, and I haven't got them all worked out yet."

"What will you do?"

"To be square, boy, I don't know." Sere sighed. "That's the problem with doubt. I can't even trust that what I'm feeling is true, or if I'm scared of death only because of my brush with the fever, or even what I should do. Is this a passing thing? I don't know."

We stood there at the bar, silently contemplating. Part of me could accept something of the Dustmen philosophy. After all, it was part of what I was trying to understand about myself. But I still looked forward to the taste of another fire seed, felt good about making lives a little better for others. Life couldn't have been as bad as the Dustmen said.

"Sere," I said, breaking the silence, "if you had truly believed in the Dustman philosophy then your brush with the fever would not have left you with such doubts."

Sere stared at me, then nodded slowly. "Maybe so... maybe so." She frowned, her face wrinkling up in concentration. "I'll have to chew it over some more."

"You should. It's no small matter."

"La, now... enough of me rattling on about my woes!" Sere stared at my scars. "You look like you've shared a few handshakes with death yourself. Hasn't that changed your views somewhat? Doesn't it make you appreciate life a bit more?"

"Of course."

She nodded, taking another sip of her tea, "And well it should. Nothing comforting about death."

I smiled. Sere seemed to be a nice woman, and trustworthy. "Well, my brushes with death are a lot closer than those of other people. I can't seem to die... at least, as far as I know."

Sere blinked. "Yer rattling my coffin."

"It's true."

She shook her head, her voice dropping to a murmur. "Strange are the ways of the Planes, and I've seen too much to throw any tale out with the wash." She studied my face. "If it's true, why does this happen?"

"All I know is I woke up in the Mortuary with no memory and covered with enough wounds to kill me three times over."



"Now don't be saying that too loud." She glanced around. "Most peculiar. Never heard of anything like that. Shame about the memories."

"Do you have any idea why this happens?"

"Nay, not a one. Never knew anyone who death wouldn't take... until now."

I sighed. If a wizened Dustman couldn't help, I really wondered how a dirty old Collector like Pharod could. I took a sip of my tea and winced.

It really was quite horrible.

## Chapter 21

"I'm telling ya, chief. Mammy Marm's is the way to go. The streets changed last time I went there, but I'm sure we can dig a way if we work at it. Marm's got more mams than all the brothels in the city combined."

"I really don't see how that's numerically possible, Morte," I said, keeping an eye out for thugs. While my purse felt terribly empty, the job that Norochj handed me seemed too dangerous for just a mangled amnesiac and a yammering skull.

"Pft. I missed the old chief who only needed to flick a blade to get things done. Now it's all numbers and formulas and you poring over that damn picture frame."

"I got my guts spilled onto the street because all I could do was flick a knife."

"Aaah those are just details. You crawl back after a couple hours, anyway."

I stepped carefully in this corner of the Hive. At every corner there was an unwashed goon with a knife, dressed in patchwork leather and dented armor. Harlots walked the streets freely, a few chatting with thugs to proffer their services. Part of me pitied those women if this was what they had to

resort to. A smaller, more cautious part, though, was glad if the whores could help work off some extra energy from those footpads. The more sweat drenched in the sheets was less spilled gearing up to fight me.

And then I bumped into the gang I had been looking for.

It was led by one heavy-set thing swathed in rags, dyed in red and black. He looked like he was made almost purely of muscle, with broad shoulders and a thick, bullish neck. His scalp was speckled and dark by the beating rays of daylight so that his head looked like a large, brown egg. Flanked by two similarly-dressed members of his gang, he glowered as I approached.

I looked him up and down, a little worried. Dying again wasn't the worst part, but it would've made things quite inconvenient. "Greetings."

"An' how ken I help you then, guvner?" The man's face broke into a sneer, "Looks t'me ye needs a healer."

My fingers twitched, instinctively itching for my dagger, "You one of the men who robbed a monk in the Hive? Took his prayer bead necklace?"

His lips twisted and his nose wrinkled in a sneer, "Some sod wit lines scrawled all over 'is face? Claimed he coulda put us all in the dead book, yet let us bob 'im blind?" His thick lips loosened, and spread into a slow, toothless smile, "Never even heard of such a sod, I haven't."

The thug's companions snickered and stroked the knives at their belts.

He casually hefted the huge axe at his side. My mind raced, and quick as a flash I began to lie my way out of this with all the milk-toothed smoothness I had, "That is interesting. The rest of his order is looking for you, the brothers of Errit-Agge seem to know you quite well."

"Eh?" the man's sneer faded, "What're ye on about? Wot brothers? The sod was alone, he was."

I shook my head mournfully, "He's a member of a religious order, you fool. That 'necklace' you stole is their most holy relic. If it isn't returned, the rest of his order'll come looking for you... and they don't have any reservations about killing thieves."

The man's eyes widened, "Eh... now... we was just keepin' the relic for 'im." He reached into the fold of his robe and pulled forth the necklace, which he carefully laid in my open palm. "Here it is, no harm done, eh?"

It was the sting of bitterness of having had to deal with rogues like him that made me press on. After all, things were rolling quite smoothly, "I hope this is enough to call off the rest of his Order. Perhaps a donation to their cause is in order as well. It might help smooth things over and ward off any curses that might come your way."

"Curses?!" The man's eyes bulged as he made a semi-circle over his heart, "Eh, well, now, wouldn't want any o' that..." He reached into a purse at his belt, and handed over several copper coins. "Take it wit me blessing, guvner. Tell 'im no harm was meant."

I bowed my head politely, clasping my hands around the necklace as if in prayer, "Your donation is appreciated. Farewell."

Morte cackled once we were out of earshot, "Oh that was grand, chief! GRAND. I can't believe you milked those idiots out of their-"

"Shhh!" I hushed him. I looked around. While the gang wasn't close enough to hear, a few thugs looked up.

It was probably my imagination when I thought that bone seemed to flush the slightest shade of pink in mortification. "Oh... uh... Uh, sorry chief. That was pretty stupid, huh?"

I furrowed my eyebrows, "Yeah. Yeah it was."

I laid my hand on my belt casually, the metal hilt of my blade cold against my fingertips. This alley was seething with thieves, a cluster of three stood casually around each bend with gazes that weighed your strength as well as your coin. I gulped. Maybe bilking the guy out of his coin wasn't such a great idea after all.

We slipped out of sight of the gangs and hurried into the Smoldering Corpse Bar as quick as we could.

The slow beat of a drum and the whine of a strange brass flute greeted me as I entered. A mournful tune, coarse and grating on the ears.

It was thick and muggy inside, and the harsh miasma of ash and char thickened the air. The scent was heavy and hot, but my lungs quickly adjusted with each breath. In the center of the bar a series of grills gave off heat and light, flooding the room with an ember-bright orange glow. The steady pulse of light made the shadows twitch and dance in fickle against the few bar patrons here that slowly milled around, absorbed in their own business.

In one corner I spied a pair of fiends hissed over thick metal tankards and crunched down on raw, reddish meat. Bone snapped under their jaws and the stench of sulfur wafted not so subtly from them. Best not to think about what creature yielded that stringy gristle.

Writhing in the maw of a thousand lapping tongues of flame, a billowing creature twisted slowly above an iron grill upon the floor of the bar. It may have once been human, but now its skin was charred beyond recognition. Streams of fire formed a wreath around the creature's body, and the flames licked at the few remaining pockets of flesh, causing them to bubble and run like wax down the creature's skeletal frame.

The heat surrounding this... creature... was incredible. To my surprise, the iron grill the creature floated above had sagged and bent from the heat. At first, I thought the heat came from the grill... but now I realized it emanated from the creature. As I watched, flecks of ash drifted from the writhing corpse and floated slowly to the ceiling.

"Greetings...?"

The thing made no response. It writhed slowly within the flames -- it lived, but it didn't seem aware of anything other than the fire that surrounded it. Its skin was flame, its heart was flame, and I knew, within some shadowed corner of my memory, that this thing was dangerous.

Just past the entrance there was a woman with fading bruises on her face and arms and a look of despairing longing in her sunken eyes. She might have been pretty once, but those days were long ago. She turned slowly to face me. Life pours into her features, and the spark of sardonic light that danced in her eyes now made me wonder if my eyes were deceiving me. "Welcome to the Smoldering Corpse, scarred man. I am Drusilla. And you must be clueless. Don't ask me how I know that. It just shines off you."

I bit back a clever remark. Best to neither confirm nor deny my ignorance, "Who is that burning by the entryway?"

That despair I saw on her face before flitted across it again like a black-winged shadow before she mastered herself. "That's Ignus, one of the greatest wizards ever to come out of this slummy excuse for a cesspool. They caught him and they opened a channel to the plane of Fire through him, and now he's just a doorway for it, keepin' himself alive by force o' will alone. If someone could douse him for a few moments, it'd give him his life back again -- but they don't make enough water to do that."

She sighed, "Fellas eventually built a bar around him. Sods who like to see people in pain come here. Fiends like it. Folks who don't much care for bein' bothered come here too... the name keeps out most of the berks.""

"I don't suppose you could answer some questi-"

"Do I look like a tout?" she snapped, "Waitin' around just in case some scarred man walks into my favorite bar and starts asking 'is barmy questions. Do you annoy everyone you meet? What a fascinating life."

"Far more so than yours, I'd wager," I said dryly.

"Oh, is that so, aye?" her face twisted into a mask of anger, and heat filled her voice, "Have you ever been in love with a living flame? Have you ever wanted to vanish utterly in the arms of another, to lose yourself in the heat of passion? Your eyes tell me that you wish you had, but you've had no luck. Don't talk to me about fascinating. Scars ain't fascinating. Fights ain't fascinating. Tough ain't fascinating. YOU ain't fascinating."

I paused a moment after letting her finish. The silence sank in so that my next words, quiet and smooth, scraped through the air like a dull dagger against old skin, "Where should I start? I'm immortal, I lose my memory every time I die, I have a floating skull for a sidekick, I'm having experiences that would make most mortals scream their souls out through their eyes, and you're telling me that being in love with a fire is fascinating? That's not fascinating -- it's just crazy."

"I love you too, chief," Morte quipped.

Drusilla recoiled suddenly, and looked at me more closely. Excitement crept into her voice. "You're him, aren't you? You're him!"

I blinked owlishly, "What do you mean?"

"He said you'd come! He said you're the one who'll set him free! He spoke to me in a dream and told me that you'd come with an ocean of water to balance him, so he could burn across the planes! Free him! Please, save him!" Her voice became frantic and pleading.

I looked towards Ignus, as he writhed in the flames, reveled them, "What's your connection to him?"

Her voice practically throbbed with a deep ache, "I was Ignus' lover and he, my beloved. We both loved the flame, though he loved it more than I did me. And now he has become the flame -- and because I love him, I love the flame. But that's all done with now. Now I wait for him to douse himself. I sell what little I have just so I can be near him, so I can watch his beauty as he writhes in the heart of the fire."

I backed away. The thought of helping that- that thing unlocked a terror within me that I didn't know I had, "You're totally over the edge."

"He said you would save him," she pleaded, "You cannot escape that."

I left her where she stood and meandered to the other side of the bar. Two patrons stood in the shade of a metal pillar, its surface coarse and scratched. Black streaks seared into the dull bronze metal were themselves slashed with deep gouges, the wounds of many bar fights.

"That doesn't make sense," the woman protested, "I mean, the portals. The fact that the gods themselves fight over it. It's placement in--"

The man waved his hand dismissively, "You don't need to be a Bleaker to see how meaningless that all is. There are patterns, but no real designs. Live here for a few years and you'd see the same." The woman scoffed in response and looked up to me.

She had a far-off cast to her face. She was not exactly young, nor was she exactly old. Perhaps it was the expression of slight disbelief sketched across her features, one that said she didn't believe her senses. When she focused

on me, she spoke sharply, but not angrily, "Do you need something?"

"I apologize," I bowed my head slightly, "I couldn't help but overhear what you and your friend were discussing. It sounded interesting."

She pursed her lips, "He's not my friend, he's my cousin. He was just telling me that this isn't the center of the multiverse, despite it being located smack in the middle of the Outlands, despite it being the focal point of portals from all over the cosmos -- there isn't a known place with more -- despite all the quarreling gods do over it, despite the sheer variety and concentration of power that accumulates here. There is no place like this in the cosmos, and he's telling me it's nothing special? Ha!"

"That's an interesting perspective. Perhaps you both have elements of truth?"

She brushed the idea off with a wave of her hand, "Perhaps you're correct, but I find that such relativism is often beyond me. Either the place is important, or it is not. Paradox may fuel the planes, but there must be sense to it somehow."

The man shook his head, his hair beginning to surrender to age at the edges of his scalp. He spoke in a staccato voice, rapping out each word distinctly and clearly "Forgive her, cutter. My cousin," he stressed the word, as if to emphasize that he had no choice in his acquaintance, "has recently come here from her backwater prime world. My uncle, a renowned wizard, brought her here to expand her horizons. She labors under the delusion that this is the center of the multiverse, and she thinks it's somehow important. Since I've lived here my whole life, I know otherwise -- it's a place the powers and planeborn overlook, just as humans overlook the squirrels in their city parks. It's not important, and the sooner humans come to realize they're not important, the better off they'll be." He ran a hand through his thinning hair, "Cilaen Iron toes. Before you ask, I got the name because my idiot brother dropped a fifty-pound stone on my feet and crushed my toes. Now I have iron toes. All right?"

The woman raised an eyebrow and looked to me, "I'm Kiarus. Kiarus Thorntongue. I'm afraid I must endure Cilaen's presence because my uncle doesn't want me wandering the Hive on my own. He doesn't seem to think I'm competent, though he may be right. I don't know this city or this plane very well. I'm not from here. I'm from the Prime."

I blinked, "The Prime? What's that?"

She cocked her head and looked at me oddly, "The Prime Material Plane? The place where the belief the Outer Planes are shaped of is born? The world? Stars, moons, and so forth? Belief and reality? I sure hope you know what the Prime is, because it's an essential part of planar knowledge."

"Er- I knew that." I shifted my weight. By the looks in their eyes they weren't buying it. "What are you doing here then?"

Kiarus sighed, "Visiting. Expanding my horizons. The Prime is a fine place to be, but it's a little too... real, I suppose. My uncle gives each of his nieces and nephews a few years in the planes, and allows us to remain here if we so desire. I think I might so desire. I am fascinated and repelled. But then, I suppose that's the nature of the planes, isn't it?"

The man's stern gaze made me a bit uncomfortable, and after exchanging a few pleasantries we parted ways. My ignorance was a little more crippling than I expected. I had to learn a few things if I was to stay here.

A slightly stooped old man waved me over. A full grey beard and a lion's mane of grey hair framed his face, creased with the touch of time. He wore a couple of shoulder guards as armor, and he kept a helmet nearby. Wrinkled, pale fingers reached into a pouch of tobacco around his waist, pulling out a pinch of dried leaf that he added to his pipe. He looked pretty strong, but he was a little plump and also appeared to have some sort of breathing trouble. The old man puffed away as he spoke, his voice gruff, "Well, now, aren't you a sight, lad! Never have I seen so many scars blanketing a fella -- like a scar cloak ye're wearing! Where you been -- hanging out in a grain thresher?!" He laughed. "Oh, I'm just jesting with ye, lad, no offense meant and I hope no offense taken. I'm Ebb." He extended his hand.

I took it. He may have looked like nothing more than fat and gristle, but his grip was firm, his bones thick. "Greetings, Ebb."

"Now, I hereby tender my apologies for the unfair jesting, lad. Hope there's no hard feelings; can I buy you a tankard or two of something to smooth any ruffled feathers?"



"Why not?"

"That's the spirit, lad! Bide a moment." He rose to his feet and headed to the bar. After a moment, he returned to his seat with a pair of tankards. "Here you go, lad. Drink up!" He took a massive swallow from his own tankard and puffed on his pipe, "What can ol' Ebb do for you on this fine Sigil day?"

I downed a gulp, then coughed. The stuff was strong, and tasted like varnish. The aftertaste was oddly pleasant, however, a sweetness past the offensive bite. I coughed. "It's- ahem- quite..."

"Aye, that stuff's got a kick to it, it does. Ebb Creakknees, Third Measure of the Harmonium, now retired and being a tout with one's voice since I don't step as lightly as I might these past two or three decades!" He chuckled.

"Third Measure of the Harmonium?"

Ebb puffed up slightly in pride and a semi-stern look crossed his face. "Aye, Third Measure of the Harmonium..." He relaxed a little. "Though I haven't served a tour of duty in many a decade. Pushing a quill wasn't quite up my alley after all the fights and skirmishes I been in, so I just bide my time keeping tabs on things down here in the Hive and helping out a little where I can. An' you look like someone who might need a hand... are you in some kind of trouble, lad?"

I nodded. "A few troubles: I woke up in the Mortuary and seem to have forgotten who I am."

"Eh?" Ebb blinked, then frowned. "What was that you said, lad? That you woke up in the Mortuary..." Ebb studied me closely. "Oh now, did they mistake you for dead under all them scars mayhap?" Ebb chuckled. "Can't say I would have been any smarter..." He puffed his pipe. "'Specially not after a couple round o' these. Them Dusties..." He caught himself. "I mean, them Dustmen... Dusties being a rude term to refer to them pale-faced fellas, and I don't mean them too much disrespect... they have all the perceptions and friendliness of a gravestone sometimes, eh? Can't say I couldn't see them screwing that up, no, lad."

I looked around the bar. "Odd place, this."

He nodded, "Ye're in the Smoldering Corpse Bar, lad. Not a pretty place as

some, but it's got it's own homespun kind of charm."

I gagged down another mouthful. The stuff was beginning to grow on me. I gestured over to Ignus, "So what's his story?"

"Him? Oh, don't be fooled. He's no corpse, lad -- no deader him. Near as we can tell, ol' Ignus is still alive inside that little roastspit. Near as we can figure, anyway." Ebb wrinkled his nose. "He can smell damnably awful sometimes, too. Keeps me on the pipe to make sure it don't worm its way into my nose it does." He chuckled.

After browsing the crematorium at the Mortuary, it wasn't that tough getting used to Ignus, "How did he get there?"

Ebb took a smoke from his pipe for a moment, as if deciding how to phrase his comment. "Well, now lad, Ignus had a smattering of problems and some not-slight wizardly magicks ta boot, and seldom do the two mix well, if you understand me. He liked to..." Ebb puffed on his pipes, and smoke trailed up. "...well, he liked ta burn things, and he started torching places and people, and generally making a bunch of trouble."

"And?"

"Well, now most of this was going on in the Hive, and I'll be the first to admit that the Hive is not the first place the Harmonium goes to keep Sigil's law..." Ebb looked a little shame-faced. "A failing on our part, since it may be the place where our presence is most needed. So, by the Lady's reckoning, there was a little streetside justice in the wizardly community... a bunch of tea leaf readers, hedge wizards, and midwife witches got together and managed to weave a spell that was kind of poetic justice." Ebb gestured with his pipe at the figure. "So now he sits there and burns. He's still alive, which I don't think they counted on."

We spoke of many things then, the workings of the city, the Lady of Pain, of merchants and thieves (though sometimes the two were interchangeable). Ebb lectured gruffly about the anomalies of the planes, and the structure of the city.

"Whew. Let me wet my tongue." He took a pull from his tankard. "The city floats above an infinitely tall spire -- the Spire. It lies on its side like a discarded wagon wheel, but there's no spokes that connect it to the Spire.

It's divided into six wards, each of them with its own function. Right now, you're in the Hive. I think the purpose of the Hive is to be squalor to the rest of the city's grandeur!" He laughed. "Factions -- philosophical clubs, or gangs if you prefer -- divide up the running of the city between 'em."

I was nursing my third mug by then, "And you were in a faction?"

Ebb raised his hand as if to stop me and laughed slightly. "Oh, now, hold on, lad -- I'm no has-been faction member... they say, and they're right, that once ye're one of the Harmonium, ye're a Harmonium for life. We're the bloods that try and make sure Sigil stays outta trouble. No rocking the spire, no folks getting too over-enthusiastic about hurting each other, keeping the city down to a low roar. We try and keep the peace, lad, and mosttimes, we do a decent job."

He continued, "The city's called the crossroads of the planes and the City of Doors and the Cage. It's got portals to all o' creation, they say, and all manner of beasties come through here to trade, call kip, or hop from one place to another. Now, that's just the quick version, lad; you'll have to experience the place for yourself."

It was just a matter of time until his throat was dry and he slumped down, tired, "Whew! Some tout I am. Ach, can't fight, can barely fill the new bloods with the chant."

"Well, it has been a while. Perhaps another time--"

He shook his head, "Nay, ye have questions yet, I gather. Go talk to Candrian there, he's a good sod. Where I can tell ye about the ins and outs 'o Sigil, the man wears the planes themselves like a robe."

He gestured to a soft-looking man with gentle, far-staring eyes. He dressed in supple leather clothing, and carried various implements of use and destruction about his body: ropes, spikes, tinderboxes, and empty vials of air. He looked half-gone - literally. There was an insubstantiality to his existence, as if his essence had been partially leached away. He focused those eyes on me, and suddenly I found them gripping and determined. "Greetings to you, o seeker."

"Greetings," I said. I looked back at Ebb, who had slumped in his chair and was snoring softly.

Candrian carefully set down the mug he had been holding, and gave me all his attention. "I have seen the far reaches of the multiverse and returned to tell the tale. I have walked upon the bodies of dead gods and spun moonbeams in the Astral ahead of a thousand shrieking githyanki knights. I have passed the edges of existence and watched my essence shiver away before me. What is it I can do for you?"

I scrubbed a hand through my hair, "I'm afraid I've only been in the city, and I know little of its workings." I looked back at the woman across the room still arguing with her cousin, at Drusilla. Clueless? Not for much longer, I hoped.

"It is not merely Sigil, but all the planes that one must know of. Perhaps I have answers for you. Speak, and I shall tell you. I am Candrian Illborne, traveler, dreamer, talespinner, and so forth. At your service."

"I've heard you were a traveler. Tell me of the planes."

He shook his head and sighed wearily, "I am tired, seeker, so tired... I am fresh back from negation. I will answer what I can for you, but I cannot promise that you will find satisfaction in the answers I give. What would you know? Would you hear of the Outer Planes, the Prime Material, or the Inner Planes?"

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is true essence, seeker. The Inner Planes are matter, substance, true physicality. They are the building blocks of the multiverse, for it is from them that all belief in the elements springs. The Inner Planes filter through the Ethereal Plane - the plane of potential, some say, which forms the elements into the worlds of mortals. Once past the Ethereal Plane, one reaches the Prime Material, where exist all manner of mortals and monsters and myths and machines. It is there that belief is born, and there that the spirits that create the Outer Planes are born. When mortals die, they pass through the Astral Plane, a no-place that is thought and mental energy itself. It is in all things, and in none. It is paradox, among other things, and it filters spirits into the Great Ring. Do you comprehend so far?"

I nodded, drinking in his words as quick as I could. Faster than I did this ale,

at least. "Tell me of the Inner Planes."

He sighed, as if it reminded him of his bone-deep weariness. "Think of the Inner Planes as a globe. On the top pole, you have the Positive Material Plane. On the bottom, you have the Negative Material." He paused. "Remind me to tell you of the Negative." His eyes turn inward, to some private horror. "From the interaction between the two springs all of the urge for existence and non-existence, death and life, actuality and nothing. From them spring the basic elemental planes - like Fire, Water, Air, and Earth - the para-elemental planes that lie between the four basic elements, and the quasi-elemental planes that come from the interaction of the four elements with the Positive and Negative. The inner planes are the planes of matter and substance, which travel outward through the Ethereal to form the Prime Material."

"You mentioned negation?"

His eyes clouded over. "I went to the Inner Planes to discover my true essence. I made the mistake of visiting the Negative Material Plane in order to understand my body's urge to decay and the cycle of death in life. I thought myself protected against the ill effects of the plane with my magic, but I was wrong. The blackness of infinite nothing pressed upon me, and I was beset by shadows that sought to snuff out my very soul. I lost my way for a time - for an eternity - and nearly lost my existence. I could feel my essence falling away from me, and am even now half-gone. Never will I return."

I shuddered. His words had touched on that same void in me, that same jagged cut where something had been torn from my essence. "How did you survive?"

"How did I survive?" He smiled tightly. "With a piece of nothing that held back the nothing. Nothing can stop nothing, you know, and so I carried nothing in my hand to protect me. Do you plan to journey to the ultimate negation yourself? You have the smell of desperation about you, and so I make you this gift. Hold it in your hand when the shadows press in, and it should protect you and your friends somewhat, should they remain close to you. Heh." He passed me a small, black token that looked as if it had no dimensionality to it all.

"Thanks for nothing," I said with a grin.

He chuckled, "You're welcome. Now, as for the Prime Material... they are the worlds where mortal men are born. Planets, stars: the worlds of Krynn, Oerth, Khavala, Earendor. From these worlds men think and feel, love and hate. Their beliefs, good and evil, law and chaos, are the stuff that flow through the Astral and form the Outer Planes, just as the Inner Planes provide the substance for the Prime. You want to know of the Prime, visit it. The boundless worlds of that plane have an infinite variety, as do the planes, but I cannot encapsulate them as I have here. Suffice it to say they are the birth of the Outer Planes, the children of the Inner, and they hold limitless potential within their boundaries."

"And the outer?"

"Where should I start? Do you know the cardinal rules of the planes, on which all others are based? Do you know about the composition of the Outer Planes? Do you know of the Great Ring, and its divisions in our hearts? Do you know of the individual planes? Each of these leads to the next, and so it is best to start from the beginning."

I set my empty mug down, "Tell me the cardinal rules."

"There are three rules you must remember. The first is the Rule of Threes: If you see two things, look for a third. The second rule is called The Center of the Multiverse: The cosmos is so big, seeker, that anywhere you stand may as well be considered the center. Some would call Sigil the center, and they're right - but they would also be right to call it a spot in the endless voids of Gehenna. There is no edge to the multiverse, and so there is no center. The third rule is the Unity of Rings: All things come in rings - rings have no beginning and no end: The Great Ring of the Outer Planes, the ring of Sigil's form, the ring of the elemental planes - even the powers think in rings, circles upon circles upon circles."

He formed his fingers into rings, gesturing to push his point. Suddenly aware of the relative silence, the lack of chattering bone, I looked around for Morte. He was nowhere to be found.

I merely leaned back and tapped my heel nervously as Candrian continued.

"The Outer Planes are created of and by belief and thought and faith. They take their imagined form from the Prime Material Plane, shaped into forms

that stagger the imagination, built by the accumulation of belief. Belief creates the planes. Belief is power here. Change belief, and you can change the nature of reality. The creatures that are born here - the planeborn, like the fiends and celestials - are truly borne of the thoughts and concepts of mortals. They each express some sort of ideal, and the more powerful the ideal, the more powerful the being - thus, the being that symbolizes love is one of the strongest of all."

"That's why the powers - gods, some call them - live out here. This is where all the faith in them comes - this is where they are at their most pure and most strong. Their realms are extensions of their very beings, manifestations of their godly essence, all of it informed by belief. It is a place where moral alignment is arranged and interacts, rather than matter. At the heart of the Outer Planes is the Outlands, the realm of absolute neutrality. Probably the best place for a body to visit in the Outer Planes, outside of Sigil, if you don't want to have a plane's morality forced into your heart. Everything balances out in the Outlands - as it should be, for the plane that sits at the center of the Outer Planes. Powers' realms are scattered about here, and there are handfuls of 'gate towns' that open into the rest of the Outer Planes. The gate towns usually mirror the philosophy of the plane their gates open on to - and if the balance of belief isn't kept in the town, the town slips into the nearby plane. It's a bad situation for everyone, because few of the folks in the towns really want that change. Encircling the Outlands is the Great Ring: where good and evil, law and chaos stand in opposition instead of water and fire, earth and air."

Candrian's fingers formed a steeple, "And at the center of the Outlands is an infinitely tall spire, and atop that great spike floats Sigil, where we are now."

I chuckled, "You seem very well-traveled, then."

He smiled, "I have mapped many of the portals here, and have traveled through most. If you ever need a guide, you know where to look."

I blinked, "I don't, but someone else does."

Candrian raised an eyebrow, "Oh?"

"I met a woman named Ingress with very bad teeth. She said she had come through a portal from some world that was opened by a tune hummed near two crossed trees. Can you get her home?"

He paused briefly, thinking. "I know the portal of which you speak, though I have not traveled it these thirty years gone. I will take her home, seeker. Go tell her to await my arrival, then meet me back here, and I will tell you if I was successful or not."

I nodded, and strode to the door. It didn't look like Morte was in the bar, and I needed his help to find Ingress, especially if she was going to run like a madwoman as before.

The door suddenly flung open, and a familiar ball of bone and teeth barreled in, "Chief, we've got a problem."

"Morte! Where were you? Candrian was just telling me about-"

"Yeah, I've heard it all before. Great Ring, Law of Three, very nice," his eyes rolled, glancing around nervously."

"No, Candrian's a traveler. If we can find Ingress-"

He cut me off, "Look, there's trouble. I went out to look for a mammy bar..." I buried my face in my hands and groaned as he talked, "...and was scoping out some of the nicer harlots about, and... well. Looks like that big ugly guy you tricked figured it out somehow and wants revenge. He's gathered together a load of the local gangs: the Satch Uglies, the Four-Fingered Hand, the Red-Ebon Fangs... I think they're going to rip you apart, chief."

"...Crap."

## Chapter 22

"This is your fault, you know that?" Morte scowled, clicking his jaw.

"Me?! But- you- Morte! You were the one who was practically cheering so the whole block could hear!"



"Tch, hey. I told you we shouldn't try tricking the big ugly armed gentleman. Just ask politely, you know. No need to lie like a street harlot at the sight of a silver piece. Speaking of which-

I grabbed him before he could make an exit, "Oh no. You got us into this."

Morte clicked his teeth, "Now's not the time to point fingers, chief. I mean, you've got me at a disadvantage."

I scoffed, "We aren't leaving until this dies down. We'll just have to hole up here for a while. I'm not going to risk you getting smashed against a wall."

"Fine," he said. I let him go, and he calmly floated alongside me, "But we're going to be in here a while. I mean, if you just went out there and let them take a few pieces out of you, they might calm down and forget this ever happened."

I tried keep from punching him, "That could work, but I don't know if I could still heal up if they tore me limb from limb."

"There's always a first time, isn't it?"

I grumbled and made my way to the back of the bar, leaning against a support pillar.

At my side was a man, standing stock still. He wasn't moving a muscle. On closer examination, it appeared that he wasn't even breathing -- just standing. His eye sockets were empty holes in his face. Contained within their bounds was a flat gray light that seemed to dance with possibility. Looking into the sockets, the eerie, empty feeling of a limitless void shivered through me, as if I had gazed into a sliver of eternity. The head slowly swiveled toward me (I noticed that no muscles appeared to move under his skin as he turned), and he spoke in a pure, bell-like tone: "Well met, wanderer. You have forgotten again, haven't you?"

I blinked "Do you know me, stranger?"

As he opened his mouth, I got that feeling of eternity again -- inside his mouth, I could see no tongue, no teeth. It was almost as if this man were a shell surrounding an illimitable expanse. "I have spoken with you before,

and always you forget. Your endless quest to discover yourself ends always in your amnesia. You draw close to the truth and recoil. Let us hope that you have the strength to endure your existence."

I stood up eagerly now. Finally, someone who could give me some answers! "What do you know of me? How do you know this?"

He waved one hand, flicking his fingers delicately, "I know that you, like a fly, rise up from the wreckage of your old shell, buzz about for a time, and curl up and die at the window of truth. You bumble about the pane, seeking the light without any plan to your actions, and fall exhausted when you fail. You alight on others to feed from them for a time, and move on with no regard to them. I have watched you come here and listened to your words, and watched you move away no wiser. Will you learn from your mistakes, seeker?"

I bit my lip, trying to tolerate his haughty tone, "Who are you?"

"I am O." For some reason, when he spoke his name, it sounded like he was speaking of much more than a single letter -- as if the speaking of his name contained untold possibilities and nuances. No human tongue could ever create such a sound.

I swayed a little in wonder, "What sort of a name is that?"

"It is my name. It is the name of a portion of eternity. I am a letter in the divine alphabet. Understanding me leads to understanding existence. I am writ in the true names of half of everything. My being encompasses truth. I am mathematic, organic, metaphysic."

"So what does that mean?"

"The divine alphabet is writ in the name of everything that exists, from the seed at the hearts of the elemental planes to the core of the Great Beyond. My brothers/sisters" (a single word translated into the two in my mind) "and I reach across all that is, was, or ever shall be. We are thought, and reality, and concept, and the unimaginable."

Fascinating. "Tell me about the Great Beyond."

He shook his head, "You would not understand. No mortal possibly could. It

is beyond the powers of comprehension of all but the most powerful of powers, and once they understand, they move beyond the veil of mortal comprehension. I can explain it no more than that. Perhaps, sometime, you will understand."

"So what are you doing here?" I really did wonder what could possibly interest a being as powerful as this.

"Why, I am watching the ebb and flow of mortality." He swept his hand, taking in the whole bar.

I looked about at the smattering of people here, if they could be called that. The eerie, the dingy, and the demonic were the patrons of this bar, "And what do you see?"

There was something sure about his movements, something about the way he moved his hands that seemed to outline a petty thing, "You mortals are like wasps. You build your lives/nests from the slimmest of branches, and when the wind shakes your home/life free, you seek to sting the wind to death. Instead of realizing your foolish mistakes, attempting to repair the damage you have caused yourselves, and learning from your experience, you bring harm to any who have the misfortune to blunder near you in your time of pain and distress. My advice to you -- and to all mortals: Stop acting like an insect and start acting sentient." He seemed amused as a boy looking down at a bug.

"The patrons of this place are varied, yet all mortal. Like all mortals, their concerns are limited, with the potential of blossoming into actual Truth. I can tell you this, though: You may find a companion dear to your heart here - at least as dear as your heart will allow. You will need him on your journey."

I blinked, "What do you know of that?"

He smiled thinly, "I know that your journey takes you far beyond your journal quest, to the very edges of existence. You will struggle for your life and your very spirit... and I do not tell you any more regarding this."

I shook my head, "You seem to know much."

"As much as a piece of the very essence of the multiverse can know."

I looked him in the eye, that eerie dancing glow flicking in his boundless sockets, "Then that means you know all the secrets of existence, doesn't it?"

He shook his head, "I know parts of many of them. Without a connection to my brothers/sisters, I am but a letter. Alone, I am a symbol. Combined, we are language and power."

"So you don't know the secrets of existence?"

He stood up stiffly, "I did not say that. A letter is still a powerful force, even on its own. Allow me to show you." He opened his mouth wider, and wider still. The mask of his face tore around his eyes, mouth, and nose, revealing that hint of eternity I had glimpsed earlier. I was lost in it, adrift in it... a part of it. When I returned to my mundane senses - I realized that O has vanished. Yet somehow, my horizons had expanded. Enlightenment had brushed me, however briefly, across the brow.

"That was... indescribable."

I staggered. I may be chatting up everyone in this damn bar, but this morsel of Truth, at least, was more than worth it. Still dizzy, I braced my hands on a table where an old man sat, contemplating a small cup of tea.

He was old. His dry, yellow skin had the scars of one who had traveled everywhere and never rested long in any one place. His pinched face was inhumanly angular, and his ears swept out from his skull, tapering to points. He wore a loose-fitting orange tunic, and a strange, shimmering blade was strapped across his back. The blade looked to be a two-pronged glaive, made of some metal whose surface swirled like a film of oil on a pond.

"Pardon me."

The man turned to me, his eyes like polished coal. He stared through me, and for a moment, I wondered if he might have been blind. The weapon suddenly turned a dead, flat black, mirroring the man's eyes.

I blinked, "Are you all right?"

He said nothing for a moment, merely searching my face with his eyes. "Hail... traveler." His voice was quiet and somber, like a wind whispering

through the branches of a great tree.

I returned the odd greeting, "Hail."

The man met my gaze, his eyes burrowing into mine. His weapon drained of its black color, resuming its shimmering I had noticed before I spoke to him. "Your eyes have the weight of one who has traveled far to be in this place."

I shrugged, "You could say that."

The man's gaze didn't waver from mine. "I am known as Dak'kon." The emphasis he placed on the word "known" struck me as odd... yet familiar at the same time. "You... are not known to me."

"You are not known to me."

"We are beneath the same sky in this matter, then." Dak'kon was silent for a moment, still studying me with his coal-black eyes. "The Planes number many infinities, yet you are here. I would know why you have come to this city."

"I'm looking for answers... there's much I don't know, and I've forgotten even more."

He nodded, gesturing to the seat next to him, "Speak your questions. I will hear you."

I sat down. The metal of the stool was warm, like every other surface in this bar, "Your features are... unfamiliar to me. What are you?"

"A githzerai," he said simply.

"A githzerai?"

"A githzerai is one of the People," again without an ounce more than absolutely necessary.

I blinked, "One of the people?"

"A githzerai," as flat as before.

"Yes, but what are the githzerai, exactly?"

Dak'kon was silent for a moment, then spoke. "Our history does not need to be made known to you. We would bleed to death on time's blade before I recited a fraction of the histories of our People."

I chuckled, "I don't need to know your histories... but I would know of your people as they are now."

Dak'kon paused. "Know this and accept it as an answer: We are the People who make our home upon the shifting plane of Limbo." With a deft motion, Dak'kon slipped the blade from his back and held it before him.

His voice took on a smooth, grand tone. There was a sureness there that he lacked before, strong and willful, "There, we mold the matter of Limbo with our minds. We forge cities with our thoughts." As I watched, a series of rippling waves of metal began to roll forth from the center of the blade. The pitch and crest of the waves matched the inflections in Dak'kon's voice. "In its chaos we dwell, with only our knowing to preserve us. We are the githzerai."

I gazed at his weapon, "What is that blade you have... it moved, shifted in response to your voice."

"It is a karach blade. It is an object that lets others know the rank of the wielder."

I looked up at Dak'kon, "Karach? What does that mean?"

Dak'kon fell silent for a moment, as if searching for the correct words. "In your tongue, the closest translation is 'chaos matter.' The People may shape it with their thoughts. Karach is not shaped by heat, but by knowing oneself. It is a mirror that reflects the will of the wielder on its surface and in its edge. When one knows themselves, the blade is strong -- harder and stronger than steel. When one does not know themselves, the blade is as water -- formless and weak."

"What rank does the blade signify?"

He slung the weapon over his back again, "The blade is a symbol carried by the zerth. A zerth is one who knows the words of Zerthimon, he who

founded our race. He knew the githzerai before they knew themselves. He defined the People. He gave them one mind. In knowing the words of Zerthimon, they know themselves."

"You seem to place a special emphasis on 'knowing.' What do you mean?" I asked, musing over his odd manner of speech.

"All things, whether structure or flesh -- their existence is defined by their knowing of themselves."

"And if a man does not know himself?"

"When a mind does not know itself, it is flawed. When a mind is flawed, the man is flawed. When a man is flawed, that which he touches is flawed." Dak'kon paused. Clearly he was a man of few words normally, "It is said that what a flawed man sees, his hands make broken."

"Do you know yourself?"

Dak'kon fell silent. His coal black eyes took on the same distance that I noticed when I first spoke.

"I ask again: Do you know yourself?"

When Dak'kon spoke again, his voice had changed; his words echoed, like a great stone dropped into a chasm. It looked like he was forcing the words from his chest. "It is not my will that you know this."

"I apologize, I meant no offense," I tried changing the subject, "Have you been in the city long?"

"I have traveled through it many times. It is known by the name 'Sigil.' Among the People, it is known as the city that does not know itself," he said simply.

"It doesn't know itself? What do you mean?"

"The city exists, but it does not know itself. In not knowing itself, its existence is flawed."

"You speak as if the city is alive."

"It may not be aware and know itself in the sense that you or I might know ourselves, but it lives. It grows, changes, and touches the minds of all that live here."

I cocked my head, "Why did you say the city does not know itself?"

"The city exists in opposition to itself. It has set itself apart from the planes, yet it seeks to be everywhere at once. Its walls are doors, yet it keeps these doors locked. Such an existence tells of a thing that does not know itself. In not knowing itself, it is flawed," his voice was disapproving.

"What if the city is not flawed, and you just do not know the reasons for its contradictions? There is order in everything. Perhaps there is an underlying pattern that you cannot perceive."

His voice was sure and knowing, "To your question, a question: What if the city is flawed, and you see its contradictions all around you?"

"To your question, a question:" I countered, "You claim this city's existence is flawed. You have accepted this rather than explore the possibility that something greater may exist. That suggests you are flawed... and that you do not search for knowledge, but only for a convenient answer."

Dak'kon fell silent. "There is no knowing the answer to the questions we have asked. Yet the city exists. That is all."

"Yet I would maintain that we know ourselves by the questions we ask and the ones we do not. If we cease asking questions and accept only what we can perceive..."

"Then we will cease to know ourselves." Dak'kon's voice had changed slightly, become heavier. "Such words have been spoken before. I have heard them and know them."

I leaned back in surprise, "Where have you heard them?"

"The words are mine. Once, I knew them and knew their meaning. I had forgotten them until you spoke." Dak'kon's gaze traveled through me, and his blade stopped shimmering, bleeding of all color until it was translucent. There was a moment of silence, then Dak'kon looked up at me. "I would



travel your path with you."

I grunted, "I- don't think that's a good idea right now. I'm afraid I'm in a bit of trouble currently." Would the thugs storm the bar? I hoped I wouldn't be responsible for a slaughter. Then again, by the look of it the patrons were hard as nails. They may be able to take care of themselves.

Dak'kon's gaze changed. It looked as if he was looking past me once again, "I am old, yet I have traveled far. The arts of war are known to me. The tides of this city are known to me. Where you stab in the dark, my blade strikes true. Doors locked to your hand are corridors to mine. In knowing these things through me, you will become strong. I would walk your path with you."

"No," I said, shaking my head, "I can't allow someone to get hurt by my own mistakes." Or Morte's.

"I would have you hear me." Before I could turn to leave, Dak'kon spoke again. I was finding it difficult to turn away as long as I held his attention. "You are a stranger to this city. In not knowing it, the city is a danger to you. Two blades carry more weight than one, even when left in their scabbards." As he spoke, his blade shifted to its original dead black once again.

Reluctantly I nodded. "If you insist, then I accept. An extra blade would be welcome."

"Your path is mine." Strangely enough, his voice seemed distant, and it echoed, as if he were speaking from across a great distance.

It was time to spill some blood.

## Chapter 23

"When we're done with yeh, yer gonna wish yeh were as pretty as yeh are now."

We were outnumbered three to one. Thugs in their gang colors: red and black, grey and blue, misty scarlet, rust-brown, the representatives of no less than four bands stood toe-to-toe against us in that cramped alley. Part of me hoped the worst that could happen was that I would wake up on the slab again. The other wasn't so sure I'd have such a happy ending. One way or the other, men would fall like chaff today.

If only I had had time to meditate over my spellbook. Gain an edge with sorcery. "I really didn't want you in this, Dak'kon."

He eyed the leader. "He does not **know** his companions: an acolyte who does not **know** his blade and handles it clumsily. They will fall." He unshouldered his **karach** blade. "In Zerthimon's name." His whisper creaked with the stiffness of decades, cool and sure as a windblown forest.

They came at us with daggers drawn, howling with lips scarred by the pox and teeth filed to shark-toothed grins. Daggers glinted dully in the sickly yellow daylight, piecemeal armor clattered and boots kicked up clouds of dust as they charged. I was silent. Dak'kon was still. Morte cackled in a rattle of teeth and chittering bone, and raced off with jeers and taunts, drawing away three or four men who went red with anger.

I felt a dagger bury itself into the middle of my back and grunted in pain. Something gushed inside, that nicked blade puncturing deep enough that I could feel the warm blood trickling into my lung.

The large gang coming at us from our right was a feint: a handful of rogues had snuck behind while we were distracted. I growled, spinning around as that blade withdrew, its barbed edges tearing away flesh and sinew in a horrible squelch. My dagger slid through the soft spot on one thug's armor on the first strike, the tip cracked against dented steel on the second.

"Morte needs your help!" I shouted, "He'll be killed!"

Without hesitation, Dak'kon raced toward the fray with his weapon in hand, sidestepping one thug and slicing the man through with the casual grace of an ebon-eyed hawk.

He was a warrior of wind and steel: focused, precise, swift. Four thugs surrounded Morte and Dak'kon, but the githzerai danced among the slashing blades and spiked knuckles, **knowing** the crude simplicity of their

motions, **knowing** the frailties of their patchwork armor. A thrust of his black-edged blade parted flesh and bone like a hot knife through butter, an upward slash slit the rogue from navel to nose. The man's guts sloshed to the dusty earth, and a merciful stroke of that **karach** blade ceased the agonized twitching.

Dak'kon moved with unparalleled purpose: he turned just enough for a dagger to glance off his armor, he sliced with such precision that not an ounce of strength he used was more than necessary. Each drop of sweat he shed, each splash of blood he scattered across the paved streets was done with the same divine focus that brought order to chaos, that forged a razor-edged blade from the proto-matter of Limbo. His swirling forms, one hand firmly twisting the blade, one palm smoothly guiding the shaft, brought a spiral of death into the cramped confines where his walls were the armor of his enemies, his barriers their flesh.

It was the Art of War, in its purest form.

My humble dagger twisted clumsily in my grip, the tip chipped and the edge long dulled by the armor and bone of my foes. The first rogue lay dead at my feet, the second leapt at me, hoping to score a lucky hit across the neck or through my unprotected chest to force a victory as quick as death.

The dagger handle had already grown slick with blood in my grip, and with a clumsy parry it twisted from my fingers. The thief looked up at me with a smug smile of victory on his face. Taking down an unarmored opponent would be simple.

That is, **if** your opponent feared a death-wound.

The man let out an ululating shriek, leaping forward with a quick slash and a thrust. I embraced the blood-wet steel like I would a harsh lover, and as he pulled it from my belly with a squelch and a spurt of blood, I grabbed his skull. With a twist and a snap, it was over.

I coughed, the iron tang of gore filling my mouth. I really shouldn't use this strategy too much.

I turned to join Dak'kon in the fray, and in the confused melee a meaty hand grasped my neck.

Iron and steel clashed in the distance as the thug's fleshy fingers dug into my throat, shoving me against the ground while his other hand gripped that axe close to the blade. The man's neck was too bullishly thick to break.

"No dagger, no fancy magic. None o' them yellin' Ert-Agh brothers to back ye up. Outnumbered t' boot. Things 're lookin' grim, aye?"

My voice came out in a croak, more pitched and soft than my normal gruff rumble, "You- can't- kill me..."

"Nay, that's why I'm gonna mess ye up nice 'n slow. Say yer prayers, ye hideous freak." The blade edged towards my face.

I groaned. "I'm not particularly religious." With that, I plunged my thumb into the man's eye socket.

He screamed, his fingers losing their grip on the heavy axe, which tumbled down and bit into my other shoulder. I winced as the thug reeled back, my thumb still gripping him from the inside of his skull. We tumbled over each other until I straddled his chest, forcing my thumb deeper until it broke the eggshell-thin bone at the back of his eye socket, probing into his brain until he gurgled and foamed at the mouth, his words melting into an incoherent ramble.

"But if that's what you want, I wish you peace in the afterlife..." one last shove silenced him forever: a quick death. I pulled my thumb out in a spurt of blood and brain-fluid. Thick and foamy spittle bubbled and trickled from his mouth.

After that, it was simply a matter of taking care of the stragglers.

With their leader fallen and Dak'kon's blade felling them like autumn leaves, the thugs fled so quick that even Morte's more colorful jeers (regarding their sexuality and their ancestry back three generations) could do nothing to draw them back to the meat grinder of battle.

"You okay, chief?" Morte had a crack here and there, and a fracture forming along his jaw. Dak'kon looked to be untouched.

I swayed, giggling stupidly from blood loss, "I'm- fine. But you need a healer." I coughed up another goblet of blood, but already I could feel the

familiar itch as my body kicked into gear and began to regenerate. It wasn't going to keep me from feeling as if I were just squeezed out of the tail end of a ta'nari, though.

We made our way to the northern quadrant of the Hive as quick as we could. With each step my pace was a little quicker, and I gained a little more of the strength that would allow my body to make a much-needed vomit.

We found Ingress huddled inside her cloak of dirty rags, her teeth chattering. She was glancing furtively about her, as if expecting to be attacked at any moment.

I coughed and spat, clearing my throat before speaking, "Greetings, Ingress."

"Eh? You!" She squinted at me. "What issit y'wanta me now?! Y'wanta me t'leave? NOT leaving this city, so I'm not. I can't, tried, it's not a city, it's a prison t'everywhere."

"Ingress, I found someone who can take you back to your home plane." I coughed again.

Ingress fell silent. "I wanta go. Wanta LEAVE this place."

"His name is Candrian. He should be along shortly to help you... trust him, all right?"

She said nothing, only giving a quiet nod as the teeth chattered in her mouth.

"I'll go back and meet Candrian at the Smoldering Corpse Bar and make sure everything turned out all right. Be strong, Ingress."

I had quite a few loose ends to tie together.

Porphiron was still standing grimly on the street when I next saw him, paying no heed to the passers-by. The web of lines on his face were staggered into a series of right angles.

"This one addresses you, Porphiron."

As I spoke, the angles in Porphiron's face relaxed into a series of strange

curves. "This one would ask: Do you have the neck rope of beads that was stolen?"

"I think so. Is this it?" I held the rosary out.

This one sees what you hold: Those are the beads once missing." As he took them, I noticed his hands had the same tracery of lines upon them as his face. "This one has a question: How did you get the beads from the three?"

I shrugged, "I convinced them it was in their best interest to return the necklace."

Porphiron scowled, "This one would know: One who fights with words carries a name in the Order of **Erit Agge**." Porphiron's face breaks into angles again. "Those ones are called diplomats: It is a path without discipline and without honor."

I smiled grimly, "Oh, I still killed the thieves."

His scowl melted as he nodded then, "This one is content: The message of violence has been conveyed. This one bestows: Several welcome thanks, yes?"

"The pleasure was mine. I have a question for you, though: if you cannot enter combat, how did you get your warrior training?"

Porphiron stood up proudly, "This one clarifies: The **Erit Agge** may train with one when there is no anger between them."

I scratched my chin. "I see. Could you teach me how to use those weapons?"

"This one could instruct you, yes. But this one warns you: With knowledge of violence comes temptation to use it."

We practiced stances and forms in the middle of the street for a few good hours as he taught me the art of the dagger. Slash and stab, thrust and gouge. My clumsy movements became more refined, and slowly I adjusted to the weapon as if it were a part of my own hand. When we finished, Porphiron nodded as one who had done his duty proudly, and we parted ways with smiles and thanks.

A quick word with Baen the Sender was all that was needed to assure that the message was relayed, earning me another handful of coins, as well as the urge to spend it.

Mebbeth furrowed her eyebrows as I shuffled into her hut in that sorry state: flesh torn and only beginning to knit together, bloodstained and brutish. "Tch, what happened t' ye, child?"

I had coughed up the last bit of blood right outside Ragpicker's square, but my voice still creaked, "A fight with local thugs. A lot of them."

She shook her head. "Very well, then," and reached for one of the dried herbs at her belt. Mebbeth snapped it off at the stalk, then ground it in her callused palms. Small wisps of dust and pollen rose from her hands. She filled the air with her chanting, and blew the dust in the air.

I sighed as her soothing magic settled through me, easing away my wounds and bleeding the nausea from me. Words could never convey how refreshing it felt. Morte sneezed.

"Thanks, Mebbeth."

She scowled, "I ought t' slap ye, running around so irresponsibly. I warned ye t' be careful, aye?"

I straightened up defensively, "I didn't abuse my training, Mebbeth. Didn't even get a chance, though it's not like I would."

She scoffed, "The Art conveys wisdom and power more than just a wiggle o' fingers and a burst 'o flame, boy. Best remember that."

I nodded humbly, "Do you have any spells and charms I might buy?"

When I was done poking about her wares, Mebbeth practically forced us to sleep the night. I took this as an opportunity to study, memorizing the spells she had given me.

In the morning, we left to buy whatever else we could to finish the task ahead of us, selling the copper jewelry I had lifted from the corpses of the thugs I had killed. There was no honor or pride in living like a vulture, but necessity drove me to it. I wasn't very proud of the new bulging weight of

my pouch that day.

I made my way back to the Smoldering Corpse. The bodies of the massacre just yesterday had been dragged away by collectors, but scarlet smears and dried-up puddles were still smeared along the cobblestones. Those thugs milling around eyed me warily, but none tried to attack. It would be a while before they worked up the gall to try again.

Candrian stood as I approached him. "The tooth woman wanted you to have these," he said, holding out his hand. "She wanted to express her thanks, even out the balance book as it were, and be done with the damn things." In the palm of his hand was a small green bag which he smoothly deposited into my palm. "Enjoy them, seeker."

I smiled softly, happy for Ingress, "How did she take it?"

Candrian smiled, "I've never seen one so elated. She kept crying and weeping. 'Home! Home!'"

I sighed, "I hope she finds her family again, or her friends."

"We gave her that chance, seeker."

I poured the contents of the cloth bag out onto my hand as we left. Ugh. Her teeth. They rattled amongst themselves in my palm, like a bunch of creepy ivory hopping bugs. "Hey Morte, check these out."

He floated over. "What's the chant, chief?"

"You see these teeth?"

He glanced at my palm, morbidly fascinated. "Yechhhh."

The teeth clattered as I rolled them in my hand, "Ugly little berks, aren't they?"

"Bar that." Morte shuddered. "Would you want those things in **you**?"

"Come on, Morte, they seem to like you. Look at the way they're staring at you," I teased, waving my hand towards him.



"Those little pikers better not come anywhere near me, or I'll..." Morte paused. "You know, I have no idea how to threaten teeth."

Something twitched in my hand.

"What's wrong?" Morte floated in closer and glanced at my palm. "Hey... they look like they're planning something, don't they?"

"They sure do, don't th --"

What happened next is difficult to describe... and painful to watch. Faster than I could close my palm, the teeth hopped out of my hand and swarmed onto Morte's jaw. Morte howled as Ingress' teeth promptly ripped out his old ones and then jumped into the exposed cavities.

"Morte!" I cried, utterly horrified. Dak'kon stepped back, his eyes widening.

Morte continued howling. The teeth settled in, adjusting themselves and planting their roots with a horrid drilling noise.

I grabbed him by the sides of his skull to steady him, wondering if I should try ripping the things out with my fingers. "Morte? You okay?"

Morte didn't seem to hear me... he kept howling and howling, then suddenly started smashing his teeth together. He got in three powerful bites before the upper and lower teeth locked together and prevented him from opening his mouth.

I blinked. "Wow."

Morte made muffled shouting noises at me, his eyes wide.

"Morte, are you okay?"

They teeth suddenly unlocked, and Morte took a deep breath. "I will **kill** you for this! You planned that! I know it!"

I looked him over, wincing. "Look, I didn't mean that to happen... I even warned you. Uh... how do they feel?"

Morte moved his jaw around experimentally. "Odd. But not bad." Suddenly,

the teeth extended into fangs. "Ooooooh! They change!" They shrunk down to normal, then to fangs again, then normal... "I think I'm going to like these."

"I'm sorry, Morte. I didn't mean you any harm."

"Oh, I'll still get you for this," Morte replied. He grinned, his teeth turning into fangs again. "Just you wait."

I didn't like the sound of that. "Uh... revenge never helped anyone, Morte... uh, let's go."

For the next few days I took odd jobs here and there: delivering letters, escorting visitors, fending off thugs and gangs and selling the goods collected. It wasn't a proud life by any means, but it was something to help scrape us by.

The run-down flophouse we stayed in was poor shelter, and part of me was worried that the owner would try murdering us in our sleep for our paltry coin. Yet with Dak'kon at my side and the scars mounting on my flesh, those weaker-willed backed away. I soon reasoned out that despite the blanket of numerous wounds on my flesh, thugs could tell that I was inexperienced in the ways of the city, perhaps even a little naive.

"They **know** your inexperience by your poise," Dak'kon had said.

At night I stayed awake most of the night as Morte snored away and Dak'kon dozed quietly, his blade propped against his shoulder as he leaned against the wall as if in meditation. I always dreaded that terrifying dreamless void when my eyes closed, that wound deep inside me with its ragged edges where something was missing. Something **vital**.

When fatigue finally took me into its cold embrace, it was all I could do to keep from screaming until the feeble light of morning seeped through the cracked windows. I sat up groggily, shivering and trying to clear my head of that terrible black fog. Today was the day that I would enter the tomb, and I needed some supplies. I decided to investigate a shop that we had passed earlier, but didn't have time to go inside.

The sign outside had said "Fell's Tattoo Parlor."

## Chapter 24

The cool, dry air was ominous in the tattoo parlor. Beneath the sweetness of the incense smoke, the musty scent of old leather had been intertwined with the slightest sour hint of meat gone bad.

All about the shop, intricate designs had been inked on sheets of leather and parchment. They lay about haphazardly, but by the lack of dust there seemed to be an odd order to it all. It was as if Fell worked in a meticulous but fickle hand.

A dabus stood in the center of the room... but something about it struck me as odd. It had the same shock of white hair, the same greenish cast to its skin, the same pair of goat horns... then I suddenly realized this one was walking on the ground, not floating. For some reason, that made me uneasy.

I blinked, looking to Morte, "Uh... Morte. You said dabus float, right? This one's walking on the ground."

Morte glanced at the dabus, and his eyes widened. "Ah-ha! I knew you goat-heads could walk! I knew it!" Morte turned gleefully back to me. "Ha! This one must not be aloof enough to get off the ground."

I greeted him. The dabus waited patiently, its hands tucked into its sleeves. I asked the dabus several questions, trying to refresh my memory of the rebuses that appeared above its head.

As I was about to ask the dabus as to who he was, I suddenly realized I already know the creature's name -- 'Fell.' It wasn't the sign or the obvious fact that he was acting as a shopkeeper. There was something deeper in his name than I realized. It echoed in my skull. As if in response, the dabus inclined his head slightly, and a lone symbol appeared above its head. It was blurry at first, then resolved into a white oval with a black lightning bolt through it.

"I feel like I know you, Fell," I said, slightly disoriented.

Fell bowed reverently, and a stream of symbols swirled about his head, rotating clockwise, then counterclockwise. It took me a moment to translate: <This is the first time and not the first time you have come to this

place.>

"Do you know who I am?"

Another series of symbols materialized into focus above Fell's head. The translation came to me just as quickly and sharply as the symbols themselves... as if I had translated the exact same string many times before. <Yes. But I am not permitted to tell your story.>

I bit my lip. "Why not?"

For a moment, there was no response from Fell, then a stream of rebuses appeared, as if trickling out of Fell's mind. <My apologies, I cannot. I cannot change the nature of a man.>

I couldn't explain why, but the last sentence sent a crawling sensation through my skull. The words rattled in my brains, biting deep into my mind like an itch just out of reach. There was something hidden and profound in that sentence that I desperately needed to remember. I clawed at the musty spot in the dim fold of my consciousness. It was a flicker in the corner of my eye, gone when I turned to face it.

...change the nature of a man...

I twitched. "'Nature of a man?' What does that mean?"

The symbols that appeared above Fell almost mirrored the previous stream. <My apologies. I cannot say.>

I grumbled and turned around in a circle, displaying the map of scars and scratches as well as the tapestry of ink on my flesh. "Can you tell me anything about these tattoos on my body?"

Fell studied my body for a moment, walking around me. The soft patter of his heels against the squeaky floorboards made me shudder. There was something wrong about him. Above his head, Fell mirrored each symbol as he examined it, then returned to face me. <I know them. None are by my hand.>

"Can you tell me about some of them?"

Fell nodded, symbols appearing around him like fireflies. <The ones upon your back were scribed with a careful hand and are directions for a mind that forgets itself. The symbol that lies upon your left shoulder is the mark of torment.>

I fought the tremble that wanted to shudder through me as I looked down at my arm. The word was like a set of iron claws scraping against polished shale. That wound deep in me throbbed with the word. "Torment?"

The symbol sharpened, gaining edges that were almost painful to my eyes. <It is torment. It is that which draws all tormented souls to you.> Fell nodded at my left arm, at my shoulder. <The flesh knows it suffers even when the mind has forgotten. And so you wear the rune always.>

I scratched my shoulder idly. It had suddenly felt very itchy, the mark unwelcome. "You say you've met me before, Fell... do you know how I died?"

For a moment Fell did not respond... then slowly, menacingly, three symbols materialized above his head, each of them casting a long shadow. <Shadows.>

"Shadows?"

The three symbols swirled about each other, each leaving a faint black misty trail about them. They took on a ragged edge, like teeth and talons and multiplied... where there were three, there became nine, nine became twenty-seven, until the room was a swarm of shadows. <Many shadows. They streamed from the darkness, swarmed you, then left you to die.>

Dak'kon touched the hilt of his blade while Morte's teeth chattered.

"Uh- ch-chief? Maybe we should leave..."

I faced Fell. "Why? Why did they kill me?"

The shadowed symbols swirled into one, then dissolved to be replaced with a simple symbol. <I do not know.>

After regained our nerves we browsed the store, eyeing scraps of flesh carefully etched with black patterns and symbols. Looking at them with the

eye of a mage, I noticed they thrummed with power: a resonance to them that distinguished the symbols from your everyday tattoo. One was the mark of a warrior, granting greater strength. Another was a symbol that granted insight. Yet others told tales as bards would gathered about a fire.

As I explored the store, Fell patiently sorted his parchments, setting them here and there knowingly even if there was no apparent pattern to his actions.

Curious with the enigmatic creature, I took the opportunity to brush past the curtain into the back room.

I wish I hadn't.

Long frames stretched out and laid against the walls adorned the room, with human skins stretched across like leather being tanned. Scrawled across the torn and distended flesh were tattoos, artful designs that seemed to tell a dozen stories of triumph and tragedy. Pain and delight. I wasn't quite sure I wanted to know how Fell had collected these.

He stood calmly, watching me as I stumbled back into the main room.

I coughed, embarrassed. "What are those frames in the back room, Fell?"

A caravan of symbols slowly materialized around Fell, one by one. <It is my gallery. Your discarded skins are my canvas. I admire you. I am saddened for you.>

I shuddered at the thought of all those pelts. Were they mine or was Fell exaggerating? I didn't want to know. "Saddened for me? Why?"

Another train of symbols formed around Fell, this time forming a circle. <The mark of torment lies upon your flesh. Tragedies and loss have built themselves upon it, like stones upon a foundation. You have endured great pain.>

"What do you mean?"

A long string of rebuses appeared above Fell's head, then surrounded his arms like manacles. <I admire you because you have never surrendered to the weight of these losses, despite the fact their chains hang on you still.>

A string of rebuses coalesced yet again, then drifted down, covering the dabus like a cloak. <These losses blanket this life and all of your past ones. You shed lives like a molting serpent. You are exploring the infinite paths of life.>

More rebuses appeared, then fell suddenly to the floor, streaming out behind him like a shadow. <Take with you this warning: each of your lives casts a shadow on existence. You must travel to a place where these shadows have gone mad and regrets have scarred the earth.>

A sudden rush of memory.

*"...You shall come to a prison built of regrets and sorrow, where the shadows themselves have gone mad. There you will be asked to make a terrible sacrifice, my Love. For the matter to be laid to rest, you must destroy that which keeps you alive and be immortal no longer." Deionarra's words echoed as if they were freshly spoken from her ethereal lips....*

I swayed, suddenly unnerved. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

A brief series of paper thin rebuses appeared in an orderly row next to Fell, then vanished into glowing motes. <Do not sign anything.>

I nodded. "Very well."

Another series of rebuses appeared, forming a spiral -- they had the texture of a question about them. <Do you feel complete?>

I closed my eyes, searching deep inside me, caressing that scar that had been cut deeper than any of the marks that tickled my flesh. "I... don't. In fact, ever since I woke up in the Mortuary, I feel like something's... missing. Something inside."

Fell nodded, and a series of symbols materialized in a halo around him. <You are strong. Keep faith, and you shall become whole again.>

We poked about his wares a little longer, purchased a few that looked useful, and eagerly left.

"Chief, I say this with all sincerity I can muster, but we really really should

leave that goat-faced berk alone." He looked over the fresh tattoos on our arms. "I've never been happier over the fact that I don't have skin."

Dak'kon shook his head as we walked, "This Fell knows you in ways you do not. He would be a most useful ally. His knowing will complete yours."

I looked back over my shoulder. "I have to agree with Dak'kon on this one, Morte. Fell knows something about my past... it's something I need. Maybe if I talk to him I might remember something."

Morte shook his head, muttering. There was almost no humor in his voice. "There's a reason the guy has to open up shop in this dingy corner of the Hive, chief. There's a reason he doesn't float like those other piking hornheads do."

Part of me was surprised we hadn't been accosted by thugs yet again by the time we made it to the arch that Norochj had told us about. I took a deep breath, drew a circle around my heart as he instructed, and with a whoosh of air the space in front of us warped, twisted on itself in a spiral of blue with motes of silver dust. A cold breeze blew from the portal. The other side was dim as a tomb.

I stepped through cautiously even as Morte and Dak'kon comfortably went in. After hearing Ingress' story, I was wary of such doors in space, where shades and fire, frost and teeth could meet me on the other side. The portal snapped shut behind me.

The air inside was stale, the dusty scent of age ripe in the air. Where there should have been an eerie, uncomfortable silence, in the distance there was a rhythmic yet irregular creaking, as if creatures were wandering through this mausoleum with mindless purpose. Ignoring my own heavy breaths and the heavy beating of my heart in my ears, in the darkness I could hear the rattle of bones and the shuffles and scrapes of things dragging against metal.

The dead were walking.

Before we could take another step, a spectral figure materialized from the gloom of the passageway ahead and quickly moved to block our path. It floated before us, its once human features twisted in a mask of rage. "Defilers! Leave this place at once!"



I quelled my shock, and after a moment extended a polite hand.  
"Greetings."

"Leave now!" Its booming voice echoed down the halls. "This place is forbidden to the living. Leave while you still can."

I looked beyond him into the passage ahead. "I have some questions first..."

Its pale face twisted into a snarl. "Seek your answers elsewhere. This place is a sanctuary for the dead. I shall not permit their slumber to be disturbed by the intrusion of yet another insolent mortal!"

"Another?" This must've been the source of the disturbed dead. "Has someone else been here?"

The spirit grumbled. "If you must know... yes, there is another intruder who, even now, continues to violate the sanctity of these hallowed halls." The anger in the spirit's voice faded. He seemed somewhat saddened by the admission. "The souls of my brothers and sisters cry out for peace."

"Who is this other intruder?"

"He is an evil coward who wields great power over the dead. He seeks something within these halls... what it might be or what his purpose is in seeking it, I cannot say."

I looked the ghost up and down. He was some sort of guardian, after all.  
"Why don't you drive this intruder away?"

The spectre shook his head. "I cannot. The coward has sealed himself within the inner chamber of the Mausoleum. He has erected powerful wards that bar my entrance into the chamber. It is from there that he calls upon his dark arts to awaken my brethren and bends them to his evil will."

I smirked. "Sounds to me like you need the help of one intruder to get rid of another."

The spirit remained silent for several long moments. I could almost feel the weight of his lifeless gaze upon me. "Yes... you might prevail where I have failed. If you will pledge to rid me of this blackguard, I shall grant you

passage. What say you?"

I nodded. "I'll do it."

"So be it." The spirit slowly began to fade, until only the echoing of its disembodied voice remained. "But take heed... tread lightly in these halls, lest you join the others in eternal rest."

The floors and walls of the mausoleum were plated with metal, laid out as if they replaced wooden boards. Subconsciously I stepped firmly on each broad slab, avoiding the cracks that separated one plate from the other. Now and again I felt them shift. They clattered hollowly beneath our boots, when it came to me.

These plates were the covers of metal lockers that held the bodies of the dead. We were walking on their graves.

There was a click, and the panel I stepped on sank half an inch into the floor.

Oh hells.

I looked up to see a bright flash of light darting out from the shadows, a scintillating orb of color that spiraled towards me with a whine. It gave off flecks of light as it flew. Bolts of pain lanced through my body when it struck me, electric sparks that set nerves through my belly afire as the chromatic orb's arcane energies were released into my flesh.

I cried out in shock, as Morte and Dak'kon paused. When I started breathing again, the halls were eerily silent.

And then the rattling ahead resumed, steadier than before as if those bones now creaked with purpose.

The wandering dead were clumsy, but possessed with a ferocity and stamina that no living creature could match. They creaked and rattled as they fought, my dagger nearly useless against their meatless bones. Morte cracked against their bones with his own skull, while Dak'kon's zerth blade clashed against the dry, skeletons. I grappled when I could, twisted and broke spines. A twist of my wrist snapped the leg bone from a fallen skeleton, and swinging it as a club I helped bring a second death to another.

Blade clashed against bone as we proceeded down the dimly-lit passages, scattering ivory shards that clattered on metal. One by one the undead fell, lifeless once again. I took the front line, soaking the damage like a sponge as their clubs and rusted axes fell as Morte and Dak'kon hacked away. The things were weak, their strikes like drops of water against stone. But still the rain of their clumsy blows wore me down.

Around one corner, though, the clanking of metal heralded a whole new danger.

A giant skeleton lumbered towards us in heavy armor, rusted and yellow with age. The enormous blade it wielded could have come up to my neck if set on its tip. The bones had been warped and lengthened by the necromancer's foul magics, grown to an immense size so that it towered over all of us.

Immediately I thrust my hand outwards, crying out the words of power that triggered the spell I had prepared. An orb of flashing eldritch light, begemmed with all the hues of the rainbow, darted from my fingertips and struck the skeleton. It punched through the armor, searing the creature to its ribs as Dak'kon leapt into the fray and Morte swung around and attacked from behind.

We strode down those halls for hours, bringing final rest to the walking dead. Dak'kon's own sorcery clashed against the undead. With chants in an arcane and alien tongue he unleashed bolts of fury that shattered whatever they struck so that the rain of bone shards had become a familiar patter. Careless footsteps triggered the magical wards that protected the mausoleum. Now and again I had to rest and wait as the wounds knit back together, laying fresh new scars over the old.

Dak'kon was a quiet companion for the most part, but some small talk loosened his tongue while we rested.

"My past is not known to you. It is not my will that you should know it," he had said.

"Know that I bear the scars of one who has travelled the Planes. Know that I have never rested long in any one place. Know that I bear the weight of one who has travelled far to be in this place.

"Know that I am a Githzerai. Know that I am of the people of Zerthimon.

"It was Zerthimon who knew the Githzerai before we knew ourselves. He knew what had to be done to free us. From his knowing, came action. From his knowing, freedom was born. The Githzerai ceased to be slaves and became a people.

"Know that I follow the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon. His words are known to me. His heart is known to me.

"All that remains is that I know myself."

What a sociable guy.

By the time we reached the gates to the heart of the mausoleum, we had downed a good portion of our precious clot charms, the crystallized blood dissolving on our tongues sent chills through us as the magic did its work, stemming the flow of blood in our many wounds and renewing our battered bodies.

In the center of the chamber was a mid-sized man in long robes of deep black. His hair was neatly coifed and an impeccably trimmed goatee complimented his handsome features. Noticing my arrival, he put down the book he was writing in and strode confidently over to face us, smiling. "Impressive... I must admit, I never thought you would make it this far."

I unsheathed my dagger. At least now there was something I could stab. "I'm glad to have disappointed you... are you the one responsible for all the walking dead?"

He chuckled and waved a hand dismissively. "Who I am is of no consequence to you. What I want is the question that should concern you most." As he spoke, he looked me up and down, as if somehow fascinated.

"Very well... what do you want?"

He took a step back and cocked an eyebrow. "I want... your blood."

I stared for a moment before speaking again. "Is that some kind of threat?"

The man started to answer, but stopped himself abruptly. An evil smile

spread across his face and he began to laugh. "Yes... I suppose it is." He continued to laugh even harder at his own private joke. His hands had begun to move at his sides. Slowly, they flitted back and forth, tracing intricate patterns in the air.

Another time I would've been mesmerized by the complexities of the spell he wove, wondering if I could have learned them myself. But instinct spurred me on and with a flick of my fingers and a cry, a chromatic orb bloomed from my fingertips and struck the necromancer in the chest. He stumbled backwards in shock as the skeletons surrounding the room closed in.

"A mageling!" he said, awed, and his hands began to move in greater desperation, not expecting this twist.

"Sorry, Morte!" I cried, and with that I grabbed him and tossed him past the clattering skeletons. He cursed as he flew, cracking against the necromancer's nose as Dak'kon and I took care of the skeletons with brutish force.

While my body took the blows from the skeletons, Dak'kon sliced apart one skeleton after another. I threw one bolt of energy after another at the wizard as Morte buzzed about, nipping and tearing at his black robe, drawing blood with Ingress' fierce, chattering teeth.

One final chromatic orb blew through the wizard's chest just as my magic was running thin, and as he collapsed with a croak, the magics that held together the skeletons surrounding us faded. Bones clattered and rags fluttered as they fell, sending up clouds of ancient dust.

Easier than I expected.

I rifled through the man's body, trying to find some evidence of who he was and what he was doing here. A few trinkets he carried looked useful, brimming with magic. But the musty tome he was writing in chilled my blood.

It appeared to be a diary of some sort, cracked and worn with age. Some sort of crest has been burned into the cover. I could make out a series of interlocking triangles centered about the initials SR. The writing upon its

pages has faded considerably, but the last few entries seem to have been penned recently:

*Day 2 of the 127th Year of Factol Hashkar's reign:*

*At last, I have found it! The missing page of the Ap'Tarj Grimoire is now in my possession. As I had guessed, the page detailed the necessary components for the casting of the final transformation spell. I have all but one of the components. A drop of an immortal's blood is all that stands between me and the eternal power of lichdom. But where can I find such a rarity? Perhaps I should seek the answer through divination.*

*Day 14 of the 127th Year of Factol Hashkar's reign:*

*After days of taxing divination spells, I finally have my answers. The divination revealed the location of an immortal to be somewhere within an ancient Mausoleum located in the Hive section of Sigil. I must make haste. I must find this creature and draw its blood before it moves on.*

*Day 15 of the 127th Year of Factol Hashkar's reign:*

*I have arrived at the Mausoleum. Immediately, I was set upon by a shade that guards the remains of those interred within this place. I managed to elude the spirit and found my way into what appears to have been some sort of inner sanctum. Protected by some minor wards to prevent any further interruptions by that supernatural twit, I have set about raising some of the locals to conduct a search for the immortal. If the divination was accurate and the immortal is here, then likely it is interred within one of the many crypts that line these halls. It is only a matter of time now.*

*Day 17 of the 127th Year of Factol Hashkar's reign:*

*I am not alone. Someone has entered the Mausoleum and is interfering with my servants. Could this be the one I seek? The divination revealed only that I would find the immortal here. Could it be that MY presence in this place has prompted that*

*which I seek to seek ME out? What a delightful twist, I shall have to*

The ink of this last entry is still wet. I would have to be more careful.

As we stepped into the corridor, the guardian spirit materialized before us. Its ghostly countenance regarded us benevolently. "I thank you. You have done me a great service. The spirits of my charges sleep quietly once again. Go in peace... friend." The apparition faded away, leaving us alone in the deserted halls of the Mausoleum.

"All in a day's work," I said, smiling.

## Chapter 25

When I next saw Norochj he was pulling at one of his spikes of hair and using it to scratch a spot on his face. I couldn't help but think he'd look a lot better with dreadlocks.

I tossed the necromancer's journal down on the table. "I found out what was going on in the mausoleum. The dead sleep again."

He flipped through it, scanning the more recent pages momentarily. Norochj's lines of worry smoothed out. "Thanks give I." He reached into his robes and drew forth a small bag, which he handed to me. "Copper coin. Twice a hundred."

I nodded and turned to leave when I spied a young Dustman, hidden in the corner of the bar. There was a bleak expression on his face, something deeper than the grim, mournful gaze that Dustmen wore constantly. The boy seemed on the brink of breaking under the weight of his despair, with stubble on his chin and dark circles beneath his eyes. He was staring at the wall with a somber expression.

I walked up to him. "Greetings."

The Dustman didn't look up. He stared straight ahead, as if he was seeing something several leagues beyond the walls of the bar.

"Are you all right?"

The Dustman didn't respond. He kept staring into the distance.

"All rightie then..." Morte hissed. "Let's go, chief. This Dustie might as well be fertilizer."

I sighed. "Fair enough. Let's get out of here."

As I turned to leave, the Dustman suddenly spoke, his voice barely a murmur -- I had to strain to hear the words. I thought he said something about wanting to die.

"What did you say?"

The boy's expression did not flicker. "Do you want to die?"

I mulled it over a moment. "No. Do you?"

"Yes..." He studied me. "Why do you want to live?"

"There are certain questions I need answered about my life before I am willing to surrender it. I want to find out who I am."

The Dustman listened silently. After I spoke, he didn't respond, merely watched me. He looked like he was thinking.

I took a chair next to him. "Do you want to die? Is that why you asked?"

His gaze slowly slid over to meet mine. "Yes."

"Why do you want to die?"

"This existence... this existence is a mockery of life. I do not wish to continue the charade any longer." His face wrinkled in disgust. "Why would anyone wish to remain in this foul city in the center of a multiverse that feeds on pain and hatred? Death... is silent... comforting."



Apparently he'd never tried Gar-Bar root. "Then why haven't you killed yourself already?"

"I have been looking for a means to end my life. Will you kill me?"

My eyebrows furrowed. "No. If you lack the conviction to kill yourself, I'm not going to do it for you."

"It is not a matter of conviction..."

In the distance, I noticed Dak'kon had ordered a cup of that horrid, tepid tea. He sipped it thoughtfully. "Then it must be another matter, then. So I ask you: what is it about living that drives you to hate it? Surely living cannot be as bad as you make it out to be."

"This is living?" The Dustman bared his teeth, and his hands clenched. "This existence... this existence is a mockery of life. I do not wish to continue the charade any longer. Death is silent... comforting."

"Maybe after the first death," I grumbled, but immediately wished I could take it back.

The Dustman blinked, then sneered. "The first death? What, were you resurrected?"

"Resurrected?"

"Resurrected... brought back to life... the magic required is indeed powerful."

My hand twitched. I knew I had the weight of countless deaths pressed upon me, so many that I knew the border between life and death well. I knew how I could cull the slightest spark back into a cold body. I gulped. "Who would be capable of such power?"

"A powerful sorcerer or priest... or one of the Powers... but not anyone I know." He frowned and waved a hand dismissively. "And I don't believe you know of anyone of that sort, either."

I scowled. If this whelp was going to waste his life like this- "You don't

believe I can die? Try and kill me then. See what happens."

He looked at me skeptically. "Nay, I think not, even if I felt the urge to do so."

I stood up stiffly. "Then I shall force you to watch me: I'll show you what death holds." I placed my hands around my head.

"What... do you mean?" He looks like he wants to turn away but he cannot. "You can't seriously..."

I barely felt the snap as I broke my own neck.

Quick. Painless. I was glad so many I sent to the black embrace had so easy a trip.

My vision slowly returned... my death felt different this time. As the dull colors of the bar swam in my eyes, I noticed the boy standing above me... he looked horrified and fascinated. He had propped me into the chair, and was looking apprehensively at the other bar patrons... they didn't appear to have noticed or had mistaken me for a drunk.

"Convinced now?" I groaned. Man, that left a real crick in my neck.

"Are..." he swallowed hard, "are you one of the walking dead?"

"No." I rumbled, still dizzy.

"Then what are you?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. But I die and am reborn."

"Yet... you still think, you still feel?"

My breath rattled in my throat as I put a hand against my chest. "Yes, but there... there is a hollowness. Something is missing, and it eats at you, never leaves you at peace." Speaking of it sent chills down my spine.

"To be dead... and still think and feel?! Will misery never leave a body be?" The thought seemed to horrify him. "Even death is no release."

I nodded, then twisted my head back and forth. With a satisfying pop, that annoying pressure in my vertebrae was gone. "Indeed. Perhaps you should not be so quick to abandon this life before knowing what the next life holds for you."

The boy stared at me. "You were speaking truthfully." He looked at me in amazement. "What is there? What did you see on the other side?"

I shivered to think about it. "I will not speak of that place to anyone. I have said too much already."

He grew more insistent. "You must tell me! I must know!"

I stood up, pushing the chair aside. "I will tell you nothing."

"You must tell me!" He clenched his fist. "What would you ask of me?!"

"I would ask you to live."

"You mock me, sir. You make a fool of my questions..." his eyes grew watery, and bitter tears trickled down his worn face.

"You are the fool to want to throw away your life so carelessly. It insults the dead, and it insults the living." Dak'kon was staring now. Perhaps he saw me kill myself for the first time. Ah, well. He had to learn sooner or later. Morte seemed worried.

"Speak what you saw! What is the True Death?! What did you see there?" His voice grew louder and more insistent, so much so that surrounding Dustmen turn their heads. Perhaps there was no ward of silence after all, or that it was limited.

I ignored their piercing stares. "Very well." Reaching into the depths of my memory, I culled the vision of the lands of the dead back into being- the nothing-place that lay between this world and the next. It was like remembering a half-forgotten dream perhaps: faded, obscure. But once I gripped the smallest detail, the rest burst forth in its full horror like the rolling tides. "I lay on an island adrift upon an ocean of great darkness. The island was formed of shadowed stones... but the stones were not stones, for they murmured and whispered to me in a speech I could not understand. There was no silence there, no comfort, and the chill burrows beneath the

flesh and sinks into the bone."

"There is no difference..." He looked down at the floor and chewed his lips with a strange expression. "Beyond the shadow of this existence, more misery awaits. There is no oblivion, no cleansing... nothing changes. The Planes rotate... and nothing ever changes."

"Except you. You can still change."

He scoffed. "Nay, I have tried. Repeatedly."

"If you believe that, then it will be true."

"It is more than belief, it is reality." His gaze turned dark. "Have you seen this city? It rots, and everything within it rots with it... there is no hope, nothing to strive for. Everything is stained with darkness and shadow."

I looked around the bar watching everyone else sipping tea or meditating peacefully. "What about your beliefs as a Dustman? Isn't that a worthy enough goal?"

He nodded. "The Dustman philosophy is a worthy goal. Else I would not have become a Dustman."

"Then why not make the beliefs of the Dustmen your focus? Perhaps this is a life of pain and misery, but if you focus on your beliefs and that which of value to you, they shall help you work past it."

"Perhaps..." He considered what I had said. "Perhaps you are right. But... sometimes it is hard to ignore the pain of this life. How should I deal with it?"

"Simply try to live as best you can. Use this life, no matter how painful, as an opportunity. You are young. Perhaps seeing more of this life will kill your eagerness for death."

The boy fell silent, thinking. Eventually, he turned back up to me. "Your words carry weight, sir... and a fresh perspective. I will do as you have said."

I nodded. "That is all I ask... live, grow old, and learn. Farewell."

With money, spells, and a little more wisdom in the world, I was ready to continue seeking out Pharod. First though, I had to visit a friend.

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Mourns-for-trees smiled widely upon seeing me. "Ah, my friend; you've returned! Something you wished of me?"

"No, I wanted to ask Dak'kon to help you," I replied.

"One finds your request most intriguing," Dak'kon mused. "Trees, in the Hive? Like cities, in Limbo. They would stand as a testament to the will of the people not to bow to that which would surround and devour them; to take what has been thrust upon them or left behind and make good of it. I, too, will care for these trees."

Gleefully, Mourns-for-Trees put his fingers to his lips to hide his smile. "Look! Oh, look!" He pointed to the branches, "It's so slight you can barely see it, but look: fresh sap, from the trunk, and a handful of new buds. It's only a matter of time, now. Oh, friend, I thank you again for giving me hope once more."

I had grown to know these streets fairly well after a few days of running errands. Every once in a while, I searched Ragpicker's square for some hint of Pharod's whereabouts, spending one day picking garbage from dawn to dusk. There was nothing there as far as I could tell, but perhaps with three pairs of hands... well, two pairs and one annoying skull, the search would be over much quicker.

I was mulling this over as we walked through the Hive, when an agonized wail caught my attention.

Streams of tears had carved channels down the man's dust-covered face. He looked to be a monk or a holy man of some sort, but the dirt covering his body made it nearly impossible to see the man beneath. He was chanting and rolling his head back and forth -- it looked like some sort of ritual.

I approached him, "Are you all right?"

The man stopped his frenzied chanting and glared at me with his tear-rimmed eyes. He opened his parched mouth to speak, but all he could

manage was a withered croak.

I searched my pouch. I knew I had a rag in here that could be used for a handkerchief. "What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"I..." His voice was so hoarse that it sounded like he had been without water for days. As I watched, a tear trickled down his face. "I... am a Crier of Es-Annon."

I tugged out a scrap of cloth, but it was rough and oil-stained. No good. I sighed and looked up at the man. "Es-Annon? Who is that?"

"Wh... Who is Es-Annon?!" The man threw back his head and gave a rasping laugh; it sounded brutal and defeated. "Es-Annon... it is not a man, but a city!"

"Why do you cry for a city?"

His voice was hoarse. "We cry its name because Es-Annon must not be forgotten. All the Criers of Es-Annon carry this burden."

"You mourn a city? Why do you do such a thing?"

"Because its name is all that remains. Its avenues of light, its great spiraling parks... when it was laid waste and reduced to memory, only three-score of its people survived. It was our duty to see that its name was remembered across the Planes. Many Criers of Es-Annon have died for the sake of remembering... many..."

The man was mad with grief. "If it places you and the others at risk, why don't you stop?"

He shook his head, fat tears crawling down his cheeks even as he spoke. "The tears I shed, the dust that cloaks me... these things are as nothing compared to what awaits should I give up my sacred burden. We MUST see to it that its name is remembered. We are living memorials to its passage."

"If that's so, then what happens if you all die?"

A fresh tear sprang to the Crier's eye. Even his dust-caked face couldn't disguise his look of despair. "I do not KNOW. We Criers of Es-Annon cannot

mourn it forever... even now, the dust clings to our robes, the spit dries in our mouths, our bodies wither and die."

"Is there any way I could help you?"

"You are kind to ask..." The Crier shook his head. "Unless you can immortalize Es-Annon, there is no help to be had."

The image of a black stone obelisk sprang to mind, and I faced the Crier with the gleam of an idea in my eyes. "Must it be immortalized by a man? Would a tombstone serve?"

The Crier blinked. "Tomb... stone?"

"It's a stone that records a man's name, his life, and a eulogy. If it serves a man, could it not also serve a city that has died?"

He stared at me a moment, awestruck. "Stones may do such things?"

I nodded. "Yes. And their lifetime is much longer than a man's. If its name was carved on stone, would Es-Annon's memory be served?"

The man paused. "Would others see this name?"

I smiled. "Yes. It would be there for all to see, long after you have died."

The man nodded. "If such a thing were possible..." He turned to me. "Where would one find such a stone?"

"I know of one, I could see to it that Es-Annon's name is carved upon it."

"You... you... would do this? I..." The man's eyes watered up again. "You would be setting all the Criers of Es-Annon free. But a score of us remain... the burden of remembering would be over after so MANY years..."

"I would do so. I will return when the name is carved."

~~~~~

"I'd like to bury a name," I said to Death-of-Names.

He nodded, then unfolded his small hand from where it is cradled on his side. I winced at the sight of the atrophied limb. "Costs jink to bury a name. Three coppers, three."

"Hmmm.... Es-Annon." I fished into my pouch for the coin.

The coppers fell into Death-of-Name's hand, and he tucked his arm back to his side. His eyes, now suddenly alive, rolled to the back of his head, then snapped forward to begin scanning the monolith and walls of the memorial area with that same inhuman speed before.

He caught sight of a spot on the wall and quickly scuttled over to it, hunching down, beginning to chip at the wall. He stopped a few moments later, hopped up, then returned to me. "Buried." The word had a finality about it that was unsettling.

I ran a hand over the tight little corner of the wall. There, the name white and freshly carved against the stone, was "Es-Annon." A humble mark, but one that would hopefully suffice.

When I returned to the Crier of Es-Annon, he was still emitting choked sobs as he chanted the dead city's name. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. "I have seen to it that Es-Annon's name has been remembered. It lies carved upon the black stone monument outside of the Mortuary."

Suddenly, there was a brief whisper in the air, and the man's eyes dried. One of the tears that ran on his cheek simply vanished. "Then Es-Annon is served. I will tell my fellow Criers of the stone you have described. You have my gratitude."

"It was nothing. Farewell... I hope you and your brothers spend the rest of your days peacefully."

"You know, chief, as much as this gives me a nice tingly feeling in places I've missed for longer than I can remember--"

"I know, I know," I cut him off, watching the monk plod away, standing straight. It was as if a world had been lifted from his shoulders. "It's time to find Pharod."



## Chapter 26

The next day in Ragpicker's Square brought with it a malodorous encounter the likes of which I'd never expected.

Now, the Hive was far from being all blossoms and daisies. The air had a sulfurous char to it, thickened with the grating smell of burned oil and sour, unwashed flesh. The Hive was the festering wound of Sigil, decaying so that it was collapsing in on itself despite the efforts of the Dabus to stitch it together. The smell was of the rankled pus of the city, molding beneath a dirty bandage.

But this...

Dak'kon, in his quiet, cool manner had recommended that we ask the slummier characters in Sigil about Pharod.

"One must know the ways of a rat to find another."

Dak'kon was smooth yet iron-hard: a sword sheathed in silk.

A man had squirreled himself into a corner, glancing furtively at the passer-by. The man was looking at us with a strange, bug-eyed stare. His eyes were huge... so huge they looked ready to pop out of his sockets and roll across the cobblestones. He nodded eagerly as we approached, bobbing his head like a bird. As we neared him, we were suddenly greeted with the smell of urine and feces. I could've cut it with a knife and buttered my toast with it.

I tried not to breathe through my nose. "Greetings."

"Phaugh!" Morte spat, "Sometimes I think you relish in wallowing about this tripe, chief. This guy smells worse than a burst boil on a fiend's arse."

I breathed in short puffs. It helped, a bit, "You don't have a nose, Morte. How can you smell anything?"

Morte spat again, gagging, "Chief, I can taste it."

The man sniffled, wiping his nose on his sleeve, then opened his mouth to

reveal blackened, rotted gums. "Stories-for-coin, sirrah?" His breath reeked; it smelled like this man has been keeping rotten meat stored inside his mouth. "Stories-for-coin?"

I took a step back, "Who are you?"

The man snorted, thick with phlegm. "Names, names... who you are, who you are..." His head twitched slightly every time he repeated himself. "Names... dangerous, dangerous." He glanced at the ground and stirred the dirt with his foot.

"Dangerous?"

"Knowing a name or bein' stuck with one, both's a mess of trouble." He looked back up at me. "My name's a given name, not one asked for. Reekwind." Once again I become conscious of his reeking breath and the smell of urine and feces that surrounded him. "A given name, a given name."

I glanced at Dak'kon, who stared ahead placidly. The smell bothered him little.

Reekwind, eh? "Is that your real name?"

"Not my true name, true name." Reekwind mumbled on, his head twitching every time he said the word 'name.' "A true name's a dangerous thing, gives others power." He stared at me with his huge eyes and wagged his finger. "Keep your name secret, keep it close, never let it out."

"What do you mean?"

"Names are like smells... things can track you with them." Reekwind coughed, his eyes almost popping out of his skull as he did so. His cough seemed to loosen his bowels, as he broke wind loudly, as if to accentuate his point. "If someone knows a true name, it gives them power." He licked his lips. "The power to hurt."

A chill ran up my spine. Was this, I wondered, why I remained nameless? I should've taken Reekwind's words with a grain of salt; the words of an addled vagrant meant little. But in a city of addled vagrants, Reekwind's words cut deep.

"I don't know my true name."

Reekwind's eyes widened; seeing his eyeballs bulge even larger made me even more uneasy. "Then you are blessed, blessed. Remain nameless, and you shall be as a spirit on the Planes, untraceable, untrackable, unseen, undiscovered." He smacked his gums wetly. "A name chosen, a name given... it allows others to find you and hurt you."

A shudder ran through me: a vestigial fear, perhaps, of a long-forgotten terror that might've hunted me. Something I might've escaped from by casting my name into the lots of oblivion. "Have you been hurt?"

Reekwind gave a twitching nod, then scratched himself. "Let my name slip once, once, only once, only once." His eyes filmed over as if the memory was painful before glancing at me uneasily. "Tell you the story I can, I will, but three coppers must I see." His face split into a smile at the word coppers, and his reeking breath hit like a hammer.

My coin pouch was full enough. "Very well. Here's three copper."

Reekwind got into a stance, looked left, looked right, then faced me. His face clenched, then with a grunt, he broke wind again. The smell nearly leveled me, but he took no notice. "Cursed, I! Walked the wards in splendor..." He stood up stiffly, nose high in the air. Reekwind sauntered back and forth, nodding to invisible passers-by.

Reekwind froze, his arms akimbo. "Crossed paths with a crossed one. Had the looking of a pumpkin, his seeds, curses!" Reekwind then thrust his belly out so as to appear fat, slicked back his hair with his filthy palm so he looked almost bald, and began drumming his fingers on his 'fat' belly. He then walked about, circling the spot where his 'stuffy, upper class persona' used to be. "All-a-jumble with curses, this one was." With a sneer and a careless gesture, Reekwind tossed an invisible curse at the 'stuffy persona.'

"Knew my name, let it slip I had, I had, all it took, took it all!" He stiffened up again, inhaling deeply and resuming his 'upper class' persona. The persona suddenly crumpled, and Reekwind broke wind violently, then exhaled, filling the air with his foul, reeking breath. "Cursed with stench, smells, excrement! Came here to tell tales, all good for, all good for now. Now Reekwind is the name, given name, given name..."

Poor sod. I tapped my chin with one finger. "Can you tell me where I could find someone named Pharod?"

Reekwind suddenly hunched over and leered at me. He walked around me for a moment, dragging his leg as if lame. "A king! A noble tale, a noble tale! A tale I can tell, but three coppers must I see..."

The coppers clinked humbly into his palm.

Reekwind remained hunched over, staring. "Once a man of respect, Pharod was, a man, a man of goals, and position. All became nothing, nothing, turned to air." Reekwind squinted, then broke wind, filling the air with a gut-churning smell. "Turned to air... and stink."

"A liar, a cheater, a man who twisted law, Pharod was." He hunched over, as if writing at a desk. He 'wrote' for a moment, then suddenly stopped, afraid. "Then one day, he found that he had twisted himself!"

"Such a liar he had become, that when he died, he was to go to a horrible place..." Reekwind shook his head sadly, then hunched over again and looked wildly in all directions. "Pharod would not accept it, would not, would not! He had cheated others, he would cheat his fate, too!"

"He read, dug in books, and consulted seers..." Reekwind stalked back and forth, his hand over his eyes as if staring off into the distance. "...and they told him that only in trash could he find that which would let him cheat his fate." Reekwind broke wind again, then gave a reeking cough. "Perhaps they lied..."

Reekwind stood up stiffly, then began to fling off imaginary clothes. With every piece of 'clothing' he threw away, he became more hunched. "Pharod threw away his position, his goals, and took up a new title..." Reekwind stopped, then leered at me. He clawed at his rags, shaking them. "And became a King of Rags! He would rule the trash, have his subjects search it all, and find that which he needed." He shook his head. "He looks even now, even now..."

Sigil ground the high and mighty into the dust like a millstone. "Uh... do you know where I could find him?"

Reekwind shook his head. "He lives amongst rags and trash. There, you will find him, find him..."

Great.

~~~~~

The drone of flies replaced the cacophony of the Hive masses. One squelched under my hand as I slapped it from my neck, leaving a biting pain and an itch where it landed. With all the strange things in Sigil I'd seen the past few weeks I wouldn't be surprised if these things were demonspawn from the Seventh Layer of the Abyss or the like.

Meandering cautiously through the piles of trash, one thing looked promising: a wooden walkway hidden in a nook behind the huts and the filth. I had only noticed it out the corner of my eye as we dug through a mundane little region, previously unexplored. It was a place you wouldn't have given a second thought to... the perfect site for the entrance of a hermit like Pharod.

With the boards creaking underneath our boots though, things became less revealing and more mundane. Garbage was piled high on either side. Some of it was fresh: bones with scraps of moist flesh, half-filled jars whose contents still held some color and were yet to be touched by mold and mildew. Now and again I saw the corpse of a cranium rat, the flies just beginning to gather. This must've been a walkway for wheelbarrows so more trash could be dumped aside.

I looked around cautiously. This was a city where its citizens fought over corpses and thugs lurked at every corner. I wouldn't have been surprised if the scavengers of this square hid amongst the filth and refuse so that they could pounce on any unsuspecting, naive explorer. Funneled down this narrow walkway, it would've been a simple matter to outflank the three of us.

But nothing came of it.

At the end of the path, an archway led only inches into a small building before becoming blocked by a solid wall of refuse. The rubbish was packed so tightly it may as well have been stones and mortar.

Morte piped up, "Hold up, chief... look at this." Peering down, I noticed a number of dirty footprints that led into the archway... and did not turn around. "There must be a portal through here or something."

"A portal? How do we open it?"

"Haven't the slightest, chief. It's got to be a common key, though- look at all the traffic that's gone through! Maybe one of the low-lives around here will know."

Leaving was quicker than entering, and much more pleasant. How Pharod, once a nobleman or official of Sigil, could bear living in these environs was beyond my imagination.

~~~~~

A weasely-looking fellow was skulking about the garbage like a tattered shadow. Seeing me and Morte, he beckoned to me.

"Hsssst... ey! Th'skull. Where ye get the skull, ey? Me skull, it is! Give it backta me." Morte turned to the Hiver.

"Pike off." I, however, was more curious about this fellow.

"Who are you?" He ignored me, still staring at Morte.

"Skull's mine, mine, ey! Give it ta me, I'll forgit ye stole it." He mumbled, his narrowed eyes darting. I was getting rather annoyed with this fellow, and decided to let him find out for himself.

"Go on, take the skull." As if there was any chance he would be able to.

He chuckled dryly and smiled. As he reached for Morte, there was a snap! and the man's hand whipped back.

The man began screaming. "Aiggghhhh! Aighhh!!! I'll kill ye! Kill ye!" Morte was holding one of the man's fingers between his teeth like some macabre cigar. He spoke around the finger.

"Touch me again, and yer hand's gonna join yer finger, berk."

"Morte! Give the man back his finger." Morte spat the finger at the man. It bounced off his chest and fell to the ground. No need to waste any more time here.

"That's a hard lesson learned. Farewell."

The man, biting his lip from the pain, glared at me. Suddenly, he attacked! He was no match for Morte and myself, and folded almost immediately with a wound from my knife in his belly. I noticed Dak'kon, who had been silently watching, had joined in my defense.

I considered asking Dak'kon what he thought of my actions, but I was... apprehensive that I might find he did not approve. I noted for later consideration that his mere presence seemed to be having an effect on me.

Another man had been watching the fight. He was now whistling a cheerful tune and playing with a well-kept fighting knife. As I approached him, he stopped whistling and gave me a curious look.

"Greetings..."

As I spoke, he whirled and dropped into a half-crouch... though whether he was ready to spring at me or in some other direction, I couldn't tell. Dak'kon rested one hand calmly on his blade as the squirrely little fellow spoke.

"What? Speak quick, now..."

"I had some questions..."

"Well I don't got answers. Pike off!" I hadn't noticed it before, but he had a long, curved dagger in his hand.

I crossed my arms and made my voice level. "Are you threatening me?"

He smirked. "Why? Does Ratbone scare ya? Ya feelin' threatened, berk?"

"No, I'm not," I said, my gaze boring into his. I'd be damned if I was going to bloody my hands any more today.

"Heh heh! Figures, lookin' the way ya do. All right, whatcha' want from me?"

I looked the man up and down. "Who are you?"

"Me name's Ratbone, cutter. I'm a thief-fer-hire in the employ o' Sharegrave, the boss o' the Collectors ye see 'round this square. He pays me mostly ta learn his lads ta be real quiet-like, an' how ta fight if they runs into a spot o' trouble. That's likely the only questions I'll answer fer ye, cutter." He sniffed and shrugged.

I relaxed, "Thief for hire? Could you train me?"

He nodded and pursed his lips. "Sure, fer a spot o' jink. Been trained before?"

"No, I haven't."

"That's fine. I'm gonna cuff ye, now, so dodge it." He suddenly swung his open hand at my head, and I leapt back in time.

He gave a nod of approval. "Not bad, cutter. Now about that spot o' jink... fifty commons an' I'll see ye trained right up."

"Sounds good. Here," the coins clinked thickly into his palm.

I had already spent too many hours and done too many jogs between Mebbeth's hut and the marketplace for training, but Ratbone made things short and sweet. His lessons on the basics of thievery were detailed, but I found myself picking up the subtle nuances of the trade quickly. The stances and techniques were oddly familiar, like the handshake of an old friend.

After a long period of training, Ratbone nodded at me in satisfaction. "I must say, cutter - never have I run across a faster learner. I'd almost say ye've done this all before!"

I dusted off my hands. A good set of skills if I ever needed it, but for now magery would probably help a bit more. "Thanks, Ratbone," I said, and pointed back to the pathway. "Do you know how to get through that trash-packed archway northwest of here?"

Ratbone blinked. "Eh? Nay, I don't. Say... ye could ask Creeden, the Rat-Catcher. Sometimes he goes pokin' about up there an' disappears for an odd while. Creeden's usually in the Hive, right outside the Office o' Vermin and' Disease Control."



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"Oye there, cutter; well met again. Have ye changed yer mind? Come back for one a' Creeden's deeee-liscious ratsies?" Creeden piped as he jangled his rat-pole enticingly.

"No, not today. I had some questions, however..."

He shouldered his rat-pole casually. "Wot's yer question, cutter?"

"I was told to ask you about the trash-filled archway in Ragpicker's Square. Can you help me?"

He thought for a moment. "Aye, I know wot ye're speakin' of. There was a lass, name o' Nalls, who I saw walk through there, once, while I was lookin' fer rats. Don't know how she did it, though. Ye can prob'ly find her northeast a' here, rootin' around a pile o' lumber for nails an' the like."

I nodded, "Thanks, Creeden. I really appreciate it."

He touched my arm: "I see ye're leavin', cutter, but a'fore ye go, wouldst ye like a nice, deee-liscious ratsie? One for the road, ye might say?"

I winced. Might as well to thank him his help. "Why not..."

Creeden grinned from ear to ear. "Good, cutter, good! Wot sort wouldst ye like?" He pointed to each in turn with a grimy fingernail. "I got them baked, spiced, boiled, an' charred! All fresh, all scrumptious... and only three coppers for two!"

"Spiced." Maybe that might cover up whatever odd aftertaste there was.

I handed over the coppers and, in one swift motion, he ran a pair of spiced rats through with a wooden skewer, unhooked them, and placed them in my hand. I let up a small prayer that he didn't handle them with his grubby fingers. Creeden winked at me: "Enjoy, cutter!"

"I don't suppose you want one, Morte?" I asked, handing the other skewer to Dak'kon. He accepted it silently and dug in calmly.

"You really love taking me past my comfort zone, doncha, chief?"

The rat-meat was aromatic and quite spicy, apparently marinated in some sort of herbal mixture before being cooked. It was a bit greasy and rather rich, tasting of some... other... meat I was sure I had before. The man looked at me expectantly. "Did ye like? Wouldst ye like another?"

I picked a few scraps of meat from the rib cage, "Er. No thanks, we should be going."

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Iron Nalls was right where I left her. Gripping a nail with a callused thumb and bracing against the board with her foot, she yanked the thing out with one pull. By the look of her burly shoulders, she could've knocked out a few teeth on the backswing if I stood behind her.

"Hello, Nalls."

Iron Nalls straightened up and put her hands on her hips. "Back again, eh? What need ye this time?"

"I was told to ask for you about the trash-filled archway in Ragpicker's Square. Can you help me?"

Nalls nodded slowly. "It's a portal, ye know. Stumbled on it quite by chance, I did... alls ye need ta do is have a handful o' junk on ye when ye walks up ta it, an' ye'll be able ta pass right through. There's a small open space past the portal, an' a gate leadin' underground, but I figured no sense in askin' fer trouble so's I just turned around an' went right back. Here..." She handed me a handful of junk. "Use this, if ye likes. I was gonna toss it away, anyhow."

It was a few hours after peak when we returned, and the heat of the day made the garbage molder, belching up a vile stench. I covered my nose and tried to filter the air through my teeth, but it left a greasy feeling in my mouth. Now and again I spat, and a few times the wad would sizzle as it hit metal cooked by the afternoon heat. With the decay quickening about me I glanced back and forth. Not even Reekwind would've buried himself and hidden in this rot (though it might've improved his own stench). No, I was listening for the groans and creaks of a pile that might collapse and bury me

in its foul grime and juices.

As I approached the archway its outline began to shimmer. The junk in my hand pulsed, shimmering as well. The two auras pulsed against one another like a slow heartbeat in blue-white throbs and flickers of pale sparks.

I thrust the junk into the archway.

The wall of refuse flickered, wavered, and seemed to fold in on itself. With a familiar whoosh the portal opened, revealing a space beyond it.

That rat Pharod had better have my journal.

I stepped through.

## Interlude

Idly Oudilin Avariis plucks the strings of his lyre. A languid tune, sweet with regret and bitter with unfulfilled joy, keeps the crowd shifting in their stools in an uneasy silence.

You sop up the last few smudges of gravy with the last bite of a roll, and pluck the last tender mushroom from your plate. The fare was a bit saltier than you had expected, but still it is hard to find a meal this fine in the Hive. Better than stewed cranium rats, certainly.

"Well?!" G'mir's gruff voice breaks the silence. The little firebrand had hopped on his stool once again. "Get on wit' it!"

Oudilin clears his throat and flushes gold with embarrassment. "I must confess, good gents, that this was the final chapter of the journal. Only a few blank pages remain, and though I have consulted many a seer and scryer, nothing remains of the rest of his tale in this humble volume."

The snarls of the crowd could only be expected, but still you reel back and

take up a defensive stance when the mismatched throng set off pounding the tables and throwing mugs. Feral beast-men reveal their claws and demons snarl, huffing fire and smoke as eyes redden with fury. You only hope that no one is foolish enough to pull a dagger: once steel is drawn in a crowded bar the only thing left is a mass slaughter and some new bodies to warm the beds of the Prison for the Mercykillers.

Indeed, steel is drawn, but not by one of this unwashed rabble. Shara Six-blades draws a gleaming curved sword from under the counter and, with a hefty swing, spears it six inches deep into the surface. With the ear-splitting crunch of wood against steel, A hundred pairs of eyes turn to face a stone-faced marilith drawing out another two sickle-curved blades. Even the uppity G'mir seems to be thinking twice before starting anything.

Shara purses her lips and nods in satisfaction at the ensuing silence like a stern den-mother quieting her unruly children. With one taloned hand she points to the deva, "Master Avariis. You've performed well in this tavern for as long as I've known you, but this is the first that I've seen you act so crass as to leave a tale unfinished. Do you care to explain yourself?"

With a smile of supernatural calm, the bard fingers his lyre and steps gingerly among the shards of shattered mugs at his feet. With a silver smile and a polite bow, he addresses the crowd, "Apologies, Mistress Shara, good sirs and ladies. But the power is not within me to continue this tale. However..."

Again he pauses for emphasis, and a hundred craning necks lean towards him.

"Just get on with it!" a voice snarls from the back of the bar.

Oudilin coughs. "Ahem. Tales of the Nameless One have been scattered throughout the Planes in the years since his legend was flesh. Some are dying echos, a hundred times removed from the original source. Some," he gestures to the journal perched next to his seat, "are left as his true legacy, scribed memories fresh with his experiences and heavy with the corporeality of truth."

He leans over to take his chalice of tawny golden wine, still standing after the crowd's fury. The room simmers as he takes a delicate sip, enigmatic eyes glancing over the rim of the glass. "It was said that the Nameless One

drew suffering to him as a lodestone draws shavings of iron. The same can be said about that which bears his mark."

The crowd whispers as Oudilin sets the glass on his stool and scans the crowd, "By beginning this telling, I believe events have already been set in motion to draw the story to us. It is my hope that, perhaps, another might be able to pick up the tale."

The crowd shifts uncomfortably. Winged demons glance suspiciously at fire elementals, githyanki snarl at their calmer, meditative bretheren. A shaman, decked in a hundred rattling bones and strips of fur, breathes, and the air ripples in front of him in patterns that might have been of running stags.

Just when Oudilin begins to scratch his hair, suddenly nervous, Scii-tavakis dusts off her leather breeches, balances her obsidian-tipped spear over one shoulder, and stands. You lean back in an attempt to avoid getting poked in the eye by the glassy, bloodstained tip, but Scii-tavakis holds herself with an expert grace and a keen awareness of those around her. You feel that if she had to, the woman could've danced the spaces between raindrops.

"Aye, well, it seems that I may have to speak after all."

Though Oudilin still attempts to keep himself dignified, you notice his lips part in the slightest sigh of relief. He smiles, bows, and retreats from the stage as the elven woman steps up. With a harsh snap of her fingers, she points at a plump barmaid, who gasps and scurries off to fetch a drink.

"I care little for telling tales. Words do little to fill bellies and tomes are of small worth in trade. But when you race the desert winds of my world for three full days under a dying red sun, respite with good company and the sharing of stories is a good way to fill a still night."

When the wench returns, Scii snatches up the mug, and tilts her head back to down the ale in one clean go. Not a drop spills from her lips.

Sighing contentedly, she sets the mug down and fishes about in her belt pouch as she speaks, "I had little idea when I was crawling through the ankheg's burrow that the oaths I muttered would bring me to such strange lands: a city with a sorceress more powerful than any other, and many times more dangerous. These Planes are lands to be wary of, but they are still lands fat with water."

She smiles as she pulls out a small cube, "In time I took odd jobs here and about. Fetching this for a wizard, that for a sage. I stole an enchanted hourglass that told time in blood for one magus, then assassinated him for the very rival I stole it from."

For one who had no taste for storytelling, Scii was more than proficient. A tilt of the head accompanied every sly word, and sharp blue eyes glinted mischievously with her dark confession.

"I had spent three weeks in a verdant grove, searching for a strange puzzle-box for an aged sorcerer. I found it in a long-abandoned den, buried under age-old bedding of straw and twigs. When I returned to claim my prize, it turned out that the old man had died in his sleep. I kept the box for payment and as a reminder to claim at least part of the reward for my work beforehand in the future. At the time I had thought it was some odd, meaningless trinket.

"Over time, however, I began tinkering with it. A press here, a twist there. Some runes would seem to shift along the carved stone while others remained in place. Soon I became entranced, toying with it at night, coated with the dust of the day's work. Those who made clever remarks of a warrior working out a puzzle more often than not I left bleeding in the streets."

She smirks, and licks her lips as if suddenly thirsty for the savor of blood as well, "Soon though, I discovered the pattern." Scii twists the box in her hands as she speaks, pressing points here and there just so. The puzzle-box clicked with each deft flick of her fingers, which danced across the surface with a practiced precision. "And with each new face I unlocked, the puzzle-box told a new chapter of a story, beginning with a journey into a land where walls were piled high with refuse."

As the box twists in her hands, from a distance the surface of the puzzle seems to writhe, as if hundreds of ants were crawling over the smooth gray-green faces. With a satisfied nod, Scii-tavakis holds up the puzzle-box for all to see, the odd runes now arranged in clear, distinct lines encircling the surface and crawling at a readable pace.

"Thus continues the tale of the Nameless One..."

## Chapter 27

It's almost embarrassing to write this.

I had gotten so used to describing the foul, writhing stench of my surroundings at the beginning of each entry that now I had to pause and readjust myself. Down here in the cooler recesses below the Hive, the walls were dry and hard-packed. The air was stale, if not musty. Only the slightest whiff of garbage was in the air. I could have walked into a fresh, clean glade for all I knew.

As the door of patchwork wood creaked shut behind me, a dozen pairs of eyes snapped up to look at the new intruder. Collectors. Gutter-rats and alley-kin. These weren't much like their foolhardy bretheren on the surface. No, there was a shiftiness in their eyes, distrusting of outsiders and careful with their knives. These berks wouldn't think twice about sliding a dagger between my ribs, but they'd take care to do it out of sight.

A ragged, middle-aged collector approached as I walked in. "I..." He quickly looked us over and then sneered. "...don't know you."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I don't believe I've made your acquaintance, either."

The collector continued to glare at me, standing directly in my path. Trying to walk around him might not be the best solution.

"I'm looking for a man named Pharod."

"What yer lookin' for is no concern of mine, berk." He spat. "What is concern'n me is that yer still breathin' in my presence."

Part of me considered threatening to crack his skull, but I thought better of it. If I were really going to show my strengths I'd shower him in flaming sparks, but then again that would probably be a little too loud.

I stared him down. "Collecting bodies before they're dead sounds like a quick way to meet the Lady."

It seemed to knock some sense into the collector, as he turned away from

me. "Watch yer back, cutter. Most 'ere will talk to ya with their blade before their bone-box, and if ya stay much longer, I be doin' the same."

I snorted. "Whatever..."

The path through the Trash Warrens ran down a slight incline, and I was wary of where I stepped. Guided by curiosity, I prodded through abandoned shelves and nooks here and there, scavenging for what I thought might be of use. The path was long and winding, and several times we met a dead end and were forced to turn back.

After what seemed like hours of exploring, we decided to take a rest in one of the rag-piled alcoves. I took this opportunity and turned to Dak'kon. There was little I knew of our new companion, and I was hoping to change that if we were to journey together.

"Dak'kon?"

The pale githzerai turned to me, his eyes like polished coal; his blade mirrored his eyes for a moment as I addressed him, then he nodded. "What is your will?"

"There are things I would know, Dak'kon..."

His voice creaked like an ancient tree on a windy night, "I will hear you."

I had seen the man in action, casting bolts of furious light that devastated all that they struck. "Can I talk to you about your teachings? Can you teach me anything of the Art, Dak'kon?" I asked of my fellow mage.

He paused, considering. "Know that the way of the People is not the same as the Art you have come to know. It is not the energy that gives strength. It is knowing the self that gives strength. The teachings of Zerthimon speak of such things."

I nodded, digesting his words. "Would you teach me the Way of Zerthimon, Dak'kon?"

"Do you know what you have asked?" The texture of Dak'kon's blade flowed, until it became as stone. He raised his eyebrows warily, as if skeptical of whether he should teach me. "To walk the path of Zerthimon



you must know of the People. The knowing of such things by one not of the People is a difficult matter. There are those not of the People who have heard the Way of Zerthimon, but they do not know the Way."

I mulled it over. If this journey was as abstract as Dak'kon implied, I must prepare to seek the deeper truths in what he has to offer. "Dak'kon, I want to know of the People and know Zerthimon's teachings. I believe there is wisdom to be learned in such things."

He inclined his head, "Know that I have heard your words, and I shall test them. To learn, you must know the People. To know the People, you must know the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon." Dak'kon held up the stone disk in his possession and his spider-like fingers hooked into its sides. Often I had seen him meditating over it, mulling over the words with a steely gaze. He had read them thoroughly before: the man had never needed to mouth the words as he read. There was a click from the object, and the plates of the Circle slid into a new configuration. He reversed the motion, sealing the stone. "Know the First Circle of Zerthimon is open to you. Study it, then I will hear your words."

The small round stone was cool in my hands. The Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon. I marveled at it, holding the strange mechanical tome carefully, lest I break it. Wouldn't that be a nice thing, cracking the sacred scripture of my new companion and teacher. It was made up of a series of interlocking circles that folded out from one another; the complexity of the plates and the intricacy of their links proved the text was constructed by a master artisan.

I mirrored the motions that Dak'kon made upon the Circle, and the plates gave way at my touch, the rings sliding into a new configuration. Upon the rings were a series of symbols; the script was like no writing I had ever seen: it was a series of interlocking geometries, with circles pre-dominating. Yet just looking at it, I knew the symbols and knew I could read them. I looked it over as we walked.

"Know that we are the First People."

"Once all was chaos. The First People were thought drawn from chaos. When the First People came to know themselves, they were chaos no longer, and became flesh."

"With their thoughts and knowing of matter, the People shaped the First World and dwelled there with their knowing to sustain them."

"Yet the flesh was new to the People and with it, the People came not to know themselves. The flesh gave rise to new thoughts. Greed and hates, pains and joys, jealousies and doubts. All of these fed on each other and the minds of the People were divided. In their division, the People were punished."

"The emotions of the flesh were strong. The greed and hates, the pains and joys, the jealousies and doubts, all of these served as a guiding stone to enemies. In becoming flesh, the First People became enslaved to those who knew flesh only as tools for their will. Know these beasts were the illithids."

"The illithids were a race that had come not to know themselves. They had learned how to make other races not know themselves."

"They were the tentacled ones. They lived in flesh and saw flesh as tools for their will. Their blood was as water and they shaped minds with their thoughts. When the illithids came upon the People, the People were a people no more. The People became slaves."

"The illithids took the People from the First World and brought them to the False Worlds. As the People labored upon the False Worlds, the illithids taught them the Way of the Flesh. Through them, the People came to know loss. They came to know suffering. They came to know death, both of the body and mind. They came to know what it is to be the herd of another and have their flesh consumed. They came to know the horror of being made to feel joy in such things."

"The Unbroken Circle is the knowing of how the People lost themselves. And how they came to know themselves again."

I turned to Dak'kon when I finished. "I have read the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon. I want to speak to you more about the Way of Zerthimon."

He nodded soberly, his coal-gray eyes rigid. "What did you come to know?"

I was careful in choosing my words. "Strength lies in knowing oneself. I learned that once someone does not know themselves, they are lost. They become tool for others."

He gazed at me for a long moment, then nodded in the satisfaction of a mentor who has done his duty. "You have come to know the First Circle of Zerthimon. You not only see the words of Zerthimon, you have come to know them." Dak'kon held up the Circle and hooked his fingers around the edges. There was a click, and the plates of the Circle slid into a new configuration. He reversed the motion as before, sealing the stone. "Know the Second Circle of Zerthimon is open to you. Study it, then I will hear your words."

As before, I slid the plates into the configuration Dak'kon showed me, and a new ring was revealed. The ring carried the same script as I read before, with the same geometries...

"Know that flesh cannot mark steel. Know that steel may mark flesh. In knowing this, Zerthimon became free."

"Know that the tentacled ones were of flesh. They relied on the flesh and used it as tools for their will. One of the places where flesh served their will was the Fields of Husks on the False Worlds of the illithids."

"The Fields were where the bodies of the People were cast after the illithids had consumed their brains. When the brain had been devoured, the husks came to be fertilizer to grow the poison-stemmed grasses of the illithids. Zerthimon worked the Fields with no knowing of himself or what he had become. He was a tool of flesh, and the flesh was content."

"It was upon these Fields that Zerthimon came to know the scripture of steel. During one of the turnings, as Zerthimon tilled the Fields with his hands, he came across a husk whose brain remained within it. It had not been used as food. Yet it was dead."

"The thought that one of the husks had died a death without serving as food for the illithids was a thought Zerthimon had difficulty understanding. From that thought, came a desire to know what had happened to the husk."

"Embedded in the skull of the husk was a steel blade. It had pierced the bone. Zerthimon realized that was what had killed the husk. The steel had marked the flesh, but the flesh had not marked the steel."

"Zerthimon took the blade and studied its surface. In it, he saw his

reflection. It was in the reflection of the steel that Zerthimon first knew himself. Its edge was sharp, its will the wearer's. It was the blade that would come to be raised against Gith when Zerthimon made the Pronouncement of Two Skies."

"Zerthimon kept the blade for many turnings, and many were the thoughts he had about it. He used it in the fields to aid his work. In using it, he thought about how it was not used."

"The illithids were powerful. Zerthimon had believed that there was nothing that they did not know. Yet the illithids never carried tools of steel. They only used flesh as tools. Everything was done through flesh, for the tentacled ones were made of flesh and they knew flesh. Yet steel was superior to flesh. When the blade had killed the husk, it was the flesh that had been weaker than the steel."

"It was then that Zerthimon came to know that flesh yielded to steel. In knowing that, he came to know that steel was stronger than the illithids."

"Steel became the scripture of the People. Know that steel is the scripture by which the People came to know freedom."

I slid the plate closed, breathing a sigh and meditating over the lesson, seeking out the deeper meaning behind the tale. With the Githzerai, history and parable flowed as one, just as Dak'kon was one with his karach blade.

Dak'kon's gaze was serene, "What did you come to know?"

"I learned that not knowing something can be a tool, just like flesh and steel, if upon encountering it, you attempt to know its nature and how it came to be."

Again he nodded in satisfaction, a hint of contentment in his eyes that I was progressing quickly. "You have seen the words and you have seen beyond them. You have come to know the Second Circle of Zerthimon." He took the Circle and with a deft motion, he twisted one of the links so one of the plates slid forth - but strangely enough, the stone still appeared intact. He handed the plate to me. "Meditate upon this teaching, and the knowing of it shall give you strength. When you have absorbed it, you shall know more."

I read the slim plate, scribed with those circular runes of the Githzerai

language. The Scripture of Steel. It was a spell, one of a form I was unfamiliar with. Its powers drew from the meditative calm of knowing, so different from the rituals of Mebbeth's recipes. I looked over the chants, the three thoughts of the ritual. Though alien, the words quickly melded together as one just as the script of Mebbeth's recipe cards did, just as the circular runes of the Githzerai language did. With a haunting familiarity, I then knew the Scripture of Steel.

I blinked, and Dak'kon looked on, his calm, stony face unsurprised at the efficiency with which I absorbed the teaching. "I would still know more of Zerthimon's teachings."

Dak'kon's fingers felt around the edges of the stone circle, and he twisted it clockwise, the links clicking until they had settled into a new configuration. He then reversed the motion, resetting the stone. "The next Circle of Zerthimon is open to you. Study it, then I will hear your words."

I nodded, "I'll look it over when the time is right."

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As we went farther, we found the crevices and passages of the warrens were filled with the same kinds of thugs we had seen in the Hive – presumably low-cost bodyguards for the Collectors. I suppose it was too much to expect that the filthy rabble in these warrens would leave us be. But what else could I expect from a trash heap than a nest of rats?

They came at us in droves, gangs of ten against three in the hopes that a pincer attack would allow them to outflank us. We held firm as best we could, Dak'kon standing as a storm of focused steel while bolts of light burst from my fingertips, shattering against flesh and patchwork armor in a burst of blood and glittering motes. Ten wily scavengers came at us, and when the bloodlust cooled and the final sparks of magic fizzled, we stood over a mass of bodies and severed limbs. Blood was seeping into the stone and ancient masses of compressed garbage. The crimson pools did little to soften the crushed and petrified trash.

Dak'kon leaned against a loose and creaking wall of wood planks and rotting cloth, his breathing labored. Morte probed a loose tooth with a tongue. Compared to us, he came out unscathed.

"You could've drawn some of their blows," I scowled at Morte. Dak'kon looked to be only a few stepping stones from death.

He snorted, "Hey, it's not my fault they chose to go after Mister Moody here. I'm the smallest target out of all of us."

I grumbled. I'd have to gild him in coppers if he was going to help sponge up some of the dagger blows.

I shuffled over to Dak'kon. The warrior-mage's eyes were coal-gray, his skin a pale dusky yellow, thin and dry as parchment. I was bleeding from multiple gashes myself. One long dagger had punched a kidney, and no less than three slashes marred my chest and back. Yet the wounds were knitting at a remarkable pace. I would recover over time, Dak'kon would not.

"Here," I leaned towards my companion and mentor, "It's not exactly curative magic, but it might give you a bit more blood and breath."

He gazed at me with half-dead eyes, looking as if he was about to wave me off. Dak'kon gave a resigned sigh, and bowed his head as I traced a few glowing red symbols in the air.

"The years have not been so kind to me," he said hoarsely, "My blade has become slower. My joints ache with time's weight. I know this."

"Nonsense," I said as I completed the incantation, "Baseless recriminations aren't going to help."

"It was no recrimination," he muttered, "But an apology."

The thrum of sorcery shook us both as I touched Dak'kon's shoulder. I felt myself drain, my body empty itself of life like an old wineskin. My head spun, the world grew pale as my own life force flowed through the conduit I wove and into Dak'kon. The old gith shuddered, gasped, and his cheeks became fuller, his breathing easier. A moment of stillness passed between us as I swayed, groaning. Dak'kon caught my hand before I could stumble.

"See? You're faster than me still," I chuckled dizzily.

He said nothing.

Dak'kon had to support me as my wounds knit together slowly. I was hobbling along at his side, trying to keep my groans of pain to a minimum. It wouldn't do to attract more attention.

One path led us towards yet another dead end, but with caution and curiosity in mind I eyed the arch standing there. A portal. It must have been.

At a touch the opening flared to life, a blue spiral, wavering like a pool of water that parted two realms. Glowing wisps framed the gate, and a dark, recessed room was on the other side.

We stepped through, and nearly stumbled back in shock.

Rats. Dozens of rats, pouring from the corners to nip at our heels. Those bony spirals that grew from their skulls like plump tumors gave them away immediately. I remembered what Creeden had told me about them:

“Yer cranium rat, though -- brain vermin, wot I go after -- they're just trouble. When ye get more than a 'andful a' the little pikers together, they start to get smart on ye... sometimes real smart.

Ye run into more than that... more than a couple dozen... ye run like ye're in the shadow of the Lady!

Sorcery, cutter... sorcery!”

The way the rats held themselves, staring at us all as one entity with a dozen pairs of beady eyes, was testament to a sinister intelligence. Thoughts of communication were promptly cut off as a shrill, piercing scream filled my brain, rattling one thought against the next like dice in a cup. Already weakened, I stumbled, blood flooding from my nose and, by the warm trickle along my shoulders, my ears as well.

Frantically I snatched at the remaining spells I had prepared, tossing spheres of death at the heaving mass of fur and flicking, naked pink tails. As they fell the hive mind collapsed, and the shrill piercing muted to a dull buzz. Gathering focus and finding myself empty of any useful magic, I threw myself at the mass with a dagger, piercing one squealing ball of fur, stomping on another. The crunch of bone and flesh flattening under my boot was unnerving, yet oddly satisfying as the pain of their psychic assault fell another step. The small biting teeth were nothing before Morte's

crunching jaws and Dak'kon's blade.

When enough were slain the rest fled, and I heaved a sigh of relief. Standing our ground seemed to be working.

"Filthy creatures," Dak'kon murmured, cleaning his blade.

"Taste fine though."

Morte spat, trying to clear the fur and skin from his teeth, "Speak for yourself, chief. Bleagh! Their little feet are colder than a witch's teat or a succubus'--"

"You know Morte, I really wonder how you know these things well enough that you can pepper them in as details." I tugged off the still-twitching carcass from my dagger and tossed it aside. I wondered if the creatures ate their own.

Morte cocked in a skull-shrug. "Practice."

"Well search the room," I said. The day's skirmishes were taking their toll on me. My voice was becoming a dull croak, and the sense of vertigo from the rats' assault was still making me reel, "This alcove isn't here for nothing."

We had already combed through every damn corner of these tunnels. Pharod's hideout must've been hidden here somewhere. Perhaps there was a hidden door, or another portal, or-

"A stash," Dak'kon declared. Tucked in the corner was an unassuming crate. The layer of dust that had collected on it was disturbed by the patter of rat prints and the swishes of their tails.

"Looks like some berk left these for safekeeping. Probably dead though, if he's been gone so long that this alcove was taken over by cranium rats."

I shrugged, "Might as well help ourselves, then. We'll need whatever we can get." A pang of guilt ran through me as I helped myself to the goods. I promised myself that I would return these things if I could, or reimburse the fellow who laid them here, if he was still alive.

It was an impressive little collection, to say the least. A good purse full of

coppers, a strange picture frame of twisted metal, echoing with magic. There was a spiked mace, also magical perhaps. Two charms of healing, desperately needed, and a scroll. Excellent.

I helped myself to the lighter items first: the charms, the scroll, the purse, the frame. It was when I lifted the mace that I should've been more careful. Ah, if only I had but remembered my thief training, I would know of the cunning traps that could be placed, even in a hovel such as this.

An ominous click was danger's herald, and I slid the mace into my pack quickly. To my horror, a button had been left under the mace's head, and another under the end of the handle. I froze in shock, only to be brought back around by the clicking and light rumbles emanating from the box.

"T-TRAP!" I choked out, but I was a few seconds shy of saving myself.

A foul brown mist billowed from the crevices in the crate, a bilious fog a rusty yellow. I was blinded as I stumbled back, and for a moment I felt nothing. Perhaps it was a dud, or the venom had degraded over the ages.

And then came the pain.

The first whiff of the gas gave me the smell of my own blood, at first dismissed as from the nosebleed I suffered earlier. But then there was the burning sensation, a quickening fire that spread through my nostrils.

My eyes were in flames, and I pressed my hands there only to meet a horrifying squelch as those tender orbs burst in my sockets, the milky vitreous humors flowing down my hands and cheeks like thick, hot tears. I struggled, trying not to breathe, but gasping in horror I had drawn the poison into my lungs. I could feel the fiery flush of blood, a torrent of crimson liquid iron flooding through my nostrils, pouring down my lips. The burning agony was spreading through my skull, reaching my brain as flesh and cartilage were dissolved, eaten away as I reeled in pain and terror.

I tried screaming to my companions, tell them to flee, but the poison had already begun its work in my lungs. My chest was charred by the venom, the inner lining of my lungs had liquified to the point that the best I could manage was a gurgle. The molten remains of my esophagus and lungs spilled from my lips, flesh sloughing off like fat melting from a bone in a cook fire.

I was glad when death took me and the wet noises I was making were silenced. The flush of acid in my lungs had grown cold even as the gas caressed my skin. All I could feel then were the dribbles of liquid trickling from my nose and lips, and the thud of boots in the distance.

The world was still.

Chapter 28

I'm beginning to notice something.

When a body wakes, the first thing that comes to mind is light. Vision. The radiant glow of the dawn. There are the sounds of birds outside chirping, or the creaks of the bed as your companion or lover rolls over. Then comes tactile sensation: the cool air, still slightly damp even after surrendering the morning dew. After that, the crisp, clean smell of dawn. Finally, as you stand up a sour tang fills the mouth, one that you rinse out with a swish and a gurgle of water.

This is the serene dance of waking.

I've heard some say that sleep is the way the body prepares for death. A rehearsal, really, where the body slips into torpor and the soul slides to dip a finger into the world beyond, whether it's the scintillating chaos of dreaming (a concept I only know snatches of secondhand) or the strange burbling lands of the dead: dark, dry, and rattling with silent madness.

Maybe there's some comparison, maybe not. I've seen no light at the end of a tunnel, or heard the voices of my loved ones, if I ever had any. There were no angels or devils or winding roads to lead me to whatever metaphysical journey's end where my soul might rest. Still, I can see the appeal of the analogy.

Because when my body twitches back to life, everything is very much the

reverse.

The visceral senses come first. There's the iron tang of blood in my throat and the dry, foul must of decay on my tongue as the saliva begins to trickle back into my mouth. There's the smell of week-old flesh: sour, rank like a butcher's shop where the poor sod had lain dead for a week and his goods lie spoiled and crusted with fat white maggots and sour with mold in that time. After that, splintered wood presses against my flesh as the vertigo clears and I can feel up from down. Warm blood fills my cold limbs. My muscles ache, stiffened with rigor mortis. Then there's the buzzing of flies that accompany the hundred itches crawling over my flesh, and the lurid orange-yellow glow of fickle light.

I groaned, and with a clink of armor, a slight breeze stirred against my flesh. The feel of six hundred tiny feet tickling my skin floated away with a chorus of buzzing.

"Dak'kon?" I croaked. The light, pitched rattle of his armor was distinctive.

"You live," he intoned flatly, neither pleased nor disappointed.

"In a manner of speaking," I coughed and slid off the table, twisting this way and that, trying to flex my fingers. It would still be a few minutes before I could form a proper fist. "The gas... what-"

A familiar, annoying chirp answered me, "Stiff-as-nails tried to go in and save you. Guy got a whiff of the stuff, so when he went down I had to drag him the hell out of there. Got to a nice, secluded corner far away, too. Could've died if I hadn't stuffed him full of clot charms."

My vision was still blurry, but Dak'kon didn't even twitch at Morte's telling.

"How many clot charms-"

Morte paused, as if hesitant to say, "Eeeeh... six. And let me tell ya, putting them on his tongue without any hands is trouble enough. I'd rather not think too much about that."

Neither did I. Those things were expensive, but as long as they had saved a life they did their job.

"Dak'kon," I groaned and felt at my face. The cartilage had grown back, and it felt funny, as if I were wearing another man's skin, "There's no need to walk straight into the meat grinder with me... I'd be the only one that comes out again."

His tone was flat yet sure, "As you say." Sometimes I wished the man would react.

It felt like a stone....no, wooden....slab beneath me. It was rather apparent that we weren't in the Mortuary. There was no formaldehyde scent, no groans or shuffles of zombie workers. The musty sterility of death and the dust of time were lacking here: there was only the smell of blood and the rank stench of rotting flesh.

Where the Mortuary was a shrine of reverence and protection for the dead, this was a vulture's den. Corpses, hacked to pieces and their crevices and folds of flesh picked over, lay haphazardly in a pile at one end of the room and a tub at the other. Most of the blood had drained away long ago and crusted over on the floor in a thick layer. The moist flesh had crusted over and though dismembered, still, and silent, the corpses were teeming with life. At each gentle curve of pink and red, fat white maggots wriggled and feasted, while flies circled and landed in an intricate dance, both partaking in the repast and furiously breeding further into the silent mass.

This was going to be one of those experiences that causes one to never eat meat ever again.

A shuffling sound brought to my attention a blockish woman dressed in a heavy burlap robe. She lumbered about the room, her joints popping as she bent over to pick up objects from the various tables. Her hair was bound back from her head with a bone hairpin, and she had a sour, curd-faced expression. As the woman worked, she mumbled to herself in a sing-song voice.

I twisted, trying to undo a few knots in my back as I spoke, "Greetings."

The woman didn't appear to hear me - instead, she stumbled back to one of the long tables and began picking at one of the corpses. "C'mon, now..." She clicked her teeth. "Don't be all-difficult on Marta... he's bein' difficult isn't he, Marta...? Yes, yes he is..."

From what I could see, it looked like she was digging teeth out of the corpse's mouth... with only her hands and fingernails. When that didn't work, she pulled out a splintered wooden chisel and a mallet and thwacked at the gums until the tooth snapped free, then put it into a bag at her waist.

"Uh... what are you doing?"

Marta leapt away from the corpse, startled, and gave a piercing shriek. "Aighh!" She caught her breath, then hissed angrily -- at the corpse on the table. "If dead you were not, ye might have said somethin' earlier, false corpse, nasty corpse, yes! Haves you no shame?"

Might as well have a little fun with the old bat. Looting a fallen body on the street was one thing, but ripping and cutting it apart for goods was another. Kicking my voice up an octave and tossing in a ridiculous accent, I threw my voice, "You are the one who should be shamed. Knocking out my teeth like that... have you no respect for the dead?"

"Hah!" Marta put her hands on her hips and puffed up indignantly. "Likes you cared for yer teeth! All rotted and scored and syrup brown -- wonder theys hadn't plopped out of your bone-box!" She scratched her head. "Isn't that right, Marta? Aye, all rot and gone they are..."

Again I squeaked, "Ooooooh... you will be punished for your evil teeth-taking, Marta. I shall haunt you until the end of your days..." Next to me, Morte was biting his tongue and his chalk-white bone seemed a little paler at the effort to not burst out laughing.

"Hah! Yous hear this, Marta? Do yous?" Marta's face scrunched up like a wrung rag. "I hears it, Marta! I hears it!" With a grunt, she started pounding the corpse with her fists, making meaty thwacks with every hit. "Haunt me, will you! Take this! And this!"

"Ooooooh... stop... stop... I will haunt you no longer... forgive me..."

"Dammable deaders..." Marta took a deep breath and let the chisel fall to her side. "That's more likes it, eh, Marta? Yes, yes... corpse quiet... yes."

I coughed, "I am the one who spoke, not the corpse."

Marta squinted and turned. "Eh? How's you get over there so fastus?" She

mumbled to herself. "Marta, how did he do that? No glimmer, no glimmer."

Morte rolled his eyes "This gravebait's blind and near-deaf."

Marta was still mumbling to herself, something about corpses and gratitude, which I didn't quite catch.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Marta, did this one ask whose I was? Aye, he did, he did..." She started humming. "Nobody but mine, I am Marta, Marta the Seamstress... hmnnnn... Mar-ta - the - Seam - Stress... Mar-ta - the - Seam - Stress..." She turned away, back to the corpse, singing her name to herself.

"What are you doing?"

Marta turned back to the corpse with a huff. "I'm trying ta gets this berk to give up his stitchies and his teethies, and he isn't re-coop-erating, no, no..." She wagged her finger, as if lecturing a small child. "Stubborn as stone, isn't he, Marta?" She pouted. "Yes, yes, he is..."

I raised an eyebrow, "Stitchies... and teethies? What are you talking about?"

"Gotta pull the stitchies out, the teethies... eh, Marta, perhaps you could give me a hand... I have been giving you a hand, old battie... no needs to take that tone with me... pulling out the stitchies and teethies, yes. And the thingies inside."

"Thingies inside?"

Morte floated over the corpse she was working on, looking over the breaks and incisions, "I think she means organs. I hope she means organs."

"Thingies," Marta corrected.

Morte turned to Marta. "Yes, 'thingies.'" He then turned to me. "It's all semantics."

The crone's handiwork was messy, unlike the quick, graceful slices and stichings of Ei-Vene back at the Mortuary. "Marta, why are you pulling out the corpse's teeth and stitches?"

"Put 'em aside, Marta, that's what I does here." She scratched her head. "Aye, Marta, we do... stitchy-thread and teethies are precious, can be turned into jink-jink. 'Strip the corpses we bring ya,' they tell Marta: 'Pull out teethies, stitchies, thingies inside the corpse, strip 'em cold and then we'll sell 'em to the Dusties."

And I thought a Collector's trade was bad. At least dragging corpses to the Mortuary for disposal was a necessary function, this was pure scavenging. "Who tells you to do this?"

"Fat-faced gimme-pig Quint, n' the other crutch-hobble, hobble-crutch Fair-odd Pharod, innit that right, Marta?" She gave a queer smile, and nodded. "Aye, it is, Marta..."

I leaned in, suddenly interested, "Pharod? Where is he?"

Marta shrugged. "Where's Pharod, this one asks? He's heres, Marta, isn't he...?" She nodded. "Aye, Pharod is heres, Marta. One of the buildings here, he is..."

"What do they do with the things you dig out of the corpses?"

"Sell. Sell for shinies," she said simply.

I ran a hand along my belly, suddenly caught with the feeling that there was something caged inside my flesh. Whew knew what odd bits and pieces had found their way deep inside me with all the dagger thrusts and broken bones? Or perhaps I once hid something within for safekeeping. The feeling was like an itch in the small of my back, just beyond my reach, persistent, irritating, until I knew I needed some help if I was to satisfy that odd urge that had just come upon me. "Marta, can you dig around in my body for anything?"

Marta squinted at me. "Hmnnn." Then nodded. "Marta can do that, cancha Marta? Yes, you can."

Morte made a gagging sound, "I am not going to watch this."

"Where? Where..." Marta was studying me, as if looking for the best place to crack me open.

I gulped. Well, better start with the obvious, "Let's try the stomach, shall we..."

I lay upon the table, and Marta stood over me, a rusty knife at the ready. I closed my eyes and waited for it... there was a stabbing pain as she sliced into my abdomen, then cut brutally downwards in a saw-like motion, exposing my innards as skin and flesh parted to reveal my glistening guts. I made a choked gurgle, and despite the pain, watched in morbid fascination as she lifted up my stomach...

My vision slowly returned... to see Marta standing over me, shaking her head. "Nothing, nothing, found, eh, Marta?" She shook her head. "No, nothing, Marta, no luck... should we try again?"

It was some strange delirium that guided my next words, "Huh... huh... How about my rib cage...?" Instantly I regretted opening my damn mouth.

Marta swiftly took up a chisel and mallet. There was a sharp crack, as she split my ribcage open. I choked back my screams as she began to fish in my lungs... those sacks of air fluttering uselessly as I tried to gasp for air. It was almost too much. Cycles of agony, turning over like the seasons. Flesh parted and bones cracked and tendons tore as quickly as they regenerated. It was a mercy when I went numb, then blacked out from the pain.

When I awoke again, Marta was still standing over me. Her pursed lips matched the disappointed look in her eyes. "Nothing. Find nothing."

Third time's a charm. "Chu... chu... check the intestines... anything could be lodged in there."

"By the Powers, chief! Please stop!" Morte was on the verge of screaming, his voice rich with desperation.

And Marta held up that rusty knife again. There was a stabbing pain as she sliced into my abdomen, then cut brutally downwards, gutting me like a fish once again. I stared, trying to keep conscious as she hummed to herself, reaching her shriveled hands into my guts.

"Ah!" There was a wrenching pain as Marta lifted up the ropy mass of my intestines, blood and other fluids streaming from it. "Look at this, Marta...

look at this... I see, I see, cut there, cut there..." Marta made a small, deft incision in the side of one of the intestines, and I heard a tnnng as something small and metallic struck the floor.

"Urhhhk..." I gurgled. Morte winced and turned away. Dak'kon watched coolly.

Marta then dumped the soupy mass back into my torso, then reached down, picked up the object... a ring, it appeared, and she flicked it to me. "Pretty, pretty, eh, Marta?" She nodded. "Yes, Marta, one shouldn't swallow such a thing, no, no..."

I tried making sense of the slippery tangles, to no avail. Apparently Marta wasn't going to give me a hand in stuffing them back inside me. "Th - thanks... was... there... anything... else...?"

Marta shook her head. "Nothing more, more nothing, eh, Marta? Should we try someplace else, Marta?"

I laid back, breathing heavily and gazing up at the hard mud-brown ceiling. "Nuh... nuh... no more..."

Chapter 29

Once the initial disgust and horror washed over me, the ordeal of trying to make sense of the tangled, soupy mass of my entrails was more troublesome than grotesque. There was no pain aside from the initial incision in my belly (well, that and the medley of other wounds and tortures I suffered) and the deed had already been half-done. There was no way to stuff the fleshy ropes back inside my abdominal cavity in the manner they were originally packed. The cleanest thing to do, ironically, would be to just call it a loss and cut the rest out and stuff my own entrails into my pack.

Morte gagged. But strange as it was to carry around my own guts with me, it felt stranger to leave a piece of me behind like that. Who knew what a

necromancer would do with the entrails of an immortal? Actually, I didn't want to think about it.

This damn ring had better be worth it.

Outside I took a moment to gaze at my surroundings. Floor to ceiling, what once was a warren of ancient garbage carved like the tunnels of a termite became a cavernous village. Not a single brick of the place looked to fit cleanly atop another. Rather, the buildings had been cobbled together with anything that could be scavenged: rotting, mismatched planks, patchwork and stained tarps. And if the unwashed denizens of the Hive were grubby, the people of what I came to know as the Buried Village didn't even have the dignity of walking the streets above. This was a village of vultures.

A ragged man walked past, clad in patchwork clothes. He reeked of smoke and trash, and had a yellowish cast to his skin. I waved to him, "Pardon."

He looked askew at me as I approached, "What d'ya want from me, cutter?"

"Just the answers to some questions... who are you?"

The villager shook his head, "Ain't important, cutter. Slipped 'twixt the cracks too long ago - or maybe that was me da. One way or another, m'just another one tryin' to make a living any way I can."

"Well, I had some other questions..."

His voice grew slightly pitched in annoyance, "Make it fast, cutter. I got mouths t' feed."

"What are you doing?"

"Tryin' to make a living. What's it look like? Only I keep gettin' asked questions, and it's stoppin' me from that. You done yet?"

I said my apologies and went on my way.

Some of the villagers seemed to have a better lot in existence. Fortune was tough meat to find when living off the scraps of others. One woman with a lined face and decked in drab clothing looked off into the distance from where she stood. Her eyes were faraway, and there seemed to be a new

vitality rising up under her skin, as if she'd been given a new life. There was a patterned tattoo around her neck. She started when I spoke to her. "Eh? What do you want?"

"I just wanted to ask you some questions..."

She tilted her head in a fey manner, "Mayhap I got answers for you, and mayhap I don't."

"Tell me about yourself."

She smiled proudly, "Me? I got two names now, and I'll show you only one - don't want you stealin' the new one, hee hee! You can call me Radine, pet, and I'll hold this other name tight to myself, I will."

I felt the slightest stab of- well. I wasn't sure what. Need, perhaps. Envy? Looking at a blank-eyed villager walking past, with no past and no future, part of me knew that he and I were alike in some ways. Nameless drifters on the wind. I looked back to Radine. "Two names, eh? Must be nice to have them."

"Aye, poppet, it is," she said with a proud nod.

"Tell me about this place."

"The Buried Village?" she looked at the ramshackle buildings, "Nice enough place, I suppose, if you don't mind the stench of corpses being torn open, garbage heaped on the roof, and the constant scurrying of rats 'round here. Much colder with only a name and no number to protect you, that's for sure."

"Tell me about the number," I asked, glancing at the tattoo.

"This squirmy thing? It's an identifyin' number. It's my number, gave to me by a kind man who saw me cold without the protection of numbers to back me up. Now I got it and I'm happier'n I ever been before."

I leaned in a little closer. "Interesting. How does it work?"

"Safety in numbers, and with safety comes warmth, and with warmth comes comfort. Numbers can do it all for you, dearie, as long as you respect their

power."

Radine was a lucky woman to know who she was, and more. I was almost on the edge of asking her for her extra name, rather callous really. But the ache in me might've been filled with a name. Such were my thoughts until I met another village-dweller.

He was a drab man with a perfectly moon-shaped face, who looked at me without expression, and didn't speak. He looked as though his voice would've been as flat as a meadow.

"Are you all right, sir?" I asked. The poor man seemed even worse off than the other villagers, who had at least an inkling of who and what they were, "I don't suppose you could help me?"

The man gazed flatly at me, "I can barely help myself, but I will do what I can. What do you wish to know?"

"Tell me of this place. I'm hoping to find a man named Pharod."

Again his tone was flat, like the voice of a dead man. Dak'kon was a bard compared to him. "I know nothing of it. I do not know this place. I have no name. I have no number. I have no memory of this place. I am cold. I am scared. This is strange, to be so naked. I fear I will die."

"What do you mean?" I asked, but I was already beginning to have my suspicions about what had happened to the poor sod.

His voice was hollow, "I once lived in a land of metal machines and doors that opened at a word. I dream of the pristine metal cities and the empty shells that are our people. I had a number and a name there, and now I have neither. Like all my kind, they are all I have. They are all I have had of my own all my life. They were stolen from me. Without them I am nothing. I request your aid."

"You have it," I offered, but needed to confirm my suspicions, "Who has your name and number?"

"The one who used to be Radine. She stole them from me. I offered her the shelter of my name and number, and she stole them from me. They are mine lawfully and by right. Find her. She is in this Village."

Damn.

The woman had returned to her faraway stare, but her mind hadn't wandered as far this time - she was not nearly as startled by me. "You again, eh?"

"Radine? The man whose name you took wants it back now," I growled.

Her voice grew shrill and a pink flush came to her cheeks. "Well, he can't have 'em! He offered 'em to me, and I kept 'em. He never said nothing about no loan of 'em, and he never said he needed 'em back! He ain't gettin' em! You can go tell him so! He really needs a name, you tell him he can have mine... the name 'Radine' should be good enough for anyone!"

It was hard not to poke a firm finger against her chest, "It wasn't good enough for you... why should it suffice for him?"

"It's a world of difference between growing up in a name and having someone else's, dearie. A new attitude behind an old name can change it all. See what I've done with this one?" That mad smile came to her face once again. She wasn't going to let this go easily.

"Very well. I'll talk to him about it. Farewell."

The nameless man gazed up at me as I approached him again, "Have you located the woman with my name and number? She will tell you she won the name from me, but she did not. She stole it. I require my name and number. She is in the Village, somewhere."

I nodded, "I have. She doesn't want to give it up."

He paled for a moment. "She must. They are mine. She stole them from me. I request your assistance." It was beginning to sound like a mantra.

"You're getting it."

"I require assistance. Any assistance you give me will be remembered with gratitude. Please help," he pleaded.

Radine looked blankly as I returned, and then shook herself out of her daze.

As she did, the tattoo around her neck squirmed. "You again, eh, cutter? I tell you I won't give the name and number back. Tell you what - using this name and number's increased me fortunes. I'll pay good money for it, and he can buy hisself a nice new one, how's that?"

I shook my head. "I don't think that'll cut it. Give me the name and number."

"How about a nice twenty coins? That should tide the wee dear over 'til he can get a new set, eh? Be a dear and go ask him if that's what he wants for it."

"How about if I buy it from you, if you're so willing to put a price to the name?"

She looked at me as if I were mad. "Are ye totally barmy? O' course I won't sell me name!"

"Why not?"

"Because it's me name, berk! Ye don't sell yer name!"

"You- you contrary woman!" I snapped.

Her crooked smile faltered, but she still managed to make one, "There are worse things I've been called, dearie."

The despondent man looked up to me, a glimmer of hope in his eyes, yet he spoke as emotionlessly as ever. "Has she given you my name and number? She has offered money, has she not? I cannot live. Money means nothing without a name. Get me my name. Has she given it?" His eyes crawled across your face, watching intently.

I nodded, "She has offered money for them."

"No money can buy a name. No amount can buy a number. Coin is scant consolation for identity. Surely you can understand."

I sighed, rubbing my temples, "Yes, I can. I'll do what I can. Farewell."

Radine's face crumpled as she saw me again. "He has refused again, hasn't he? And sure you've come to take back what's rightfully mine."

"Rightfully yours?" it was hard to keep the fire from my voice, "You have no right to that name and number. You stole it. You don't need a number to live. He does. Even if it hurts you, you have to give it up. It will be better for both of you in the long run."

Radine pressed a few fingers to her forehead as she knuckled down and thought about it. Her voice cracked when she spoke again, "I suppose... you're right. I've been a bad person, sure I have, and I can't keep this. Here." She peeled the rippling tattoo from around her neck handed it to me. She shivered as she did so. "And you can tell him his name now. He was and will be Ku'u Yin. Now let me go."

I nodded. I pitied her, I really did. When you live in a world like this who wouldn't steal to make a living? "Here's some junk for your trouble. Buy something to keep you warm."

"My thanks, cutter." She pocketed the money, looking more drab by the moment as the magic of the tattoo left her. "'Twould be best for me to be leaving here, then... and with the aid o' the junk you gave me, mayhap we'll meet again under happier circumstances for the both of us."

I smiled. "Don't steal any more names, Radine. Farewell."

"She has returned your name and number," I said.

"May I have them?" His voice was hoary, his features drained.

It was then that the fear and the temptation came over me. Is this what happens when one's name is stolen? Was I destined to die little by little, drained of life and hope until I was a mere shell of what I once was? I wondered if the man before me felt that same wound deep inside the space where the essence of his being should've been. I wondered if he had terrifying dreamless nights where he'd slip into darkness, and that horrifying void of oblivion was just past the corner of his eye.

Already I could feel that stolen identity trickle into me. Ku'u Yin, of the Asekalar Circles. Ku'u Yin, inventor of the Seelic Glimmer and Dreamer Third. It was a new beginning, draped in the warm skin of another.

I kept my voice steady, but the words were hard to force out. "Yes. Your

name is Ku'u Yin. Take your number." I handed him the scrap of a tattoo.

Life and warmth trickled back into Ku'u Yin's skin, and he stood up fuller, taller, and his voice grew strong with the authority and power of knowing who he was. No smile twitched at his lips, but soft contentment framed his features as he bowed slightly. "I thank you for my name and number. Yes. Ku'u Yin. Yes. But no. I now realize I no longer require a number here. I will find myself a new number, if necessary. I give you my old number. It can help you. It is a mantle of law. It is protection. Do you accept it?"

I bowed politely and held the tattoo in my hand gingerly. "Yes. Thank you, Ku'u Yin."

"Let it warm you. Trust in it. It will protect you. Farewell." He turned and walked away.

With the tattoo on my forearm I felt a rigid aura wrapping about me, protecting me from the ravages of chaos. There was a warmth to it, a feeling of safety. It lacked the self-awareness of having a name, momentary an experience though it was, but the satisfaction of returning an identity to someone who needed it more was enough.

And so I made my way to Pharod's makeshift palace. The guard narrowed his eyes and looked my way as I approached, but said nothing.

"What's through that archway?"

He gave me a stern look, one that knew that I was trouble. The guard recognized me. "Pharod an' his court, cutter. Mind yerself in there, an' watch yer tongue; he's in as foul a mood as ever."

I had searched too long to be repelled by anything so trivial. I stepped through the archway, and entered the King of Rags' throne room.

Chapter 30

The recesses of Pharod's court were cooler still, the air cleaner. The musty smell of incense was light in the air, the slight smokey scent was barely detectable. Perhaps this place had been a temple once, or a library. But now the chamber, far too great to serve one man, was empty and gutted by the hands of looters. The slabs of stone that paved the floor thrummed with each step, and a mystic violet light wept from the crevices between. Long cracks had split straight fissures along the floor, and strange energies swirled like lavender milk between the planks laid haphazardly over them forming careless walkways.

There was greatness in this court once, and now it was a scarred shell of what it once was, its memories, grand or cruel, had been eaten away by time.

The throne at the opposite end of the room, perhaps once an altar, perhaps once a sculpture, was a stone hand twice the height of a man. Cushions padded its cold palm, and its fingers were curled forward gently like the loose grip of a dead man. The archway curled over the palm were decked with lanterns that gave off a lurid, orange glow.

"So I see you've returned, corpse." The voice was hoary and tired, but the room was large and empty, and Pharod's greeting carried over well.

I turned to see an elderly man leaning heavily upon a crutch; his left leg was twisted, as if he tried to walk two directions at once and paid the price. His maggoty-colored skin was bunched heavily upon his skull and is flecked with liver spots. He was mumbling and smacking his lips as his eyes made a circuit of the room, but ultimately his gaze returned to a stone sundial set carelessly beside a pile of broken stone draped in faded cloth.

"Pharod."

The man's eyes lit up as I walked over, standing before him with arms crossed. "Tisn't my steady crop of jink come to Pharod's waiting arms again! Greetings, corpse." He smiled a wicked grin. "Have you come to ask Pharod for another jaunt into the Mortuary walls?"

I had been searching for him for so long that I had a tough time thinking

what to say. "You're a tough man to track down, Pharod. I've come for information. I've been told that you know something about me."

"Know somethin' 'bout you...?" The light in Pharod's eyes dimmed. He studied me, mumbling slightly as his eyes flickered up and down my frame. "Corpse...? No? Yes?" His eyes meet mine. "Ah! No..."

"Pharod? What is it?"

Pharod was studying me with a dead-even gaze. "Tisn't a mummer's fair, corpse. No time for games, no time for Pharod to play the wheel... what are you asking such questions for?"

"I have forgotten myself, and I was told to seek you out. That you would know something of me," I said truthfully.

"Eh..." Pharod licked his lips; they made a rasping sound, like dry parchment on sand. "Now who told you such a thing, corpse?"

"Well, no one told me, exactly. There were these tattoos on my back... they told me to seek you out, if I ever forgot myself."

"Ah... so little said, so much told..." Pharod fell silent, and suddenly, I had a feeling that Pharod was dissecting me, like a corpse on a Mortuary slab. "I know much you would know. Much, yes. Much, indeed..." Pharod smiled slowly, the folds of flesh on his face peeling back like a curtain.

"What do you know of me?"

Pharod licked his lips again, then settled himself upon his crutch like a vulture. "No, no... not free, the question you ask." His pasty-white hands tapped the edge of his crutch. "Much I can tell you, but the telling has a cost."

I grumbled. "Go on, Pharod..."

Pharod tapped the flagstones with his crutch and sneered. "This village is not all that lies buried beneath Ragpicker's Square."

"Yes...?"

"Chambers, vaults, corridors... filled with the dead, all a-sleep in their coffins. Somewhere in those halls, somewhere there, lies something miss-placed. Something mine."

"What is it?"

"A small thing, a trinket, such a trifle..." As Pharod spoke, his words started echoing, as if two people were speaking... I knew I'd heard them before... from my own lips. Gently, I touched the memory, and it was enough for me to recall...

"...it's a sphere. Made of bronze. Ugly. Feels like an egg to the touch, and it smells of rotten custard. Am I right?"

Pharod fell deathly silent for a moment, then nodded. "Yes... how much do you hide from me, corpse?" He chuckled. "Did you return to see if I remember what it is I want?"

"Why don't you get one of your Collectors to search for it?" I asked suspiciously.

"Because the corridors need no more dead from this village." Pharod tsks. "Strong, fast, clever... these are qualities my villagers do not have. They go below -- they do not return." Pharod glanced at me. "Perhaps the dead will welcome their own, hmmm? That is what I think, corpse."

"Do you know where this sphere is?"

"Ah..." Pharod's sigh was like shifting sand. "And why do you suppose I ask you to look for it, corpse? I do not know where it is. I know it is buried deep, far deeper than any villager has ever gone." Pharod tsks. "It may be in the catacombs where the waters run deep, deep..."

"Very well... I'll do it. But I want to know what I'm buying with this trinket."

"There's a lot of knowing rattlin' around in my brain-box, corpse." He held up a withered finger. "One of them is this bit of wisdom: everyone wants something, whether they know it or not. There is much I know about you... much that you would want to know..."

I scoffed. "I doubt you can tell me anything of value, Pharod." The bluff

made me antsy. I needed his knowledge as much as anything.

"I've learned another priceless bit of wisdom... for you, I give it for free: A man is often wrong about a great many things, and a dead man is one who has been wrong one too many times." Pharod licked his lips. "Much do I have to tell you that one would consider of value."

He had a point. "Very well, I will see about finding this sphere for you... in exchange for what you know."

"Very well, a deal struck, a deal made..." Pharod cracked his crutch sharply against the flagstones. "A sphere for a peek inside my brain box. Now, corpse -- there is no time to waste. Go to the gate at the south and east and tell those slumbering fools to open it for you -- make haste, make haste."

"Hold a moment... I had some other questions for you before I leave..."

"Then ask!" Pharod smacked his crutch on the cobbles, as if passing sentence. "Come, come, corpse, time's short and so's my patience."

"When you greeted me, you said something about taking me 'on a jaunt to the Mortuary.' What did you mean?"

"You tell me, corpse -- perhaps the Dusties that live there are more to yer likin' than some sweet-bosomed wench?" Pharod tapped his crutch on the floor, the clacking echoing throughout the court. "Most forgiving of the Dusties, to let you stride in and outta there as you please, considerin' you don't have the decency to stay in the dead-book."

The image of those grim chambers came to me. Who would want to go there? "I wanted to get into the Mortuary? But why?"

Pharod scoffed. "Corpse, you were so bent to git in there, now you spill that you don't even know why's you wanted in there in the first place? Sometimes it's a wonder why the Planes turn..."

"What is this place?"

Pharod's eyes rolled in his sockets, scanning across the ceiling, walls and then the floor. "This here's Ill-Wind Court -- not a name of my choosing, thank you kindly -- and the kip outside this Court is the Buried Village,

corpse."

"What is the Buried Village?"

"Well, now, there's a story..." Pharod licked his lips again, then shrugged. "But to tell true, the story bores me. The short of it? It's a piece of the Hive that got bricked over one day, a piece-o-Sigil got penned in the dead book."

"What do you mean?"

"Y'know them floating goat-heads that serve the Lady, them dabuses? Well, no matter if you do or not -- they go all 'round fixing, breaking, burying, building all the time. D'you follow?"

I nodded, "Yes, go on."

"Well, as the chant goes... and a dusty chant it is too, being so old... them dabuses just damn well bricked over a section of the Hive one day and all bodies just forgot 'bout it. Dump a lot a trash onnit, and soon, nobody even knows it's here." Pharod smiled. "Wicked, no? A piece of Sigil all-forgotten?"

"How did you find it?"

Pharod tsked. "I still have my eyes, corpse, and I still have my ears, and when you have enough sense to tie the two together, then finding the dark of any matter is not as hard as some make it out to be." Pharod rubbed his filthy cloak. "Now, was there somethin' else you wanted to pick my brain-box 'bout? You didn't come just to hear 'bout this raghole, did you?"

My skin was beginning to crawl. Pharod knew much, but it made me uncomfortable talking to such a wretched, twisted figure. "When I awoke in the Mortuary, I was missing a journal. Do you know where it is?"

Pharod squinted at me, the folds of flesh coming down almost over his eyes. "A journal you had when we spoke last... has it lost itself?" Pharod chuckled dryly. "These eyes have not seen it... but keep them peeled, I will. I would love to read such a magnificent work..."

And finally, to the heart of the matter. The one question that many asked, that many wanted to know. "I heard you have found a wealth of bodies, Pharod. Where do they come from?"

"Does a mage tell the secrets of his craft? So it is with the Collector..." Pharod frowned, studying me. "Perhaps I will tell you... but you must promise that it is for your ears only."

I gestured, weaving my hands through the air. My fingers crackled with the small spells I had prepared, but Pharod seemed unimpressed. "Are you comparing yourself to a mage, Pharod? I think you're insulting the craft."

Pharod flushed nonetheless, and he tapped his crutch against the ground. "Collecting is as much a skill as any petty mageling can hold a copper to."

"Pharod, finding a bunch of dead bodies and selling them can hardly compare to the study of magic," I let the energy dissipate and waved dismissively, flicking aside the sparks with a careless hand.

"Was it not skill that found this place?!" Pharod's voice rose to a bellow, and his fingers tightened around his crutch. "It took sense to find this place, it did, and it took sense to make the most of it!"

I laughed, playing the old man like a fiddle. "The Buried Village? Come on, what's the secret of that?"

"Very well..." Pharod tapped the flagstones with his crutch and sneered. "This village is not all that lies buried beneath Ragpicker's Square."

I nodded, intrigued. "Go on..."

"There are catacombs..." Pharod gave the faintest of smiles, and his eyes gleamed like gold. "Places, black as pitch, filled with weeping stones and the precious dead, all a-sleep in their coffins. Sleeping..."

"Where do all these dead come from?"

Pharod affixed me with a lopsided stare. "Corpse, corpse... everything dies. Life is so short, but death lasts for so very, very long. Many people, many deaths..." His stare traveled past me. "Such a waste for their deaths to be useless in a Dustie's arms, eh?"

I raised an eyebrow, "What do you mean?"

Pharod smiled, greedily. "Not all the dead that goes to the Mortuary gate is fed to the furnace, corpse. The Dusties bury some of the dead in the city's bowels. Under the village... so near, so close... is such a place. I would have been a fool not to see opportunities..."

Worse than a vulture. A defiler of graves, one who disturbed the dead. Not even to pry the gold from their teeth or steal the gems interred with them, but to pick the bodies from their resting places and sell their bones like scrap. "So you rob the catacombs of the dead the Dustmen placed there, sell them back to the Dustmen and they bury them again?"

Pharod nodded, then chuckled lightly -- the sound was like shifting sand. "These catacombs are as deep as a Dustie's pockets."

"And as deep as the greed of man," I said, disgusted.

"Oh, yes..." Pharod sneered. "And the greed of man is something that shall always be counted upon when naught else is left, eh?"

Having satisfied my curiosity on all points except those that were of importance to me, I left Pharod alone to his shadowed throne.

Chapter 31

I decided to spend the night in the Buried Village, knowing that Marta would allow me to sleep in her hovel. Next day was soon enough to start on Pharod's quest. Besides, dying is not something one recovers from in an afternoon.

At the gate on the edge of the village was a massive human, dressed in castoff, patchwork clothing and reeking of old ale. He was truly huge - it was obvious he was chosen for this job for his brawn, not his brains. "What d'ya want?"

A repulsive man. Clever. Devious. But most of all repulsive. The mood set by

the name "Wormhair" was fitting for him.

"What lies beyond the gate?" I pointed to the dark tunnels across the bridge that lay on the other side of the gate.

"The Weeping Stone Catacombs. Lotsa deaders, lot of crypts to loot."

"Why do they call it the Weeping Stone Catacombs?"

He scratched his neck. "Lot of water drips down from above, make it look the walls are crying. Name follows."

"Pharod gave me his leave to go down to the catacombs. I need you to open the gate."

With that the fellow gave a curt nod and unbolted the gate.

Sigil truly was a city of disarray if, even when supported by a whole faction providing services for the dead, a village of graverobbers could be built up next to one of its ancient crypts. Urns had been smashed, offerings at biers looted, and coffins and graves were smashed and torn open for even the slightest glint of copper. The thick layer of dust over many of the broken bones was testament to how long ago they had been disturbed.

The squeaks and scuttles from the shadows told us that we weren't alone.

"The damn things have just about infested the city," Morte grumbled, "Eighty years ago they tried to eliminate the cranium rats. Called a few beast lords, a poisoner, a piper... each time the city was clean for two weeks, but after that the things just crawled right back. No one knows where they come from."

"Once the answer to such a puzzle is known, the problem can be solved."

I stomped on a rat and it crunched without a squeak underneath my boot, "I doubt we'll be able to figure that out right now. I'd rather just find that damn sphere and get this over with."

"Yeah, it's not like some random half-addled codger had asked for your help in finding the breeding ground of these guys. But oh what a hero you'd be!" Morte teased.

A distant, inhuman noise, half-growl and half-shriek, caught my ear.

"Keep your guard up. I'll keep ahead and take the first blows. Morte stays in the back and keeps an eye on things there. Dak'kon is quick and agile, so he can skip to the front or back with ease."

He smirked. "Tired of my sage advice and snarky commentary already?"

Finally he gets it. "No, but we do need someone to watch our backs."

Another cry in the distance. The noise was pitched yet subdued, and gurgled as if the creature's vocal cords were in the process of rotting away.

"Vargouilles," Dak'kon whispered under his breath, but if the word was supposed to mean anything, I didn't pick it up.

And yet there they were right around the corner: three of them. Vile creatures they were: heads fluttering in circles with ichor-dripping fangs and tongues fat and long like those of a hanged man. Flapping, membranous wings held them aloft, with talons tipping each jutting bone. They were chalk-white, ghastly, with screeches like those of a dying hawk's.

If I said these were the most horrifying things I've yet to come across, I'd probably jinx it.

"They are of the weaker variety," Dak'kon said sagely in his hollow voice.

"Then we fight," I growled, and threw myself into the fray.

The tactic was brutal yet effective. With my ability to regenerate torn flesh and broken limbs, I soaked up most of the damage as I was surrounded. Outside Dak'kon and Morte could flank and hack away at the enemies' backs.

"Be warned!" Dak'kon called as the heads slavered over my flesh. The saliva of the dead was thick and foul- with a ropy quality best left forgotten, "Those who die from a Vargouille's fangs arise as one themselves!"

"NOW you tell me?!"

Surrounded by Vargouilles, I was in a poor position to play to my strengths and lob bolts of furious doom onto the critters. Hell, I was saving them for something I thought was more threatening.

If I died, would my head detach and float around biting my allies? Would I be consigned to a fate of eternal damnation fluttering around these halls and attacking unwary Buried Villagers looting the tombs? "The Eternal Vargouille," they'd call me. "Watch out for the one that's scarred and ugly, as opposed to the ones that are just ugly." Well, at least then Morte and I would have something in common.

But enough philosophising... time to kill with something sharp and/or heavy.

There was no real weight to the critters, and thus my dagger knocked them away as much as it stabbed them. But bowled into Morte's butting forehead or cleaved in half by Dak'kon's keen blade, it was effective enough.

And then there was another chorus of screeches from down the hall.

Oh damn. Another fight...

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One arm hung uselessly at my side as I lay against the wall. The ancient stone was damp and cold, and the rubble itself was moist with stray trickles and condensation. A large hunk of flesh had been torn from my bicep by hungry fangs, and slowly the pink flesh beneath was knitting together. If I looked closely I could see the pulse of blood flowing through the tissue.

I chose not to look closely.

Morte made a clicking sound with his tongue, "Damn. That hurt, chief?"

"They severed the nerve," I said flatly. Perhaps I was being stingy with the blood charms, but all I needed was a few hours and I'd be in top condition again. Those were best saved for Morte or Dak'kon.

"While we're waiting..." I cleared my throat, "...Dak'kon?"

"What is your will?" he intoned.

"Perhaps this downtime would be good for me to study up on the Circle of Zerthimon."

Dak'kon stared at me a moment and, with a simple utilitarian nod, slid the plates into the proper configuration for me. I accepted it with my functional hand, and Dak'kon leaned back with his Zerth blade laid across his lap. Looking down at it he entered a focused, meditative trance. The black-edged blade became smoky, rippling until it became clear as polished glass and keen as thought itself. Again it rippled, and the blade took on an obsidian hue with fierce, serrated fangs lining the edge.

Leaving Dak'kon to his mental exercises, I began to read.

"Zerthimon labored many turnings for the illithid Arlathii Twice-Deceased and his partnership in the cavernous heavens of the False Worlds. His duties would have broken the backs of many others, but Zerthimon labored on, suffering torment and exhaustion."

"It came to pass that the illithid Arlathii Twice-Deceased ordered Zerthimon before him in his many-veined galleria. He claimed that Zerthimon had committed slights of obstinance and cowardice against his partnership. The claim had no weight of truth, for Arlathii only wished to know if flames raged within Zerthimon's heart. He wished to know if Zerthimon's heart was one of a slave or of a rebel."

"Zerthimon surrendered to the illithid punishment rather than reveal his new-found strength. He knew that were he to show the hatred in his heart, it would serve nothing, and it would harm others that felt as he. He chose to endure the punishment and was placed within the Pillars of Silence so he might suffer for a turning."

"Lashed upon the Pillars, Zerthimon moved his mind to a place where pain could not reach, leaving his body behind. He lasted a turning, and when he was brought before Arlathii Twice-Deceased, he gave gratitude for his punishment to the illithid as was custom. In so doing, he proved himself a slave in the illithid eyes while his heart remained free."

"By enduring and quenching the fires of his hatred, he allowed Arlathii Twice-Deceased to think him weak. When the time of the Rising came, Arlathii was the first of the illithid to \*know\* death by Zerthimon's hand and die a third death."

I looked up. I was hesitant to disturb Dak'kon in the middle of his meditation, but he noticed my flickering gaze. "Er... I have read the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon. I want to speak to you more about the Way of Zerthimon."

He took the blade up from his lap and gave me his full attention, "What did you come to know?"

The moral of the story was simple. It was a prayer I had heard Dak'kon utter many times in battle, "Endure. In enduring, grow strong."

The words seemed to strike Dak'kon strangely... as I spoke them, his forehead creased, then resettled into its normal passive expression.

"Your will has brought you the knowing of the Third Circle of Zerthimon. With this knowing, I impart this to you." He took the Circle and with a deft motion, twisted one of the links so one of the plates slid forth. He handed the plate to me. "Meditate upon its teachings, and the knowing of it shall give you strength."

"Very well... I will study this Circle. Is there more you can teach me?"

As I asked the words, I suddenly noticed that Dak'kon wasn't looking at me. He was holding the Unbroken Circle in his hands, studying it. His blade had taken on the same texture as the Unbroken Circle... and Dak'kon suddenly seemed older somehow.

"Dak'kon?"

Dak'kon's black eyes rose from the Circle and looked at me. "Know that I did not believe you would come to know the teachings of the Circle. It is... a difficult path you will walk in learning the Way of Zerthimon. Is your mind focused on this matter?"

I nodded, "Yes. I wish to learn more."

Dak'kon's fingers felt around the edges of the stone circle, and he twisted it clockwise, the links clicking until they have settled into a new configuration. He handed it to me as it was. "The next Circle of Zerthimon is open to you. Study it, then I will hear your words."

I glanced at the plate he had given me before looking over the new circle... a meditation that would grant me the strength Zerthimon took with him in his year of punishment. "Thanks. Get some rest. It may take me a while to meditate on this."

Again he nodded, and leaned back with his Zerth blade held in the crook of his arm. Eyes closed, features placid, I could never tell if he truly was asleep or not.

I began to read.

"Know that the Rising of the People against the illithid was a thing built upon many ten-turnings of labor. Many of the People were gathered and taught in secret the ways of defeating their illithid masters. They were taught to shield their minds, and use them as weapons. They were taught the scripture of steel, and most importantly, they were given the knowing of freedom."

"Some of the People learned the nature of freedom and took it into their hearts. The knowing gave them strength. Others feared freedom and kept silent. But there were those that knew freedom and knew slavery, and it was their choice that the People remain chained. One of these was Vilquar."

"Vilquar saw no freedom in the Rising, but opportunity. He saw that the illithid had spawned across many of the False Worlds. Their Worlds numbered so many that their vision was turned only outwards, to all they did not already touch. Vilquar's eye saw that much took place that the illithid did not see. To the Rising, the illithid were blinded."

"Vilquar came before his master, the illithid Zhijitaris, with the knowing of the Rising. Vilquar added to his chains and offered to be their eyes against the Rising. In exchange, Vilquar asked that he be rewarded for his service. The illithid agreed to his contract."

"At the bonding of the contract, a dark time occurred. Many were the betrayals Vilquar committed and many were the People that the illithids fed upon to stem the Rising. It seemed that the Rising would die before it could occur, and the illithid were pleased with Vilquar's eye."

"It was near the end of this dark time when Zerthimon came to know

Vilquar's treacheries. In knowing Vilquar's eye, Zerthimon forced the Rising to silence itself, so that Vilquar might think at last his treacheries had succeeded, and the Rising had fallen. He knew that Vilquar's eye was filled only with the reward he had been promised. He would see what he wished to see."

"With greed beating in his heart, Vilquar came upon the illithid Zhijitaris and spoke to his master of his success. He said that the Rising had fallen, and the \*illithids\* were safe to turn their eyes outwards once more. He praised their wisdom in using Vilquar's eye, and he asked them for his reward."

"In his greed-blindness, Vilquar had forgotten the knowing of why the People had sought freedom. He had lost the knowing of what slavery meant. He had forgotten what his illithid masters saw when they looked upon him. And so Vilquar's betrayal of the People was ended with another betrayal. Vilquar came to know that when Vilquar's eye had nothing left to see, Vilquar's eye was useless."

"The illithid gave to Vilquar his reward, opening the cavity of his skull and devouring his brain. Vilquar's corpse was cast upon the Fields of Husks so its blood might water the poison-stemmed grasses."

"I never understood how you could bear to read that junk," Morte grumbled.

"Go to sleep, Morte," I paused, "On second thought, why don't we talk. It's been a while since we just chatted." Might as well keep him awake as long as I could... his snoring might've lured some more Vargouilles our way and I was already short one working arm.

He clicked his teeth eagerly, "Well, in that case, let me tell you about the time I worked for the Archwizard Khelebak. Now this guy was getting on in years, and stingy as a goat, though really in the sense that I can't think of a good analogy for either of these things right now. Anyways, he set me up on a shelf as a cheap burglar alarm, and one day this cute elvish rogue decided she'd try a robbery with as little encumbering her as possible..."

Ten agonizing minutes later he was snoring away tucked inside a rag-filled sack with our packs piled on top.

I whittled away the hours reading over my makeshift tome bleary-eyed,

copying the new spell and memorizing others, practicing the basic exercises of magery: focus, gesture, chant. Focus, gesture, chant.

In between the arduous tasks of preparing my spells, I looked at my companions and wondered how it came to this: a nameless wanderer followed happily by a floating skull and an aging Githzerai that looked as if he'd be more at home in a monastery than risking his bones in a dank crypt as this. I was grateful for my companions, true, but at times like this I had to wonder what made me so fortunate, or what made them so cursed or daft to join me.

With a sign, Dak'kon's eyelids lifted. He nonchalantly glanced at the snoring pile of goods, then looked to me. Sitting up straight as a spear, the man was all business and discipline.

"What have you come to know?"

I had thought about this long and hard. "When one chooses to see only what is before them, they see only a part of the whole. They are blind. And just as Vilquar was blinded by his promised reward, so were the illithids blinded to the true Rising. For when they heard Vilquar's words, they turned their sight outwards again, didn't they? And the Rising was free to strike?"

Dak'kon nodded, "Know that you speak truly. Vilquar's Eye blinded both Vilquar and the illithids. The tentacled ones thought the Rising to be no more. When the Rising occurred, the ground drank deep of illithid blood. So was victory born from treachery."

I stroked my chin, "It is a curious lesson. Why would it be part of the teachings of Zerthimon?"

Dak'kon's blade bled into a dead, night-black, and his voice deepened - for a moment, I thought he was angry, but I was unsure. "There is much about the Way of Zerthimon and his path that is difficult to know."

"Do you know why Vilquar's Eye is part of the Way of Zerthimon?"

"It is part of the telling of how our People came to know freedom. It lets us know that there are those, even among the People, who are not of the People. And that even in the greatest treachery, a greater knowing may be achieved."

I nodded, "Very well."

"You have come to know the Fourth Circle of Zerthimon." He took the Circle and with a deft motion, he twisted one of the links so one of the plates slid forth. He handed the plate to me. "Meditate upon its teachings, and the knowing of it shall give you strength."

"Thanks, Dak'kon."

## Interlude

The Harmonium guard Mikon growls, "You're telling me that a den of robbers and thieves is living right under our noses? And stealing from graves?!"

You roll your eyes and sip your next drink slowly. While many had milled in and out to relieve themselves, doing so now would all but forfeit your seat at the bar. Perhaps you could offer Mikon a gold piece to keep watch over your seat, but fewer breaks means more gold saved.

The man truly is a new recruit. The Harmonium may have conquered and pacified a few worlds, but no police force could root out all the criminals and lowlifes from the Hive. Poverty would simply breed more, even if the Free League and Xaositects didn't send the Hardheads scurrying. Then again, all the bloodshed in the streets would surely attract the Lady, and Factol Sarin is much too sensible to...

In the background, Oudilin strums his harp. Throughout the tale he had moved from a quirky strum when Scii-tavakis spoke of the Buried Village, to a calm, wistful tune through the exploration of the crypt. The song played like a forgotten memory, interrupted only by a dramatic crescendo each time Scii described battles and fights in full, gory detail. The woman was a bloodthirsty little savage.



The elf purses her lips and toys with her spear. Crouched over and catlike on the stool, Scii looks ready to heft the obsidian tip straight through Mikon's Clueless skull.

"In the world I hail from, it is quite rude to interrupt a telling. Worthy of slitting a man from navel to nose, in fact," she cocks her head and grins madly. Bloodthirsty indeed.

Oudilin's fingers dance across the strings, strumming a tense, dramatic tune. In his corner he cocks his head and smiles as a few patrons chuckle.

"But if you truly are curious," she continues, casually setting aside her threat, "I did visit the dingy corner of the Hive soon after decoding the Puzzle Box. This long after the Nameless One walked these streets, one can only expect that much has changed, however. Pharod's name had been long forgotten in the Buried Village, and the Dustmen had reinforced the crypts with deadly protective wards. All that remains is a hidden alcove where madmen and vagrants hide, visited occasionally by the Bleak Cabal."

Mikon leans back and grumbles something under his breath about arresting the woman for threatening a keeper of the peace. But by himself and with only two hands to wield his swords, it was doubtful that he could fight off the furious mob that would form if he did so.

Scii-tavakis pauses to see if there were any other protests she could quell with a death threat. Hearing nothing she continues, "Now, I was never one for philosophizing, so let us skip ahead to something more interesting..."

## Chapter 32

I've fought against gangs, hordes, and flocks. If you're good with a blade and happen to have the ability to tap into the fabric of the cosmos and bend the laws of physics to your will, all it takes is a few bolts of focused rage or a chromatic orb, and the crowd scatters like chaff on the wind. Of course, this strategy depends on the fact that your enemies can feel fear.

So it's quite easy to conclude that undead are another manner of beast entirely.

Individually, each one of us was a seasoned enough warrior that we could handle a couple of Vargouilles ourselves. With a makeshift phalanx, the winged beasts faced us head-on, unable to flank or surround any one of us completely. Those that tried to fly past risked a severed wing.

And when the last Vargouille fell, the path was open to us.

We entered....what I could only describe as some kind of butchery. The metal gratings of this alcove were crusted over with old, dried blood, as if this room had been used to store the leavings of a charnel house. I could imagine the floor covered with splayed severed limbs and gutted torsos. If this was a warehouse of flesh, perhaps the initial waste disposal for Marta's chamber of horrors, then it has seen frequent and recent use. The stench of rotting meat was thick in the air, and scuttling sounds rose from the darkness below.

The sanguine decor also served to hide the triggers for some traps in the metalwork.

While the coffin at the end of the chamber yielded only a grotesque collection of limbs (who the hell wanted to store such things?!) stomping on the flanking metal grating a little yielded a passageway down.

Yep. Just as bad as I expected.

Within seconds I found myself doubled over in the corner, spilling my guts into a puddle of what once had been blood, time and filth had transformed the crimson pool into a ruddy, foul-smelling ooze. The sight of yellow vomit splashing into that mass set my stomach spasming once again.

"Oh good gods- HURGKKK!!!" Splash.

The chain reaction had me going until I was weak in the knees and trembling. Trying not to look at the mess on the floor, I spat the remnants of my last meal against the wall. Even Dak'kon looked queasy. Then again the yellow pallor was natural for him.

"Ugh. Chief, I really really hope we don't have to dig through this stuff to find that sphere of yours," Morte took another look around, "And by 'we' I mean you." I pushed the thought of the crimson midden heap from my mind. No one could be cruel enough to order Morte to dig through that with his teeth.

I can't think of anyone who would willingly descend into this gore pit. As Morte would describe it later, by the look of things it was "Sigil's rotting cootch at that time of the month." Yet something drew me here, as if I were led on a string.

And that's when I saw the corpse.

The features and flesh had rotted beyond recognition, but by his garb the man was a thug. By the hair and bone remaining, certainly wasn't human. More than that though, the man was out of place here: his body hadn't been picked over, stripped, and dismembered. What caused his death I couldn't be sure, but I knew there were at least some clues I could find. I sifted through his belongings.

A bird's claw, dried into a husk and enchanted as a wand, and a severed arm. The former was a simple matter of identification. The latter... was intriguing.

Petrified, scarred, and gray with age, the arm looked as if it were a fitting club. Now, at least, I can chuckle at the thought that "I'll rip your arm off and beat you to death with it" could, in fact, be a genuine threat. Intricate tattoos spiraled up from the wrist and onto the shoulder, beautiful patterns that had been drawn with care. I ran my hand along that mummified limb... I should take this to Fell when I can.

Morte disagreed. "Gross."

Thankfully the next chamber we explored, the Mosaic Tomb, was much less interesting. A poison trap or two, a simple enchanted hammer (which would probably fetch a good price), and a few coins and we were set.

Perhaps I should feel a little guilty about taking these treasures from their resting places, but necessity guided my hand. Perhaps I was too quick to judge Pharod and his ilk. Then again, I don't plan on peddling bones and manhandling the dead themselves.

It was when I was traveling down one corridor that things got really interesting.

I had yet to meet any real life in these catacombs, with the exception of the cranium rats. Most of the things that moved bit, fought, or snarled, undead born of the otherworldly stirrings of dark and dismal planes beyond. You can't exactly have a friendly conversation with any of 'em. Of course, I was exploring with an eerily quiet warrior-mage and a skull who turned inane, mindless chatter into an art.

So of course I was surprised when the walls started talking to me.

Down one of the corridors the stone sweated with the damp air, and stale, moldy-smelling water flowed along the cracks. Over the years they had carved deep runnels into the walls. The carved stone faces that decorated the tomb, perhaps as guardians or watchers, were heavily scarred by their ceaseless weeping.

As I passed one of the twisted stone faces on the walls, it called out to me in a creaking voice that sounded like the shifting of boulders. Its voice was a slow groan, as if it wearily struggled to force out each word, "Immortal... regard me. I am... Glyve. I would have... words with you."

I jumped, "WH-- H-How did you know I'm immortal?"

"I see... a burning purpose... within your shell. I see... many things in the falling... dust of these... tunnels. You lack... something essential... and that keeps you... from death's sweet embrace."

Regaining my composure, I straightened up and listened. There were stranger things in the Planes, after all. "What did you want to say to me?"

"Listen: This place holds... much danger for you. Treachery awaits you... on the surface... and your way is... long and winding. At the end... you will find... what you have sought... but you may not ... want it then."

I blinked. "Are you some sort of oracle?"

"Oracle? No... I observe. That is all."

"In that case, perhaps you can answer some questions I had..."

"What... did you want... to know?"

I looked around. "What can you tell me of the catacombs around us?"

"The catacombs were carved... eons ago... to house the dead of the city... who did not wish ... the tender ministrations of the Dustmen. They have become... the refuse ground of the city... where dwell monsters barely seen... where humans prowl like... scavengers among the scavengers. Many-as-One patrols these tunnels... and has turned many against ... their natures. The Dead Nations... prowl as well... guarding against... the depredations of ... the humans ... who come among them."

A nation of the dead protecting these catacombs? Fascinating. "Tell me of the Dead Nations."

"The dead... have achieved life... in their own way. They rule... a portion of these... catacombs. They struggle with... Many-as-One... for the heart of these... tunnels."

"Tell me of Many-as-One."

"You have heard... of cranium rats? When they gather... they become more powerful... a shared mind. They and their servants... wererats... seek mastery... of these undertunnels. They war with ... the Dead Nations." Yech. Best to stay away from those things then.

"Tell me of yourself. How did you come to be in this situation?"

His sigh was mournful, and weary with the weight of ancient memories. I felt sorry for him. "I was once... a respected leader... of my community... in the Lower Ward. A petty lord... sought to increase his power... at the expense of my people... my friends... my relatives... and friends and I spoke... against him."

I had yet to see the heights of the class divide in Sigil, but by its depths the gulf was sure to be wide. "That was very unjust. What happened then?"

"And then... he captured us... one by one... and bound our spirits and senses... into these screaming faces... under the Ditch... where all filth in

Sigil... comes eventually. And then... he let the polluted waters above... flow through our mouths... and noses... and eyes."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I am cursed to... remain here until... fresh water passes my lips... There is a ... magical flask of water... in the ... Drowned Nations. Bring it to me... and give me a taste of it... and I shall tell you... of someone... who can help you unlock... its full potential... and you shall never... lack for water... again."

That could be useful. "Where is this flask?"

"I do not... know. There was ... an artist named... Chad who frequented... these tunnels. He knew. Find him... and he may tell you."

"And how do I get there?"

"Through the Dead Nations... where the dead walk ... and rule... or through the Warrens of Thought... where Many-as-One holds sway... Neither is without... its risks."

I nodded to him, "Thank you, Glyve. I'll see what I can do to help you."

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Scouting ahead and braving the dangers so my companions wouldn't be hurt, I watched as a lumbering form hunched over, gnawing at a fresh corpse. The leathery sound of meat tearing and bones crunching softly were so basic and animalistic that I forgot that the creature's victim was human once. It made it easier to watch in mute fascination.

The thing's movements were too quick and sure to be those of a zombie's, and its form was much too large to be any normal humanoid. Its thick body was draped in rags, and where cloth fluttered away thick fields of gray-brown fur covered its massive, thickly muscled frame. A fat, wormlike tail flicked and dragged behind it as it feasted on the corpse, possibly a buried villager or thug dragged down from above somehow.

A giant rat. Ugh.

So when it started sniffing the air I knew it was too late to creep back. I

frantically waved my hand to signal Morte and Dak'kon for help as in my mind I prepared a nasty little something for this overgrown rodent.

Snarling, the creature leapt blindly in my direction, raising a crude axe to cleave whatever hid behind the coffins. With a gesture and a whisper I spread my fingers, and three bolts of violet light flew in sharp curves, homing in on the monster and blasting it straight in the chest. With a shrill squeal the rat-creature, carried forward by its momentum, stumbled and crashed face-first into the stone wall. A couple of yellowed buck teeth clattered against the floor, scattering amongst the dust and ancient debris.

"Crap."

My dagger was unable to pierce its thick, greasy hide, and instead I focused my efforts on dodging its clumsy blows. Blood trickled down its snout and the thing snarled at me as it swung, blinded by fury. That axe never landed, but a swish of rusty steel past my ear and a swift tug on one of my braids was a reminder that the thing could get pretty damn close.

Thank the Powers the reinforcements arrived.

While Morte was willing to sink his teeth into many things to save my scarred ass, it seems like a hulking rat-monster was his limit for now. With Morte balking, it was up to Dak'kon.

Rusted metal clashed against karach, and as Zerthimon learned how steel was stronger than flesh, as Dak'kon pressed forward the axe began to squeal. Slowly the black-edged blade sunk into the broad head of the axe, and the rat's grip tightened while its arms trembled. It was as if the creature was unsure whether to press forward, or step back and risk a deadly riposte. All it knew was that it was losing, as karach proved stronger than steel.

I simply made the decision easier.

Another triple bolt of flickering violet lights shot from my palm, and the rat shrieked in pain as those magic missiles pierced its flesh. In a flash the Dak'kon's blade broke through the resistance, cleaving a chunk from the axe head before it slit a wound across the creature's belly.

The rat's guts sloshed onto the wet stone, and it pawed blindly at the ropy innards as if making a last attempt to stuff the slippery mass back inside him.

Another slash ended its suffering.

"Cripes. I never thought I'd see a wererat here," Morte muttered.

I looked at him, "There are such things? Lycanthrope rats?"

"Yeah," he said as he floated along with me towards the next arch, "You'd think better, fiercer critters would be more successful in the lycanthrope world. Weredragons, weresharks..."

We entered another tomb. It was a circular chamber, lined with coffins all about, but the central coffin across the room was hinged along the sides such that it would swing open like a pair of double doors, or the body of an iron maiden. Rust-red smears and blotches drew a line up to the metal sarcophagus. I had had too many run-ins with traps in these tombs, and so I crept as warily as I could to look at the central coffin.

Morte's eyes popped out a little, "Oh no, chief. NO. A thousand times no. For all you know you could be opening up the arse-hole to the Nine Hells and get slaughtered by a mob of winged barbed wire demons or something."

"Or it could be a portal to a sylvan paradise where unicorns shower us with candy."

"ARSE-HOLE. TO. NINE. HELLS."

My curiosity was getting the better of me. Surely it couldn't be as bad as Morte described. Could it? "You'd better stand back, then."

Feeling along the patterned surface, my fingers probed for a crack. A way to open it. The strange material, smooth and shiny as metal, but stable and solid like stone, was neither warm nor cool to the touch.

"Chief..."

With just my hands pressing firmly against the hinged lid, I pried, pushed. Slowly, and with an eerie silence, the heavy lid began to part, making a noise only when the thing was fully open and the hinges locked.

Sarcophagus. Sarco. Phagus. "Eater of Flesh." The name had never been

more apt.

The small chamber held the corpse of a man with a surprised look on his beak-nosed face. It was hard to tell how he died: whether from the numerous horrific slashing wounds across his abdomen and throat, or from the blood loss incurred when his right arm was nearly severed from his shoulder. So mangled was his flesh that I was unsure how well I'd come through if I suffered as much.

I felt sorry for the poor man. It was a hell of a place to get locked into, clamped into a coffin with a lid snapping shut with the fang-toothed jaws of a demon. If he didn't live to be sealed into this pitch-black tomb, I would have considered him blessed.

Morte waited a moment, then floated up to take a closer look. Dak'kon stood where he was, coal-gray eyes gazing at the body impassively.

"Ugh. That's a bad way to go," Morte muttered.

I nodded, "If we could talk to him, he'd surely have a hell of a tale."

It was then that we heard the hungry snarls from the shadows, and three ghouls materialized from the darkness.

Damn.

Several bolts of eldritch sorcery, a few fierce bites, and a few graceful swings later, the ghouls lay twice-dead at our feet. The battle had almost killed Dak'kon, and halfway through I had to order him to back away and swallow a blood charm before he died. The ghouls' talons were razor-sharp, their fangs dripping with ropy saliva as they tore at us with an unnatural hunger. Morte, fleshless and swift, came out relatively unscathed.

I spent the next hour helping Dak'kon bandage his wounds, and transferred a good portion of my own life force to him. Wheezing, his eyes were downcast and dull. The slump in his shoulders told me all I needed to know. He was a great man once, but age and despair had drained him of much of his vigor in youth, and bitterness had blunted his wisdom. Part of me was surprised he still had the strength to shape and wield his karach blade.

His spirit may be drained, but his mind was focused.

We needed some rest.

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Okay, let's review. Cranium rats. One or two are easy to handle. A handful, sure. Just stomp the little buggers if you're quick. A dozen and you're in trouble. The bolts of lightning I could take, the crushing psychic blows were a nuisance. And yet I continually had to reevaluate the true extent of cranium rats' powers.

"BEES!!!" Morte screamed, and to my horror I watched as the rats huddled together, and a cloud of buzzing insects materialized above them. Brown and gray specks swirled, a thousand wings beating in a terrifying hum. The rats could summon.

Morte might not have much in the way of fleshy parts to puncture, but the primal horror of being swarmed by a cloud of stinging doom never left him, even after death.

Of course, at least Dak'kon and I had eyelids...

"Ow ow ow ow! I can't see!" Morte cried, snapping blindly at the swarm. Now and again he crushed a bee or two between his molars, but more often than not Morte's attacks served as an invitation to his tongue. His efforts merely enraged the swarm further.

"Just attack the damn rats!!!" I yelled. With the insects blinding and biting, I couldn't gather the focus necessary to cast my spells. Could the little bastards have been learning? I hoped not.

We continued exploring after the battle ended, scratching the bug bites. Morte moaned. His tongue was patterned with small, bleeding specks and his eyes were so lumpy with stings that it looked as if they had been put through a pickling jar.

We soon stumbled across a long-abandoned alcove, perhaps a preparation room for the Dustmen. The shelves were ancient and carpeted with dust, but rooting around there were still a few stray supplies left. A jar of embalming fluid, a few bandages...

"Hey, do you think this embalming fluid would help with the itching?" I grumbled, scratching away.

"Wuh? Thath thupid. Uour thupid." Poor Morte. That was the wittiest he could be in his condition.

"Take a clot charm already, Morte," and eagerly he floated over to my pack and nuzzled around in the depths, probing for one of the tear-shaped crystals. I smeared a little of the fluid on my arm experimentally to see if it would help with the itching.

Amazingly, it worked. Of course, it was replaced with a somewhat painful burning sensation in my wounds, but it was certainly less annoying.

"That's surprisingly effective," I said, slathering the foul-smelling chemicals over my itching flesh. If the stuff poisoned me, I'd recover, after all. And if it ruined my skin, well. I don't see myself getting prettier anytime soon.

With a clot charm, Morte's swelling went down, "Auuuuuuugh it still itches!" he scraped his tongue against his teeth. I held up the jar as I applied more embalming fluid with my other hand and gave it a little shake so the greenish contents sloshed within.

Morte grumbled, still trying to scratch his flesh. It might've worked better if he tried rubbing up against the rough stone walls, but I might as well ask him to tongue-wash these coffins while he was at it, "Yeah. Apply that stuff to mucous membranes. Brilliant, chief."

I shrugged, "Hey, it was just an idea."

I offered the jar to Dak'kon, and he politely waved it away.

"You're full of brilliant ideas, chief."

I hissed as the burning chemicals faded to a dull warmth. Hells, I was lucky the bugs didn't go up my loincloth... "I suppose you have better recommendations?"

"Look, how about I pick out the next path? I've got a sixth sense about these things."

"Well, considering you've lost two of your other senses, I guess something else had to pick up the slack."

He grunted, "Hey, better than a blood-soaked flesh-pit and a ghoul-filled tomb." Ouch.

Morte chose a brass arch with blunt metal teeth curving towards us. Somehow the metal had survived the centuries of moisture... it was too unlikely that someone would've chosen to install a fresh new archway here for the sake of aesthetics. The soft yellow luster, so unnatural against the dull stone walls, was somehow inviting with a cold warmth that bordered on surreal.

"Huh. Nice."

The large circular chamber was high-domed and empty, encircled with stone cobbles and slabs pointing inwards like two dozen fingers. Our steps echoed as we entered, and on the other end of the room a patch of white came into view.

Bones. A pile of polished white femurs and ribs, skulls and skeletal hands. They were crowded together with a purpose, as if they were a nest.

A cacophony of familiar screeches echoed from around the room. The whole swarm of Vargouilles descended on us from seemingly every wall and shadow in the room.

"Uh... chief? I think I'll leave the leading to you from now on."

I let my arms fall helplessly and groaned. "Oh son of a-"

\*SCREECH\*

\*HACK\*

\*CHOMP\*

\*TEAR\*

\*THUD\*

## Chapter 33

"Hrghlllll..."

You know those mornings where you feel groggy and you simply don't want to wake up? Maybe you've drooled in your sleep and your cheek is resting on a puddle of cold saliva pressed into a ruined pillow. You happened to sleep in a funny position so that one arm was pressed under your body and by the time your consciousness flickers into being it's completely numb. Maybe you poke at that limp, motionless limb a couple of times thinking it belonged to someone else.

Now imagine something like that except you're covered in blood, your arm was partly severed and is inches from recovery, and you're coughing up and covered with blood. Crap, I think I lost a nipple to those winged jaws.

"Ugh..." I groaned, and flexed my fingers experimentally. There was no permanent damage, thankfully. That, and my head was still attached to my shoulders, so there's another plus.

"Why do I feel like dog leavings?" I grumbled. How much damage did I have to recover from?

"Eeeeh, Dak'kon insisted on carrying you on his back when we fled. Luckily the things seemed a lot more interested in picking over your immodestly clothed bits and we kinda used you as a human shield until we were safe."

"Thanks," I grumbled. I meant it, grumpy as I was. The thought of being trapped forever in a chamber of clacking jaws, flesh torn apart and devoured by hungry teeth as quickly as it regenerated, was as close as I could get to a real nightmare. A scarred immortal would be an endless source of food.

The signs lay littered on the loosely cobbled ground as we descended deeper into the catacombs.

Skeletons and other corpses had been draped with loose clothes after death. Some gripped crude weapons in their hands, others bore wounds that never clotted or healed. I knelt down cautiously, examining one body. The skeleton definitely bore marks and wounds taken as an undead creature.

We were in the Dead Nations.

We passed by an odd corpse, dead for sure, but its neck still writhed as if it were trying to twist itself off his body. Some strange force held it back though, restraining the full transformation into a vargouille, and I decided to leave it be.

A pair of iron gates barred the entrance to the next chamber, but with a push and a creak the way was open to the next chamber.

If the Mosaic Tomb was an exercise in intricacy, this was a work of regal scale. Smooth blue-gray and violet stones were arranged in circular patterns in the floor, spreading outwards like the extensions of a spiderweb. Ancient columns, carved and polished, glowed dully in the fickle lamplight from the torches set in the walls. Much of the stone matched the material that the rest of the Weeping Stone Catacombs were made from, but where the catacombs were rough and broken with the ages, the clean angles and polished surfaces could have been found in a royal court.

But the halls were empty, and not a trace of life or warmth could be found, aside from the torches that lit the main hall.

"Spooky," Morte muttered.

It was as if the very word was forbidden, an incantation of summoning. The moment the first echo resonated back, a handful of ghouls scuttled from the shadows. Four of them. I remembered our last encounter, which left Dak'kon gravely wounded. We were hardly in the condition to fend off another four ghouls.

Then two more entered, slaving and growling, spurred on by their unnatural hunger.

And another three.

Five more.

Well... they don't call it the Dead Nations for nothing, I suppose.

It was when the gate behind us slammed shut that I muttered the most

profane oath I could think of.

"Oh by the Lady's sagging teats..." Even Morte bristled at that one, and all about the undead froze as if awaiting my inevitable doom. Hmm. Perhaps I should be more careful with my choice of expletives.

Before I could throw, cast, or swing anything, a commanding, hollow voice cried out to us, "Stop!" With that the ghouls stood quietly, eyeing us like fresh batches of meat.

Two skeletons strode forward, flanking another tall, royally garbed skeleton with glowing red eyes and a high helm. In one hand he held a tall metal staff set with a skull, which clacked against the stone as he walked. His robes rippled as he made his way towards me.

The creature's voice was dry, and hollow with lack of a tongue or flesh to speak with. But it was rich with command and as it spoke, the other undead obeyed. Cautiously, I walked forward to speak to it.

He looked down on me, with what seemed to be pity in those glowing red eyes. "Thou have come too far, traveler, and trespassed into the Dead Nations, realm of the Silent King! Wilt thou submit peacefully?"

"Submit to what authority?" I asked carefully.

"'Tis the will of the Silent King that all who pass the gates into our Nation become prisoners of his lands. Wilt thou submit?"

Looking back to my allies for support, I saw Dak'kon fingering one lip in thought, and Morte bobbing up and down in a frantic nod. Well, we had no other choice after all.

"Very well, we will submit."

The skeleton sounded satisfied, "Come, then... we shall show thee to the Chapel. Know this: thou shalt be free to wander these halls, but not to leave the catacombs. Thou shalt be a prisoner here until thy death; should thou later arise as we have, thou shalt be free. Praise the Silent King; his will be done."

For prisoners, we were treated fairly well. The skeleton guards walked

calmly alongside us, with none of the shoving or verbal abuse you'd expect from your average disgruntled military dropout. The tall skeleton leader himself trusted us enough to leave us with only the those two, though the slaverling ghouls all about really made even the slightest additional security precaution little more than a formality.

Even our cell (if it can be called that) was built with the same graceful stonework that composed the main hall. It even lacked a door, and no guards were posted to watch over us. Yet while it furnished well enough with long-unused blankets laid out on the floor, the grim colors and dim lighting made the place seem more like a final tomb than a room for "guests."

A familiar voice greeted me, "Ah, another member of the living. Most are slain by the ghouls, this far into the catacombs; you are fortunate."

Sitting on the edge of a stark wooden bed was a man in Dustman robes. At his side rested a few books, covers gray with age but kept well enough that even the leather at the corners showed little wear. Tomes of Dustman wisdom. The man used a slip of paper to mark the spot he was reading before setting down the book and looking up at me with red-tinted eyes. "You're Soego," I said in surprise, "from the Mortuary. What are you doing here?"

He merely stared at me flatly, "Your memory serves you well. I am no longer stationed in the Mortuary... instead, I have become a missionary in these parts."

"Missionary?"

Soego looked past the entrance arch as he spoke, "Yes, I came to these catacombs after hearing rumors of undead that were aware in these parts. I hope to save them."

A zombie shuffled in as we spoke, carrying a tray laden with whatever scraps of food they could scavenge here. She set it down on the edge of the bed, bowed her head, and gave a moan that might have been 'Enjoy,' before leaving.

"Save them?" I murmured as I poked around the tray. A crust of stale bread, a cup of clean water, and a skinned, gutted cranium rat for each of us,



though the latter was uncooked. Yech.

Soego nodded and looked at the tray. He seemed to be eyeing the rat, half in disgust, half in yearning. "Yes, a unique civilization of sentient undead. Such a thing is unusual, even in Sigil. But nonetheless an abomination in Dustman doctrine." He swallowed and turns away from the tray, "Passion ties them to this false life. I hope I can teach them to forsake these passions and leave this false life behind and reach the True Death."

I knocked a piece of the bread against the woodwork and the echoing cracks emphasized my words, "Why have I been made a prisoner here?"

"I do not know. Ask some of the 'citizens,' here."

I nodded, "Perhaps I shall. After we rest up, that is."

Soego nodded, "I offer some advice before you rest. Do not attack any of the undead here in the catacombs; they will not harm you so long as you remain peaceful. Should you prove hostile they will defend themselves, and there are... many of them."

"Thanks."

Over the next few days we lay back in rest, recovering from the near-fatal damage we suffered in our explorations. When Dak'kon wasn't meditating he practiced the graceful, fluid forms with his blade with the sureness and knowing of a master. Morte flirted with a few of the zombies for a few hours, but seeing as how many were uninterested in reciprocating (indeed, they could do little to communicate aside from unintelligible groans) he quickly became bored and spent most of his time chattering and pestering me.

Granted, his presence made our detainment bearable, but it was distracting when I was trying to focus on studying the items we had collected. And indeed, on the second day I made a startling discovery.

The severed arm we plucked from the corpse in the midden heap was my own.

The gray pallor and the mass of scars should've given it away, as well as the haunting familiarity I felt for the thing. There was no way to tell how long it

had lain there, or really what had happened that I would leave a severed arm to the depths of these catacombs. Again I felt the need to deliver it to Fell for analysis.

"What do you know of this 'civilization?'" I asked Soego later on.

He thumbed through his book, "They have been here many centuries, I think, taking care of those that have passed away in their halls. Such devotion to duty is no longer necessary... it is almost a crime."

Morte growled, "You just want to kill them. Sentience threatens the Dustmen."

"Tell me about the Silent King."

He looked at me, eyes peering over the edge like an intrigued predator, "I have never seen the Silent King. I wish I could tell you something about him, but I have never seen him. Presumably, his throne room lies beyond the crimson doors, but I cannot gain entrance... Hargrimm, the skeleton priest, will not let me."

"And Hargrimm?"

He sighed, "A stubborn one, but admirable in his piety and devotion to duty. He is my strongest rival here, and he has kept this civilization together for many years. His passions stem from his piety and devotion to duty... admirable qualities, but misplaced."

And when we finished chatting, he left to proselytize the word of the Dustmen for yet another day.

On the third day we had recovered enough to venture out and take a look at this nation ourselves. While Dak'kon remained in meditation, Morte and I stepped out of our cell.

The heart of the Dead Nations was a temple of iron and stone. The familiar, ornate stonework was well-kept and polished here. Whereas the rest of the Nation was built in chaotic and desperate patterns of violet and blue, the floors were tiled in beautiful, ordered precision, as if the temple was built first and the rest of the Nation had to make do on the scraps of color remaining. While the temple was dark, dismal, and hollow as a tomb, there

was a humble shadow of faith here that spurred the dead as much as faith bolstered the living.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" a skeleton chittered to me as he walked past with an armful of scrolls.

"Creepy, more like. I'd sooner see a Dustie ballroom dance in the Mortuary than one in this dump," Morte ducked down and cocked his head in an attempt to look up a passing zombie's skirt, "Though I wouldn't mind being proven wrong."

"But look around, Morte," I gestured, "We're talking about a fledgling civilization born from death. They're a people who refused to die and in the name of duty banded together to protect the ones that weren't strong enough to do so." As we wandered down the halls skeletons and zombies walked and shuffled about, busy at their tasks, deep in thought. Occasionally I heard a few ghouls snarling about better protection against the incursion of cranium rats. It was no metropolis, but the Dead Nations were thriving, "Doesn't that amaze you at least a little?"

"Eh," Morte rolled his eyes dismissively, "I know you're still kinda green here, chief, but trust me. Once you've seen one necropolis of undead standing guard over an ancient and forbidden maze of catacombs you've seen... 'em... all..." his speech slowed down as a female zombie who still had most of her long, white hair shambled past. "Excuse me."

I sighed and walked ahead. Whatever he said to her, it earned him a smack across the jaw which sent him flying into a pile of rags. "Wooo! Someone call the mortician! We've got a live one here!"

"'Mawgry?' Nay... 'anhungry?' Nay..." a nearby skeleton muttered to itself, occasionally pausing to scratch its skull. It was old enough so that no meat was left on its bones... only a few colored rags.

"Greetings..."

It nodded a greeting in return, but didn't reply.

"I was hoping you could tell me where I could find the Silent King..."

The skeleton looked up at me and grunted in frustration. "Not now! Forgive

me, but I've the most horrid riddle on my mind and I can't puzzle it out!"

"What's the riddle?"

It seemed surprised. "Oh? Going to give it a try, art thou?"

I shrugged, "Yes, go ahead."

"Very well. This is from a chortling buffoon of a bone-bag thou may well find nearby. It refuses to give me the answer, and it's killing me!"

"Go on, then..."

It nodded. "Think of words which end in '-GRY.' Angry and hungry are two of them. There are but three words in the Common Tongue... what is the third word? The word is something that one uses every day. If thou hast listened carefully, I have already told thee what it is."

I rubbed my chin in thought. "It's... uh... hmm."

"Stumped as well, eh? Let me know if thou should find the answer... and best of luck should thou try and get it from the chattering fool which gave it to me!"

"Whew," Morte whistled as he caught up, "I hadn't seen so many fine slabs of cadaverous flesh ever since the Perelandrous Plague hit the downtown brothels. And they're spunky too!"

I rubbed one temple, still trying to work out the puzzle in my mind, "I'd rather not hear about that."

"Then don't ask, chief."

As I continued on, eventually I bumped into the tall skeleton that had ordered my imprisonment. It wore what appeared to be ancient priest's robes, heavy and ornate. In one dessicated hand it carried a large, impressive stave, capped with intricately carved horns, dangling pendants, and a gilded skull.

"Greetings..."

The skeleton, its eyes aglow like two burning embers, looked me over... but made no reply.

"Are you the Silent King?"

It shook its head, turning with an eerie grace and pointing eastwards. It then turned to me once more.

"Are you Hargrimm?"

It nodded solemnly, the pendants suspended from its stave tinkling softly. There was something disquieting about its silent, piercing gaze.

"Why have I been made a prisoner?"

"'Tis the will of the Silent King. The Living who are caught here are made to languish in his halls until they join the quiet ones," it said in that musty, ancient voice. It was rich with command, and trimmed with a formal eloquence that was impressive, if not archaic.

"Could he be convinced to allow otherwise?"

After a short silence, its jaws creaked open: "'Tis doubtful, but perhaps. Mysterious are the ways of Silent King."

"May I speak with him?"

It held up a bony palm. With a creaking groan and a puff of dust, its jaws opened to speak: "No." Its voice, deep and resonant, echoed for a long while in the vaulted chamber.

"But why not?"

Its voice boomed throughout the chamber and its staff cracked firmly against the tile: "No living creature may pass the doors that lead to his throne room; nor would I allow thee an audience even if such a thing were possible. Thou shalt not see him."

This was a troubling situation. "But that's unreasonable! I need his permission to leave."

It held up its palm. "No. By the power of the Silent King, thou shalt not leave this place."

I sighed, "What can I do to convince you?"

"Firstly, I would know why thou art here."

I made a ball with my fingers, "I'm looking for something. A small bronze sphere."

It shook its head. "I have seen no such thing. Why dost thou seek this object?"

"For a man named Pharod."

The skeleton drew back. It looked up and away, as if peering at the surface. "Blood still beats in his black, worm-ridden heart? That wheezing sack of flesh still sends his pack into our homes to raid and pillage." It faced me once more. "Thou were wrong to come here... we tolerate no such desecrators within our borders."

"But I'm not of his pack..." I protested.

Its voice was firm and razor-edged, "Why, then, art thou here, invading our homes on a fetch-and-carry for that miserable soul?"

"I'm finding the sphere for him in return for information I need. There is no other loyalty between us," I said firmly and honestly. Hopefully Hargrimm would accept that.

It looked me over carefully, tapping its chin with a bony finger -- click, click, click. "Thou do not seem the sort to follow such a man. Perhaps you speak the truth. Perhaps... your presence here is tolerable."

"Tell me of the Silent King."

He straightened up proudly, "Our lord and vision, he who makes the law and protects us. Thou wouldst do well to start no trouble here, stranger, for the Silent King's eye is everywhere and his justice, swift."

"Why is he called the Silent King?"

"He speaks no more than necessary to guide us. Praise to the Silent King."

"Tell me of yourself."

It indicated its stave and robes. "I am called Hargrimm. I am the high priest of the citizens here. I spread the word of the Silent King to his followers." Its eyes took a faraway look as it recalled the distant, musty past, "I passed away long ago, and found that beyond death lies only oblivion... fortunately, I was able to step back at the last moment from the brink."

I raised an eyebrow. "Step back?"

"Yes, I awoke here. I wandered the catacombs for untold days before stumbling into the throne of my lord, the Silent King. He spoke to me, and from that fated meeting the Dead Nations was born."

"You mentioned followers. Who else is here?"

"We, the skeletons. Other undead - zombies, and ghouls. There were once shadows, but they have long since fled. Sometimes, one of Living spends the last of its days here. Also, far to the east live many cranium rats."

Hargrimm placed a hand against its bony chest, "We skeletons tend to the quiet ones, the true dead, and obey the word of the Silent King. Our work here has gone on for centuries. The zombies... they serve the Silent King and the Dead Nations as laborers. They work beneath the guidance of Stale Mary, the most intelligent and wisest amongst them."

"Tell me about Stale Mary."

Hargrimm's voice had a tinge of warmth as he spoke of her. "She is the most intelligent of what some call the 'rotting herd,' those zombies which populate the Dead Nations. Unlike many of us, her heart did not depart at the moment of death. She was a compassionate soul in life, and is just as nurturing in death. That is as much as can be said."

I glanced to the side and watched as a small group of ghouls huddled together, growling and whispering in the dark. Unlike the zombies and skeletons, who meandered about freely to perform their daily chores, the ghouls seemed to stand apart with a silent dissatisfaction.

Hargrimm caught my gaze. "You are most perceptive. I do not trust the ghouls either, or their matriarch, Acaste. They watch us with hungry eyes, and would doubtless devour us all if our numbers and the word of the Silent King were not a shield against them." It paused, as if thinking. "They are forever ravenous; without us holding them in check, they would run rampant in the Buried Village and the warrens of the cranium rats, killing all, then return to devour all that is here. And Acaste... she is the matriarch of the ghoul pack that has come to our halls. She is strong and extremely cunning."

There had been a thought nagging me in the back of my mind, a long-buried instinct ever since Hargrimm mentioned it. It was the predatory pair of eyes in the dark that glanced over your shoulder, the hidden sin that you had nearly forgotten and was flitting at the edge of your memory with fangs of regret. It was the fear a lone stag had of hungry wolves at night.

But I had to ask, "What of the shadows?"

Hargrimm shook its head, "We know not. It may be that they wander elsewhere. We rarely leave this place." It paused, as if unsure whether to go on. "Once, many shadows dwelled among us, but they come to our halls no more. They left long ago - and we know not where they went. Some say they wander the planes."

A chill ran down my spine, "They wander the planes?"

Hargrimm ran a bony finger along its jaw in thought, "I asked about it once. Mary says that she has seen their fate in visions. She claims they have all been drawn to a wrecked fortress that drifts within the Negative Material Plane, a graveyard of regrets from where they cannot escape."

A fortress... a prison crafted of sorrow and regrets. I blinked. "Mary... Stale Mary?"

Hargrimm nodded. "Yes, Stale Mary, may the Silent King watch over her. She was a seer in life, ages past, and still receives visions, at times."

"A fortress on the Negative Material Plane?"

"Yes." The skeleton priest shook its head. "Sheer foolishness."



"Tell me about Soego. I've met him before at the Mortuary, but there's something odd about him."

"He tries to convince us to give up this 'pretense of life,' as he calls it, and pass into the True Death. He claims that it is our passions that anchor us to this life, and we must let go of them and our duty. He wants us to die..."

Hargrimm growled. "Some listen to his words, but none have chosen to surrender themselves to his beliefs. Those that did would be forever silenced. Our numbers would dwindle, and all that we have here would be destroyed by what surrounds us. Soego may believe he is doing right, but is, in truth, causing great harm."

I clicked my tongue. Speak of the ta'nari, and he'll come. At that precise moment Soego decided to walk the halls, chanting a dirge in mourning of the misguided throng about him. A few skeletons and zombies turned to listen, even a few ghouls paused and looked up. One or two looked ready to rip his throat out but stayed their claws.

Ugh. Evangelists. "Why do you allow him to stay if he's such a pest?"

Frustration leaked into Hargrimm's voice, "We can not force him to leave. He knows we cannot harm him. The Dead Truce... no undead may injure a Dustman unless first attacked. Also, the Silent King wishes no slaughter in his halls."

A pregnant silence followed the wake of Soego's passing. "You must understand that I must leave. I have duties to perform, and I need information so that I might know myself. What can I do to convince the Silent King to release me?" I said, breaking the tension.

Hargrimm turned to me calmly and considered me for a moment before speaking. "Prove to the Dead Nations that thou meanest no harm. Acts of goodwill. Perhaps then I shall take thy petition to the Silent King."

"Great. More errands," Morte sighed, "Keep a list, why don't ya?"

I looked up to Hargrimm. "Is there some task I could perform for you?"

He nodded. "Yes, perhaps. Occasionally the ghouls will miss small packs of

well-hidden cranium rats that have come to spy here. Shouldst thou come across any, be sure to slay them."

Well, this ought to be easy.

## Chapter 34

It was most convenient that Dak'kon was walking down the hall just as I was about to fetch him.

"Great timing," I said to him, "We were just about to get you."

Dak'kon nodded, holding up yet another skinned, gutted cranium rat by the tail. "I am not so callous as to question the hospitality of these good people, but we do need more coal for the brazier. It seems that the zombie workers have forgotten again that we eat flesh cooked."

"If you're up for something a little fresher, the chief got us a mission to hunt down any stray packs of the buggers and put 'em in the Dead-Book," Morte chirped.

Dak'kon nodded to me and handed the rat to a slaving ghoulish who had been eyeing the morsel, "My blade is yours."

Bolts of ice flew past us, embedding themselves into a stone pillar, a wall, the tiled floor. Despite their proficiency at elementary magics, the cranium rats had poor aim.

Fight fire with fire, frost with frost.

Small detonations of icy splinters and waves of cold blanketed the area, killing a few, softening up others. It was a simple matter, then, for us to mop up in closer quarters before heading back for lunch. I must say, freshly roasted cranium rat meat tastes much better.

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"I found and killed a group of cranium rats in the rubble of an old passageway."

Hargrimm nodded, obviously pleased. "Thou have our thanks. May the Silent King watch over thee."

"So... can you speak to the Silent King for me, now?"

It held up its palm. "No. By the power of the Silent King, thou shalt not leave this place." The intonation was beginning to get rather tiring.

I scrubbed a hand through my tangled black hair in frustration. "But... what else can I do to convince you that we mean you no harm?"

The skeleton priest hrmmed deeply, the lights of its eyes dimming as it thought. "Soego. Rid us of that damnable Dustman, and I shall speak to the Silent King of thy freedom. However... I do not seek to have him assassinated. Merely give us a reason to remove him from the Dead Nations."

I had no love for the Dustmen, but this was going to be difficult. Soego had been spending a great deal of time in solitude, poring over musty old books on the philosophy of death and rhetoric. Perhaps he was trying to strengthen his arguments before he went to the pulpit again. With his gloomy presence always in the kip, it would be impossible to snoop around freely.

Might as well explore this civilization a little more.

After shopping a little from a skeleton merchant, we walked down one hall only to bump into a skeleton shaking its head and giggling to itself. It guffawed and snorted occasionally, biting down on its bony hand to stop itself. The thing was old enough that no meat was left on its bones... only a few colored rags.

"Greetings, yes!" It sniggered, puffs of dust flying forth with each breath.

Well. This must be the one the other skeleton was talking about, "I understand you've got a difficult riddle."

It nodded, giggling. "Dost thou want to hear it?"

"Of course."

"Ahem! Now, think of words which end in '-GRY.' Angry and hungry are two of them. There are but three words in the Common Tongue... what is the third word? The word is something that one uses every day. If thou hast listened carefully, I have already told thee what it is."

I racked my brain once again. "It's... uh... hmm. Morte?"

"Aw pike it, chief. I all my virtues are invested in dishing it out. I'm no riddler."

"Dak'kon?"

Dak'kon mulled it over a moment, carefully considering the possibilities, "My apologies. Common is not my native language... such words are not known to me."

The skeleton burst into a fit of mocking, derisive laughter. It pointed at us with a skeletal finger, chortling and chattering as it clutched some imaginary gut.

Part of me wondered how that polished skull would look smashed up into a bunch of tiny, giggling bits. Much better. "All right, what's the answer?"

"Not a chance! Not a chance!" Seeing my dour expression only caused it to laugh more, chattering its teeth at me.

"Well... what if I stump you? Will you tell me, then?"

The laughter stopped abruptly. "What's this?" It cupped a bony hand to the side of its skull. "Do I hear... a challenge? Yes... yes... go ahead! But should thou lose, or leave half-way through, I shan't speak to thee again!"

If only he would make it so easy. "Very well. Let's begin."

I didn't know all that many riddles. Hell, sometimes I felt lucky that I woke up knowing how to speak the local language. Half the ones I used were

simple things pulled out of the ass-end of a Dabus that every grubby child in the Hive should know. As the back-and-forth grew in difficulty though, I racked my brains trying to form a few good ones in between answering the puzzlers he gave.

It wasn't long until I came up with a good stumper.

"What is the beginning of eternity, the end of time and space, the beginning of every end, and the end of every place?"

The skeleton began to giggle derisively, but suddenly stopped. "Ah... er. Oh, dear."

Morte joined me in giving some mocking laughter of our own. Maybe I wouldn't have to turn its bones into wind chimes after all.

The skeleton hung its head. "I... don't know."

"Give me your first riddle's answer, and I'll give you mine."

It nodded. "It is 'tongue.' The first two sentences are unrelated, only there to trick thee. Remember: there are three words in 'the - Common - Tongue.' The third word is 'tongue.'" It sighed loudly. "Thy answer?"

I smirked, "The letter 'E.'"

"Aw, troll's leavings! Oh, well. Just don't tell anyone else the answer. Wilt thou promise me that, at least?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Because I enjoy the idea of them standing about, trying to puzzle it out for all eternity." It giggles evilly, holding a skeletal hand over its mouth. "Well? Will thou promise?"

"No," I said, and grinned again before leaving.

The puzzled skeleton looked up upon noticing I had returned. "Solve that dastardly riddle, yet?"

I grinned, "Yes. It's 'tongue.'"

It seemed incredulous. " 'Tis what? But..."

"The first two sentences are unrelated, only there to trick you. Remember: there are three words in 'the - Common - Tongue.' The third word is 'tongue.'"

"That's... that's... ooh! A devious trick! Why, I have no tongue, either!" It stopped, then laughed, dust billowing from its creaking jaws. "That's good, all right. I thank thee!"

"Be sure to think of a good stumper to get him back," I replied as I left.

It was down a side corridor where I met the second of the Dead Nations' Triumverate.

The musty-smelling female zombie looked exceptionally old, almost mummified. Her skin had the appearance of moldering, gray-green leather, and one of her eyes had fallen out, leaving a dark pit in her face. The other had shriveled to apparent uselessness, but her vision seemed keen enough for her to examine the wounded zombie in front of her. A long gash had been torn across its chest, and though its guts had been removed long ago in the process of embalming, an exposed cavity like that couldn't have been good. The female zombie had been sewing up the wound with utmost care and a motherly touch, as if she were caring for a child who had scraped its knee.

The zombie she was treating looked away, as if embarrassed, but she casually ignored his shame as she nipped the end of the thread with ancient yellowed teeth and tugged until it snapped. With that she rose, gave an affectionate pat on the zombie's face. Her lips creaked as if smiling, and she groaned, "B-be cuuurfuul urunnnd weeeraaatz."

The zombie nodded in response, and shuffled away.

The female noticed me as the other zombie shuffled past with a polite, if unintelligible "kscuzzz meee." She tilted her head and spoke with a voice that was slow and thick: "Guh-guh-guhreeetingz."

"Greetings..." I said, shifting a little. Odd, how such tender affection could seem so unsettling.

She indicated herself and spoke again. "Suh-suh-stuhl Muhhhry." It sounded as if her vocal cords were festering away in some soupy mess at the base of her throat.

I looked around. Zombies shuffled back and forth, applying resins to the broken bones of the true dead and knitting together torn shrouds. There was a self-directed will to them, a liveliness that didn't exist among the zombie workers of the Dustmen. Each zombie worked as if knowing their tasks, and that meant they had to communicate somehow. I looked to Stale Mary, "How is it that you speak to these other zombies? I cannot understand them as I can you..."

The corpse took a step towards me, reaching her arm out to touch my flesh.

I looked down curiously, "What are you doing?"

She only moaned softly in reply, reaching out once more to touch my arm. Despite the ravages of time, there was still some vestige of humanity left in her gaze. I knew she meant no harm.

"Tch. I don't understand what they see in you, chief," Morte grumbled.

Stale Mary's nearly fleshless hand brushed gently against my forearm, and she spoke. "Luhhssnnn." With that soupy gurgle, though, the word rang clearly in my head, like a whisper echoing within a silent chamber. <Listen.>

I stepped back, shocked somewhat, "How is it that I can understand you?"

I didn't hesitate when she touched me once more. "Spuhhhkkk tuuh uh hh yuhhh kuhnn. Buhuuhhh mhuuussst duhh uhht puhhhpuhlee." <Speak to us you can. But you must do it properly.>

"Can you teach me?"

She smiled, the hardened skin of her face creaking like thick leather. "Yuhhh." <Yes.>

It didn't take long to learn the art of what Mary called 'Stories-Bones-Tell.' While I knew that there were magics to call, summon, and bind the dead so that they might be forced to speak true, this was a simpler skill, one less

intrusive, that sought to listen to the echoes of an entity's essence that lay deep in its bones. It was a gift I grew to cherish, just as much as when Old Mebbeth had taught me the Art.

"Can I talk to any dead body?"

Mary nodded, "Suhmmm. Uhhhhers tuh duhhhud. Muhhht yuhhhh skuhhhh." <Some. Others too dead. Must use skill.>

She shuffled past me and picked up a brush, helping another zombie piece together the broken bits of a corpse that lay on a slab. Laying down a thin layer of the stuff, Mary clumsily plucked up a chunk of bone and pressed it against the resin before brushing another layer over it. One layer as glue, another as sealant.

I helped her arrange and place some of the smaller bits, the ones that her fingers were not quite dextrous enough to handle. "Tell me of yourself."

"Stuh-stuh-stuhhh Muhreee." <Stale Mary.>

I wiped off a bit of the resin that got on my fingertip. The stuff was well-watered and would've taken several good hours, perhaps even a few days to dry. Given how slow the zombies were working, it must've been a necessity. "How did you come to be here?"

"Duhhhhd luhhhnnn tuhghmmm. Muhhhhmuhrrr guhhnnnn." <Dead long time. Memory gone.>

"I know what that's like."

She bobbed forward gently as if nodding, "Guuhhd uuuhd zzzohhhmmmb. Cuhrrr fuhrrr kuh-kuwht whunnns. Turrr dehhd." <Guide other zombies. Care for quiet ones. True dead.>

While I didn't exactly approve of the defilement of graves committed by Pharod and his ilk, for a while I couldn't find myself caring much about the sanctity of the dead either. The spirits of the dead were gone, with no passions or cares of what would happen to their corpses.

Yet here were the Dead Nations, committed to preserving the dignity of the quiet ones. It was a strange sort of empathy that these undead held. The

Dustman might've attributed it to a misguided instinct, or a spark of misguided empathy that still smoldered like a slowly-dying coal. The undead here saw themselves in their silent brethren, and Stale Mary was the grandmother that tied together all the shambling children.

Of course, some weren't quite so agreeable.

As I walked past, the rot-stink of the ancient-looking ghoul-woman was nauseating, even from a distance. Her gray-green skin was infested with tomb rot and festering sores, and her fingers, each capped by a long, curved talon, were covered in dried blood and filth. Her hair, thick with scuttling insects and worms, hung to her knees. It hid nearly all her face in shadow, save for a fanged, feral grin and a lolling gray tongue.

"Hsssst. What have we here? Some pretty meat, aye, a little tough gristle? Sharpen me teeth on yer bone and grow fat on yer marrow, hmmm? Hsssst."

"Damn. What is with you, chief? Why is it you're suddenly a blood with the ladies and I'm stuck all by my lonesome 'ere?"

I ignored Morte, "You must be Acaste."

"I don't have to be anything to ye, meat and bones," she hissed, "Ye watch yer tone with me, or no one will find ye in one piece again. Now, who are ye to come before me like a feast? Answer Acaste."

I began to step away, but the other ghouls at her side were slavering like bulldogs. If I ran now it might just spark that instinct to give chase. "I am... Adahn," I lied.

"Aaadahn..." She drew her long, gray tongue slowly across her lips, yellowish drool trickling from the corners of her mouth. "Yes..."

"I don't suppose you could tell me a little about yourself."

"Go! Pester Acaste while ye still live, meat! Ask!"

"What are you doing here?"

Her chuckle came out like a hiss, "We fight, win and feed. Blooded ones such

as ye become our food in the end. Ravenous hungers we have, burn the stomach, never full. We hunger all the time... and here ye are... hurry up, die and be still!"

I needed to look for a good opportunity to escape. Silent King's dictates or no, Acaste looked mad enough to not care, "How did you come to be here?"

"Wander catacombs, hunt and kill, crack open crypt and coffin, eat bones and dead-flesh. Come here..." Acaste blinked. "Here... strange place... Acaste stay among the weak, marrow-filled bones and herd of dead-flesh... can make noise, talk to them and they talk back."

Acaste frowned as if considering something, and started to look off into the distance. "But not easy prey. They are not still like other bones and dead-flesh are... they fight as pack and are many of them. Difficult to beat both, weaker separate, together strong, almost strong as Acaste. So we wait."

I didn't let her pause and consider going after other, tastier fleshy things in her vicinity. "What do you do while you wait, then?"

She snarled, "We say we fight for them, kill blooded ones when they come to take from us, hunt blooded rat things, kill them, eat them, leave bits of bodies we not eat as warning, say 'no come here or we eat you.' They make us protect here only. Hargrumm and Stale Maree say we not allowed to go kill blooded ones."

"That's all I-"

Acaste no longer seemed to be aware of me. She hissed, baring sharp, bloody teeth. "Hate them! Want to eat blooded ones! Hungry, we are... kill all blooded ones, tear flesh with teeth and crack bone, suck sweet marrow out of their warmth!"

I scurried away as she continued her rant.

"You know, she's rather pretty in that tie-me-down-and-hurt-me kind of way."

"She wanted to eat me!" I protested.

"I know! Sheesh, let me tell you though, only the shallow girls go after your type. 'Oh look at me and my big scary muscles!' 'I'm so scarred and mean-looking!' 'I've got legs! Look at me walk!' If you wanna get a girl that you'll really click with, I'll show you the ropes if we ever go to a real bar."

"You can forget about Mammy Marm's House of Many Mams."

"I'm hoping you don't really mean that."

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If I was to leave the Dead Nations to continue my search, I was going to have to speak to the Silent King. Hargrimm had proved unwilling to help, Acaste would sooner see us all disemboweled and eaten, and while Stale Mary was as kind-hearted as they came, she was torn between her generosity and her duty to the Silent King. The King's own chambers were too well-guarded for me to sneak in and speak to him directly.

The only way I would be able to take another step towards escape (and finally get something to eat other than stale bread and cranium rats sizzled over a brazier) would be if I could get rid of Soego, and that was proving difficult.

Until one day I stumbled into the answer while I was taking my routine stroll down the halls.

There was no meat left on the bones of the ancient, animated corpse... only a few colored rags, which seemed to serve more as decoration than clothing. It was staring at the floor, shaking its head and tapping its chin thoughtfully.

"Greetings..."

It made no response, apparently lost in thought.

"I said, 'Greetings.'"

It looked up and, seeing me, sighed with a small puff of dust. "I've much on my mind, and would prefer to be left alone."

"Is there something I could help you with?" I offered. There was nothing to

do here, so lending a hand where it was needed was no matter.

The skeleton sighed, "No. I've a difficult decision to make, 'tis all."

"What decision is that?"

It paused a moment, as if considering whether it should say. "To continue my... 'life'... here, or to die. To finally pass into the True Death I have been told of."

I clicked my tongue, "Soego's preaching, eh? I see no reason why you should give up your life. You only get one- well, in your case two chances after all."

It nodded, "I shall take thy words into consideration. Now, I ask thee to leave me to my thoughts. Farewell."

With that in mind, it was a simple matter to convince Soego to leave.

Putting on a blank expression and trying to look as bored and depressed as possible, I spoke to Soego as if it were one Dustman to another, "I met a skeleton -- in one of the hallways here -- that seems on the brink of seeking the True Death."

His reaction was a bit more energetic than I expected, "Oh! I will go speak with him, now!"

A full minute after he scurried from the room, Morte stood watching the door as Dak'kon and I sifted through his things.

"It does not seem right to go through the possessions of another," Dak'kon murmured.

"Necessity breeds many things, I'm sad to say." I flipped through yet another book, looking for hidden letters or documents folded between the pages.

Dak'kon looked up at me, his eyes sharp with sudden clarity, "Where was Soego when we first entered?"

I thought back, "The edge of that creaky wooden bed."

Dak'kon nodded thoughtfully, "And where does he always sit?"

I caught on quick, and began running my hands along the frame, "The bed. It's not a matter of comfort..."

"Habits often hide an agenda... one must know how to sift these patterns from chaos," Dak'kon intoned.

Upon closer inspection, the bed frame was constructed from one of those strange substances you only find in Sigil. It wasn't cold to the touch, yet the clang of knocking against it was hollow. The rippled pattern gave the illusion of a wooden surface- likely the product of spiral methods of annealing two metals. I ran a dagger along the crevices, careful not to scratch the surface too badly as I explored.

Wedging it in one spot I nudged the blade a little. The panel creaked. A little more force and it popped free, revealing a hidden compartment and a book.

I skimmed through it. The scribbles were messy from the outset, and in spots here and there the ink was blurry, as if tears had been shed during its writing. While much of the journal was illegible, there were enough details for me to piece together a little of what happened, and of what Soego really was.

"Chief! He's coming back!"

Immediately I placed the journal back, and clicked the panel back into place gently, silently, and picking up a Dustman book I scurried to one corner and pretended to read. Ugh. A Discourse on The Four Stages of Necrosis.

Soego was frowning when he returned, "It seems that the skeleton requires more time to think."

I nodded, "I hope you didn't mind I borrowed one of your books. It gets terribly dull here."

He shook his head, "Not at all. I've been here a few weeks myself. I find this solitude to be peaceful, but I can understand the sentiment."

I handed the book to him, "Well, if you need me I'll be talking to Hargrimm. Perhaps I can convince him to release me."

Soego's gaze hardened a little, and for a moment I worried that he knew we had been through his things. "Perhaps."

He said nothing else.

## Chapter 35 - Soego's Tale

With hair brushed and teeth polished, a 14-year-old Soego straightened his clothes. True, they were ragged and threadbare, and utterly unremarkable stitched as they were from old drapes scrounged from a meek peddler in the Hive Market, but it was still his best shirt and he had to make an impression.

While he shared the abandoned warehouse with twelve other stray youths, he was the oldest, and with age came the privilege of privacy. Soego lifted a loose floorboard to reveal his stash, plucking a vial of perfume from among the stashed treasures he kept: a slightly tarnished bronze pendant, a small bag of fire lotus seeds he nicked, and a pair of old shoes he wore when he was ten (they were still fine, stout leather, and he didn't have the heart to let them go when he outgrew them). The fine crystal vial held a pinkish oil that glittered bright in the daylight that filtered through the windows. It was something he kept on an idle whim, the result of tickling a few pockets, but today he was thankful he didn't sell it after all.

True it was a scent for women, but a rosy aroma was better than the stink of grime and sweat so prevalent in the Hive. The previous week he had fairly bathed himself in it and it had drawn enough sniggers and teasing to turn him red in shame. Still, Soego was smart enough to know he had best not let that get in his way.

With two fingers dabbing a drop of the remaining perfume at his neck he was ready to go.

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The crowd of youths joked and chatted as they sat in a circle before the

Obelisk, or 'The Hangman's Pillar' as the boys called it to the consternation of many Dustmen. So many jokes had been made about the large stone erection, carved with the names of countless dead, that they had gotten stale years ago. Yet still the jokes were told if only to tweak some Dustie noses.

Soego had always been a slim boy, and in the alleys it was always a disadvantage. Here though, he found it easy to squeeze between a burly factory worker and a tall, toothless old man. Behind him one of the taller boys, a soon-to-be Backalley Shiv if rumors were to be believed, was punching his friend in the shoulder. That was the most violence the Dustmen would allow in this sanctum. Soego shifted, trying to nudge himself a bit more room. The old pews squeaked.

And there she was.

Her name was Seladril, a golden-haired aasimar with azure eyes and a milk-toothed grin. The loose Dustman robes ensured her modesty, but it was low-cut enough that it revealed a neck like a swan's. Seladril moved as if she were a force of nature: she swished like the wind kissing the summer grass, walked as if she traveled the paths of the stars that so many Prime Worlders spoke of. Yet it was not this celestial dance that guided her: rather, it was her natural will and charm that seemed to cause all in the planes to bend to her beckoning.

And it was that charm that drew the crowds to witness a Dustman preach, of all things.

She knew how to use her body to that effect. A flick of her wrist would catch the eyes of all the boys, and they would stare. If she lifted her arms just so, those drab, loose sleeves would slip, revealing slim lily-white arms bending like liquid porcelain, and the men would sigh.

Once a week she came to the obelisk. She would smile with each point, joke and fill the air with bubbly laughter between each hymn. But what drew young Soego was her eyes.

Limpid and bright like silvered sapphire, Seladril's gaze was so unlike the dull, dead beyond-the-grave stare carried by so many of her brothers and sisters. When she was silent, they were piercing as wistful half-forgotten memories at twilight. When she smiled, those eyes were bright and teasing

like a woman returning courtship. And more than once, Soego noticed, those eyes seemed to fall on him more than on others.

"The True Death is peace. It is liberation from your suffering. It is the final restful sleep after a lifetime of toil. Passions are the anchor that keep you locked in this pointless cycle of rebirth, good people. If you only release them, you can know freedom."

"Aye? And what 'passions' might ye have sacrificed?" A satyr asked, his words slurred with drink and hot with lust.

When the laughter quieted down (and it always did, quickly, when Seladril smiled), the odd lecturer answered, "Well. If you goodfolk must know... before I first accepted the robes of an Initiate, I was quite fond of roses." The smile she held was meant for Soego, and him alone.

And once again, Soego blushed.

~~~~~

While interest in the bright young woman waxed and waned with the crowd over the weeks, Soego was one of the few that sat on the bench every week to listen to Seladril's lectures. While he had yet to be convinced of Dustman philosophy, he was one of those faithful to Seladril, at least.

And when he was 17, Soego took the title of Namer.

One of twelve Namers that Seladril had gathered that year (an astronomical number, by Dustman standards), Soego found himself grumbling with the others over mundane tasks and sitting through lessons on the five arts of embalming (and their many variants) and the stages of decay. Being continually quizzed and tested and beaten with a stick by a maggot-haired old crone was not the best way to spend one's youth. But still, like the other Namers he studied and fetched and worked with, to see Seladril glance at them with those deep blue eyes from down the hall was enough.

Each time those eyes twinkled in the distance was like the first time he had seen a portal open to the Blessed Fields, Elysium. A wind sweet with meadow-scent had caressed the long-stemmed grasses that bent in reverence under an azure sky, all framed in the silvered borders of the portal itself. It took all he had not to leap through and follow the travelers to



that strange realm.

And one day, while he was hard at work cleaning the blood from a dissection slab, a swish of cloth behind him announced her presence. Soego knew the sound of those footsteps well.

"Scrubbing with the etch pattern of the metal is much more effective," she said in that voice, warm and musical like the song of silver bells.

"F-Factor Seladril," Soego stuttered. Turning to face her he bowed awkwardly.

She smiled, "I know you. Soego, yes? My, you've grown into a fine young man."

He blushed, "I- I'm honored you remembered."

With a finger white as ivory Seladril ran a finger along the surface he was cleaning, and examined the light layer of dead black and scarlet dust that stained her skin, "It's been... what, a year since you first came to us?"

"Ten months, Factor Seladril."

"Tch. No need to be formal, Soego," she chided, turning to examine a zombie swaying in the corner. One arm was hanging limp from its side... the body was in need of some repair before it was put to work again, "You can tell I'm not like many of the other Dustmen."

Soego nodded.

"Go ahead and ask, dear," she laughed, "Don't be shy. Everyone else did... and my did they put me to the irons when my promotion to Factor was announced."

"Y-you..." Soego started, taking a moment to calm his stutter, "You don't seem like a regular Dustman."

Plucking through a tray, Seladril lifted a pre-threaded needle to her eye. Examining it, she nodded, half in satisfaction, half in answer to Soego's thought. She turned to stitch up the zombie's arm as she spoke, "I was a Sensate a few years ago, a good one too. And one day I had decided to

experience what it would be like to be a Dustman."

The needletip punched through gray and partly dessicated flesh, looping back over into a fine, even stitch. Seladril's fingers, by all appearances much too delicate for such coarse and foul work, were nimble and practiced. With the other hand she raised the zombie's arm as she sewed, binding flesh ever tighter to flesh, "Like a good Sensate I gave myself over fully to the experience, and over time I learned and accepted the dark of life and death. Many of the Dustmen were skeptical. Some were openly scornful. I didn't blame them of course. Sensates can be so fickle when it comes to everything: taste, touch, feel, hear, smell... the quest to capture the passing phantasms of this shadow of life is all they will ever know. If I could feel pity for them, I would."

Muttering an incantation, she touched a finger to the zombie's arm, and with a flicker of black flame the wound sealed itself shut.

"Zombie 918, finish cleaning this slab," she commanded, then turned to Soego with a smile, "A young man like you shouldn't waste his time on such things. Come, let us discuss some lessons."

Soego gripped the edge of the slab just as the zombie began scrubbing. With the sudden leap in his pulse he was almost certain he was about to collapse at that moment.

But when a soft hand took his own, Soego swallowed. He knew he was stronger than this. This was his moment to impress, "But isn't it somewhat contradictory for you to be a Dustman?"

"Contradictory?" the edges of her lips twitched playfully as they walked out the arch.

"Well, yes," Soego's voice strengthened, "You obviously seem to be one who enjoys life. And you gather potential initiates by inflaming their passions, and urge them to kill those very passions that inspire them to join the Dustmen in the first place."

"Truly. You are as bright as I expected. There is much potential in you as a Dustman if you can be so direct. Few are so bold as to question one who outranks them," Seladril smiled in delight, "But I do not enjoy 'life.' I live it. That is all that can be expected of anyone, Dustman and living alike. No

more, no less. And as for my place as a Dustman, well..."

Soego's breathing quickened when she gave his hand a firm little squeeze, "People hear the truth I preach. Some listen, many do not. But still I gather many to our cause even if they do so on a whim and leave us later. But their fates are of little concern to me... frustration and pity are also things a true Dustman must rid herself of. And futility must be embraced.

"Besides," her moist red lips curled back to reveal a sharp grin, "I tempt the higher-ups. I test and remind them constantly of what they must purge themselves of. It was probably why I was promoted to Factor so quickly... mixing with the weaker stock of Factotums would've done more harm than good."

Soego licked his lips, "I believe- I am ready to join the Dustmen."

Seladril's smile was still warm, "Patience, Soego. You still have much to learn."

~~~~~

Under Seladril's tutelage Soego's passions cooled over time. She was as warm as ever, as kind and cheerful. But in Soego's heart it was as if a bright summer day had clouded over, and the resulting gray pallor had leached the color from the world. A dreary fog had begun to cloud his passions, usurping the light's rightful place.

And so when he was twenty, Soego put on the robes of a Dustman Initiate.

Seladril, his sponsor, smiled proudly during the ritual as he coldly handed over his last physical ties to sentiment and feeling. The bronze pendant he had given to her long ago in shy gratitude, but that pair of old shoes and the bottle of perfume would be destroyed in the furnaces that night, freeing him at last to walk the path towards True Death.

The other Factors nodded approvingly as they filed past him, faces flat and expressionless as stone. Seladril was the last to leave, and as she did she pressed her soft red lips to his cheek in a sweet kiss and whispered into his ear.

"I'll share one more secret with you, dear Soego: I am still quite fond of

roses."

Something flickered in his chest then, a memory of a fading ember where there once had been a blaze as hot as a forest fire. But Soego obediently willed it away as Seladril had taught him, leaving only a cold, hollow numbness behind.

~~~~~

They still met for a cup of tea every week or so. His former teacher's soft laughter, so warm and merry, was in sharp contrast to the somber near-silence of the Gathering Dust Bar. Even if there hadn't been wards laid to mute noise and enhance meditation, another Dustman would've been embarrassed to be seen with a beautiful, lively young lady like Seladril.

But not Soego. Something stirred in him with each meeting. The days before they met were sweet with anticipation, and the days when she had to cancel seemed bleaker than before. It wasn't love, Soego knew... that was a boyish fantasy he had left behind long ago. It was something, but it wasn't love.

He knew that Seladril was still testing him. Even though Soego was still a lowly Factotum, his former teacher was proud of him, and had expectations as high as the ones she held for the other Factors. And so Soego began to spend the days after their meetings deep in meditation, though once or twice he allowed himself the vice of feeling, just a little.

In the meantime, cranium rats had been scrabbling through the Mortuary in greater numbers than he had known in recent memory. Traps were laid, only to be found sprung yet empty. Poisoned scraps were set out, but the pests avoided them. The Factotums growled in frustration, while those wiser knew patience. One day, one of the critters was bold enough to scabble up to Soego as he chanted quietly to himself. A bowl of incense was smoldering before him.

Soego had been trained well, but still he felt a touch of annoyance, and quick as a whip he snatched the rodent. It squealed in his hand, struggling as he held it up and cocked his head in curiosity. What could the creatures be doing? There was no fresh meat for them here.

A few years ago Soego would've let loose a colorful string of curses when that rodent bit down on the fleshy part of his hand and drew blood. A few

choice ones he had learned on the streets as a boy, too. But he simply winced and held it up sternly.

"Nasty little creatures, aren't you?" he muttered, and throttled the rat with both hands. It gave a short squeal before bones crunched in his grip, and blood spurted down along his fingers. Soego calmly dropped the mangled mass of fur, flesh, blood, and bone and resumed his meditation.

The wormy pink tail twitched once, and was still.

~~~~~

A knock sounded at the door to Soego's chambers. "Soego? I know you're here. You changed your assigned room."

The call went unanswered.

Another knock, "Soego? You'd better not have hung yourself from the rafters. I'd be quite cross if you tossed aside your training like that."

The door opened, and Seladril glided in with a tray in both hands, "Tch. You could've had the courtesy to tell me you couldn't come for tea last week. You never missed a chance to talk, and I waited for over an hour. Do you know how dull the other Dustmen are? Of course you do."

The blanket-covered lump lay still on the bed.

Setting the tray on his small desk, Seladril sighed. There were so few Dustmen, and even fewer Initiates each year, it seemed. The recordbooks had never told of a time when more than half the bedrooms were filled, "Now I'm neither innkeeper nor cook, but I heard you haven't been eating. Rumors of Red-Eye Fever."

Soego didn't move.

Seladril sat down on the bed and ran a hand along that lump, "Soego? I haven't said this to anyone in a long time, but you're making me nervous."

His words came out in a guttural snarl, "Get out..."

"Soego?" she whispered. For the first time in Soego's memory, Seladril's

voice was trembling. She began to pull back the sheets...

Predatory urges were never kind. They were merciless, inhuman, and bloody. If the simple need to tear apart and devour one's prey could be called cruel, then Soego could think of no words to describe the sheer brutality of his instincts.

Because they were not even kind enough to grant Seladril a quick death.

Her screams echoed unheard through the near-empty Mortuary, with the twisted irony that it was in the abandoned apartment wing that Soego hid himself in to protect others from his condition, and now no one could come to his teacher's aid. She struggled, clawing against Soego's thick, fur-covered hide, trying to shield herself from his long, yellowed fangs in that primal instinct to protect herself. Any other time Seladril would have embraced death, but she had long ago taken up the habit of setting aside her expertise and training for her pupil.

Soego wept long after her death rattle was drowned out by the rip and crunch of flesh and bone. He wept as he began to eat.

~~~~~

Three small heresies were committed by the Dustmen on the day of Seladril's funeral.

First, they expressed surprise. It was the shock and confusion of the brutal murder of a Factor in the heart of Dustman power itself. It was the awe that cranium rats were responsible- dozens had been found scrabbling over her body, swarming over her still-warm corpse in the hallway nipping and biting in a throbbing mass of black-brown fur. Softer, though, was the bewilderment that so many Dustmen attended who had considered Seladril a friend.

It was a closed-casket funeral.

The second heresy was greater still. As that casket was edged slowly and gently into the consuming flames of the crematorium, the Dustmen chose to remember Seladril's life. They remembered her beauty, her odd smile and warmth despite her devout commitment to Dustman cause and Dustman ideology. They remembered her for her grand work in guiding more initiates

into the fold and for her unwavering belief in the final peace of True Death. Perhaps it would have shamed her cause, but the gathering chose to remember. And in a moment of weakness, one by one several Dustmen shed a single tear, and no more.

The third heresy belonged to Soego and Soego alone.

He chose to mourn.

~~~~~

"If I may ask... are you all right? You look... tired."

Soego managed a weak smile, and the corners of his mouth twitched slightly, "I have recently taken ill... minor fevers, nothing more. Sometimes they make sleep... difficult."

"Anything I could do?" the stranger offered. He was gray-skinned and terribly scarred, and if it weren't for Soego's heightened sense of smell he would likely have mistaken the man for another zombie.

Soego shook his head, "No, no. Thank you for the concern. I will endure."

"Hey chief! You gonna rattle your bone-box all day or are you coming?" the traveler's mimir called.

The stranger gave Soego a polite smile before he left, "Thank you, Soego. I hope you feel better."

Such a kind man, if a little naive and ignorant of Planar ways. Poor clueless sod.

"Tch," Soego chided himself for a moment, having forgotten to ask the stranger's name. But no matter... the Dustmen would see him again in due time. Death came to all in the Planes, after all.

With that, the weary Dustman closed the door.

"Good day." a familiar voice addressed him.

Soego looked up, "Remn." Like Soego, Remn had been an orphan adopted

and trained by Seladril. Perhaps there might've been some rivalry between the two as a result (indeed, perhaps there already was) if Seladril hadn't been coyly disapproving of such nonsense.

"I know you were very close to our late Factor Seladril," Remn said coolly. There was suspicion in his eyes.

"Somewhat," was the response, just as cold, "We were friends, nothing more."

"Still, it strikes me as unusual that you chose to perform the autopsy yourself. And the embalming," Remn ran a finger along his chin. He had a habit of doing so every time he was deep in thought.

Soego toyed with the idea of gutting the fleshy morsel where he stood. Already he could feel the hot blood trailing through his fur, lapping it up sweet and thick and nourishing from Remn's veins, "She taught me well. I believed I would do honor to her by showing I wouldn't flinch to perform these final favors."

Remn made a clicking sound with his tongue, "And such pride undoes it, Soego. You are far too arrogant for your own good."

The hot slosh of guts in his talons, the crunch of bone hiding tender marrow within... "Is there something you wanted, Remn?"

"Ah. Yes, I had forgotten," Remn flicked his fingers as if dismissing the original thought, "You were the one who found the body, and you had assumed that she was coming for a visit since you had been sick."

"Yes. We all know that Seladril was very considerate."

"I was at the Gathering Dust Bar that evening, as well. When she came in she had ordered a tray with a bowl of soup and a cup of tea. For you, I imagine."

Soego could feel his eyes burning even redder already, "Very kind of her."

"How odd that the tray wasn't found with her body."

"Yes. How odd. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to lock up," Soego said. It

was difficult to keep the snap out of his voice.

The next morning, Remn's body was found in his bed, half-devoured by cranium rats.

~~~~~

He had stumbled through the catacombs, tripping over ancient corpses and passing looted tombs. Such concerns were behind him now. He had fled the Mortuary and the Dustman ways. With each step Soego descended further into the maze of tunnels. He wanted to die here, but he knew it was impossible.

The Dead Truce protected him from the ghouls, zombies, and vargouilles that prowled. Unless he attacked one of them first, no undead would lay a talon on him. Soego may have had a death wish, one greater than he had when he was still a true Dustman at heart, but he was no fool.

He had thought, perhaps, that there was a chance the cranium rats would kill him. Indeed, he had stumbled onto several good-sized groups of the creatures, but they merely scattered in his presence.

Even though he meandered blindly through the tunnels, not knowing where he was heading, Soego knew that something guided him. There was an instinct to take one path rather than the other, and always he thought he heard a chorus echoing noiselessly as he came ever closer.

And when the wererats greeted him, he was not at all surprised when the sorry creatures guided him to their god.

It was a circular chamber, a nest of twigs and bones, with cranium rats perching atop the concentric circles they built. There were thousands of them, and where there lacked seats in this council of vermin the rats piled atop one another, whiskers twitching. Countless eyes glinted at him from the darkness, as if they were twin stars shimmering through the night.

Its voice sounded like the anguished pain of thousands, echoing through his skull, "WE HAVE BEEN EXPECTING YOU FOR A LONG TIME, BIPED. SPEAK SWIFTLY AND TRUE. YOU ARE IN THE HALLS OF MANY-AS-ONE. YOU WILL NOT LEAVE BUT BY OUR GRACE, AND THAT YOU MUST EARN THROUGH SERVITUDE."

"You've destroyed me!" Soego screamed, "You've taken the Dustman ways and the path towards True Death, then you've taken the one person who would've made life bearable!"

"SELADRIL'S DEATH WAS NOT OUR INTENT," the chorus of voices was less painful now, but cold and unapologetic.

"But why..." Soego croaked. Perhaps he could throw himself at the mass of rats. With their hive mind and magic potential they could surely have given him a quick death.

"THE PRIMAL URGES GRANTED BY OUR GIFT WOULD HAVE JEOPARDIZED YOUR SALVATION THROUGH TRUE DEATH, AND IN SO DOING DRAWN YOU TO US FOR THE CURE. WE WOULD STILL HAVE YOU SERVE US, AND WE CAN REWARD TO IN EXCHANGE."

Soego crumpled to his knees, his voice bitter, "What would a pack of vermin need from a Dustman? And what could you possibly offer in return?"

"YOU CAN WALK AMONGST THE UNDEAD FREELY WITH THE PROTECTION OF THE DEAD TRUCE. WITH THAT SHIELD YOU ARE TO GO TO THE DEAD NATIONS, SEEK OUT THE SILENT KING, AND KILL HIM. IN THE PROCESS, SOW DISSENT AMONG THE UNDEAD AND BREAK THEM APART. WE DO NOT TRUST THOSE WHOSE MINDS WE CANNOT SEE. WE DO NOT TRUST SILENT MYSTERIES. AS FOR REWARD... WE OFFER YOU SELADRIL."

Soego fought back the tears, "You are a fool, Many-as-One."

The hive mind was unimpressed, "WE HAVE POWER BEYOND YOUR UNDERSTANDING, BIPED. WE OFFER YOU SELADRIL."

"Fool!" Soego cried, "Even if her body were intact, even if you had a scrap of her flesh to work your magic, a Dustman cannot be returned to life! Just as the Dead Truce is unspoken law among Dustmen, so is this! Her soul is already beyond the reach of mortal magic!"

And Soego gasped, as he felt the fingers of a soft, lily-white hand curling into his own.

"WHAT WE OFFER IS MUCH SIMPLER, SOEGO OF THE DUSTMEN."

And Soego's throat sounded a hoarse moan, as he felt tender red lips brushing his cheek.

"WE OFFER YOU THE MEMORY OF HER TOUCH."

"I am still quite fond of roses..."

"WE OFFER YOU THE DREAM OF HER LOVE."

The slightest scent of roses filled the air. It was something Soego hadn't known he'd missed all these years. The scent conjured her smile, brought back the memory of those silver-blue eyes and her laughter like the song of silver bells.

Many-as-One knew Soego's answer even before he did, "AND SO OUR COMPACT IS MADE."

## Chapter 36

"Did you know Soego's a cranium rat spy?"

Hargrimm drew close to me, smelling of dust and moldering cloth. "What is this thou speakest of? What proof hast thou that Soego runs with the brain vermin?"

"There's proof in his quarters, his journal. The entries aren't very coherent or legible, but from what I could gather he was bitten, became infected with lycanthropy, and ended up transforming into a wererat and killing a friend in the Mortuary. For some reason he made a pact with Many-As-One to spy on or kill the Silent King."

Hargrimm's voice was stern, but an undercurrent of skepticism ran through it. "We shall see; I shall gather Soego and speak to him of this matter within his chambers. Should this be true, I shall owe thee thanks."

~~~~~

We went to our cell with an escort of skeletons and ghouls, Hargrimm's staff clacking against the tiles as he walked. Soego had been resting on the bed once again, and sat up in alarm upon seeing the grim cavalcade.

Hargrimm's voice was a cold, emotionless hiss when it spoke. "Soego, what is this I hear of thee being in league with Many-As-One?"

The Dustman's eyes shrank back in shock, "What? That is a lie! Who would dare level such a heinous accusation against me?!" He scanned the group, and those red-rimmed eyes fell on me. He snarled, half growl, half chitter, like that of a rodent, "You!"

A crack of that heavy staff snapped Soego's attention back to the tall skeletal priest, "Darest thou lie to the high priest of the Silent King?"

"No! No, Hargrimm, I would never presume..."

"Where is thy journal? Let me see it. Prove thy innocence before the eyes of the Silent King."

"I... I..." he gulped, crestfallen and meek, "I beg for your mercy, Hargrimm."

"The Dead Truce shall protect thee here, Soego, but thou shalt never leave these catacombs. Thou shalt continue thy pursuit of thy precious "True Death" here, alone... for the rest of thy days. Farewell," Hargrimm laid Soego's sentence with grim satisfaction, with a nod stiff and sure as an executioner's arm.

Soego sputtered, "But... you... can't... nnnnARAGH!"

Robes tearing and eyes bleeding fully into a bright crimson, Soego transformed. His skin thickened into fur-covered hide, his teeth elongated into yellow fangs. A thick, wormlike tail snapped out behind him. Soego curled forward on all fours, shrieking in an inhuman howl as long whiskers twitched along his rat-like snout.

Hargrimm merely clicked its teeth, unimpressed, "Mark my words, Living; only the Truce protects thee. Do not cast aside thy only shield so

thoughtlessly."

"I won't be caged!" Soego screamed, "Die!"

As Soego leapt at the priest, the two skeletons stood before their leader to protect it. Yet it was all for naught, as Hargrimm cracked the tiles with its staff. Raising one hand and snapping a command in an ancient, foreign tongue, a nimbus of light swirled around the priest. With a crack and a flash, a bolt of lightning shot down from the realms above and struck the man-rat, enveloping his body in a pale flash.

Soego was thrown back with a screech. Laid flat on the ground, he twitched and groaned in agony as the transformation receded. His torn robes revealed pale, smoking flesh.

And the ghouls set upon him, devouring him alive.

I turned away from the grisly sight, tried to ignore the crunch and juicy tearing of still-living flesh.

Hargrimm spoke with cold finality, "It is done, then. May the Silent King protect us from such filth in the future."

I'll never eat a cranium rat ever again.

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Hargrimm was pleased when he spoke to me in the temple, "I thank thee for thy assistance. Soego's infiltration could have done genuine damage to the Dead Nations."

"I was just glad to help, Hargrimm. Now that me and my friends have shown that we are harmless to your people, can we talk to the Silent King?"

Hargrimm's response was firm and its voice cold, "No."

The shock to its response shivered through me, "But- we unveiled the traitor Soego! Surely we have earned your trust by now!"

Hargrimm shook its head, "No living creature may pass through the doors to the Silent King, and again, I would not allow an audience even if it were

possible."

I growled in frustration, "Look, I've done nothing to harm your people, everything to help you, and exposed a spy sent by one of your most dangerous enemies. I feel I've earned a chance to plead my case."

Hargrimm tapped one finger bone against its staff, "I shall speak to the Silent King on thy behalf."

"You didn't trust me all this time. Why should I trust you to do the same?"

"Thou hast no choice."

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"Quit pacing, chief. You're making me nervous."

With nothing to do, I found myself walking circles around the iron pews of the church. The ghouls had ripped apart Soego's body by now and I didn't feel like sleeping next to a freshly-killed corpse. I had gone over my spellbook countless times by now, and was too antsy to discuss philosophy with Dak'kon.

"I understand your frustration. However, the situation seems to be out of our hands. Rest, meditate, and do what you can when the opportunity is provided for you," Dak'kon added.

Despite the rare occasion where Dak'kon and Morte were in agreement, I couldn't accept my powerlessness in the Dead Nations. I had done all I could, and now my fate was in the hands of Hargrimm, who had been distrusting since the first day and who had refused my request to appeal before their great leader and plead for my freedom.

"Dak'kon, you hail from the plane of Limbo, where the land itself roils and tumbles in chaos."

He nodded, "It is through knowing ourselves that the Githzerai bring order to the realm."

"You shape your own fates through will alone. I'm about to do the same."

Dak'kon crossed his arms and breathed deeply, "We know not what will happen if we enter the chambers of the Silent King. It is said that no living creature can pass through the doors..."

I shrugged, "Well, what's it going to do, kill me?"

I wasn't foolish enough to enter through force... setting the entire Dead Nations against me would be a poor way to begin a diplomatic effort towards earning my freedom. Hargrimm was an obstacle, Acaste was more predator than leader, but Stale Mary... her kindness had not been snuffed in death.

The ways of persuasion and charm were known to me in my studies of the Art, and it was through this lens that I focused my will. I softened the harsh, grating tone of my voice, straightened my stance, and softened my features so that I came to Mary as a true supplicant. This was no deception (could undead even be susceptible to charms and glamours?), it was a way of finding the right words.

"Mary, I need to speak with the Silent King. Can you help me?"

"Whuh?" <Why?>

"I need to leave this place, Mary. I've so much to do... and to be imprisoned here, simply for stumbling upon the Dead Nations... it isn't right. Please... I ask only for a modicum of compassion. Can you help me?"

"Hrrghnnnn..." <Hargrimm..>.

I shook my head, "Hargrimm will not allow me to speak to the King directly. I don't know if it truly intends to release me or my friends."

Stale Mary was quiet for a time, then nodded. She pointed to the first of the three portals along the northern wall. "C-c-cluuuhh ayyysss. Thuuuh uh Suhhhlunnh Kuh-kuknnng. Wwhhhuuuhbh uuhhhnd nuuuheehhh ahhhlilk-ku-kuuuhh. Bhu-bhu-buhhh uhn suuuhhh lhuuung ayyye lhhuuuv." <Close eyes. Think of Silent King. Walk through northwest alcove. But only so long as I live.>

"Thanks, Mary."

"Hrrghunnn... uzz khnnnd unnnsss..." <Hargrim... was kind once... > She said it with the silent sorrow of lament. Mary's tone wasn't that of a mother or matron this time. It held the wistful passions of a woman, one who has had to watch from afar as time changed those she knew, and struggle hardened their hearts.

"I hope that you can rekindle that kindness someday, Mary. Farewell."

And so I stepped into the archway. The dim alcove was dry and empty, the dust of decades, if not centuries, blanketed the ground. It looked like no one had used the back door in ages.

"Here goes nothing," I muttered, and envisioned the Silent King: tall, proud, and regal. I imagined him as a mummy, a lich, a ghost, wearing crown, stole, or scepter. As I focused I could feel the air ripple, and there was the tickling sense that reality itself was twisting before me. With a gut-wrenching tug, the space before the alcove seemed to tear and ripple into a spiral of blue.

The chamber we stepped into was cold, dry as a tomb, and absolutely silent. Tall skeletal guards encircled the room, standing so stock-still that they could've been propped up to scare off intruders.

Dak'kon climbed the steps grimly behind me, and Morte looked back and forth as he floated. The silence was unnerving, and the way the skeletons stood sentinel was even more unnatural than undeath could be. I licked my lips. Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea after all.

The throne was set in the center of a platform, spaced with holes covered by an unnaturally hard, glassy substance. Deep in the pits below was a mass of shattered bones and grinning skulls. An eerie yellow light lit the chamber from below, the shadows danced upwards as if they were alive.

"O Silent King," I said, kneeling before the throne, "I have come to plead for my freedom. My mission through these catacombs is peaceful, and I do not seek to disturb the dead. All I want is to find a small golden orb, its surface vile to the touch. Please, if you would but--"

I looked up. Something was wrong.

The throne, built from the rib cage of a great beast with massive bones shaped and curved inward, kept the king's visage in shadow. I approached

for a closer look, only to see a withering corpse. While it was impressive in its engraved parade-armor despite its coating of dust and cobwebs, the lord and master of the Dead Nations was little more than a dessicated shell.

"The Silent King... is dead..." I whispered.

Morte's teeth chattered, "I-I don't feel right about this, chief. If Hargrimm knows that we know his dirty little secret..."

"Such is the danger and power of knowing what is forbidden," Dak'kon intoned.

We turned to leave.

"HERESY!" Hargrimm cried, "Ye dare to approach the Silent King?!" With that its skeletal form lifted in the air and flew at me with supernatural grace.

The fingers of one bony hand elongated, and the talons dug into the flesh of my throat. With that firm grip on my neck Hargrimm tossed me into the air like a rag. My body flew, spiraling awkwardly until my head cracked against the glassy surface at an awkward angle. There was the sickening, awkward feel of my spine snapping and immediately everything from the neck down went numb.

The world faded, flickered, before it returned in full force. Cheek pressed against the cold crystal substance, I was treated to a full view of the terrifying drop down into a pit of spiky bones. That would've hurt.

Despite the damage I had suffered, my body was healing already and with a twitch I cracked my neck back into place.

Hargrimm hovered over me, a strange look of concern in its glowing eyes, "But- how...?"

"I'm immortal," I groaned, sitting up and twisting my head until it cracked into place. I thought I could feel a small shard of bone still lodged in the muscle in a funny way. I was going to have a kink there for a while, "It seems that I can't die. I'm trying to find a way to become mortal again, but apparently I need to go through Pharod first."

"Then thou shalt never leave this place," Hargrimm commanded grimly,

"Forever shall ye remain with thy companions, bound by every scrap of power I can command..."

"Stuuup." <Stop.> Stale Mary struggled to speak as she shuffled up from the bottom of the staircase.

"Stale Mary..." Hargrimm muttered, "This is thy doing?! Thou hast placed our nation in peril! This man now knows the most dangerous of secrets of the Dead Nations!"

"Nuuuugh. Uuuh wuuuh nnn ruughhht." <No. It was not right.> It was difficult for her to force out the words, but Stale Mary spoke with the conviction of a mother protecting her ward.

"Mary..." Hargrimm groaned, placing its face in one hand. "Thy compassion threatens us all."

"Coompnnnn drruuvs uuuz tuuu pruuuhtk kwuuuht uuns. Coompnnn mmmkus uuus wuurth." <Compassion drives us to protect quiet ones. Compassion makes us worthy.>

Hargrimm loosened his grip on its staff and its shoulders slumped, as if calming down. "So, thou hast come," It addressed me in a tired voice. The skeleton turned to gaze upon the massive throne. "What thou seest here is the end of our culture."

"Is that the Silent King?"

"Yes," a musty sigh sent a puff of dust through the air, "None must know that the King speaks only silence."

I got to my feet, "How long has this gone on?"

"Luhnnngg." < Long.>

Hargrimm stared off into the shadows. "He stopped speaking to us long ago -- he himself has left for the thrice-damned True Death." A trace of rage and despair trickled into its voice. "He has abandoned us here to suffer amongst the Living! We have become... the prey... of all that lives."

"Then why does he rule?"

"He rules because he must."

"But if he's dead... how?"

"We interpret the wishes of the Silent King based on what he said many long years ago. It has not been easy..." Hargrimm sounded tired; he sagged beneath the weight of an invisible burden. "Many questions, many questions do I have for him."

I looked up to Hargrimm. So this was the true power behind the Dead Nations. I should've been appealing to him instead of trying to meet an unseen king. "So you are the one who truly rules here, Hargrimm."

It looked to Stale Mary, "Mary and I speak to the Silent King. We rule in his stead."

"Why don't you tell your people the truth?"

The priest sighed. The ache of centuries living weighed upon it, and while Hargrimm seemed meek and defeated, I knew he still lived to work towards a greater purpose. "I wish to preserve what we have created. I do not wish to die."

Stale Mary spoke, her voice ponderous: "Nuh-nuh-nor I." <Nor I.>

"If our own people were to learn of this... or Acaste were to discover this deception... or Many-As-One... all that we have created here would be destroyed. This husk," Hargrimm said, pointing to the slumped body of the Silent King, "is all that keeps the inner and outer enemies at bay. If the truth were spoken, our small civilization would become dust."

"Such a fragile balance," Dak'kon murmured.

"I cannot force thee to be silent. But I would ask thee to look beyond thyself, to consider what would happen if thou spoke of what thou hast seen here."

I nodded, "I only wish to leave, Hargrimm. Grant me this, and I vow that you shall have my silence."

Hargrimm was silent for a moment. "Thou may leave this place. Go, now..."

and I beg of thee: honor thy word."

"I have one last question before I leave... have you seen a small, bronze sphere anywhere here?"

Hargrimm shook its head. "I have seen no such thing, here. Perhaps deeper beneath Sigil... search the drowned catacombs. Thou shalt find the entrance to that place west of where thou first came here. Leave now, and do not disturb the dead. Mary and I have much to talk about." Mary nodded, and she patted my cheek gently, "Muuuh unduuuh." <Much indeed.>

Chapter 37

Down the dimly lit halls of the Dead Nations and through the gates I entered the Drowned Nations as Hargrimm suggested. Hopefully Pharod's bronze sphere would be somewhere down here, but if I hadn't gotten any clues combing through the rest of these damn catacombs, it seemed even less feasible that I'd find it in this dank little corner of Sigil.

A ghoul greeted me as I entered. His eyes were wary, and he waved me away with a hiss, "Sss... Meat creature, no place for you thisss isss."

"What are you doing here?"

He gestured, taking in the entire red-bricked maze of tunnels. Slabs and ancient furniture were scattered about the place. Before the coffins were moved in it might've been a tavern until it sank beneath the city. "We look to exsssspend our home. Eliminate enemiiesss... find food to keep from chewing on walking meat, yessss? The Silent King tellsss usss... no walking meat."

"Are these the Drowned Nations?"

"Thiss? Thisss iss the Drowned Nationsss, yesss," he hissed, "Thisss iss our new hunting lair. Thisss... thissss is our larder."

Totems were set up in several corners craft from bestial skulls and rags scrounged from shrouds or ancient tapestries. If they didn't ward off the more savage creatures of the Drowned Nations, they likely served as signs to mark out sanctuaries that had been cleared of such dangers.

The ghouls here didn't eye me or lick rotting lips with serpentine black tongues as others did. There was some measure of control here: while the ghouls glanced furtively at the shadows and crept warily for hidden dangers, there was a contentment that came with the hunt and the satisfaction of being well-fed.

These ghouls didn't have to live on rats with just enough meat on their frames to pick out of their teeth. The prey here was larger, more rampant, and I would have to be careful.

Searching down one chamber, I came across just such a monster.

"Are you... ssscared of thiss creature? Ha ha!" one ghoul barked a laugh.

His companion scowled, "I will try. It is... fassst."

As I watched, the second ghoul crept towards a hulking beast at least eight feet long from nose to tail. Mottled white skin, fishbelly pale, was drawn tight on its heavily muscled frame. A mouth held rows of dagger-sharp teeth that sprouted from its jaws like weeds fresh after a rain, and two large bony spines protruded from its mandibles. The thing could've taken an arm in a snap and a tug, and as the ghoul crept closer I winced, expecting a snarl and a wet, ripping sound as those jaws tore gristle and tendon.

At the last moment the creature growled, and the snarl sent the ghoul running with a pitched "Yeeeeeeeeeee!"

His companion howled, "Ha ha! Coward!"

"Ssstupid beast..."

When his laughter died down he glanced at me with quite possibly the friendliest grin I had ever gotten from a ghoul. While I'd rather not see that sort of snaggle-toothed grin again, it was better than the Acaste's snarls and furious ramblings, "Sss... meat creature... trocoptoca keeps us from

treasure, yes? The troco must die. You keep treasure. We get body. Yesss?"

"What is that creature?" I couldn't tell whether it was undead or not. Then again, the thought of large reptilian monsters keeping a comfortable ecological niche in a network of sewers was ridiculous.

"It'sss a trocoptoca. White. Hornssss. Nasssty. Trocosss eat flessssh. Our enemiesss. Kill it, yes?"

"What's with your friend?"

He grinned, "Ha ha... coward, he iss. Afraid of troco. Ha ha. Kill it for us, yesss?"

The second ghoul snarled, "Not friend! Braggart! Big ghoul! Afraid of nothing, he saysss! You see him getting closse to troco? No! He coward! You kill it and show him who brave iss!"

I leaned to get a better look. A motionless lump lay behind the tocop-something, a mangled corpse draped in a Collector's robe. "I'd rather not get in the way of such a thing if I can help it."

The second ghoul hissed, "Hssst- we not interested in coins or things that go clink. Just the flesh... Kill the troco for usss, yesss, and you take itsss money. We take itsss food. You like, yesss?"

Well, we could do a favor I suppose. The more content the ghouls are here, the less they'll bother me.

The thing snarled, trying to drive me from its territory the way predatory beasts do. Such creatures are rarely interested in fights. Much better to butt heads and scare an enemy off than risk crippling wounds open to infection if things got really nasty. If all it had were snarls and grunts, perhaps I could-

My thoughts were cut off when the thing swung its head and gored me with one of those mandibular spikes.

"Oh son of a-" I screamed as I landed, gripping a deep puncture in my leg. The gush of blood wasn't as bad as it could've been... a quarter of an inch off and the artery would've been spewing my scarlet life over the stones.

"We're coming, chief!"

Karach sang and teeth chattered as my companions came to my aid. The creature screeched and hissed as black blood spilled onto the stones. Half-blind and frantic I groped around as the creature's clawed feet stomped. Now and again those razor talons missed my arms by a hair, and twice they grazed my flesh.

My fingers curled around the bone dagger's hilt, and taking advantage of the troco's confusion I thrust the blade up into its heart. The first blow merely earned an agonized screech, but with the second and third stabs its movements began to slow.

I don't recall how many times I gouged pale flesh, but by the time the frenzy was over I was covered in a good layer of bilious black blood.

I did what I could in those catacombs. It was a tenuous alliance, born kicking and screaming and soaked in the blood and fluids of the mortal dangers that lurked in these catacombs. I fought only to carve a way deeper into the dank tunnels with the slim hope that I might find the bronze sphere, while the ghouls fought only to spread their dominion so that they might sate, even for a moment, their neverending hunger.

And once they achieve their goal, I would be useless to them, protected only by the edict of a dead King.

Some days, I just really need a hug.

Room after room I slew the creatures. By the outdated totems in troco-filled chambers it seemed that the monsters of the dark were taking back their territory. Even with the edict in place I hoped the ghouls would value my aid when we drove the creatures back. I'm sure of it.

Standing in the middle of a crossroads, a pair of ghouls waved me away. "Ssss! Come no closer, human!" the female hissed.

"Wait, I can help," I insisted as I stepped forward.

And then that chorus of Vargouilles' screeches gave substance to the warning.

"Oops."

They came in swarms, overwhelming the ghouls in their hungred frenzy. Both sides tore and bit, arching for whatever flesh they could get their teeth on. We joined the fray on the ghouls' side, but too late – they fell screaming as they were torn into pieces by the seemingly unstoppable horde. The Vargouilles, however, were weakened, and soon fell to Dak'kon's blade and my magic.

I crept away from the mangled corpses of the ghouls and continued down the hall. The large hall, with a floor shining and rippled as if it had been poured, was ensconced with deep arches along the walls. The murmur from the openings made me wary, and as we walked I glanced to the side, ever wary of enemies. Dak'kon was tense, creeping forward with a fluid sidestep so that he could watch our backs. Morte floated silently behind us.

Halfway down the hall a corpse came into view... a ghoul, a mummified yellow by the look of it. Waving a hand and pointing I gestured for Morte and Dak'kon to stay where they were.

Creeping forward I knew it was too convenient, a single body in the middle of the floor, conveniently placed, a clear outline against the floor.

And those damn screeches only verified my suspicions.

Chanting in an ancient tongue, Dak'kon's body thrummed with the strength of ten men. While he was swift and sure as always, his blade struck with a force that cracked stone.

The black-edged blade shrieked, slicing a vargouille in twain with each passing. As Morte rolled through the air his gnashing teeth ripped the wings from one vargouille, then another, and as Dak'kon passed that keen obsidian tip would follow with a downward stroke to end the beast's wails. The forms of the blade were graceful even in these improvised opportunities, as if Dak'kon were connecting the heavens with the earth.

Of course, I had little time to admire his battle skills when nine of the fluttering horrors were gnawing on my scarred backside.

As always I sponged up the damage as Morte and Dak'kon picked off the stragglers. While much of the flock focused on me the two circled the room,

slaughtering vargouilles with each pass until they centered on the flock gnawing and tearing at me.

And then it was just a matter of killing them faster than they dealt damage to me.

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"Yer not looking so great, chief."

"I'll be fine," I muttered as I sewed my flesh back together.

"It would seem those that did were not slain have fled," Dak'kon intoned, prodding a dead vargouille with his boot. With that he nodded with the satisfaction of one who had done his duty, cleansing these chambers, at least, of the flapping vermin.

"Pain in the arse, these things are, chief. Almost as bad as cranium rats when they swarm. Twice as annoying as acid pigeons."

"They might just be a little of both," I grumbled, bandaging up my arm, "Rodents and birds have one thing in common..."

"Aside from abandoning their leavings in and on your walls?"

I nodded at the dull glint coming from one alcove "They have an inordinate fondness of shiny things."

I picked it out among a small pile of twisted bits of metal and scraps of pounded foil. The bottle was heavy in my hands, and as I turned it over I couldn't see a single bubble floating from the cork. The glass was a dull mustard-yellow, but with an idle shake the bottle seemed to thrum as if it contained the seas of a thousand worlds. Glyve had mentioned that a command word was required to activate it, but still I felt somewhat unsafe holding the thing... a Decanter of Endless Water. A fool or madman could consign a world to a watery doom by merely misplacing the cork.

"Ooooh. Those things are rare, chief," Morte murmured, "That could fetch a nice bit of jink if we could find a buyer. There are desert worlds that would sell kings into slavery for this..."

And so we continued down, deeper into the Drowned Nations into caverns too dark and perilous for even the ghouls.

There were rooms high with graceful pillars, built by men who yearned to touch the sky with their creations.

There were halls with walls ensconced with mummified bodies, holding bones and shrouds like babes returning to a mother's cold breast.

There were crypts that held the shells of men long forgotten, their dust held in sarcophagi whose features had been long-eroded by the waters dripping from above.

And lastly, there was a crumbled, hollowed-out lair fetid and foul with the dung of the blubbery reptilian denizens here.

And with the last battle's end Dak'kon's supernatural strength faded, and he sighed a weary sigh, leaning against the wall with a heavy hand. Morte probed his teeth with an idle tongue, searching for a molar or two that had been loosened with the chain of battles we had endured.

I don't know how or why a Collector had found his way so deep into warrens that even ghouls would dare to tread. Perhaps he had been slain in the catacombs above and dragged down here through a side tunnel. I didn't care.

All that I could see was that glint of bronze he clutched tightly in his hands in fingers frozen with death.

"Finally," I whispered in satisfaction.

The sphere was light to the touch, as if hollow. While it was unremarkable in any way, it made my skin crawl at the touch. The surface curdled under my fingertips, and the mere feel of it gave me the impression that it was an egg just about to burst open. To make matters worse, the faint smell of rotten custard emanated from it, so putrid and thick it made my eyes water.

"Yes!" Morte cheered, "Now we can go make ourselves sodden with drink and bounce coppers off the bar girls!"

While I was in a celebratory mood, I didn't care to raise the sphere aloft and

cheer. Tucking the disgusting thing into my pack I led the way back to the surface, where things might not have had a semblance of normality, but at least there was warmth, food, and a good mattress if we could spare enough coin.

The feeling that gripped me then was a cold talon curling around my heart, piercing with terror and haunting like a memory lost to the ages.

And there, to our left, was an old, forgotten gate. Like the sphere it was utterly unremarkable at a glance, but as I touched it the black metal seemed chill and unforgiving. It was the echo of a dirge, the face of a forgotten passer-by. It was a stranger you once knew, the name teasingly coy on the tip of your tongue.

"Chief...? Chief we have the sphere! What are you doing?"

As I opened the gate, a cold wind rushed forth. I began to shiver as I heard the sound of a voice whispering, although I couldn't make out what it said. In a second, it was gone and all was silent... and I realized that I had been here before, and there was the strong feeling that my companions musn't follow me in.

"I'm going in alone... Wait out here for me."

"Oh no, chief. No way are you going in there without me! I'm not letting you run off into some barmy crypt by your lonesome self!"

"I concur," Dak'kon intoned, "I asked to join you so that I might lend my knowing of these strange lands. I cannot leave you to enter territory unexplored by any of us on your own."

"Just trust me!" I said sternly, stabbing a finger at the two, "Just stay here and wait 'till I come back."

"But chief-" Morte protested.

Dak'kon straightened. "As you will," he said smoothly, crossing his arms. While glad I didn't have to argue further, I was taken aback by Dak'kon's sudden shift. Did I disappoint him? Was he angry that his disciple would take such a tone with him? I didn't know, I merely felt ashamed that I would treat a companion and mentor so.

Morte sighed, "All right. If the gith is gonna stay I might as well too."

I nodded, "Good. I'll be right back."

## Interlude

"I do so envy the Nameless One," Scii murmurs, "possessing a bottle whose stopper holds back endless waters. One could change a world with such a thing... found a new kingdom fat with water and wealth. Draw together the largest city ever built on the dunes. Drown the Sea of Silt and plant a wealth of grasslands in its place. Oh I have dreamed of such things, I have..."

"Aye, aye, yer home world sucks donkey teats get on wit' it alreaAIEEEEEEEEEEE!" a solid thunk accompanies G'mir's squeal of shock as an obsidian spear buries itself into the wood of the table where his boot was just a moment ago.

"I did warn you," Scii-tavakis smiles, "On my world, it is also quite rude to interrupt a telling."

"You- YOU MADWOMAN!" the dwarf screams, kicking aside the spear. The shrill cry that booms through the high-ceilinged tavern seems much too loud for a creature of such small stature and lung capacity. Yet launching his three-foot-high bulk at the stage, G'mir the Midget Dwarf swings his axe, red-faced with the heat of insane fury roiling through him.

It takes three able-bodied men and a pixie just to slow him down, and a bariur receives a swift kick in the face for snatching away G'mir's axe. How such a squat creature could leap high enough to do so is a mystery in itself. Patrons leap from their seats: some shouting encouragement, others demanding the dwarf be beaten or killed so that the story could continue.

In the background Oudilin plucks frantically at the strings of his lyre in bizarre contrast to the soothing bard-song he is attempting. Mikon screams

at the patrons, his threats of arrest impotent against the steadily growing chaos in the tavern. Several barmaids join in the fray, clubbing the enraged dwarf with their trays and pelting him with nearby mugs. Futile endeavors to say the least.

Disarmed but still full of spitfire and vinegar, G'mir rips off the leg from the nearby table, clubbing anyone foolish enough to venture close enough. A black-clad rogue that was attempting to sneak behind him is tossed two tables over. A barmaid is caught across the jaw by the makeshift club. A bespectacled cacodemon takes it in the shin as the pot of mint tea and plate of strawberry scones he had been enjoying crash to the floor as the table collapses.

With the way cleared, G'mir clambers up onto the stage even as a tiefling and several other planars grab at his stubby little legs.

Taking a step back, Scii-tavakis calmly places two fingers to her temple just as the maddened dwarf finishes pulling his plump little body over the edge. The elf focuses.

The pale bolt of light that shoots from her forehead was an almost placid azure. It strikes G'mir squarely in the head and with a soft cracking sound he falls back like a limp, overcooked noodle, collapsing against the bespectacled demon as he sobs over his fallen tray. The tussle resolved, a dreadful hush falls across the crowd.

"Well," the elf's tanned, leathery face pulls into a wry smile, "I didn't think I'd have to use that trick again."

Mikon's face has grown to be nearly as red as his armor. Sweating and furious, he bellows, "You are all under arrest!"

The three hundred or so planars that crowded around him stare, unimpressed. A few chuckles arise from those on the second tier of the tavern.

Shara Six Blades' voice is cold and razor-edged, "On whose authority?"

"Mine! On the order of the Harmonium I hereby place everyone in this bar under arrest until the matter can be resolved, and that includes you, tavern wench!"

Spreading all six arms out and stretching her claws, Shara rises up onto her tail, towering at a full twelve feet and encircled with a halo of talons. She speaks with a voice thick with deep, abyssal fury and with eyes red as fiery blood.

"Do you think your petty laws have meaning here, manling? Do the words of addled old men swaddled in Guvner robes hold weight against the crushing madness of the Hivers?" The blood drains from Mikon's face as Shara slithers over the bar with a tail flowing like sinuous water, "Can you wrap chains around the infamous fury of a marilith, manling? Truss up the blackness of a fiend's heart for the Mercykiller's axe?"

One bare arm curls down towards Mikon as he backs up against a pillar, his skin pale as smoke and eyes bigger than teacups. Those long, red-black talons seem to elongate as they snap around his face like a cage, holding him still as he trembles on the edge of soiling his armor.

"There is a reason this is the Tavern of Broken Dreams, foolish manling. I have supped many times on the hopes of men from a hundred kingdoms, gorged myself fat and happy on the wants of peasants and kings. By all means, challenge my word here. It has been long since I have painted my tavern sign red with mortal folly."

"S-s-so long as we understand each other," Mikon trembles, and the talons withdraw.

"I thought so," she hisses. The Harmonium guard collapses to the floor as Shara points a talon towards the grinning storyteller, "You are in no place to smile, Athasian. This establishment works by my word of law, and you are the instigator of this conflict."

Even the sturdiest steel will warp and bend under a hot enough fire, Scii-tavakis' eyes widen and she bows meekly. It's a strange sight, and the subdued tone she speaks in is unnatural, "I humbly seek your forgiveness, Innmistress. I have been a poor guest to have taken advantage of your gift of water and shade."

"Continue your tale and I shall decide your punishment afterwards. If it pleases us, I shall consider mitigating it. Now," Shara smiles sweetly, calling out to the entire crowd, "For the next hour all drinks are half-price save the

premium black-box items on the list. No need to crowd, the barmaids will be happy to take your orders. And someone tie up that dwarf... I know exactly how to deal with him when he wakes."

Mikon doubles over and vomits noisily.

As several adventurers pull out some lengths of rope and manacles, Scii-tavakis continues her tale, if a bit more unsteady than earlier. Holding your mug by the rim and giving it a little shake, you attract the attention of Shara herself, who sighs as she fills it to the rim with that bubbling obsidian brew. This vintage is a bit sweeter than you remembered.

"With- with care the Nameless One entered the darkened hall, the ancient ways had been hewn by a master. But while the brick was newer than the city before, the path was caked with the dust of time, spans of time and seas and mountains of dust deep and high enough to bury the Pristine Tower itself..."

## Chapter 38

The chill air of this chamber pricked my skin. It wasn't merely the way the massive crypt seemed to draw the heat from my flesh, sucking the warmth from my bones. Nor was it merely the blue tiles that cracked like ice under my step. It was something the soulless chill of things best left forgotten, ancient secrets buried away because they were too grim or mad to behold. Across the way and through the arch was a central chamber with a blocky gray sarcophagus at its heart. This was a tomb, for who or what I felt like I should've known.

I gulped upon seeing the skeleton at the side of the entrance. Apparently very few make it very far.

Each sound I made echoed through the vast chamber, rippling the air in razor-edged crescendos that signaled how utterly huge this place was. It was as if a worm had hollowed out a space in the core of Sigil itself, and left it

empty when it died.

But most eerie of all was the giant rune gilded into the center of the floor in an unfamiliar, silvery metal. It was the same rune I bore on my shoulder... knife-edged and barbed inward and out as if it were pain betraying itself.

The Rune of Torment.

I explored the gallery, and with my careless steps a bolt of blue light shot out from a corner, cracking against my shoulder and sending me spinning.

Damn. The place was trapped.

Well, it's not like this place could kill me.

Could it?

A sheet of leather hung from a wall, bat-winged as if it were freshly stripped from a body, head, arms, legs, and tail. The scratchy runes were a little faded with age, but the chill, dry air seemed to have preserved it over the ages.

At last I have you. Never again will you torment me, for no mortal man can escape these walls. Seek the keys and embrace death with each that you find. Only then shall you be free.

Well that's reassuring.

Intending to progress to the next room I headed towards the passage down. Yet foolishly I had stepped onto the seal that was the symbol of my curse, the black mark I was fated to carry with me.

So when it glowed I stood stock-still, paralyzed with the flash. The bolt of lightning cracked down through me like a white-hot whip, frying every muscle and nerve along my spine into a useless puddle of molten flesh. I collapsed, twitching a moment, before the darkness claimed me.

~~~~~

Shifting, I groaned, arching my back to work the kinks out. The renewed flesh itched, and my nerves weren't in proper working order just yet. My

whole body was numb and my movements were clumsy, but with a few minutes rest the paralysis faded and I stumbled to my feet.

Best not do that again.

Circling around the rune I continued down the passage.

A simple, straightforward process to get to the next Gods-forsaken room, so imagine my confusion when the air rippled in front of me. There was no chance to step back, no warning when reality about me seemed to tug at my being and tear me away. I cried out in shock as space itself twisted around me, and I was drawn unwillingly into a portal...

And into another side chamber.

There was only one thing of interest here: the grim sarcophagus of gray stone and copper finishing. Even if each side was a foot thick it was still huge enough to fit two or three bodies within. Barring the Silent King's sanction against graverobbing, part of me didn't relish the thought of cracking open the seals and exposing whatever monstrosity lay within.

By now, however, I was getting over the mortal squeamishness towards pain and death. Looking around I was surrounded by bleak cobbled walls, the only path no doubt another portal.

Seek the keys and embrace death with each that you find. Only then shall you be free...

I pushed the coffin lid aside.

Though thick and heavy, it was lighter than I expected. While I strained and sweated, grunting with each shove the lid steadily moved aside when I threw my weight against it. Stone scraped against stone, and by the time I was left resting at the base of the sarcophagus panting with exhaustion, there was a space wide enough for me to fit an arm through.

Biting my lip, I slid my hand into the darkness.

To my surprise I reached down all the way to meet bare stone. Groping around a little I still felt only empty air. I stood up on my toes, leaning further in to explore deeper.

Finally my fingers bumped against a slim bar of metal, and my fingers curled around it. Pulling it from the stone sarcophagus it looked like a key, but without door or lock in sight I couldn't find much utility for it.

I sighed. I suppose I would have to trust the inscription. If no mortal man could escape, then my immortality must be the way out.

I stepped onto the seal.

As expected, the lightning shot through my body, searing through flesh and bone so that I felt as if I were being split in half.

Yet when I twitched back to wakefulness, I found myself still sprawled over that seal... I was only half-dead from the blow, and the agony and was unbearable.

The smoky smell of my own burnt flesh swirled among the tendrils of smoke, savory enough to make my mouth water, acrid that it made my eyes well up with tears. The foamy bile met my lips before the wave of nausea hit a split-second later and I choked as every nerve along my body burst as if they were afire.

Almost fully paralyzed, I couldn't crawl off the seal. Instead, I slapped the silver-gilded seal weakly, crying out in a hoarse voice.

"Take- me..." I croaked, "Take me!"

And mercifully, the powers above granted my plea and ended my suffering.

~~~~~

When I came to, I was at the entrance once again. In my hand I still gripped the key. Bits of my burnt flesh had been welded to the metal surface.

I rolled it over in my hand as I shook off the residual light-headed feeling of my previous death.

The key seemed vaguely familiar somehow... as I held it I suddenly knew its purpose. Like the keys of Sigil's portals this would allow me to teleport to one of the other inner chambers of the tomb-- but only if used at the

entrance corridor.

And the only way to return to the entrance was by the trapped seals. I shelved away the question of how the damn thing worked... dimensional lightning, imps that dragged my corpse back to the entrance, who knew. All I needed right now was to get into the tomb.

I circled around the seal and stepped through the portal.

Once again I was teleported into another room. The key had worked, altering the path of the portal so that I wound up in a new chamber.

I got to work quick. Throwing my weight against the sarcophagus there I sweated, grunted, and urged the lid aside so that I could reach the second key. I was thankful for the respite of my death, though tired as I was by the time I plucked the key from the lightless depths I was not too eager for another.

I sighed and stepped away from the sarcophagus.

Well, we all have to sleep sometime.

~~~~~

It was a mercifully clean death, in that my eyeballs weren't bursting with vitreous humors melting from my sockets. The ache along my spine stiffened my back, and the migraine led me to feel along my head to check if the blast had cracked my skull.

I sat up and stumbled around the seal. Each progressive death in such quick succession left me feeling drained: whether it was my body meeting its limit or the mental fatigue of the task.

I passed through the portal once more, entering what I hoped would be the final room.

Another bout of pushing, grunting, and the lid edged aside. I sat next to the sarcophagus, wondering what Dak'kon and Morte were doing now. They were a mismatch if I ever saw one (and in all honesty, to my memory I hadn't). How long had I been down here and how long had I left them waiting? Morte would be zipping around Dak'kon trying to pester him with

one of his well-honed insults as the gith meditated.

The sooner I got this over with, the sooner I could rescue them from each other.

I scrounged the key from the sarcophagus and trudged to the seal and into my fate.

Spreading my arms like a hawk about to take flight, I embraced the spear of light as it sliced through my body.

~~~~~

I stumbled weakly towards the entrance.

Tendrils of smoke curled from my flesh, the only hint of warmth in this cold tomb. My limbs were rubbery. My muscles were weak. The strength was flowing back into my body in a sluggish trickle, and the keys clinked in my loose grip.

I almost didn't notice that I had passed the arch without being teleported once again.

Collapsing on my back I began to laugh. Victory was mine and I was too weak to fully claim it. The chuckles echoed cold and hollow against the walls, taunting me in yet another bitter twist of irony.

Eventually the nausea trickled away and the weakness crumbled from my body. My stomach began to growl and I thought back to the last time I had food... a half-cooked cranium rat and a crust of bread that could've been used to cobble the floors. Softening the damn thing in mildewed water had improved it little.

Strange how you suddenly think of the little things when you're inches from your greatest goal.

I stood over the grand sarcophagus. The workmanship was rigid and alien, and gripped with multiple bronze fingers. There was no moisture to tarnish the metal, but mere age had begun to turn the edges green. The slab covering it was carved with a rigid, utilitarian pattern, and the pedestal the whole thing rested on was inlaid with more bronze and gray-brown stone.

I strained trying to open the sarcophagus lid, but my efforts were in vain. It was locked firmly in place.

With a sigh I leaned against the slab momentarily, when a thought struck me. I leapt to my feet.

The Runes of Torment. The strange feeling that I knew this place and its workings. I knew.

This was my own tomb, built by my own hand.

I looked around.

Hung along the walls were slabs of stone, white underneath but rust-stained as if they were ancient blood-soaked shrouds. The inscriptions were written in a style identical to my own hand, but the words were foreign. The runes inscribed were calm and determined in some places, frantically scrawled in others, like the words of a madman who knew not who he was and whose moods were as mercurial as his memories.

Was this... my original journal?

I began to read.

"THERE IS NOTHING THAT CAN BE DONE. MEMORIES ARE GONE, PERHAPS NEVER TO RETURN. WITH EVERY DEATH I LOSE A PART OF ME.

HOW CAN ONE BE IMMORTAL AND STILL DIE?

HE TOLD ME THAT MY MIND IS WEAKENING WITH EVERY DEATH. I ASKED HIM HOW THIS COULD BE, BUT HE COULD NOT ANSWER. HE WAS OF NO USE. I BUTCHERED HIM SO THAT NO OTHER INCARNATION WOULD EVER BENEFIT FROM HIS USELESSNESS."

I ran my hand over the inscription. The runes were mine, but the brutality behind the words wasn't in my own heart. Who was I? Who am I?

Upon closer inspection though I believed the panel could recess into the wall. I pushed it, and the panel glided into the wall. A click emanated from the sarcophagus behind me.

Click.

“I HAVE LOST LIFETIMES BECAUSE OF MY KILLER. I CANNOT DECEIVE HIM, SO I MUST KILL HIM. I TRIED TO THROW HIM OFF THE SCENT. I LEFT FALSE BODIES, TAILORED IN SUCH A WAY TO PLACATE HIM. I ROAMED THE MOST OUTER PLANES, HOPING TO USE DISTANCE AS A SHIELD. I BUILT THIS TOMB FILLED WITH TRAPS TO TRY AND KILL THE KILLER. I HID.

ALL I BOUGHT WAS TIME. THE ATTACKS INEVITABLY BEGIN AGAIN, WITH MORE FURY THAN BEFORE. DECEPTIONS ARE USELESS. SOMEHOW, THE KILLER ALWAYS KNOWS THAT I LIVE. AND NO MATTER WHERE ON THE PLANES I HIDE, HE FINDS ME... EVENTUALLY.”

Another inscription, another panel. It slid smoothly into the wall.

Click.

“SO THEY SAID - YOU HAVE BEEN DIVIDED. YOU ARE ONE OF MANY MEN. YOU BEAR MANY NAMES, AND EACH HAS LEFT THEIR SCARS ON YOUR FLESH.

LOST ONE... IMMORTAL ONE... INCARNATION'S END... MAN OF A THOUSAND DEATHS... THE ONE DOOMED TO LIFE... RESTLESS ONE... ONE OF MANY... THE ONE WHOM LIFE HOLDS PRISONER... THE BRINGER OF SHADOWS... THE WOUNDED ONE... MISERY-BRINGER... YEMETH...

I GROW WEARY.”

Click.

“FEAR NAMES. NAMES HAVE POWER IN IDENTITY. OTHERS CAN USE NAMES AS WEAPONS. NAMES ARE A HOOK THAT CAN BE USED TO TRACK YOU ACROSS THE PLANES. REMAIN NAMELESS, AND YOU SHALL BE SAFE.

I AM THE NAMELESS ONE.”

The panel was beautifully constructed, and slid without a whisper of a sound, save for the lock opening on the sarcophagus behind me.

Click.

"WHAT LITTLE LIFE THERE IS IN THE WORLD IS DRAINING OUT THIS HOLE IN MY BODY. THE WORLD CAN BURN, THE PLANES CAN BURN, JUST GIVE ME LIFE! I WILL DESTROY THIS LIFE SO BADLY, BREAK IT, SMASH IT, AND STAIN IT IN BLOOD AND FECEES, SO YOU CANNOT LIVE IT EITHER! LET ALL CREATION BURN FOR I CANNOT DIE!"

I pushed the panel.

Click.

*"It is extremely important to record your journeys so that you might learn from them. The greater need, however, is that the sources of information you use to uncover this mystery need to be protected when they are found. If key figures, documents or oracles are somehow removed, either by death or destruction, then you will never know who or what you are or how you came to be this way."*

The craftsmanship of the panel was exquisite, inset with the precision that only a master could achieve.

Click.

*"I suspect that we will continue to die and be reborn until we finally get our life right. I do not know what we have to do to bring that about, though. And therein lies the frustration."*

*Is it some sort of karmic cycle? As I gather, some incarnations have committed terrible crimes but also there have been a number of incarnations where we have labored to do nothing but good. Are these incarnations intended as punishment? I don't know. And that is the only real truth I can offer in these carvings: I do not know."*

*At what point does the I get separated from the we? At what point am I freed of the shackles of the actions of these other incarnations? At what point am I allowed to be \*me,\* without the weight of these past lives?"*

Click.

The final inscription looked like the directions on my back that Morte read to me in the Mortuary. While I thought I gleaned all I needed to know, I looked it over to refresh my memory. Perhaps more can be gleaned from a direct reading.

"I KNOW YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'VE BEEN DRINKING A FEW KEGS OF STYX WASH, BUT YOU NEED TO CENTER YOURSELF. AMONG YOUR POSSESSIONS IS A JOURNAL THAT'LL SHED SOME LIGHT ON THE DARK OF THE MATTER. PHAROD CAN FILL YOU IN ON THE REST OF THE CHANT, IF HE'S NOT IN THE DEAD-BOOK ALREADY.

DON'T LOSE THE JOURNAL OR WE'LL BE UP THE STYX AGAIN. AND WHATEVER YOU DO, DO NOT TELL ANYONE WHO YOU ARE OR WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU, OR THEY'LL PUT YOU ON A QUICK PILGRIMAGE TO THE CREMATORIUM. DO WHAT I TELL YOU: READ THE JOURNAL, THEN FIND PHAROD."

To my surprise, there was one more line - one that Morte didn't read to me in the Mortuary:

"DON'T TRUST THE SKULL."

I stood, my head spinning, made worse by the residual headache from so many deaths.

*"Hey, chief. You okay? You playing corpse or you putting the blinds on the Dusties? I thought you were a deader for sure."*

*"Eeeeh... I don't trust the gith. We should leave him behind."*

*"What's eating you, chief?"*

*"You and me, chief. You and me."*

Reaching around, I ran a finger along my back where the inscription probably was. I had to fight down the sudden urge to take a dagger and slice off my skin in sheets so I could see for myself. In my fury and confusion I snarled, punching the panel so it withdrew.

Click.

I had more important things to focus on, I thought. I could deal with such problems later. For now, I needed to focus on what was in front of me. I needed to see what I had to die three times for.

*Don't trust the skull...*

The sarcophagus lid slid open with ease, unlike the others... I discovered



only a single key lying within: no body, nothing of worth.

"Well that's damn disappointing," I grumbled and snatched it up.

Walking through the arch once again I wasn't surprised when the key thrummed in my hand and I was warped to one final chamber. A large square chest stood in the center of the small room, and opening it I finally found a worthy stash of goods, no doubt sequestered here by a past incarnation waiting for a new one who needed these tools.

Finally. I happily helped myself.

When I was done looting a final portal opened up. Deep down I knew this would take me back to the catacombs where Morte and Dak'kon were hopefully still waiting. I would come back richer in supplies, seared with a few new scars, and troubled by the dark revelations of my tomb.

~~~~~

Dak'kon turned as I approached, his eyes like polished coal. "It was known to me you would return. Is it your will that our two paths become one?"

"Yes. I need your aid, Dak'kon. I hope I didn't keep you guys waiting too long."

He shook his head, "Your path is mine."

Morte chirped, glad to see me again, "Whew. I was worried, but I knew you'd be back, chief! Finally realized you needed me, huh?"

"Yeah... let's go."

"I tell ya, chief. I'm not letting you go this alone anymore. I mean let's be honest, without a mimir like me around to give you the dark of things you would've been dead ten times over. I'll be hanging around until you learn to live off of the apron strings, but until then we're stuck skull-to-skill. Bestest buddies we are, Morte and... well, we'll call you something eventually. After all, big scary place like this it's just about impossible to find real friends..."

Chapter 39

I left the Dead Nations happily, eager to taste the foul air of Sigil once again. At the portal, however, I passed by that corpse once again. The sandy-haired Collector was covered with nasty bites, and still the dead man's neck writhed, as if it were trying to twist itself off his body. He spoke with an effort, but thanks to the Stories-Bones-Tell that I had learned from Stale Mary I could understand him with perfect clarity. "Hey... I'm Chad... need your help..."

I squatted next to him, "What's wrong with you?"

"See... this... neck?" It was stretching like taffy and contracting. "Damn vargouille bit me. I'm dead, and... I need to hold my head on if I don't want to be... one of those damnable... things. You gotta kill the vargouilles down this passage... all of 'em... t'save me from that."

I nodded. I had worried about this very fate the first time I learned of the vargouille's terrible bite. "You got it."

"In return... I'll give you ... directions to... a powerful magic item... deadsight tells me... you might need it..."

"What is it?"

"Find it and... then I tell you. Not before."

I had faced hordes of the things already, fought giant sewer lizards in the dank tunnels of the Drowned Nations. I had been threatened by slaving ghouls, had hacked apart a wererat in these tunnels. Slaying a small swarm of vargouilles was a simple affair. They were little more than flying rats to me now.

When I returned I noticed Chad's neck was better... it no longer bulged out as if it wanted to separate from the torso. "Thanks, friend... at least now I know I ain't going to be a vargouille for eternity... You want your reward now?"

"Tell me."

"All right, here's what it is: There's a reason the Drowned Nations are called that. There's a magic bottle that never stops its flow, a decanter, hidden in the Drowned Nations catacombs. You get that, and you got all the fresh water you'll ever need."

"You mean this one?" I pulled it from my pack, holding it before his dead, motionless eyes.

"Wha- oh cripes. I'm sorry I can't offer you anything else to thank you... wait! Someone down here might know how to get the command word... a guy by the name of-"

"Glyve? Face in the wall, speaks like he's got a mouth full of molasses?"

"Powers above, I feel so useless."

I shook my head, "No. I needed to be reminded that I still have a few things to do here. Thanks, Chad. Rest in peace."

With that I felt his spirit fade, passing into the planes beyond. If I had to I could always drag up the memories from his bones, but there was no need for that now.

"Things to do here?' Unless there's a mammy bar and about ten other ways to fulfill my eleven-plus vices we're getting the frickin' hell out of Sigil's arse-hole!"

"We have some obligations, Morte."

Such as revenge against a certain vargouille swarm that had killed me earlier.

By now the population must've been decimated. Those few scattered pests would have to kill a lot more Buried Villagers to become a real threat again. Hopefully I could warn those vultures away by telling them that the Dead Nations protected these warrens.

I sifted through the scattered bones of the dozens of adventurers that must've been slain here. Most of their goods were damaged, but an exquisite pair of punch-daggers still looked good.

I returned to Glyve.

Glyve spoke in that slow rumble, like stone scraping against stone, "Have you found... the flask of which... I spoke?"

"Yes."

A note of eagerness crept into Glyve's dead voice: "You have it? Pour some of ... its water across ... my lips... and I shall tell you... what I promised ... to tell you."

"Here you go."

The clear water from the flask trickled across the stone lips, diluting the filthy flow that spewed from the holes. As we watched, the Ditch's water slowly dissipated entirely, the dirty taint of it replaced by clear, fresh water. Glyve groaned in ecstasy. After a moment, he spoke, "My thanks, Nameless One. In gratitude, I gift you with knowledge that will allow you to harness the full power of the decanter."

His voice began to fade even as he spoke, "Seek out... the woman called... 'Nemelle'. She resides in ... the Clerk's Ward... in Upper Sigil. I know not... where exactly... Best of luck ... in your quest... immortal."

"Thanks, Glyve. Go to your rightful rest."

The stone face was silent. A trickle of clear water ran from the corner of its eye, and the grimace carved into the face had loosened. Another soul freed from its torment.

"Very well, then."

"You know, boss, I was getting really sick of his... constant... pauses... anyway... it's a ... good thing... he's shut up... now."

"Very funny, Morte. Let's go."

I wasn't expecting any fanfare when I returned, and indeed I wasn't disappointed. When I came to gate that huge, hulking thug was still standing guard, face creased into an ugly grimace.

The guard straightened up. "You gots what Pharod's wanting, berk?"

"Yes."

"Show it to me, berk, and I'll raise the gate. But not until, right?"

I glanced him over, suspicious of his intentions. I bled and died and starved for this orb, and I wasn't going to let someone else take it. "It's for Pharod's eyes only."

The thug barked a laugh, "Then you ain't getting in."

A muscle in my cheek twitched, but I tried to stay calm, "On the other hand, I do have something you might be interested in."

He raised an eyebrow, "Yeah? What might that be?"

"Jink. How's twenty-five coppers sound?"

"You're getting warm, berk, but you ain't there yet."

I sighed, "All right. How's fifty sound?"

A smile wreathed his ugly face. "That's good enough. Pass it through, and I'll open the gate."

I pulled out a fistful of coins, giving a rough count before tucking them in a rag and tying it off quickly with some leftover thread. I held out the small satchel, offering it just past the gate. "Grab it and it's yours."

He reached through the gate for the coins I held out.

In a swift motion I deftly pinned his arm back against the gate and wrenched it. The guard screamed in agony as his arm creaked in its socket. Twisting it further the muscle and sinew strained on the edge of tearing.

"AIEEEEEEE!" he squealed like a piglet, "Gerrof! PLEASE!"

I let him go. "Now let me in or I'll tear you to pieces. We'll have no more of your games. I'm tired, aching, and I haven't had a hot meal in days and I'll be damned if I'm going to let a flimsy iron gate and a graverobbing rat get in my

way."

He hastened to open the gate before I made good on your threat, and stood far out of my reach as I passed through the gate.

"Learned our lesson, have we? Let's see a little more respect next time. Farewell."

The other guards looked at me with mingled fear and loathing, but they readily gave me a wide berth. No one met my eye as I passed by.

I gave a friendly wave as I left them, "Top of the morning, lads!"

Keeping my pack close to me I led the way to to Pharod's throne room. I had gone through too much to lose it to a cutpurse now.

I licked my lips. Pharod had answers for me. I could taste it.

"Ah, corpse..." Pharod turned as I approached, his crutch clacking on the cobbles of the Court. He licked his lips and smiled expectantly. "Have you brought me what I asked for?"

I held it out. The surface curdled under my fingertips, and the nauseating stench led me to hold it at arms length. "Here it is. The bronze sphere."

Pharod's eyes gleamed as I handed it over -- he touched it gingerly, almost reverently. How Pharod could bear to show this sort of affection to such a vile thing was beyond me. Then again, maggots did breed best in rotting flesh.

"You..." He chuckled. "Ah, corpse, such a gamble you were, and paid off handsomely, you have..." Pharod studied his reflection in the sphere and tsked. "The years have been cruel to me, I see..."

"I did what you asked, Pharod. Now I want some answers."

Pharod didn't even look at me as I spoke... his attention was swallowed by the sphere he held. "Yes, yes, ask your questions..." Pharod turned the sphere in his hands. "Very important, your questions..."

"What do you know about me? Why was I told to seek you out?"

Pharod studied me with a critical eye. "Stay your weapons for what I'm about to say, corpse, for it could be your ears'll take offense..." Pharod smiled wickedly. "My ears no longer care, but yours are still fresh for the burning, it seems."

I placed my hand across my chest, "You have my word that I'll stay my hand, Pharod. I swear it. But I need to know what you know."

"The truth..." Pharod's tone softened, as if cajoling. "The truth was stretched a bit from my mind to my tongue when we first spoke, corpse -- in all terrible honesty, I know little about you." He raised a withered finger. "Yet, hear me out..."

"Yes...?"

"You're a cutter who plays at being dead, as I see." Pharod squinted at me. "Some time ago, you came to me, like you are now, but not, just strolled right into Ill-Wind Court and said you wanted an 'audience' with me."

"An audience with you?"

"Aye, an 'audience.'" Pharod chuckled, like whispering sand. "Like I was royalty..." He seemed amused, but there was an edge in his voice. "You knew the right things to say, you did, oh yes. You spoke the chant like a Guvner, born and true. And I listened."

"But you were royalty... at least a man of position, once, were you not?" Reekwind's tale was still fresh in my mind.

"Once." Pharod hissed. "Once. Titles, only words, NOTHING in the end..." He lapsed into silence, then tsked. "Knew that, too, my history, I think you did..."

"What did he... I... want from you?"

Pharod gave a mock bow, his crutch creaking as he leaned against it. "'Oh, Pharod, great Collector King,' you says. 'I have come before you to request a boon.' 'A boon?' I says. 'What could I offer a man of such obvious strength?'"

Pharod wagged his crooked finger. "And you asked for a strange thing: You

says, 'Lord Pharod, I ask for courtesy. Your Collectors roam throughout the Hive. If they should find my body, I want it kept safe. That is all I ask.'" Pharod shrugs. "A simple boon."

I tried to urge him to continue, but before I could speak, I suddenly felt a prickling in my skull as Pharod spoke the word 'boon' and the smell of blood and fear rushed through your nostrils... Pharod was hiding something, something that happened in the past, involving me -- and it scared him. The boon he granted was no simple matter.

"So you granted my boon just like that? There's nothing to be gained from it, for you. Why did you even agree to do it?" I asked suspiciously.

Pharod fell silent for a moment. "A dead man can keep no promises, and promises to a dead man are easy enough to make, corpse."

"You're a merchant, Pharod, not a Samaritan. There must have been another reason..."

The memory burned as it returned in white-hot prickles, searing as it ate its way forward into my consciousness. Soon, though, it cooled, icy with the rigid calm I felt then. The stench of the Hive burned at my nostrils. A hand was curled around my sheathed dagger, and a cold sweat had made the handle slick...

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*The thug chuckled, "An 'audience' with Pharod? Did Sharegrave send ye?"*

*"No," I said simply, "I'm beginning to lose my patience, street-vulture. Where do I find Pharod?"*

*"The Collector King don't see outsiders, berk," he grinned, revealing two rows of moldy yellow-green teeth, "But I do think he'll be likin' that purse o' yours." Out of the corner of my eye I noticed the thugs moving, ten... no, twenty of them. Moreso. The Hivers could smell the sharp tang of danger, and down the streets window shutters snapped and doors slammed, finishing with a chorus of clinking as deadbolts slid home. I grumbled. It was a sad day when I'd have to waste my energy on these rats.*

*Ah well. Might as well have a little fun.*



*Swinging an arm back I gripped the neck of the thug that was maneuvering in to backstab me, the other hand snatching his wrist before he could slide the blade somewhere soft. His eyes bulged, and he struggled as I whispered a single word of power in his ear: "Insects."*

*I could feel the blood trickling from his nostrils, pouring from his lips and eyes and wetting my fingers as he collapsed, his insides liquifying as he was eaten from the inside out. His body convulsed, thrashing as a wet, bubbling scream gurgled from his lips. By the time he was twitching in his death throes the centipedes were writhing free from under his eyelids, ants swarming from his ears and spiders crawling from his lips, gleefully carrying bits of his tongue in their mandibles.*

*"B-Barek!"*

*"A mage!"*

*"Quick!" another thug screamed, "Grab his wrists! Cover his mouth!"*

*They weren't as stupid as I imagined. Showing their backs would've meant certain death. If they could reach me and pin me to the ground with manacles and gags, they might've had a chance.*

*But I make my own rules.*

*Cracking my fists together a wave of air and force battered the nearest thugs backwards, knocking them to their feet. I waved my hands, and one by one I plucked each of them up as if by invisible, telekinetic hooks.*

*One I threw into the wall of an abandoned building, and his body slid halfway into the stone before it solidified again, stone and flesh melding into a conglomerate that left his guts ossified. His screams were short and choked off, and he died slowly as his organs began to fail, half-merged into the brick as they were.*

*Another I speared mercifully with arrows of glass, leaving him dangling and still from the brick wall.*

*A third I entrapped in prison of crushing salt. He died in an instant.*

*I made a game of it, practicing my hand-eye coordination by juggling between the ones that tried to attack and the ones that tried to take flight, seeing how many I could kill and how creatively. Their screams of terror were silenced one after the other, in ripples of chaos and razor-edged blades of law. They fell with missiles of ash, weaves of pure light, and coils of metal that wound around bodies and limbs and tightened until they were sliced into medallions of flesh and bone.*

*The streets were drenched with blood and the scattered limbs of the thugs still twitched as I walked calmly towards the last one standing, facing me only because he was paralyzed with terror. It was the one who first mouthed me off, the one with the mildewed grin.*

*With a shriek he tried to flee, stumbling over the bodies and slipping on the blood of his allies.*

*I was glad I left one alive. With a flick of a finger he was dragged into the air, limbs flailing as I gestured, pressing him stock-still against a nearby wall.*

*"I'm not in a good mood today," I whispered, reaching out to grasp one wrist. The skin immediately blackened under my touch, bubbling over in hideous boils as a pox began to take his flesh. It distended in angry green spheres, the rot eating away at his flesh so quickly that by the time flesh sloughed from bone there was no blood left... only pus beating white and hot from his veins.*

*He shrieked. Oh how he shrieked.*

*I sighed. Art always came at the cost of precious practicality. "Look, this wouldn't have happened if you hadn't attacked me," I chided, and with a flick of my finger the last bones of his arms crumbled away, "Now you have three more chances to answer me. How do I find Pharod?"*

*He blubbered, sobbing, and was in the process of soiling himself, if the warm stink that arose was any indication. "Ugh."*

*He calmed down by the time I was about to grasp his other arm. "P-Pharod! R-R-Ragpicker's square! Building to the north... portal! A fistful of junk is the key!" he wailed.*

*I nodded, "Thank you." And with that I turned and left. Someone else can*

*take him down... I had a Collector King to greet.*

*I passed by a Dabus as I headed to the northwestern part of the Hive. It cocked its head in disapproval, frowning at the sight of the carnage. The Lady didn't like this sort of thing in her city, but everyone had the right to protect themselves. I was just lucky there were no Harmonium guards around to make things even more complicated.*

*"Sorry about the mess," I said politely to the Dabus. It never hurt to show a little respect to the servants of the ruler of Sigil.*

*The Dabus shook its head, rolled up its sleeves, and began to clean...*

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I reeled as the memory leaked away, the residue of that cold, analytical cruelty like a dagger sliding from a wound. Pharod was fuming, not noticing my sudden fugue.

"Aye..." his face suddenly peeled back in fury, his skin flushing red. "After you'd strung up a score of my blood on the Hive walls t'DIE, I had enough reason to promise you the PLANES themselves. Then your butchering self comes to my HOME, my KIP, to DEMAND a 'boon' of me..." Pharod calms himself, though his face is still flushed. "Aye, I agreed..."

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*The man was hunched over his cane, his face fishbelly-pale as he watched his bodyguard float in the air, rolling over in a smooth circle as he whimpered in terror.*

*"Pharod, I know you're debating on whether you should send your thugs at me. Spill some of my blood in revenge. Right now you're sizing me up and seeing whether you should take the chance."*

*The thug whined as I bent him over backwards, "Help me! PLEASE, Uncle!"*

*"But please believe me when I say I didn't take pleasure at the deaths of your men. I just hate wasting time, and that was the quickest solution, as is this."*

*"S-stop..." the man moaned as Pharod watched, mouth agape.*

*"How about I just demonstrate my power on this one man? Show you how serious I am and how I can sunder your entire court if I have to. It'd save both of us a great deal of time, resources, and yammering, wouldn't you say?"*

*"Enough! Enough, you wight! I agree! PLEASE, I agree!" It wasn't the fear for the lives of his men that made Pharod agree, nor was it simple, pure reason. I knew the look in his eyes well, as I've seen it many times in the eyes of men who betrayed their companions, from prisoners who killed their cellmates for food they had squirreled away. Pharod agreed only because he was afraid of what I might do to HIM.*

*It served my purposes just fine. The thug dropped to the floor in a clank of armor and scurried away.*

*"Thank you, Your Highness," I bowed politely, "I'm sure you'll find my terms most agreeable."*

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I swallowed hard, shaking the rest of the memory off. "I'm- I'm sorry about your people, Pharod. That wasn't me... but if I can make up the loss to you, I will."

Pharod tsked. "No matter, their bodies served me well enough. The Dusties pay the same for fresh deaders as for old..."

How long ago did I first meet him? Ten years? Twenty? Strange how the most horrific acts can cool in such a short time. What sympathy I did have was bleeding away if he treated his companions so callously, "Was that the only reason you agreed to my request?"

"You knew things about me... things only I knew. You knew I was greedy for somethin' beneath Sigil, and you put a name and picture to it: the bronze sphere, you said. I didn't think you would fetch it for me..." He chuckled. "Yet did you? Aye. The Planes turn in strange ways..."

"And that's all you know?"

"All I know? Nay... but it's all I know about you, corpse."

"Fine. Next question... what did you take off my body after I died?"

"I?" Pharod licked his lips. "Why, I took nothing, corpse." His face split in a grin. "Then, I wasn't the one that found your body..."

"Who did?"

Pharod's smile widened, pulling the pasty folds of flesh back from his face like a curtain. "My daughter, the rose of my eye, the sweetest of my family, and the sharpest wit of them all..." He licked his dry lips and sighed in mock sadness. "Such a cruel tongue on her..."

"Your daughter? Who?"

"My darlin' girl, Annah. She found you, dead as deader can be, in a place where most Collectors wouldn't go for a mountain of coppers. Could be she plucked something off you, could be not..." He leaned in, shaking his head. "You'll have t'ask her, for it's not her Da's place to say."

Something about him pricked at me, "Don't lie to me, Pharod. You're a merchant, and you always take a cut from your workers. What did Annah give you from my body?"

"Ah... yes... my tribute..." Pharod folded his withered hands over his crutch, almost protectively. "There's no telling what was from you or not, corpse. Most like, there was nothing."

As much as my past incarnation had done him ill, the man was rubbing me the wrong way. I needed the elements of my past if I was to piece anything together and here was this vulture hanging onto my possessions as little more than trinkets, "Pharod, my patience is at an end. If you don't hand over what was stolen from me, I will see to it the Dustmen know where to find you." Pharod was silent for a moment. He tapped his fingers against his crutch... slowly.

"Well?"

"Where has the decency of man gone..." Pharod grumbled, shaking his head. "A courtesy I am doing for you, corpse... such a courtesy. Pharod parting with anything... it'd be the dead-book for me if anyone heard... wait here, move not a yard. I shall return."

He slunk off into the shadows behind his throne, "Hmmm. Wonder where he's going..."

After a long while, Pharod returned, his crutch clacking against the flagstones. In his hands, he held a number of items, which he passed off to me. "You will be silent on this and accept the blessing that I even remembered..."

My eyebrow twitched. He really was a vile creature, "A few hundred coppers, a scrap of paper, and a ring? Very well... now I'd like to speak to this Annah. Where is she?"

"Where's Annah?" Pharod shrugged. "She's hiding in the shadows here, I expect, listening to us trade the chant. I called for her after you went below... had to ask her if you were really in the dead book when she found you or not..." He chuckled dryly, then took a deep breath and called out to the darkness. "Annah! Stop mithering in those shadows and come greet our guest!"

"She's here...?"

There was movement in the shadows of the chamber. The almost playful flicking of a long, pearly tail caught my eye, and with that I could pick out the vague outline of a woman pressing against a wall, hidden and motionless in a sliver of darkness.

I didn't even hear her enter the chamber, even in the piecemeal armor that all the rogues here patched together. Her right arm was covered with a series of interlocking plates that looked as if they were taken from the skin of some creature, and a horned shoulder piece protected her left arm.

She stepped from the shadows, the sway in her walk and the sharp way she moved her shoulders betrayed her sass and vinegar. Her hair was the ember-red glow of a fire flickering with stubborn life, and her eyes were as piercing as the daggers tucked in her belt. Her leather armor left little to the imagination, and while she was lithe with catlike grace, she was as milk-skinned as any noble with an ample bosom that she carried well.

"Whoa... guess there are mams down here after all..." Morte gawked.

"Ah, what now?" I recognized that thick, curling brogue, the sharp sneer of those black-red lips.

I gawked. "You're Annah? I met you in the Hive - outside the Mortuary! You pointed me down an alley that was swarming with thugs!"

The girl ignored me and turned to Pharod. "What's this about, then? I'm not playing the leash-pull with this scarred dog, so I'm not. Get one of your other gullies to do it."

"Do you know how many stab wounds I took?!"

"Annah, rose of my eye - have I not taught you to respect the dead?" A thin smile wormed across Pharod's face, and he made a slight bow towards me. "This resourceful corpse needs to know where you found him."

"Eh? What are yeh on about?" She squinted at me. "'Ee's not a deader."

"Ah! Yes, my mistake..." Pharod nodded, then his voice dropped dangerously. "Yet, my darlin' Annah, that still makes it YOUR mistake... for this one only had one foot in the dead book when you brought him to me." He tapped his crutch against the flagstones with a light tap. "He woke up, sought me out - MOST embarrassing."

"So?" Annah glanced at me, then shrugged. "He shouldn't be playing deader on the Hive while I'm about, or he'll wake up in a Dustie's arms, he will."

A muscle at the corner of my eye twitched as they talked over me, "Maybe you could have CHECKED to see if I was alive before dumping me off there," I growled.

"Oh, aye, and maybe YEH should have been more careful an' maybe yeh wouldn't have been lying face-down n' stone-still on the alley cobbles like a deader, aye?!"

I worked my jaw, trying to knead out that frustration. Waving my hands I dismissed it. Anger never solved anything, "Enough of this - where did you find my body?"

"Show him where you found his body, Annah." Pharod tapped his crutch again for emphasis. "Take him to the haunted alley." Pharod studied Annah

for a moment, then grinned and turned to me. "If yeh happen to lose my darlin' Annah on the way to the alley, corpse, you come back and see Pharod. I'll guide you..."

"Tchhhh..." Annah sneered at Pharod, then threw a glance at me. "C'mon, then. And keep yer steps quick, jig? I've little time tae waste on the likes of yeh."

I shook my head, "Not just yet. The three of us have been pissing around in the catacombs for days and we're exhausted. We need to get a little respite in Sigil for a few days before we go anywhere as dangerous as you describe."

Her tongue snapped, sharp as the barbed tip of a whip, "Oh, aye? Well, then, yeh can sniff out yer grave on yer own, eejit! I'm not wai-"

"Annah..." Pharod's voice was quiet, but it cut through the girl's speech like a knife. "Be his minder. See that he comes to no harm while in the village. Then guide him to where he wishes to go."

Annah spat on the ground. "Pox on yeh both..."

"That's what I was thinking... now let's go," I said with a grumble. This smelled like trouble, I could tell.

Chapter 40

"So... Annah. I've been thinking-"

She scoffed, "There's a first."

"I'm just saying we got off on the wrong foot. I mean, if we're to be traveling together we might as well try to get al-"

"I'm not interested in gettin' along wit ye. Or travelin'. Or Powers-know-what a clueless berk like ye would want t' do. I've got deaders

t' nick ye... wait, wot's yer name again?"

"Er... I don't know. All I know is that I woke up on a slab in the Mortuary... thanks, by the way... and that I can't die."

Annah gave me a cockeyed look, those dark lips curling into a sneer. She spat then muttered to herself, "Daft, this is."

Dak'kon gave Annah a cold glance, sure and straight as steel, while Morte bobbed up and down, eyeing her from every flattering angle he could think of, "Say, Annah... does that tail go all the way up?"

"Oh, aye... up yer bone-box to rip out yer brains."

Morte ceased his bouncing, "Uh- I think I'm going to hang next to the chief now."

We took the wooden stairs up and out of the Buried Village, and at the entrance was another tall, broad-shouldered thug. He might've been handsome once, but birthright had not been kind to him. His face and arms were relatively clean of scars, and that meant that he was either new or he was a more formidable fighter than the rest.

As I entered the room he got up from his chair and approached me. "'LO there! Name's Bish. Who might ya be?"

"My name is 'Adahn,'" I lied. Having a false name might've been less off-putting than having none, and it would be best to not stir trouble just as I was leaving.

"Adh-what?" Bish stared blankly at me then shook his head violently. "I never seen ya comin' in and Pharod didn't tell me about no 'Adahn' comin' around." I noticed his hand moving slowly towards his weapon. "Ya best be tellin' me what yer doin' here, berk."

"I've got nothing to hide, and I don't want to cause any trouble. I just want to pass through."

Bish paused, as if considering what to do.

"Ach, just let us past, ye eedjit!" Annah snapped stepping out from behind

me.

Bish's head snapped to meet he gaze, and a shorter, one-eyed thug grinned, "Oh so yer travelin' with Pharod's favorite, eh? I do wonder how she gets that much jink just dealin' with deaders. Did Pharod hire her out ta be yer escort or..." he snickered, "an escort?" The gang cackled, and I glanced down to see Annah slip one hand gracefully behind her, fingers curling around a hidden dagger.

"Oi! None of that, ye scum-brained sod!" Bish turned and frowned at me. "Alright, if yer travelin' wit her it should be fine. Ya can go on. But know this, berk. Ya go causing trouble for the lass, I go crushin' yer skull if I see ya again."

I nodded, and just as I left the one-eyed villain moved past Bish and leaned in for a whisper, "If ye do happen ya tame the lady and lift her tail, be sure to give the rest a taste, ya jig?" We left with their raucous laughter burning in my ears.

"So where to now?" Annah asked smoothly. Too smoothly, as if she were forcing her calm. Funny... Annah didn't seem the type to rein in her anger.

"I don't suppose you like Gar-Bar root?"

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We sat on the curb enjoying our feast.

With plenty of gold from the sold spoils for food, Morte and I tore into our repast with gusto. The pears were crisp, firm, and sweet. The spiced nut-bread was aromatic and flavored with of carrots and almond, slightly sweet and light and leaving me hungry for more. The sea plums were an odd blue-green color, with a rind slightly bitter and extremely sour. It was enough to make me grimace and shudder as I bit into it, but the fruit's meat was remarkably sweet... a wonderful complement.

"I haven't had these since I was a wee one," Annah murmured, spitting out the pit of an Arborean fire-seed so that it clattered halfway across the street, "Had ta nick 'em o' course. Along with a fat purse or two from the crowd."

"What's this now?" I asked, opening a small paper packet.

Dak'kon looked up from the skewer of spiced meat he had been sampling, "Shiftspice from the Planes of Limbo. The spice may taste of whatever one would like. It is little more than a matter of concentration and willpower to bends its flavor to one's whim."

I wet my finger and dug in, licking the powder from the tip. Indeed, I finished off the packet in a matter of nine or ten licks, and as promised each taste provided a different flavor.

"Ah, I always liked lapping up lines of the stuff from a harlot's stomach," Morte sighed, "Hey, I don't suppose you have an extra fifty gold to spare?"

"You need to learn that no means no, Morte."

Dusting of my hands off I stood, and my companions followed suit.

We spent a good couple of hours shopping for new spells and tools, and it was fortunate that we did so when we came across a familiar face... and a familiar stench. The meal was past the point of no return by the time we came across Reekwind once again, picking a crust of filth from one ear as he belched in unison with a wet pooting sound.

"Ah, ye comes back to old Reekwind, cutter?" he greeted me with a moldy grin.

"Phaugh! Away wit ye, ye foul little beast!" Annah snarled.

"Hey hold on," I nudged Annah aside, and with the look she shot me I swore she would've stuck one of those daggers in my back if I let her. My pouch was feeling a little heavy after all, and the poor man could've used some charity, "I suppose we have time for a story." Any knowledge could've been helpful.

The coppers clinked into Reekwind's palm and he tucked them away. With a few taps of his chin his eyes brightened, and he backed off, taking a stance as he began to weave his tale.

"A sorcerer there was, no simple hedge wizard this, but a mage of power." Reekwind brought his hands together reverently, then smiled evilly. "He

burned with the Art, and the Art burned him."

"The name given him was Ignus, a name respected, then feared, then hated, then punished." Reekwind gave a rattling wheeze, then clawed the air and hissed, apparently imitating 'Ignus.'

Ignus... the face of a cackling fiend came to mind, his flesh black as coal and breath thick with ash. I could feel the heat on my face... hear the metal squealing as it melted under him. That fiend in the Burning Corpse tavern... the memory sent a shudder down my spine.

"Taught by one of the last great magi Ignus was, and as an apprentice, Ignus learned much, much... and nothing at the same time." Reekwind shook his head sadly. "In his heart, his coal-black heart, a fire blazed. It burned, it burned, and it hungered." Reekwind clawed at his chest, as if in pain. "As it hungered, Ignus hungered. It was his wish to see the Planes burn."

"In the night..." Reekwind hunched down and began to slowly stalk in the direction of the alley, a mad grin on his face. "Ignus came to the Alley that was to be the Alley of Angles, and the fire in his eyes, the fire in his heart, both he let out." Reekwind pointed at the Alley, then flung his arms in the air, silently screaming and laughing at the same time.

"Flesh ran like wax, people like candles, and Ignus laughed, laughed..." Reekwind crumpled to the ground, his body wracked with imagined pain. "An evil, an evil was done, and forgotten not, forgotten not." He stood up, then hunched over, looking left, looking right, then started mumbling, as if secretly in a conference with someone. "Something was to be done, be done..."

He stood up, stiffly, his face resolute. "A punishment was decided, all the hedge wizards, midwives, rune-tellers, copper-pinching witches, all manner of magelings... they came, all, even those with the smallest trace of the Art, to punish Ignus. Separately, they were flies..." He made a buzzing noise between his rotten gums. "Together, dangerous, dangerous."

Reekwind hummed, then raised his palms... "Caught Ignus, granted his wish..." He swirled his hands, as if casting a spell. "He wished to burn, they granted it, using his own desire to fuel the casting. They made his body a door to the Plane of Fire -- they intended to kill him, kill him..."

"Failed, failed..." Reekwind broke wind again, as if to accentuate the failure of the wizards. "Ignus lived, Ignus lived, only slept, blanket of flames, flames, turned in his sleep as he burned, never happier, never happier..." He shut his eyes, wrapped his arms around himself and turned slowly. "Burning... ever-burning..." His eyes suddenly snapped open. "One day he will wake, and then, then the Planes shall burn!"

I rubbed my chin, pondering a moment before I spoke. "I want to hear the story of the man who came to this city without name or memory and spoke with the cursed story-teller who warned him of the danger of names."

Reekwind stopped twitching and scratching for a moment, and stared at me. "That tale... that tale costs nothing, for it is worth nothing, and it is worth noting that it would be a sad tale indeed."

"Nevertheless, I would hear it."

"Where would such a tale begin...?" Reekwind grunted, then gave a reeking wheeze that made my eyes tear up. He seemed to be thinking.

"Phaugh!" Annah choked, taking a few steps back, "An' I never thought the air o' this city could get any fouler!"

I crossed my arms, gave Annah a glance, and turned back to Reekwind, "It would begin with a man waking up in the Mortuary, believed dead, but in truth, only his memories are dead."

Reekwind nodded, then studied me and started scratching himself violently, as if to give himself scars. "Dead, but not dead... no memories, no memories, no name..."

"He escapes the Mortuary, enters the Hive, and speaks to a man who let his true name slip once and has regretted it."

Reekwind seemed hypnotized by my words. "Yes, yes, much danger in naming... perhaps..." He paused. "Perhaps the man to whom the nameless one speaks is a warning to the danger of names." He seemed to chew this over. "Perhaps he who has forgotten his name is better off...?"

"Is he?" I glanced at Dak'kon, and he shook his head solemnly. Morte cocked as if in a shrug, and Annah rolled here eyes with a lily-white hand over her

nose as if to ward off the stench, "Is it better to suffer the truth with all its consequences or is it better to remain ignorant? Which of the two men is better off?"

Reekwind gave a hacking cough, spat, the spittle green and wet, and then turned back to me. "It is your question, your tale..." He spoke slowly. "It is you who must answer it."

I looked to Reekwind, then to Dak'kon, and back to the malodorous little man, "Perhaps the man who has forgotten his true name is better off, for he is protected against those that would do him harm, including himself. Where a named man moves, he is followed. When a nameless one moves, his name leaves no trail..."

Reekwind nodded as if in agreement, as I continued,

"But... the man who knows his true name is better off, for he knows himself and is stronger person for it. Some choose to merely survive... others seek salvation."

Reekwind mulled this over, licking his lips. He began to nod slowly, then mumbled under his breath, as if debating with himself. Eventually, he turned back to me. "That is a tale, a tale with a moral that tells the teller's morals..." He coughed and spat another phlegmy glob onto the cobblestones. "A tale that will answer itself, in time, in time...?"

"It must have an answer, and every tale has an ending. I will refuse to accept it any other way."

Reekwind scratched himself for a moment, nodding, then reached into the folds of his robe and flicked me a coin. "For such a tale: a clipped copper." He sneered. "No more, for the tale's not finished."

"Thanks, Reekwind. Good luck to you."

The sky was bleeding into a dim orange, and soon night would've been upon us. Even as well armed as we were I didn't trust the streets of the Hive to not throw any more fangs or blades my way.

"So, do you know of any place we could rest, Annah? Any good inns around?"

"We've got enough jink to settle someplace nice. No more sleeping in the streets... no more gruel and hard beds at the Gatehouse..." Morte sighed wistfully.

"Aye..." Annah murmured, "There be a kip just around th' bend iff'n ye don't mind rats an' roaches."

I gave the coin bag a good squeeze, the pleasant clack of coins reassuring. We'd have enough coin for a few good supplies, and a few weeks at an inn if we were careful. A couple days of rest wouldn't do much harm... it's not like the trail could get any colder after the weeks I crawled around in alleys and the guts of Sigil. Good food, a warm bed, and answers just around the corner. Life was good.

As we rounded the bend, though, a grating little voice whispered to us from the shadows.

"Psst! Hey you! Wanna earn some jink?"

My first impression of little man was that he needed a long bath, preferably away from any creature that has any sense of smell. While not nearly as terrible as Reekwind's foul miasma, I could almost see the stench waft from his body in sinister yellow tendrils. He motioned towards us frantically in an effort to get us to come over and talk to him.

"Ach! Just ignore th' sod," Annah grunted, tugging my arm.

"Please-" the man whispered, edging towards me just a bit as I stared, "I need help." There was desperation in his eyes, and his face was pale as if he were being slowly strangled by his ordeal.

"It- couldn't hurt to listen."

Annah cocked an eye at me then, but grunted and looked away when she saw that I wouldn't be shaken.

A look of excitement crossed the man's face as I approached. "Thank ye fer stoppin'. Me name is Mar, and I've a fav'r to ask of ye."

"I'm listening."

"'Tis a matter of life or death! I must be deliver'n this 'ere box or it'd be me head fer sure! 'Tis me bad luck that I twisted me leg something fierce. So will ye help me out by deliver'n this 'ere box fer me?" I looked down, and while I wasn't completely sure the limp he sported seemed a bit exaggerated.

I shrugged, "Just a delivery, then?"

Mar nodded, "Aye. Just hand it off to some sod."

I held out my hand, "All right. I'll deliver the box for you."

Mar slowly took out a small box from within the recesses of his ragged clothing. For the briefest of moments, there was a look of regret crossing his face... and then it was gone, as he looked at me and handed over the box. A slight shimmer surrounded the box as both Mar and I touched it. Mar sighed with relief as he released the box into my care.

I gulped. Something funny was definitely going on, "What now?"

"This be need'n to be deliver'd to Ku'atraa. He can usually be found somewheres down in the southeastern section of the Hive. Oh, and lest ye try to say I didn't warn ye: whatever happens, DON'T OPEN THE BOX! And don't leave the Hive with the box. Now be off with ye!"

With that, Mar scuttled off, his limp gone.

Somehow, I felt like I was up to my eyeballs in abishai dung.

## Chapter 41

"Are ye daft? What is wit ye and talkin' to every soddin' basher in the city?!" Annah snapped with that tongue-curling brogue, "Yer just askin' fer trouble ye are!"



"The chief's just like that. Sure he stirs stuff up but we end up doing more good than harm... intentional or not."

Annah snarled and turned to Dak'kon, "Well? Don't ye have anythin' to say?"

Dak'kon merely gave Annah a passive glance and said nothing, returning to his meditation. The smooth sound of Karach sharpening and flowing helped soothe my troubles.

I had set the box on the rickety end-table earlier and examined it. It was a small wooden cube, with intricate designs etched into its surface. At one time it would've been worthy enough to be displayed at any aristocrat's estate, but over the years neglect had taken its toll and the thing was falling apart: wood was creaking and splintering, the hinges were rusted, and the gold finish was flaking away. If not for the large ruby mounted to the front of the box, it'd be worthless. Thinking better of it, I set the box down carefully and slid it under the bed.

While the ruby glittered with a comforting shine when the light hit it just right, the box itself seemed to emanate feelings of dread. Soon after I had accepted it I could bear to hold it no longer, and bought a sack packed with rags to hold the damn thing. Mar's box made the bronze sphere seem like a ball of smelly yarn in comparison.

"Bloody addle-coves," Annah growled, "The Nine Hells can have ye, I'm not restin' me eyes next to yer thrice-damned souls." With a flick of her tail Annah strode towards the other end of the bunkhouse and took a bed there.

"We've been through worse, right?" I said, looking to my remaining two companions.

Morte was embarrassingly silent. Dak'kon continued to stare at his blade, shifting between fluid and black chaos-steel.

"...Right."

~~~~~

Moving from crate to crate, the sole worker in the warehouse seemed to be totally immersed in counting boxes and scribbling results down on a piece of

parchment. It had taken several queries and a few dead ends trying to untangle the conflicting nest of directions the Hivers had given me... 'southeastern section of the Hive' was a description that was next to useless. The man looked annoyed as I approached, interrupting his work. "What is it now? Can't you see I'm busy taking inventory? Go bother someone else."

"Are you Ku'atraa?"

He raised an eyebrow, "Well who wants t'know? If yer trying to worm your way out of owing me money I'll remind you that Thog the Collector has a two-for one special on kneecaps this week."

"I was told to deliver this box to you."

His eyes brightened, "Well, why didn't you say so in the first place? Let's see what you got for me. I'm sure it'll need to be inventoried."

"Mar told me to give this to you," I reached into the rag-filled sack.

As I held the box out for him to take, Ku'atraa's expression turned from one of interest to that of intense horror. The blood drained from his face, and his lips trembled as he stumbled back. "No! Please... get it away from me!"

"I don't understand... why are you afraid of this box?"

"I said... g-get back! Death... evil... had to d-dupe Mar... couldn't take it any more. Please... take to Brasken... lives southwest... Hive... me... noooooo!" Apparently the sight of the box was just too much for him as he ran screaming from the building.

"Wait! What am I supposed... to... do... with..."

I stood there dumbfounded and holding the creaky wooden box in my hands.

Annah looked up to me from the corner of her eye and gave her tail a little flick, "Idjit."

~~~~~

'Lives southwest' wasn't a very good description either, but I with a little

luck we were able to find Brasken's kip well before the day's peak.

I gave a firm rap on the door. No answer. Another knock, and the door creaked open. For a city that was so dangerous to its denizens it was unusual that the door wasn't bolted or locked... but by the rumors I picked up Brasken was someone that no one really wanted to cross.

As I entered a warrior in loose armor grunted from his seat, shaking his head at the light that suddenly flooded in. His head was rolled back in sleep and a trickle of drool had crusted at one corner of his mouth. Upon noticing us enter though, Brasken leapt to his feet and shook off the grogginess in an instant. In loud, booming voice he growled, "What in the name of the abyss are you doing in my house?! Leave now, before I make you even more ugly than you already are."

"Whoa! I'm sorry... I was just asked to deliver this box into your care," I said, holding out the sack.

"Well, why didn't you say so? Let me see it and you can be on your way," Brasken shrugged off his temper as quickly as he did the fog of sleep, and only a grunt of annoyance punctuated his words. As I pulled out the box for Brasken, however, his expression changed from one of anticipation to that of amusement. "Whoa there! I won't fall for that trick a second time. Put that thing away and leave."

I shook my head and looked him in the eye. A full head taller than I was with hair wild as a lion's mane, I wasn't about to take any chances with him, "I don't understand; why won't anyone take this box? First Ku'atras, and now you."

"Did you say Ku'atras?" Brasken let out a great bellow of laughter. "Why, that's the fellow who bought the box off me. Thought he got the best of me when he bought it. I guess he figured the gem alone was more than worth the price he paid me. Poor fellow didn't realize what he'd gotten himself into 'til it was too late."

"Just what's so horrible about this box?"

"You mean you really don't know anything about that box you're holding? Well, I guess it won't hurt to tell you what I know," the floorboards seemed to quake with each step as he made his way to a cupboard where he pulled

out a bottle of cheap wine, guzzling down a third of the stuff before looking back to me, "First off, so you don't get any ideas in your head, the curse on that box only affects the current owner of the box and to be the owner of the box you have to willingly take possession of it."

Sigh. "There goes the idea of just leaving the box for someone else to find... so, what's in the box?"

"Now that is a good question. That box has been around the Hive since anyone can remember. There are many rumors flying about. As you can imagine, over time the truth has been warped a little bit further with each retelling of the story," by the hint of vinegar in his breath as Brasken loomed over me, it seemed as if the wine was beginning to turn. He took another good swill, however, not quite caring if he was downing something more suitable for salad dressing.

"Go on."

"I've heard many a story about that box, and they all seem to have a recurring theme. The name given that that foul thing is 'Moridor's Box,' and the owner of the box will die should he or anyone else open it. As to the contents, who knows? Some say it's an ancient dragon, while others say it's the evil soul of Moridor himself. I cannot tell for sure, but just by looking at it any soul can tell it's something evil and one would have to be a fool to open it."

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

He shrugged, and looking at the empty bottle he seemed to ponder whether to shatter it against the wall like some wifebeating drunkard just for kicks. "I would suggest you go see Shilandra. She lives in the northeastern region of the Hive. It was from her that I 'won' the box. Who knows, maybe she will have more knowledge of what to do with it. Or you can find some other clueless berk to take it off your hands. It's up to you. I wish you luck."

~~~~~

I'd had enough of running around the damn Hive.

Shilandra's home was a tall, slim tower wedged into the northwestern corner of the Hive, built right against the wall that encircled the Mortuary.

Razorvine had covered much of the walls, and was well tended to as if to discourage thieves or burglars. Despite this, a Dabus floated nearby, carefully clearing away the overgrowth.

I entered.

Shilandra's home was not much richer than others I'd seen in Sigil, but it was tidy and well-kept. A few bottles and a twisted wand lay on a table across the room, and along the walls diagrams had been pinned. I recognized some of the symbols... the woman was a mage of some middling power.

Unfortunately I had barged in as she was in mid-gesture for some sort of ritual. She looked up in surprise.

"Blast! I almost had it that time. Don't you know it's dangerous to interrupt spell casters while they are evoking a spell? Luckily for you I was only practicing." Shilandra flicked her fingers, as if to clear away the residual energies she had been drawing upon. Honey-haired and a bit on the pretty side, the sorceress seemed to be slowly approaching the age where most women would've been growing a bit desperate for a wedding band. Her skin was still taut and her breasts firm, revealed as they were in those lavish robes, but there was age and wisdom in her eyes, and enough confidence in her own power that she was not put off by a heavily scarred man barging into her home with three well-armed companions. "Well, what is it you want?"

"Er, uh... sorry," was my lame reply, "I just wished to learn more about this box..."

Shilandra recognized the box at a glance. "Ah yes! I remember this artifact well; I acquired it some time ago. What do you wish to know about it?"

"Who did you get this from?"

"Hmmm.... Let me think. I don't recall whom I got it from. I just remember I was down in the marketplace looking for some spell components when some person offered me this box. After testing the box, I found it to be cursed, but was intrigued by the spells woven into the box, and so I purchased it anyway."

I gave it another look. As far as I could sense there were some spells binding

it, though the essences were too subtle for me to catch. "If you were so intrigued by the box, what made you decide to give it away?"

A small smile quirked at Shilandra's lips, and for a moment she relived the memories of being a mere journeyman wizard, "I was young and brash back then. In my relentless pursuit of knowledge, I carelessly undid one of the spells. Look closely at the box, it was like new when I had it. The signs of decay are an indication that the spells are weakening. I realized I was in danger if I kept the box any longer. So I held a contest to get rid of it."

"A contest?"

"It was the most expedient way to rid myself of it. I simply invited all the bashers in the Hive to fight each other to determine who was the best. Bashers are notorious for having big muscles and not much upstairs, if you know what I mean," Shilandra said, tapping the side of her head, "They came like flies to honey. I offered some money and the box as a prize. I believe some basher named Brasken won the contest."

"Do you know the history behind this box?"

She shrugged, "The only thing I have been able to learn is its name. It is called Moridor's Box. As to who this Moridor is or the origins of the box, I do not know."

"You seem to know something about magic. Can you tell me what spells have been put on this box?"

"For many years I studied the box and tried to learn its secrets. Spell upon spell upon spell has been woven into it. To my amazement, my studies revealed that all the spells are of the type used to confine fiends," Shilandra said it casually, with the same calm with which she arranged several reams of paper covered with formulae and scribbles. As if she had no problem at all with the idea of holding the legions of the Abyss in one hand.

My hands trembled at the word, and my fingers clenched against the wood. "Fiends!? You mean there are fiends trapped within this box..."

"No! Not fiends. A fiend," she gave the box a tired glance, "And judging by the sophistication and power of these spells, it would have to be one of significant standing and power in its realm."

"I told yeh..." Annah mumbled, her voice quivering, "I TOLD YEH!" There was real fear in her voice now, the kind of bone-chilling terror that came with the first inkling of forbidden knowledge. Annah drew a half-circle over her heart, smoothly and quickly enough that it must've been a force of habit to attempt to ward off evil with such a gesture.

I wondered how badly a fiend could hurt me. "Can you safely remove the spells on this box?"

"Seeking to remove yourself from this box, eh? That spell is the worst of them all. Basically, that particular spell draws energy from the current owner of the box and uses it to power one of the spells of confinement. That isn't the worst of it," Shilandra smiled softly, as if in pity, "The fiend inside can smell this energy and would more than likely hunt down that person should it escape. It's really a no-win situation to own that box. Either it drains you dry of your energy, or the fiend within kills you."

"Is there a way to safely dispose of Moridor's Box without hurting anyone?"

She shook her head, "I am not strong enough to fight or banish such a creature. It's been ages since I've been there, but there was a cathedral located in middle of the Alley of Dangerous Angles. A priest or someone who gains their power from a higher source might be able to help you."

I stifled a groan. "You've been a great help. Thanks."

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With fire and steel we forged a path through the Alley of Dangerous Angles. The more I handled the Art the more adept I became, and by now I was a formidable foe by myself. With Dak'kon, Morte, and Annah behind me, the once-proud clan of thugs that had burrowed deep in here had been cleared out. Soon another gang would move in on this newly cleansed territory, but for now we could traverse the Alley safely, approaching a burned-out shell of a building that might have once stood tall and proud.

The old priest smiled as I entered. In one hand he held a grand staff, and was draped in noble black robes trimmed with violet. He pulled gently at a well-oiled beard snowy with age and greeted me, "Welcome to the cathedral of Aoskar... I am High Priest Aola. Have you come to worship

Aoskar with me? You can be his second disciple."

I looked around. The run-down shack was just as delapidated within as it was without. It was less of a cathedral and more a hermit's hut, "Why are there no other disciples of Aoskar?"

His smile never faltered as he stared off into the distance, "Over the years I have had many disciples. Unfortunately, they have all disappeared. It's quite frustrating, actually. As soon as they become initiates I never see them again," he clicked his tongue, "Lately, there has been a rumor going around that the Lady herself is the cause. Now no one comes by any more. You are the first soul I've seen stop by in a long while."

"Tell me more about Aoskar."

Aola's voice took on a tone of adulation and his eyes brightened as he gazed upwards in reverence. "Aoskar is the Keeper of Gateways. Within Aoskar lies the power of portals, doorways and opportunity. Sigil, also known as the City of Doors, used to be the home of Aoskar, until he was 'cast' out by that accursed Lady. Now there are few worshippers of Aoskar here because the Lady forbids it. That will soon change, however, as I help the people to see the greatness of Aoskar. She cannot stand against the will of the people!" He rapped his staff against the floor for emphasis.

Annah hissed. Morte glanced side to side. Dak'kon closed his eyes as if to center himself. Few natives were so bold as to speak of the Lady in such a manner, if at all. The man must've been half-addled, and I was skeptical of whether he could help me at all. Still, the trail seemed to end here, and I was at my wit's end. "I come seeking counsel concerning a box and a fiend."

I explained to him my predicament. Aola seemed to consider things for a moment before speaking, "I, a humble disciple to the great Aoskar, can indeed help you. First you must relinquish the box to me."

I handed it over, with some concern. If this priest underestimated the power of the fiend or the nature of the curse, I didn't want to be responsible for his grisly demise. Aola seemed unconcerned, however, and placed Moridor's Box within a wire pyramid-shaped structure, muttering a prayer to Aoskar. The familiar shimmering of a portal soon filled in the sides of the pyramid. Aola then casually reached through the portal and flipped open Moridor's Box.



I screamed in an attempt to stop him, but it was too late. Almost instantly the box began to disintegrate as a sickly smoke curled in the interior of the pyramid. A feeling of immense dread filled the room, and it was all I could do to keep myself from bolting from the tent. I could hear Morte's teeth chattering, Annah's muffled curses, the keening of Dak'kon's blade as he himself uttered what may have been a prayer invoking Zerthimon's name.

But as the tendrils of smoke touched the sides of the pyramid they were drawn into the swirling vortex of the portals. As the last spiral of smoke disappeared the feeling of dread passed. Aola smiled a bit nervously at us, triumphant. "Witness the power of Aoskar, the Keeper of Gateways!"

I swallowed, "I'm sure a fiend of such power that it required so many spells to contain it will have no problems making its way back here. And when it does it's going to be looking for you..."

"I have taken that into consideration. You see, each side of the pyramid contained a portal to a different plane. In effect, I scattered its essence far and wide across the multiverse. Did you know there are races out there that consider demons a sort of delicacy?" He began to chuckle softly as he reached into the pyramid and sifted through the ashes of the box, removing the gem that was attached to it. "Payment for my services. I will use this to help rebuild my beautiful cathedral."

I sighed in relief, "Keep the gem; you have more than earned it. Farewell."

I wished Aola well before we left, but out of the corner of my eye I noticed Annah slinking behind the old priest.

"Okay, hand it over," I said when we exited the building.

"I don't know what yer talkin' about."

"The ruby. I know you nicked it from Aola."

"The man accepted the box, Annah," Dak'kon murmured, "The dangers as well as the rewards. It is his by right."

"Hey, hey, lighten up, wrinkles. Who do you think needs it more? Some barmy old priest in a burned-down hut or our gang of monster-slaying

wrong-righting do-gooders?" Morte clicked his tongue.

"The man's a danger to us all!" she snarled, stabbing a finger at the hut, "Dinn't ye hear?! He seeks ta spread the word of the L-" Annah glanced this way and that, then dropped her voice to a whisper, "Her rival."

I rubbed my chin, "I know nothing about the rivalries between gods, b-"

"Don't yeh say that!"

"BUT- look, just hand it over and let's get going."

Annah's tail cracked against the ground, "Nay. I'm not followin' some clueless addle-cove anymore! Ye've got the mark o' doom on ye, yeh do! And yer not draggin' me to the depths wit ye."

"Pharod said you'd help me! We still need to find that alley-"

"Pharod can pike it for all I care. Mebbe this'll pay off another sod ta take yeh. It's not worth goin' another two steps wit-"

I grabbed her shoulder. Her skin was milk-white, and soft under my rough grip. But there was steel under that beauty, like a rose forged from metal by a skilled artisan. And quick as a whip she turned, with a sound of metal sliding against leather. There was a sharp stabbing pain in my gut and looking down I stared dumbly at a punch-dagger buried right in my solar plexus.

I looked up at Annah, whose eyes had grown wide with shock, as if she'd just surprised herself with her own instincts. The only words that could come to mind were, "Nice form..." but the blood that bubbled to my lips drowned them in a gurgle. Oh, sweet pavement, here I come again.

THUD.

## Interlude

"Oi? What's this about this Aoskar fellow now?" a voice calls out from the crowd.

"That- that name is forbidden..." Mikon growls, "The Harmonium would have the head of anyone who dared to speak it." He looks around for support, but finding none he resigns himself to sitting down and downing a gulp of bitter black ale.

Scii-Tavakis purses her lips in an embarrassed smile, "Ah... I'm afraid I've heard little of the name. It seems that few in Sigil are eager to speak of the matter... and I've little patience for chasing the wind."

"Ah, if I may," Oudilin says, raising a hand, "Such is a tale worth telling properly, and in full."

"Ach! Better to chase th' wind than be full o' it," G'mir grumbles. The stout midget dwarf had been bound from shoulders to ankles and set upright. As the one responsible for ripping off one of the table legs, he now is responsible for propping it up. While no doubt grumpier, he has been a lot more quiet.

Oudilin strums his lyre, "Listen all and hear the tale of one who is whispered of in shadows, memory kept alive by silent hymns and muted chants. Know that the Harmonium destroys all that bear his image, arrest those who speak his name, and strike his history from all tomes. Aoskar, once god of travel, the bearer of fortune, the keeper of all opportunities, and lord of portals! This all back in an age where the Powers themselves walked the streets of Sigil.

"Yes you hear true. Long ago Poseidon had drawn the waters of his land into the City of Doors, and fair Lady Bast was paraded through the marketplace on a palanquin of sweet myrrh and incense. Heironeus' light shone pure and true, cleansing the city of all iniquity, while Shar lurked in the shadows and waited. All Powers were welcome to come and go as they pleased, some merely to shorten the vast journeys between worlds, while some built temple and kip within Sigil's fair and shining walls. Aoskar was one such deity, the god of travel, the bearer of fortune, the keep-

Oudilin gives a start at Shara Six-Blades' annoyed glance, and coughs politely before returning to strum calmly at his lyre, "But to continue, Aoskar prospered as the figurehead of Sigil. His word was the thrum of this heart of the Planes. His portals were the veins through which all prosperity flowed. The face of Aoskar gilded every wall and pillar, and every other hymn sung was in praise to this Father of Portals.

"Many believed him greater than the Lady of Pain herself, while no few philosophers considered Her Serenity to be a mere aspect of his power... for who could truly love that sublime queen of blades, when the light of grand Aoskar's portals outshone hers?

"As for the Lady of Pain herself, she remained silent."

Another artistic strum and Oudilin continues, face solemn as his tune grows mournful.

"It was one fateful day when one of those silent caretakers of Sigil, servants to the Lady of Pain... a Dabus, made a terrible decision. He could sing no hymns, nor preach the holy word, but he had faith, and that was enough. Draping the clerical robes over his shoulders his proud folly was also the doom of that which he had chosen to worship, for the Dabus known as Fell proclaimed himself a Priest of Aoskar!"

A collective gasp fills the room and a chorus of murmurs abound. Many have heard some whisper of rumor, and indeed a few wore proudly the crawling tattoos that Fell had inscribed upon their flesh. So strange for a quiet and humble Dabus to betray the Lady of all things.

"Some say the Lady floated to the Grand Temple as serene as Her namesake, some say she strode the streets howling with the fury of ten thousand worlds. I have heard it told that the winds of Sigil carried the shrieks of countless blades sliding against one another, that Aoskar squealed in half a hair of a moment of agony as he was impaled on one of Her shining blades, evanescent gods-blood spilling white and pure upon the stones.

"This... this was and still is the most terrifying moment of the Lady's fury that any and all have witnessed, for with but a thought the Lady gave Aoskar her razor-honed caress."

"It took only one moment for this god of portals to be utterly slain by the

Lady, and his temple and all things within a thousand spans were annihilated. Buildings were ground to dust, and flesh was riven from the bones of countless loyal worshippers. Only the shell of the Grand Temple remained, and the gray husk of Aoskar's corpse was taken by the Astral Plane. From that point on, all Powers were barred from the city of Sigil. Such was the justice of Her Serenity, the Lady of Pain.

"To this day the Temple still stands, taken by the blaspheming Athar as a monument to the impotence of gods. Such is the fate of Aoskar, and the tender tragedy of his memory."

"I've gone and soiled me knickers..." a voice whimpers from the crowd.

"That... is why the name is forbidden," Mikon grunts. He glances at you, shaking his mug, "No need to bring Her down on our heads like that."

You nod politely in response. The poor man had been shamed, dismissed, and scoffed at his entire time here off-duty, and now he had to sit through what bordered treason against the Lady in the minds of the Harmonium. Perhaps it would be best to treat him to another ale... he seems like he desperately needs it.

You rap your knuckles against the bar for service, just as the Athasian begins anew.

"The Nameless One had endured worse of course, and such a petty death would not keep him still for long. Those familiar aches returned to him as he stumbled to his feet, stiff and numb with his fresh death..."

## Chapter 42

The first sense to return was touch, and I could feel my blood wet and cold on the paved ground.

The second was sight, and as my eyes cracked open I could see the blurry

whip of a slim milk-white tail, and the motion of struggling limbs.

The third was hearing, and in a flash the sound of a dozen obscenities that would put Morte to shame burned my ears.

"Oi! Let go o' me ye pikin' slaad-skinned gith! Gettoff if ye wan' t' keep yer shriveled yellow-skinned stones!" Annah snarled.

I gurgled, my throat once again clotted with blood, "Urghlll." Annah yelped in shock and finally held still, and was thankfully quiet.

I coughed to clear the junk from my mouth and shifted to roll over. Stumbling to my feet I leaned against a wall, giving Annah a good, chastening look though I probably ended up looking more petulant than authoritative.

"He lives again. Did I not tell the truth?" Dak'kon murmured.

Annah's tail ceased its twitching, and Dak'kon released her wrists, confident that she would not be fleeing now.

"Like I was saying..." I coughed again, "Nice form."

A muscle in Annah's cheek twitched, and her eyes bored into mine. With the way her tail moved she looked much like a cat trying to tease out whether I was predator or prey.

Her eyes slid over me, sharp and keen as a razor's edge, and clicking her tongue she pulled the gem out from a small nook in her armor, "Fine yeh sod. If it'll satisfy yeh, take it and we'll be done." There was an edge of fear in her voice when she spoke, as if she had found herself unwittingly dealing with a devil.

I held the ruby up in my hand. It was a glorious shade of rose, and it glinted pure and clean even in Sigil's smog-fouled daylight. I looked back at her, "The gem is a small matter, actually-"

"GHCK!" Morte's eyes widened.

"I really just need to pick up a few more protective wards, some new weapons, and we'll go to the hidden alley where you found my body. You

can keep the gem if you want."

"I don't need charity from the likes of yeh!" she snapped, growling and thinking it over. Trying to refuse the request of an immortal mage is one thing, it was another entirely to say no to one that was proven to be troublesome and who knew where you lived, "Fine. But just until then, aye?"

"Great. Now that that's settled..."

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If a good meal had smoothed things over with Annah earlier, a little alcohol may do even better.

"Ach, now thar's a sight these old eyes have missed," Ebb Creakknees chuckled as Annah swayed past his table, "I don't suppose I could buy a drink for you, lass?"

"There ain't enough ale in the planes for that, yeh fat sack o' wrinkles."

Ebb pursed his lips, "Well now that's harsh, lass." Ebb smiled at me, "Oi, it's good to see you again, my old friend. I don't suppose a clueless berk like you still needs a tout?"

I shook my head, "I think I can make my own way around for now. Thanks, Ebb."

He smirked, and leaned in close so that his paunch pressed against the creaking table, "Well, I'll give you this bit for free. The bartender's been staring daggers at you since you've arrived. He's asked me a few questions about you the last time you were here."

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing too incriminating," he slapped the table and let out a loud, bawdy laugh at the look of shock on my face, "Ahhh! Sorry lad, yer just too easy. No, there was nothing to be said. We had a few drinks, I spoke a little of the chant, and you left. Though if I recall correctly you painted that alley red on your way out."

I had the sudden urge to scrub my hands. They itched with those old bloodstains, "Well... I really had no choice-"

Ebb gave a dismissive wave, "Bah, don't worry your ugly little self about that. The Harmonium can barely keep in check the number of worthless berks in this corner of the Hive- er, don't tell 'em I said that, mind. In any case, I'd be wary of the bartender if I were you."

I nodded, "Thanks, Ebb."

Behind the bar was a leather-skinned man with just a hint of ashen color to his face. His teeth seemed sharper than normal, and his eyes were filled with the boredom that came with having seen too much. His voice was nasal and clipped, and simmering with anger as if I had done him wrong. "You again, eh? Whaddya want this time?"

I blinked, "What do you mean?"

"Yeah, 'you again'. You got a hearing problem or something now? You was in here 'bout fifteen years ago, got all bubbled up, smashed up the place, and left a pile o' coin that wasn't enough to pay for the damages. So you plucked out your own bleedin' eyeball and tells me you'll be back to reclaim it when you got two hundred coins together. With fifteen years of interest, you got about five hundred coins. You got the jink, pal, I got your eye."

I sputtered, "Five hundred? That's ridiculous!"

He paused for a moment, considering. "That it is. Tell you what. Give me three hundred, and the eye's yours."

I thought it over, I really did. But hells, if it was a piece of my past I couldn't afford to be stingy, "It's a deal. Here's your money."

"It's a deal." He produced a darkened, wax-stoppered, wide-mouth bottle from his pocket. There was the sound of liquid sloshing around inside it, along with a heavier, squishier noise. Opening it, the stench of some sort of preservative agent nearly made me gag... Powers above this damn city should sell more nose-clips and perfumes. Floating in the viscid muck was an eyeball.

"You'd better figure out what you want to do with that..." the barkeep said

sagely, "now you've exposed it to the air, you might as well put a pickled egg in the jar for all the good it'll do you. Make up your mind, cutter... pickled egg or not?"

This was going to hurt.

With a moment's hesitation, I reached into my socket and popped my eye into the palm of my hand. The pain was incredible. My vision distorted, and for a moment I was slightly overwhelmed with a sense of vertigo as my plucked-out eye pointed in an odd direction, the two images I read not quite blending cohesively. The bartender helpfully severed the optic nerve, and directed my hand to the jar of goo that sat on the bar. I deposited my still-living eye in the preservative, wrapped my fingers around the old one, and slid it into my empty socket.

I hissed at the sensation of the brine soaking into the tender flesh of my naked eye socket, but after a moment I could feel the optic nerve reattaching itself to the new eye... and suddenly a flash of memory cracked like a whip.

Flicker. I looked down at the vast expanse of chaotic, ever-changing wasteland stretching down below, a group of humanoid vultures plummeting toward me, cruel weapons ready to strike, and held my own shining blade clutched tight in my fist...

Flicker. Three toughs surrounded me, in the colors of an enemy I couldn't quite place. Long daggers glistened in their hands, and the light glinted cruelly from their exposed teeth. I glanced at my scarred hands, and knew that soon they'd be covered in blood...

Flicker. An enormous frog-like creature came bounding over/through/under chaos-stuff, headed for me with a mouth full of teeth. I hurled my javelin through the shifting matter and pinned the creature to a sudden stone plinth... and I KNEW the ways of fighting once again.

I found myself slouching over the bar, groaning as the memories receded like water trickling from stone and the barkeep grumbling as if I hadn't just ripped out my own eye and replaced it with a pickled one, "Hurry it up, will you? I got paying customers."

I blinked that eye a bit. Things were a bit blurry, but even as the seconds

ticked on the images were getting clearer as the flesh regenerated, "Give us a few drinks."

Satisfied that we weren't about to loiter, the barkeep nodded, "You want a drink, you got a drink. This is what we got for you: Beer, bitters, mead, Elemental water, Arborean firewine and fireseeds, Curst heartwine, and Baatorian whiskey. What'll it be?"

Morte chirped, "Mmm... mead."

"I shall request a cup of shiftspice tea."

"Ach, if th' boss is payin' I suppose I could settle for th' firewine."

I nodded, "Whiskey."

The bartender placed a shot of some steaming substance that looked like boiling urine in front of me. The fumes that wafted my way, however, were exquisitely tempting. The taste, though nearly unbearably hot, was as smoky as the scent - the feel of the liquor burning its way to my gut was nearly painful, yet even this pain was sweet. The barkeep's eyes widened. "Still standing? Most folks can't even make it halfway through the first shot."

I shrugged, "I feel fine. I don't even feel anything."

The barkeep considered me carefully as he set down the other cups. "Y'know, cutter, there's some as have a natural immunity to poisons and such. Some folks call bub a poison. If that's the case, chances are good you got yourself a handy little defense against poisoners."

I smirked, looking at the empty glass, "Well, how about that..."

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The sweet kiss of incense greeted us as we entered the tattoo parlor. With a click of beads and the light creak of the floorboards, Fell walked out of the back room, parting the beaded curtain to face me as I approached. Next to me, Annah stiffened as she caught sight of Fell.

"Annah... what's wrong?"

"Are yeh daft?!" Annah turned to me... and I suddenly realized she was frightened. It was more than the edge of wariness she had around me. Annah wasn't the type to become truly afraid. A childhood scraping a living off of the streets of Sigil had hardened her to many things, but somehow, the sight of Fell pierced her to the core of her soul. "Are yeh so pig-eager to dance in the Lady's shadow yeh'll bandy words with this one?! Let's give this place the laugh before we get penned in the dead-book!"

"What's the problem?"

"It's Fell." Annah threw a fearful glance at the Dabus. "Let's be away, aye? No good'll come of being here, so it won't!"

"I'll ask again... what's the problem?"

"He's a dabus who's not a dabus, aye? He walks on the ground..." Annah's voice dropped to a whisper, and she started trembling. "No more questions, let's give this place the laugh, aye?"

"Annah, no harm will come to you while I'm here. Now tell me what's wrong." My voice might've been more reassuring if it had less of that coarse rumble to it.

Annah threw a frightened glance at Fell. "Fell's a dabus who angered Her. It's said he's a dabus who isn't a dabus, and the time's close when the Lady's gaze'll fall on him, so it will."

"'Her?' You mean the Lady of Pain?"

"Aye... and heed yer tongue." Annah made another semicircle in the air in front of her as I mentioned the Lady's name. "The dabus work for the Lady, an' she protects them... 'cept Fell." She shudders. "Let's be away, aye?"

I shook my head, "We need the supplies, and I have some important questions for him."

Annah grabbed my arm. "Please, nay, nay! No good'll come of it -- anyone speakin' ta Fell could draw the Lady's gaze. I donnae want t'die, I don't!" To my surprise, Annah looked close to tears.

I placed my hand on hers softly even as she clutched hard enough for her

nails to dig into my skin. Dak'kon was busy examining the wares, Morte looked away, probably embarrassed upon seeing Annah's terror. I looked down at her, gentle but firm, like a man soothing a frightened girl, "Annah, no harm will come to you while I'm here -- I promise. I just want to speak to him for a moment."

For a minute, Annah just looked at me. Then, something in my gaze seemed to calm her, and her grip loosened even as she steeled herself. "I donnae why I..." She shook her head. "Go on, then, talk ta him! I donnae care!" There was an undercurrent of fear in her voice, but that rare moment of vulnerability was gone.

Fell waited patiently, his hands tucked into his sleeves. A series of symbols materialized above his head, then dissipated and a question mark appeared.

I could read rebusspeak well enough, though it curdled my eyes and tested my brains. My vision in that orbit was still blurry, however.

"Morte, can you translate for me?"

He turned in the air, "What? why me?"

"Because I've only got one good eye right now and my head's spinning. I'd appreciate the help."

Morte scoffed. "I'd sooner be strained through a tanar'ri's bowels than unravel what these floating goat-heads are trying to say. You want a translator?" He nods at Dak'kon. "Get holier-than-thou-and-twice-as-silent to translate."

I grumbled, "Dak'kon?"

He nodded.

"Ask him if he did the tattoos on this dismembered arm I found."

I unwrapped the petrified hunk from the butcher paper I had packed it in. A mass of scars crisscrossing the pallid gray skin seemed to mimic my own. Time and dessication had rendered it slightly withered, yet heavy and dense with immortal flesh.

Fell examined it for a moment, tracing the patterns with his finger. He then looked up, and a series of rebuses formed, hazy at first, then coming sharply into focus. I could barely make it out. <The arm is yours. The tattoos are mine. One tattoo speaks of a time when your path was shared by four others.>

Dak'kon studied the symbols, but he remained silent.

"Dak'kon? What is he saying?"

"The arm is yours. The tattoos are his."

I looked at him levelly. Did I mistranslate? Add some figment that wasn't there? "Did he say anything more than that?"

Dak'kon was silent for a moment... and suddenly, instinctively, I knew Dak'kon was lying to me. He continued on with a dead-level tone. "The rest of the symbols are not known to me."

The silence between the three of us was pregnant with tension. Annah backed away as both Fell and Dak'kon stood calmly, looking at each other without a bead of sweat on their heads.

"Why are you lying to me?"

Dak'kon fell silent again; he did not turn to look at me -- he seemed to be staring at something leagues away. "The symbols... there is no good in knowing the answer to what you ask."

"Since when has not knowing the truth of something ever really helped anyone, Dak'kon? The counselor who councils ignorance betrays his station."

He breathed a long sigh, dry and hoary with the mists of age-old memories crisp and painful as a knife's edge. "There is truth in your words. That truth... should be known to me." Dak'kon was silent for a moment, then he turned to me, his eyes hardened. "The symbols speak of four you have traveled with in the past."

"Go on... what four are these?"

The symbols swirled before me, and I pieced them together roughly as Dak'kon translated:

One unloved who loves one who does not love.

One who does not see what others see and sees what others do not.

One who is familiar and bound with duty.

One who is a slave and his chains are words.

As I finish translating, the four strings seemed to form themselves into links, and they merged into a chain... the chain bent and warped, into a symbol that I knew all too well.

Dak'kon wasn't even looking at the symbols. "The tattoo speaks of four minds. One was a woman, who loved a man who knew her and knew not love. The other was a blind man, who saw things no mortal eye could see. Another was a familiar, a mage's pet, bought and bound. And the last was a slave."

"Why did you not want to tell me this?"

He closed his eyes, "The four are bound with a symbol that is known to me."

The mark of torment. The lines were thorn and razor-edged, as if it were a blade twisted in upon itself. Fell's earlier words came to mind: The flesh knows that it suffers, even when the mind does not...

"Enough about the symbol. Tell me everything you know about those four that are on the tattoo."

Dak'kon was silent again, and he looked older somehow, not with the wisdom of age or the ripeness of season, but weathered and chipped as the sands of time eroded a mountain face. Those hands were strong, I knew... I had seen them raised in battle. But it seemed that at any moment then Dak'kon could've crumbled into dust. "I will not say of it here. Ask when what we speak of will only be for the ears of those that walk with you."

I nodded. His pain was his own... it would do no good to speak of it here.

"Very well. Fell, what of the tattoos on the arm?"

Fell examined the arm again, tracing the other faded tattoos upon its surface. As he did, they each appeared as a symbol above his head, hazy at first, then coming into focus sharply. He turned to face me. <Ones forgotten, now remembered. You may wear them again if you wish.>

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"So where's the place where you found my body?" I asked Annah as we left Fell's parlor.

She pointed down the street, "The spot where I found yer body lies behind the Painted Door in the Hive Red-Light District - the door's on that northern street, north and east o' the Smoldering Corpse Bar. Beyond the door is an alley where I found your body. Strange place, it is. Not many berks'll go there."

"Strange place? How?"

"Some berks with less courage than names say it's all a-haunted, it is." Annah spat and made a semi-circle over her heart. "It's wash. Sometimes the wind blows through the alley and makes weird sighing noises, but that don't mean there's spectres and haunts and the like."

Dak'kon's coal-black eyes stared off into the distance, "Perhaps they are the whispers of lamentation, from a city that does not know itself."

Morte bobbed in a nod, "Mmm. Sigil's a pretty barmy place, and it's probably more alive than you might think. Spooks aren't anything special, of course, but I don't think I'd like to run into a spook from a dead piece of Sigil itself." He shuddered.

Annah shifted a bit uncomfortably at their words, but said nothing. I turned to face her, "Annah, did you find anything on my body before you brought it to the Mortuary?"

She looked at me warily, and her tail stopped flicking for a moment, then resumed, slower than before. "Aye, mayhap I found somethin'. But if I found anythin', it's mine by right, it is -- the other bits are in Pharod's keeping."

I shook my head, and as much as I didn't want to prod her too much I needed to know, "Annah, I don't have time for games... what did you find on my corpse?"

"Well, yeh had some fist irons, yeh did... an' a little bit o' jink, but I left that for the Dusties so they'd think I was a wee bit honest. Yeh had an ugly ring that I kept..." She dipped her finger into her arm bracers and pulled forth a small ring with a stone mounted on it. "Worth thrice-more than the jink an' the irons, it was." She studied the ring and squinted. "Too bad it's too ugly tae wear."

"I'd like that ring back."

She studied the ring with a frown, glanced at me, then back at the ring. With a sneer, she flicked it to me. "Dinnae want the ugly thing anyway, I didn't."

"Thanks. Now when you mentioned that some stuff from my body had gone into Pharod's 'keeping,' what did you mean?"

She nodded, "Aye. Pharod takes a bit off each corpse we find, he does. It's his right, being lord o' the Village n' all."

"Off of every corpse you all find? That's a lot of corpses."

"Oh, aye - tae hear tell, ol' stutter-crutch has got a stash pit somewhere close tae him. It's the only reason I can see why he's set up kip in that filthy, drafty hall, it is. Nothing but stink and shadows."

"Really? And that's where he puts the tribute he gets?"

"Aye." She squinted at me. "Now what are yeh on about? Yeh plannin' to bob him?"

I chuckled, "After all that running around to get that sphere for him and then getting next to nothing in return, I'm tempted to."

"I'm warning yeh against such a thing, I am. Pharod can be daft sometimes, but he's mean as all fiend spit when he gets worked up." She frowned. "An' he loves his keepsakes, he does."

"Eh what can that old bag of bones do? Cough at us? Send his thugs?"

Morte's grin withered under Annah's piercing gaze, and he floated over to keep Dak'kon between them.

"But where would he keep it all?" I wondered, "If he's been at the Village for as long as he says, he would have amassed quite a collection."

"Well..." Annah was silent for a moment. "I know he's never left his hall to get his tribute when he needed it."

"He wouldn't want to walk far with that lame leg of his, though."

"Aye, that's true - but only if yeh don't watch him careful. He isn't lame, though he puts on a fair show about bein' weak in the leg."

A sudden flash of insight hit me, "So that crutch of his... could be a portal key?"

Annah frowned in thought for a moment, then slowly nodded her head. "Aye... there's a thought." She shrugged. "I wouldn't know how yeh'd use it, though. Maybe yeh just need tae have it."

"Hmm."

"Ach, here we are."

I walked up the short flight of steps and felt along the wall. what I had first taken to be a door in the archway was actually a painting. The artist had made use of the shadows of the overhanging arch and some subtle texturing effects to give the door the illusion of substance.

"Are you sure this is the door, Annah?"

"Aye... it's been smeared with barmy paints from the Starved Dogs, it has - it's a real door until yeh look at it, then it turns into a painting."

"How did they do that?"

Annah shrugged, "There's stranger things in th' Planes." She suddenly frowned, "Ye might as well as how yeh got yerself out o' the dead book after I was sure you were dead."

"So this door... I just don't look at it? And then open it?"

Annah glanced at the door, then nodded, "That's the dark of it, if chance be true."

"All right then... I'll do what you say. You just -"

"Houl' on!" Annah stopped me before I reached for the door. "This is the only path I know to reach the place I found yer corpse, but it's not the safest road, aye? Yeh sure you're ready? I'm not here to play yer minder, no matter what ol' stutter-crutch says."

My hand paused an inch away from the portal, "What's beyond this door that's so dangerous?"

"Chaosmen," Annah whispered. "Barmy as they come. Barking wild into the day and night, ready to either paint yeh with colors or crack yer brain-box with a chamber pot. Dangerous bloods, they are."

Dak'kon's brow creased in disapproval upon hearing the word, and Morte rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue. None of them had much love for whatever these things were.

I looked at the door, harmless on its surface, but suddenly it seemed as if it was a gate to madness itself. I had no idea what a Chaosman was, but I didn't like the sound of it either, "If they're so dangerous, then how did you get through?"

"I crept in nice and quiet-like. Can't paint yeh or kill yeh when they can't see yeh." She looked me up and down with a frown, "Doubt I can pull that twice with yeh around. Yeh look right clumsy, yeh do."

I nodded, "We've been ready for a while, Annah. Just stay behind me. Now let me open the door..."

I closed my eyes, reached for the door, and fumbled around. To my surprise, I found a handle. With a slight tug, the door opened. A narrow passage led into the building, and from within, I could hear distant howling.

"Time to head in..."

Chapter 43

We entered a small room. I saw a slender tiefling girl standing with her back to me. I noticed that both her hands and the upended table in front of her were smeared with a fresh coat of what appeared to be pink paint. She seemed oblivious to my approach.

I greeted her. At the sound of my voice, the girl turned her head to regard me. Her face, though somewhat dirty and spattered with drops of pink, was strikingly beautiful. She flashed me a wide, mischievous smile, then returned her attention to the makeshift canvas.

I tried to talk to her, but the tiefling girl seemed totally immersed in her artwork. She ignored me entirely.

From this room a short hall opened, with doors on both sides. There was another inhabitant in the hall, and I figured his reaction was likely to prove more typical, as he attacked. He was quickly dispatched, being so foolish as to face four to one odds.

The lingering residue of energy crackled through my fingertips as I looked down at his corpse in sad satisfaction. The hole in his chest trailed smoke, and his eyes were still wide and bright with madness.

These Xaositects really were as barmy as they come. When they weren't trying to paint me with a blade, they were speaking utter nonsense.

In one room I stumbled across an aging man dressed in tattered rags. As I drew nearer, I discovered that he was missing both of his eyes. The scarred tissue of his eyelids had receded into his empty sockets, giving his features the macabre appearance of a decaying skull.

"Greetings."

The old man turned in my general direction, his arms outstretched as if feeling for me. "Darkness who be in voice? The friend words I'll speak of you and call chaos."

"Speak the words of chaos and you'll call me friend? Is this jumbled up scramblespeak really necessary?"

"Ugh, it's just a barmy old Chaosman," Morte grunted, "Pike it, just leave

him alone before he tries to send the other dogs after us."

The old man cocked his head to one side, his sightless gaze fixed on empty space. "Chaos of you are not. Not! Pot! Snot!"

I groaned, "Has everyone here lost their minds?"

"That's kind of the point, chief."

"Walk, not talk. Talk is complete. Completed to completion!" The old man gave a dismissive wave and turned his back to us, apparently done with the conversation.

I shut the door behind us as we left, and headed towards another, "It's obvious we'll get nowhere asking these madmen. We'll have to find our own way."

"Maybe not," a voice whispered. I jumped.

As I looked closer I noticed a figure hidden amid the shadows in the corner of the room. When I drew near, a young woman stepped out to reveal herself. She was dressed in a loose-fitting tunic, which, together with her short-cropped hair and slender frame, gave her a rather boyish appearance. "I must say, it's quite a relief to see some sods who don't knot their words or chew at the walls. And I wouldn't go in there if I were you." She nodded in the direction of the door on the south wall.

"Why? What is beyond the door?"

She winced at the sound of my voice, putting a finger to her lips to indicate silence. She paused for a moment, then answered in a hushed voice. "A whole mess of them howling lunatics, that's what. Looks like they're having some sort of gathering. Won't be able to get through to the alley until they clear out."

"Who are you?"

"My name's Sybil." She whispered quietly, then spat into her palm and reached out to clasp my hand. I shook it reluctantly as the wad squelched against my palm.

"What are you doing in here?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm hiding. I came in here looking for... food." Yet I noticed that as she spoke, her right hand moved instinctively to the pouch at her waist. "Only the barking idiots in the next room showed up and decided to throw a party on the front doorstep. Now I'm trapped in here and can't get out."

"You're looking for food, eh? What's in the pouch?" I said, pointing to her belt.

She seemed about to respond, but stopped herself short. She eyed me for a moment, then shrugged her shoulders. "Alright, alright... so I'm a thief. A girl's got to earn a living somehow. What's it to you anyway? You're obviously not Harmonium, and you're definitely not with the savages in there." Sybil looked over my shoulder, "Well... hello, Annah."

I looked behind me, and for a moment I couldn't spot her. Annah had slipped into the shadows as we were speaking. I'd had no idea she was hiding as well.

Her black-red lips twisted into a sneer, "Well, I can't say I expected t' see yeh here. But t' get trapped like a Lim-Lim in a wet sack, that's ol' Sybil for yeh, aye?"

"Hmph. Well, with your bumbling about you would've given up at the front door. Then gone off to scavenge more deaders, perhaps?"

Annah hissed, "At least I can fight me way out, yeh alley rat!"

"Oh of course. Brawling like a drunkard was always your style, wasn't it? No need for grace, or sly ghosting about," Sybil smiled, "Nothing better than a thief that's hammer-sharp and just as quiet, eh? And one that can only handle marks that're cold, stiff and ready for the slab."

A muscle in Annah's cheek twitched, and for a moment I was sure they were going to come to blows. Instead, Annah stabbed a finger at Sybil, "I can handle yeh just fine, if that be an offer!"

"You know, girls," Morte whispered, "as arousing as this little row is, we're still in a haven full of lunatics."

With that Annah's mouth snapped shut. Sybil blushed in embarrassment.

I stepped to place myself between the two and addressed Sybil, "Do you know of another way to get through to the alley?"

She sighed, "There may be another way to get past those animals without a fight. There is another door that leads in there. From what I was able to see, there are stacks of wooden crates along the same wall as the other door. It may be possible to sneak from that door to the exit on the other side of the room. There's only one problem..."

Morte chuckled, "There's always a problem... wouldn't be much fun otherwise."

"The door's locked... I tried it. My guess is that key is on one of the thugs upstairs. I'm not addle-coved enough to go up there looking for it, though." Sybil folded her arms across her chest and stared at me expectantly.

I nodded my assent, "If the key is up there... I'll find it."

Sybil smiled, relieved, and stepped back into the darkness, "If you do manage to live long enough to find the key, the door is in a room to the southeast. I'll be watching from the shadows. If you can unlock the door and make it out to the Alley in one piece, I'll be right behind you."

We searched around for a way upstairs, our fingers sticky for any scraps we might find. Some loose coin here, a few clot charms there. It was easy going until we came across a certain crate.

"Hssst! Watch yer ugly bones, yeh clueless sod!" Annah whispered, grabbing my wrist as I was about to take a peek inside, "That one's trapped, it is."

"How can you tell?"

"A thin thread... an' a trigger beneath th' lid. These eyes don't lie, they don't." With that, her eyes followed the thread, leading her to a dust-covered crate on the other side of the room. Slipping a dagger under the lid so it kept the trigger down, Annah lifted the lid and pulled out the small pouch of coins within.

"Thanks, Annah."

"No need. I'm keepin' this one for meself."

I didn't argue.

With only a little more poking around, we found the stairway up.

"Oi, d'ye hear that? Th' bones of wickerwood are bleak in sound, and they've sweetened the marrow of the dancing land," a gruff voice murmured.

"Nay, 'tis a rat. Get away ye sod it's mine! Has a message for me, it does, from the whispering council to see which to kill next."

"It's jess a rat ye barmy sod! Best te eat it before it tells them where the Nimbus of Nine hides tonight."

"NO! NO they fly with crimson wings, and will put all the laughing ones in the abyss if we do not appease in blue-blurred smiles!"

With their mad, inane chatter in my ears I had trouble focusing. By the Powers I could feel my forebrain trying to eat its way through my skull just to silence the insanity.

I opened the door and came upon two unsurprised thugs. Their hair was in disarray, and their lips were flecked with blood as one held the mangled corpse of a cranium rat in hand. Soft blue eyes gleamed and swirled with the motes of chaos as they stared at me as if they expected my arrival.

"Hello," I said, and blasted the nearest thug with four rose-hued magic missiles.

Two against one... it was too easy. Dak'kon moved swiftly and his blade shot upward, impaling the thug's head through the chin, pinning his jaw shut so he couldn't scream, even in death. Morte barreled over my shoulder, head-butting the wounded one and sending him crashing into the wall.

We stood silent for a moment as I held a finger to my lips. When no thudding of boots or the clatter of approaching guards came our way, however, we continued upward.

Blood for blood we traded blades with the Chaosmen. They howled madness as they fought, moving their hands and feet in random patterns that were hard to guard against. Their jerking steps had become an intricate dance to dodge our blows, and in the distance, an unfamiliar chanting grew in volume even as I felt the familiar thrum of the Art snapping into reality.

Damn.

Their skills were directly counter to the Way of Zerthimon, but effective in their own way. Under the weight of our magic and steel, however, the Chaosmen collapsed, and sifting through the smoldering robes of the dead wizard I retrieved the key.

From there, it was a simple matter to sneak our way past the remaining Xaositects, creeping behind the crates to safety.

We stepped out to the brisk night air, and while it wasn't quite the same relief we felt when getting back out to the stink of the Hive after being trapped in the Dead Nations for so long, it was soothing nonetheless to be out of that warren of madness.

"I must say, cutter... I'm impressed. I thought for sure those animals would chew you up good," chirped a familiar voice behind me, and again I nearly jumped a foot in the air.

Sybil smiled, "Sorry. Well, I guess I should thank you." She paused for a moment, then reached into her pouch and pulled forth a small, green gem. "Here... this one's on the Dogs. See you around, cutter."

"Farewell, Sybil."

"Ach. I do hate that lass," Annah growled.

Chapter 44

The empty abodes were dust-filled and dingy. Here and there doors were half-open, some barely clinging to rusted hinges or locks. Some were barely fit to stand in, others were in near-ruin. What huts and buildings that did stand proud were sagging under the weight of years, held together with nails and boards pounded in by a relentless servile hand.

I could hear the hammering from afar.

A dabus floated among the old houses hammering boards and patching in holes its relentless duty. Just as I saw nothing remarkable about it (the creature looked like any other dabus I'd ever seen) it saw nothing remarkable in me, or any of us for that matter. Never did it once look up from its work, even to glance at a stranger that had just wandered into its barren domain. All it knew was its duty, which it performed with metronomic grace.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

As we walked past the hammering grew most distant, and a chill wind blew through the narrow street. As it whipped past the decaying buildings it sounded to my ears much like a groan. The buildings creaked in response, as if they ached for the agony and bliss of release.

One building, however, looked like it had stood the test of time.

What else could we do but enter to investigate?

While well-kept, this building was no more habitable than the rest. The floor was damp and green with ancient mildew, and what furniture there was had rotted away long ago that they should've fallen apart if not for the lingering strength of the wood.

Dak'kon whispered something I couldn't make out, and Annah stood stock-still, moving only to draw a circle over her heart when she recognized what lay in the corner of the room.

It was the shriveled corpse of a dabus, flesh mottled and yellow with rot. The stench of its decay was overpowering and, from the looks of its rigid,

unnatural posture, extreme rigor mortis had long since set in as the rest of it putrefied. That great shock of white hair clung loosely to the scalp, as if it could be pulled out with a gentle tug like weak-rooted grass from damp soil.

I raised my hand, reaching out with the Stories-Bones-Tell power I had learned from Stale Mary.

"What are yeh doin'?" Annah whispered, "Th' creatures are under th' Lady's protection, they are! We cannae be bossin' about with nary a care, aye?"

"I just want to speak to it," I said calmly.

As I reached out with my power there was a faint stirring in the air, and the dabus' body blurred for a moment. I felt a strange, wrenching pain in my skull, as if someone was hammering on it, sharply, desperately.

I tried to focus, and the effort was like trying to swim through a field of cold iron shards, sharp and piercing as each hammer blow that sounded in my brains.

My vision went black for a moment and the hammering pain faded, until it sounded like it was coming from outside my skull. The darkness cleared, and I could hear the hammering coming from outside the building. The entire building seemed hazy somehow, confused, as if I was seeing it through a mist.

The hammering died, and out of the corner of my vision a spectral version of the dabus floated into view, entering the building. As it did, the windows and the doors became like water, suddenly sealing over the entrance the dabus came through. Within, the dabus turned, paused, and then began a slow circuit of the room, examining the walls and hammering on each one once, as if testing it.

The dabus completed its circuit of the room, then paused by the "door" it once entered. It began hammering, chipping away the stone, but with every blow, the wall repaired itself. The vision faded to black, and the hammering continued, first at a steady pace, then slower, then slower...

"Think I should bite him? He's not coming to... I think I should bite him."

"Slappin' him around hasn't helped. An' he isn't dead, he's not. Ach, this is

bad..."

"Oh I dunno, fiendling. Everything looks good from this angl- EEEEE!"

My hand shot up and grabbed Annah's wrist before she could gouge out Morte's eyes. "Nngh... I'm fine," I said, swaying as I stood, "Dabus don't communicate in words... I guess speaking to its spirit has strange results as well..."

"What have you come to know?" Dak'kon intoned as Annah tossed Morte aside, sending him clattering over the floor until he could right himself.

"This building... is alive somehow. It trapped the dabus, and let it wither away here," I ground a knuckle into my temple to edge out the rest of the haziness. There was little more to be said as we hastily made our way out.

"Well if yer done trading chant with deaders, follow me, then," Annah said, guiding us the rest of the way.

Down a couple of twists and turns, we stopped at a high, solid gate of ancient wood. Somehow, the hinges rolled smoothly without the slightest hint of a squeal when Annah pushed, revealing a stairway down to an open courtyard.

Descending down the stairs I grew nervous, as if I was beginning to uncover something best left hidden. There was something taboo about discovering the fate of my previous incarnation. I felt as if I were trying to recapture a dream, evanescent as a forgotten memory and as impossible to grasp as smoke snagged on my fingertips.

"This is the place," Annah said, stopping on a lone spot and turning around to face me, "I found yeh lyin' right where we stand."

I would've expected a bloodstain, or an outline where I had lain.

Another breeze stirred the dust from the ground, stronger this time. There were no shutters to rattle or scraps of loose cloth to flutter, but the alley itself seemed to breathe. It was a bloated wind that gusted past us, aching with the groan of a creature brimming with pain and paralyzed with stifling aches.

At the corner of my vision the walls seemed to bend and warp ever so slightly, just past my gaze. When I turned my head to catch a glimpse I saw nothing, but looking at my companions they seemed to feel the same.

When the wind died down a section of the wall shuddered, warping and extending as brick became smooth and stone softened. Fixed to the spot I watched as the stone shaped itself as if out of clay and smoothed into a dull bronze glow in the dim, starless night.

I stared, awed by the bizarre spectacle. What had appeared to be an ordinary, unremarkable bricked wall throbbed, pulsating with movement. The wall expanded with curious elasticity, heaving outward as if some unseen force were trying to push its way through the barrier from the other side. Slowly, the undulating mass began to settle, its curves becoming more and more pronounced, and we found ourselves at eye-level with the stony caricature of a human face.

"What is that...?" I muttered. Dak'kon stood in awe... perhaps this city does know itself after all...

"I donnae know," Annah stared at the face in disbelief, her hands nervously fingering her daggers, "But I'm fer leavin' 'fore we find out, aye?"

Something nagged at the back of my mind, "Not just yet. There is something..."

Suddenly, a strong breeze began to blow around us and the air was filled with an eerie sighing. More mournful than the wind and louder than despair, the rushing wind grew stronger, carrying other sounds as well: the creaking of boards, the rustling of leaves, and the grinding of stone upon stone. After a few moments, the clamor ceased to be a cacaphony of individual noises and began to blend into one articulate sound. I could make out a voice, a voice that spoke softly, yet seemed to come from all around me at once.

"YOU? IT CANNOT BE YOU."

Hesitant but eager for answers, I approached the entity and spoke, "Do you know me?"

The wind around us had stopped, but the voice was still somehow present,

"YOU ARE RESTORED AGAIN? I SAW YOU DESTROYED."

"Who are you?"

"I AM I," the voice said simply, as expressionless as that stone face before me.

"Where am I?"

"YOU STAND ON ME, IN ME. THE STONES, MORTAR, THE AIR... ALL ME UNDIVIDED."

"Are you... the voice of Sigil itself?" Dak'kon asked. His voice, cold and even as the breeze, seemed to mesh against that of the Alley's.

"I AM I," it responded, and Dak'kon remained silent, neither satisfied nor unsatisfied.

"Things in Sigil almost never speak the plain Chant," Morte grumbled.

I glanced at the spot where Annah stood, "You said you saw me destroyed... where?"

"I SAW YOU DESTROYED HERE, IN FRONT OF ME. I SEE ALL WITHIN ME."

"Do you know what happened to me?"

"THINGS THAT CAST NO SHADOW... WERE SHADOW. THEY ROSE AROUND YOU. TORE YOU DOWN. DO YOU NOT REMEMBER?"

I concentrated on the strange voice composed of sounds around me. Somewhere, in the deepest recesses of my mind, there was a brief glimmer of recollection. I felt as though there was something vaguely familiar about the sounds...

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*They swarmed around me, with talons of mist and eyes full of hate: hate for every living thing and for what was stolen from them. As that noiseless throng surrounded me the Alley grew silent, and merely watched as they*

*closed in the flesh they so envied.*

*Those sharp spirals of shadow cracked like a whip, and the dagger-like tips pierced me through the throat and the chest. My hands grew clumsy, vainly cupping the blood and attempting to pour it back into the wounds as I swayed.*

*Another crack, searing a wound across my back.*

*Another, tearing open my belly.*

*I was vaguely aware of my body hitting the ground with a heavy thud, and at the dim edge of my flickering awareness I was thankful that I wouldn't feel those talons as they began to tear into my flesh.*

*A tail flicked through the crack in the gate, as if to lure any prey out to investigate. But the abandoned streets were silent save for the wistful sigh that permeated the entire alley, and after a few moments the gate swung open a little further, as a lithe young tiefling poked her head through and crept in.*

*She was beautiful, with rust-red hair and skin pale as milk, her armor creaking little more than plain leather as she moved.*

*Kneeling over the corpse, her tail flicked again. Another deader for the Dusties, and that was that.*

~~~~~

"YES... YOU REMEMBER." The voice of the Alley rang in my ears, scattering the images from my mind and returning me back to the present, "DESTROYED. AS SOON I SHALL BE. I CANNOT DELAY DIVISION MUCH LONGER. PRESSURE BUILDS. SOON STONES WILL CRUMBLE AND THE FLOATING ONES WILL REPAIR ME TO DESTRUCTION."

"You're dying?"

"PRESSURE IS TOO MUCH. TOO MANY PLACES FOLDED INSIDE. NOT ENOUGH SPACE. MUST DIVIDE."

"Divide?" I asked, genuinely confused.

Annah's lip curled, "Uh, it must be in the 'way."

I blinked, "What are you talking about?"

"I think it's pregnant."

"Oh."

"Freaky," Morte chirped, "So where are we technically standing right now?"

"I really don't want to know the answer to that, Morte."

The voice continued as the wind grew in volume, drowning out our chatter, "HELP ME TO DIVIDE. BRANCH OUT. EXPAND. NEW APERTURES WILL OPEN. YOU MAY USE THEM TO TRAVEL TO THE LOWER WARD."

If that was the only way to get through, I nodded, "What do you need to divide?"

"THE FLOATING ONE IS UPON ME. REPAIRING. IT PREVENTS ME FROM DIVIDING. I UNDO ITS REPAIRS. BUT IT RETURNS AGAIN AND AGAIN. REPAIRS ANEW. MUST REMOVE FLOATING ONE."

"You want me to kill the dabus in the Alley?"

"REMOVE IT. ONLY THEN CAN I DIVIDE."

"Oi, chief... I really don't think that's a good idea," Morte cautioned, "Those hornheads might be irritating as the crotch-rot but they're still under Her protection." Annah nodded reluctantly as she found herself agreeing with the skull.

"We don't have any other choice," I said, walking up the stairs.

Following the dabus' continuous hammering was a simple matter. Getting rid of it, however, wouldn't be quite so easy.

The creature was hammering a board into place when I approached, "Greetings."

It turned to face me, and a series of symbols appeared around its head, <I must attend to my duties. No time to speak.>

What came next was hard to say, honest words though they were. As much as I tried to convince myself that all I did was tell the truth, and that there was no evil in doing so, I couldn't help but feel guilt deep in the core of my being. "I understand. I just thought you should know that I discovered the body of a dabus in this Alley."

The dabus cocked its head slightly to one side. A number of symbols streamed above its head, most of which indicated surprise and distress rather than words. <Dead? Where?>

"It lies in the abandoned building not far from here. It looks as though it got trapped inside somehow."

The dabus stared at me briefly, then bowed slightly and floated off in the direction of the abandoned building.

"Farewell," I murmured, and in its shock the dabus couldn't pick out the tone of finality in my words.

I returned to the stone face feeling drained. I'd had to kill to protect myself before, but this was something akin to murder. Greater and more terrible, perhaps, to do so to a dabus. Surely these streets had seen worse in their time, but in the pit of my stomach I felt... queasy. The silence after such an act was unbearable, and once or twice I looked over my shoulder, as if the whole city knew what I had done. Yet even if the Lady herself was witness to my actions, she would've rent the flesh from my bones the instant I spoke.

Best not to dwell on such things, but I was afraid that I would have to do worse in times to come.

The various ambient sounds of the Alley once again assaulted my ears, and through them the voice spoke, "YOU HAVE RETURNED."

"I spoke with the dabus. I told him about his dead brother and he left to investigate."

"YES. THE FLOATING ONE NO LONGER REPAIRS. IT IS NOW

WITH THE OTHER. I HAVE CLOSED MYSELF AROUND IT. IT REMAINS INSIDE ME FOREVER."

I shuddered, "You can now divide without interference, right?"

"STILL CANNOT DIVIDE. TOO WEAK. CANNOT UNDO FLOATING ONES REPAIRS. ITS CHANGES MUST BE REVERSED BEFORE I CAN DIVIDE. YOU MUST UNDO THE FLOATING ONES REPAIRS FOR ME. SEEK THEM OUT. REVERSE. MUST BE EXACT. PRECISE. ONLY THEN CAN I DIVIDE."

With that I sighed, sifting through my pack, withdrawing a prybar, then a hammer.

"Let's get to work, guys."

With his lack of hands, Morte cheered from the sidelines and Annah and I sweated and grumbled, and Dak'kon went to work with stoic silence. Boards were torn down from one building, hammered back into another. The ground shook ever so slightly as it seemed to sag in relief, and the buildings creaked as if stretching tired old bones.

We returned to the face just as the sky was beginning to glow with the new dawn.

"I have reversed the repairs as you have asked."

"YES. ALL IS IN ORDER. I AM GRATEFUL." Again the wind began to blow around us, this time with fierce intensity. The omnipresent sounds of the Alley began to increase in volume until the soft murmur of the voice is nearly drowned out by the ensuing racket. A section of the length of wall that the face rested on crumbled, falling away neatly until not a stone remained upon another stone. A fresh, clean wind blew through, carrying the scent of wet mortar, fresh-cut wood, and crisp, new metal.

We stood at the new entrance hesitantly, but as the walls began to warp and old buildings began to crumble, the voice urged us on, "NOW YOU MUST GO. DIVISION BEGINS. THE WAY IS NOW OPEN TO YOU." With those final words, the face crumbled away.

We ran. The ground underfoot rocked violently as our boots cracked against the pavement, rolling like water and stretching like taffy. The wind

intensified all around us, howling, urgent in an almost human-like moaning, like a man on the edge of a sneeze. Stones crashed and boards snapped all around us as we dashed through the passageway, and lightning crackled in the air as the old city gave way to new, streets birthing new streets, houses splitting into new houses.

Cobblestones popped along the road like bubbles as the new section of the city gave one final quake, expelling the four of us like afterbirth. Tumbling through the air in a cloud of gray and yellow dust I screamed. The girlish shrieks and obscenities echoing behind me could've been either Morte or Annah for all I knew.

All I knew was that when I landed it was flat on my tailbone, which cracked under my weight. Annah tucked and tumbled gracefully past me, stumbling only slightly as she rolled to her feet, while Dak'kon slid through the dust until he came to a stop at my side. A small white sphere tumbled past me, shrieking as it cracked against the pavement, bouncing once, twice, before rolling to a stop in the distance.

I groaned, rubbing my backside as Dak'kon helped me up, and a very surprised merchant in fine beige garb gawked down at me, "Well... good day, sir." He looked me up and down at the dust and grit, the tattered kilt and sash of bones. "You look like you might be interested in some fine clothes."

~~~~~

In the distance Morte coughed, and scraped the dust from his tongue with his teeth. Lips or a soft palate would've been a blessing, but he might as well have wished for a body if he was going along that line of thought.

This one's crazier than the rest of them put together, Morte grumbled to himself, But at least he's getting farther than most of those other poor sods.

He got up, and it was as simple a matter as standing would've been. Imagine one leg, then the other, and just think about moving. Looking around, Morte whistled a breath of air through his teeth. The Lower Ward... what delights awaited here. He couldn't wait to introduce the chief to the Sensorium, or the Twelve Vushilla Dancers. With the coin they had now they wouldn't have to scrounge for rats or sleep on smelly sheets anymore. No, silk and mammy pillows it'd be, if he could get the chief to just loosen the purse a little

more...

In the darkness two voices whispered to each other, pitched and squeaky and breaths fetid with the stench of rotting flesh.

"Is this the one?"

"It's a skull, ain't it? That's what HE wants. Grab it."

Morte turned around just as a sack popped over him and snapped shut. "Hey! What are you-" he struggled, tumbling against the stale burlap. His teeth slid uselessly against the thick and smelly cloth.

"Hey! Let go! Help! HELP!" Morte screamed. In the back of his mind, he despaired that this time, he just might lose all hope of ever nestling between a pair of bouncy mams ever again.

~~~~~

"CHIEEEEEEEEEEEEEFFFF!!!"

With Morte's pitched squeals in my ears, I pushed past the merchant whose sharp, cultured accent contrasted starkly against his muttered oath. One hand cradled my shattered coccyx as I shuffled. Looking around all I could see was a wormy tail as it flicked around the corner of a building.

My feet were numb and leaden as I tried to follow, but taking a few steps already proved too much. I fell to my knees as Dak'kon raced after Morte's voice, fading into the distance far too quickly for him to catch.

I pounded the pavement with my fist, cursing myself for adding another broken bone to the list, and cursing those who abducted my companion. The first friend I'd made in this bizarre new life.

Annah crouched next to me, saying something I couldn't quite hear through the haze of pain and anger.

Damn it.
Morte.

~~~~~

Bones aching and twisted with age, Pharod sat gingerly in the palm of his throne. The fingers curled ever so slightly inward, and once with the proper cushions they had supported his spine just right. Time, however, had not been kind to him. His bones had bent with the weight of years, and every time he rose from this seat he ached.

He gazed into his reflection cast by the orb in his lap. His face, tainted a sickly mustard by the bronze, was as warped as his body.

Gingerly he sucked at a tooth. Yet another was loosening, yellow and moldy, rank with the sour taste of flesh rotting as it still lived. In the Clerk's Ward he could've called for a dentist. Perhaps the healing services of a cleric. A potion to cure his ills would've been a pittance, but those days had withered long ago when he fled to the depths in desperation, seeking a way to cheat the damnation that would follow in death.

Pharod had the mocking laughter of the other noblemen at his back and the knives of the thugs at his breast when he first fled into these decaying warrens. He had sold his businesses and whittled his gold to gain a foothold and a reputation here. The rest was politics, and Pharod had been quick to learn how to pit Backalley Shivs against Bloodringers, Black Hands against Edge Dogs with those same whispers and lies he had perfected when dealing with rivals or magistrates. So much had been sacrificed, so much blood shed and lives lost like chaff in the wind for one man to escape the mad cruelty of damnation.

Pharod caressed the surface of the orb gently, and the metal crawled beneath his fingertips. All he needed now was to learn how to use it. Perhaps an oracle, or-

A chill swept through the room. Illwind Court had earned its name from the dusty scent of ancient detritus, not from odd drafts. Drafts were no good for his old bones. But cold there was, the kind of aching cold that comes slowly, devouring the warmth of a flickering brazier as a father huddles in a blanket during the winter, mourning his sons all lost to war. It was the cold that numbs a mother upon seeing the pallid face of her stillborn infant, and wondering what she could've done to have kept it alive. It was the frost that drifts upon a dead village, blanketing the stiff corpses lying in the streets with only a lone survivor wondering why he was spared.

It was the chill of regret.

Pharod tugged the blankets closer to him with gnarled fingers. As the braziers dimmed he drew a circle over his heart as if he could ward off the encroaching darkness.

And they came, flickering into substance from the shadows. One by one they drew themselves from the darkness. Their bodies were warped and misty, eyes gray with unshed tears. Serpentine wisps trailed from their scalps like the hair of bloated corpses swaying in the cold sea. Their fingers were long and needle-tipped, and they flexed as if eager to taste the softness of living flesh.

Pharod's voice creaked when he spoke. "If- if you've come for me-" he paused, trying to find the words, and they came out in a whimper like the whine of a starving alley dog, "I have the sphere. I have it!"

Pharod held up the bronze orb, and that sickly yellow surface distorted those bent and misty forms further. The creatures floated over to him silently, and Pharod clung to the desperate hope that the sphere would hold them at bay somehow.

"I have the sphere..." he whined. His throat ached, and tears welled up in his eyes.

The sounds of smoke whipping against flesh filled the high hall of Illwind Court, and there was the wet crack of meat and bone under a butcher's knife. Somewhere in the din was a wet scream.

By the time the braziers flickered back to life, the blood had grown cold on the stones.

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The dawn was clear and bright over the clean, well-kept district. Sigilians in richer garb, of silk and velvet and in bright, fresh-dyed colors, stared at us. The air smelled clean, if a bit acrid with the slightest hint of smoke and savory with the richness of fresh-baked bread. In the distance the murmur of the city was growing. Sigil was stirring with the morning light.

It was going to be a beautiful day.

Interlude

"And that... is the end of my part of the telling," Scii-tavakis says with a bow. With that she snaps the box shut, and the flow of runes vanishes.

There is no applause, no murmurs or cheers. The stark silence of the room is all that greets her when she leaves the stage. Her leather armor creaks as she moves, and the blunt end of her spear clacks against the stage as she descends, melting back into the crowd.

"I do hope the next storyteller is not going to leave us hanging," Oudilin urges, trying to fill the awkward silence with the strumming of his harp.

"Give it a moment," Scales-of-Three murmurs, coins clinking as he counts them.

Like a pinprick the chatter begins, first as one voice, then as a handful. The whole crowd begins its whispers over the story, correcting misheard details or embellishing others. You sigh. With the drink that had been flowing and the feckless nature of rumor and gossip, a thousand versions of the tale would spread from the tavern when it is finished.

If it ever is finished.

Already you can see the patrons glancing at each other. They are restless, and as that begins to build once again the tavern would be in trouble. Tavern brawls in Sigil are neither small nor legendary, but rather, bloody, and merciless. Doubly so in the Hive.

Mikon's nerves are shot. Two rounds of ale ago he had pulled out a pipe and stuffed it full with dry leaf. Puffing away with a mug of beer in hand he had abandoned all pretense of being on duty not out of laziness, but by the simple sad fact that he was utterly helpless in the throng.

You check your pouch with a squeeze, satisfied that there should be enough gold to cover your tab. Shara Six-Blades smiles as she offers to refill your mug, pleased at all you'd been downing this whole time. The food is rich, the snacks are salty and well-spiced, and as such it would have been impossible for you to stop drinking now. That marilith's attitude is as matronly as they come, but she would get a customer to drink himself stupid if he didn't

watch himself just to pad her coffers.

Well... a few more crisps wouldn't hurt.

The flow of ale and wine, beer and whiskey hasn't slowed a hair. Flashes of dim light fills the room each time the door is opened, and each time it admits a pair of burly thugs with a keg on each shoulder or a few more patrons who were drawn to the tavern. No Hive rats are these, no... but high-born men, women, and otherwise in fine silks. Their faces are veiled with perfumed kerchiefs to block the Hive's stench even as it fades with the day.

A woman sways in wearing a green silk gown and a high wig. Her pale white hair curls around a cage, which holds two small buntings that flutter and chirp as they flit among the perches. She is decked with jewels and clattering with gold bracelets, and somehow had entered the Hive alone at this hour without having her throat slit.

Three monks enter, swathed in black robes. Their faces are hard as if carved from stone: slim, stern, and pious. Still they approach the bar and order all manner of indulgences a Planar mind could conceive of, in defiance of their vows.

And there is the group of a smattering of races, each as different as the next in color and costume, but each muttering to themselves and nodding in agreement, fingering the Signer brooches at their chests.

"So I bring myself to this tavern, one I've never seen before yet imagined in my dreams."

"I've built this bar for some purpose and I know not what."

"All shall be revealed by myself to myself, of this I am sure."

A pitched shriek is heard, sharp as a dropped glass and as grating as a fiend's claws on a chalkboard. Fluttering up over the crowd is a mephit, no more than six inches tall. In its little claws it carries a tome that shifts among a hundred colors. One moment it is circular, the next it is shaped like a spade. And then it becomes a wedge, a square, a slim notebook before it turns into a circular grimoire once again.

"I IS XoRaskAviT aNd my tUrN iT is mIne!"

Drunkenly he flies, and weighed down by the journal he careens and cracks against a pillar before flopping proudly upon the stage. With a mad grin Xoraskavitt perches up on the stool, cackling at the bewildered crowd as he begins his tale.

"gREen anD mad And qUIckeNing wiTh paVEd gllmMers ThE OnE naMEd NAuGht tuMbles froM the sEa, wHIte anD blaCk at tHe SAme tiMe IN tHe sAme maNneR. TwICe The sUm of Four bE tEN wHIch daNCes into thE chIlI bOne-nlght...

'Sally forth we and shall we be fourth to sally,' I growled, 'Find the Painted Egg we must for Morte hides truth to be cracked open, yolk spilling a thousand thoughts that shall become the nectars of the Lethe.'

Barbed with the sigils of two moons Dak'kon takes the art most peculiar, smiling a whispered grin greenly. 'Thus spaketh Monnizerth and his four truths.'

I slip into the warm waters and slide the razor cross my wrist.

Torment. Pain. Torment. Pain. Torment. Pain.

Whip the shade-streets with four tails and over the fifth star we go. The path is cobbled with a thousand of the third fever-nights where delirium springs hot and moist from the skulls of the Lost Ones.

She is green.

Rhadamanthus spoke to me in a bubbling voice, grey and silent as the ashen fields from which all life springs. His words spin out in a thousand needles, each piercing the eye of a sinner. It hurts much to do so, but I melt as ice in the sun. A scream wells from my lips burst in butterflies. So colorful they are. One becomes a fish. Another a thimble. Three curve into bulbous bubbles and tell me what to write.

She is green.

Nimbus of the weak we ride, high across the planes and for each we pass we catch two others hidden in a seashell. 'Ride the winds!' I cry, 'Writhe with the

zephyr like lovers in copulation, and we shall see him knighted at last!’

And so we did, stepping through the gates of fruition.

Dak'kon is a bowl of milk, lapped up by the cats as the Lady consumes the cats in turn, making offal out of the elements, Earth, Fire, Twelve, and Air. They swirl in the motes and rides, hardening into four forms that becomes the ground we float upon.

She is green.

Dak'kon is lost to us but run we must. Run or else the gates shall open. The gates pass to the Elemental Plane of Bees, and the swarm shall descend upon the world. And thus shall the Bees snag the children in their webs and carry them off into the Nine Hells, to be tortured forever.

Run. Run. Run.

I am tired but we must run. For the children.

Dak'kon is a bright red candy fresh from the lips of a corpse. He melts in the sun, laughing a laugh most odd.

*For all the Profane Arches of Sanctity. **SHE IS GREEN!***

‘Ach, have ye seen me looky charms yeh Blarney-faced laddie?’

‘Who is John Galt?’

The light was ebbing, and the man could not distinguish my face. I had said it simply, without expression. But from the sunset far at the end of the street, yellow glints caught my eyes, and my eyes looked straight at the man, mocking and still- as if the question had been addressed to the causeless uneasiness within h-“

"Stop it! Just stoppit!" G'mir howls, and his thrashing rattles the table he is responsible for propping up, "This is stupid! You're stupid! 'Tis absolute and utter nonsense! Every last word!

"Aye!"

"Oi can't unnerstand a single word!"

"Wait... the Lady eats cats?"

"This is madness! Who in their right mind would let a barmy addle-coved *Xaositect* perform a telling?!" Scii-tavakis snarls from her table.

"I would," a piercing, crisp voice calls out from the crowd.

He is a tall man, slim and sharp with a honed, pointed face. A lizard perches on the rounded cap covering his head, and a pair of smoked-glass spectacles obscure his eyes. A dozen necklaces, earrings, and other hangings jingle from his robes as he walks, his limbs cutting the air with each step. In his hand he holds a simple staff, nothing more than a slim, perfectly straight length of wood. It clacks as he approaches the stage in even intervals: quick, precise, and metronomic. Immediately the audience is hypnotized by his slight but imposing figure.

"Xoraskavitt," he chides sharply. Everything about this man is sharp and angular, "Now I gave you a chance to tell the tale proper. Hand over the journal."

"I hAve iNFinite power. AnoTher has infiNite power. otHers havE iNfinite pOWer. I cAN cause mYseLf to HaVe iNfiNite poWER..." the mephit rolls on the ground, foaming at the lips as it clutches the tome.

"I said hand it," the man snaps, snatching at the book. It transforms into a slim scroll and with a firm shake the mephit slips free. Xoraskavitt tumbles about on the stage, murmuring gibberish, but more quietly.

"Now," the man clears his throat and stands up tall, "I must apologize and explain in full detail. I am Factor Epetrius of the Fraternity of Order, Twenty-Fifth of Two Hundred and Twelve Keepers of the Keys of the Eighteenth Great Library in Mechanus and High Scribe to the Libris Occultis on the Prime World of Tedrecon."

"A Guvner?" Mikon slurs, clearly well into the drink now, "Odd company for a Guvner to keep, a mephit and a Chaosman, at that."

Factor Epetrius purses his lips slightly. "Yes, I must say it is an odd pairing of sorts. Xoraskavitt is a handful. When he isn't chewing my wallpaper or

urinating on my notes he spends much of his time stuffed in a blue glass bottle." He sighs, "Yet somehow he manages to escape, and I have little energy left to catch him and put him back in."

"A most odd-looking journal, that," Oudilin fiddles with the strings of his lyre, tuning them to his liking, "A thing of Chaos to be sure. Perhaps craft from the formless matter of Limbo, and scribed with the blood of madmen. How that fell into your hands must be a truly fascinating tale."

Epetrius nods, his voice crisp, "Indeed. That in itself is an interesting tale. It was near a quarter-turning ago- and by that I mean of the central wheel of Mechanus, without a doubt the most precise timekeeping device in the planes. Remarkable device really, with no detectable margin of error. My office, in fact, rests on a quarternary cog and has a stunning view of the turning-"

"Ach, yer worse than th' deva," a voice snaps somewhere near the front row.

Epetrius crosses his arms, "Madam, if you would prefer I could have Xoraskavitt relate his version of the events again. No? Very well. As I was saying, and this is relevant mind you, Mechanus is a plane of precision and order, and since I had an excellent view of the workings of the central cogs I noticed one day, to my shock, that my clock was off by two thousandths of a measure."

"Now I was aghast of course, and examined the timepiece itself. The thing was modron-craft and by such accounts the warranty shouldn't have expired for another three hundred and eighteen years, two months, and five days, give or take. Initially there seemed to be nothing wrong, and I had just begun to take apart the entire thing to examine the finer mechanisms when a commotion outside confirmed that just the opposite had occurred, something quite impossible.

"You see, it was not my clock that had been malfunctioning (and I do wish I had discovered this earlier, for it was quite an expensive clock) but rather Mechanus itself that was off. Well the Modrons scuttled about not quite understanding what to do as such an event had never occurred before, had never been anticipated, and as such no protocols had been written to handle this case.

"Instead, it fell to the Fraternity of Order to take initiative and help sort things out. The Library staff was reduced to a bare minimum as everyone available rushed to investigate the source of the error and correct it as quickly as possible, since it was compounding by the minute.

"I had been scouring one of the peripheral cogs, and within two hours, fifty-two minutes, and twelve seconds from the start of the search (again, this is merely an approximation), I had discovered this tome wedged tightly between two gears. The damn thing had resisted the crushing forces of the gears of Mechanus, and awed beyond all reasoning I took it back to the Library as Mechanus reasserted itself.

"Of course, the Modrons were very unhappy about the whole affair, especially when I kept the tome on my shelf and examined it every chance I could get. It was exactly ten days later that five Pentadrones knocked on the door of my office while I had been sitting down to tea and indulging in two little square-shaped scones. They were under orders to expunge the tome out of Mechanus entirely. Apparently the order had been given to the Pentadrones by a Decaton, who was informed of such by a Nonaton. The Nonaton in turn was under the direction of an Octon, who recieved the order from a Septon. The Septon had relayed a Hexton's message who had been under orders from a Quinton, who was chided quite fiercely (in Modron terms, at least) by a Quarton. The Quarton had been in a mood since the order had come directly from one of the four Secundi due to the urgency of the matter."

Epetrius gives a dry chuckle, "So you can see, this matter really had the entire hierarchy rather disoriented."

The crowd remains silent.

Epetrius clears his throat and continues, "Well. In any case, I had sought to study the tome and tease apart what secrets it held, and doing so meant that I had to move much of my equipment to the Courthouse in Sigil. It was cramped, dusty, and quite frankly the view is quite foul. But if I could study this enigma it was worth it.

"To my frustration, the text resisted all form of probing, translation, divination, and analysis. I shouldn't have been surprised of course, but every spell I threw at it simply fizzled or was utterly useless.

"So I turned to the Xaositects, and thank the Powers they were willing to help me on one of their mad whims. For the price of a moldy potato carved in the shape of a Bariur's nose, they gave me Xoraskavitt, who they swore up and down and by their eyes and arse that he could translate anything chaos-written."

"Did it work?" Oudilin strums his lyre, the strings sweet and freshly-tuned.

Epetrius purses his lips, "A thought experiment: Pretend that you are trying to inspect an insect under a magnification device. It is a species who holds in its belly something that will unlock the secrets of the Multiverse, and the only lenses you are handed are hunks of irregularly-shaped granite. That is what it is like working with this mephit."

The Guvner sighs, "But nonetheless we were able to piece it together over the months, and in that time I've grown somewhat fond of the creature. The tome is maddening to read and the words continuously shift if they aren't phasing in and out and through existence, but I can manage now, thanks to Xoraskavitt's help. Though quite frankly, sometimes I think the Xaositects had the richer end of the deal."

With that, the Guvner flips open the multihued book (which at the moment is giving off a slight smoky scent) and pierces a page with a firm finger, "Now, allow me to continue our tale..."

Chapter 45

I tried to lose myself in the din of hawkers and buyers, merchants crying out their wares and the rabble of hagglers in heated debates over the proper price of the goods. One would think that in a crowded marketplace as this one less voice would go unnoticed.

I sighed, feigning interest in an Arborean apple.

"I dinnae understand what yer down about. 'E was just a stupid skull."

"He's a friend, Annah."

"E's obnoxious, talks too much."

"Morte is one who endures well in the dance of blades," Dak'kon said firmly.

"Oh fine, so we lose a damage sponge, aye? Yeh're too eager to play pincushion anyways, yeh barmy sod."

I tossed the merchant a couple coppers and bit into the fruit. Its flesh was slightly tart, with a sweetness that seemed to fairly glow as the juices trickled over my tongue. It alleviated my dour mood just a bit, "Morte has answers... and I want to know why he's been lying to me."

Annah huffed. Dak'kon said nothing.

As soon as I had crawled out of that ancient crypt I had looked for a mirror. Craning my neck and twisting a little I had taken a look at the tattoos on my back for myself. While the marks were there and deeply-etched, the mass of scars and burns had rendered many of the words nigh-unreadable, unless one knew what the message had said in the first place. No wonder Annah and Dak'kon had said nothing about the grim instructions and the dire warning that followed. They couldn't have read it easily.

Don't trust the skull.

It was certain that Morte had read that message off of me before. It was possible that he was a treacherous mole. I had put off the question for far too long out of simple sentiment. The thought of having to deal with him if he betrayed me was... unpalatable.

I was growing too fond of the little guy.

"Take a care, cutter," Annah mumbled, pushing close to me. I could barely hear her over the noise of the crowd, "Th' Lower Ward may be more peaceable 'an th' Hive, but yeh might be better off not stirrin' up th' trouble yeh do when those Hardheads are about."

"Hardheads?"

She nodded in the direction of one of the heavily-armed guards at the doors of the marketplace. They were clad in heavy red armor, crimson as the blood of sinners, and stood stern-faced and tight-lipped.

In the Hive the denizens walked heavy-footed and the rogues swaggered through the streets proud as tomcats. In the Lower Ward when the locals weren't hunched over with sickness they swept through the streets quickly, staring straight ahead with grim certainty. The city guard, however, patrolled in groups of four or five like lacquered juggernauts, with jaws set in stone and fists tight as if ready to break any dissent.

"The Harmonium," Dak'kon said as he leaned in, "The Fraternity of Order writes the laws of Sigil. The Mercykillers deal with the guilty, executing the punishments with neither tenderness nor tears. The Harmonium... enforce what they can within the walls of Sigil and conquer what they can without. They are not a force to be trifled with... their ways are to sweep across the planes, bringing their knowing of order to all, willing or not."

He scowled, "A distasteful philosophy, to enslave worlds so."

I glanced at a long-toothed axe, a crimson mancatcher. Not a group I would like to cross anytime soon.

Looking away, I noticed a pretty, young woman wearing simple clothes. She wandered about the market and examined everything, but didn't seem to be making any purchases. People seemed to be avoiding her, focusing on other things as if trying not to make it obvious. She flashed me a warm smile as I approached.

"Greetings. I don't suppose you could help a stranger to this ward."

The girl's smile broadened. "Hello, I'm Karina. It's a pleasure to meet you, cutter." She continued to smile. "What do you want to know?"

"Well... I had a skull and it's been stolen from me. Do you know anyone who would do such a thing?"

She blinked, and pressed a delicate hand to her bosom, "A skull? Why do you want such a thing? That's rather morbid, isn't it? Oh well, if you want a skull I guess you could get one from the Mortuary... well, maybe not. They don't like to give those things out now that I think about it... anyway, I don't

know who would take your skull. Why do you want a skull?"

"He's a friend of mine."

Karina gave me a quizzical look. "Really? A skull? That sounds weird, you know. I've never heard of anyone having a skull for a friend. I've seen people with pets and all, but never a skull. But then, you didn't say it was a pet, you said friend so that just makes it weirder." She paused to think.

I sighed, "Well... where can I buy some weapons?"

She smiled and pointed to one of the counters. "Anze over there sells weapons. All kinds of weapons. Are you a warrior? How silly of me, of course you are. I mean, how could you not be with all those scars... oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't mention those. You're not sensitive about them, are you?"

I shrugged, "No, I've gotten used to them."

She looked relieved. "Oh good... I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, or anyone else's for that matter. You just have to be careful what you say to someone, you know? I mean, people are different and you never know. What may offend one person may not offend another. So... anyway." She paused for a breath and smiled at me.

"Where can I buy some magic?" My skill had begun to outstrip the spells I knew, and the Hive had offered little in the way of high magery.

She smiled and pointed to one of the counters. "Aalek over there sells magic things. Are you a mage? You don't look like one, but I guess looks can be rather deceiving. I don't know what a mage really looks like, now that I think about it. Do you?"

I chuckled. The girl was hardly daft, but she certainly seemed to have a talent for saying so little with so much, "Yes. They wear robes with funny symbols and a pointy hat."

"Really? That's good to know. I mean, mages scare me so I want to know what they look like. I guess it's all that power they have, and they can do really incredible things and all, but you don't know what they look like. Warriors and priests and... and... you know, other powerful people just look powerful with all that stuff they carry around that says they are powerful

people. But not mages." She paused.

"You, uh... really like to talk, don't you?"

She shuffled her feet and looked embarrassed. "I, uh... Well... I've been told that I probably talk a bit too much and, well... People tend to avoid me... and I don't really have any friends or male friends courting me... sometimes I get lonely..." Her voice became lower and lower until she was finally silent. She stared at the ground at her feet.

I smiled, "I don't think you're a bad person, Karina. I happen to like you."

Annah rolled her eyes and huffed.

She gave me a hopeful look. "Really? Thank you so much... I don't know your name."

I smiled as I lied through my teeth, "I'm Adahn."

She smiled back. "Thank you, Adahn. It's nice to know I have a friend."

"All righ', if yeh be wantin' ta look for th' skull we'd best be quick about this," Annah said, annoyed.

Annah followed her own advice and kept her fingers clean as we shopped. A few fancy spells caught my eye.

The large, blustery merchant tapped the glass counter and smiled at me. He was totally hairless, and his pale yellow skin was scarred as if from burns. "Greetin's. I'm Cinder. I heard aboutcha'. Ye be the scarred Clueless fella that be goin' around the Wards askin' questions."

"You look like you have a few scars yourself."

He frowned then began to laugh, "Aye, that I do. Few years' back I had me a kip set up in the Hive. Some barmy mage decided ta burn the ward right out o' Sigil. Almost took me with it. Sick fer a month, I was."

Ignus. For a moment I stood a little confused, and mulled over the span of time, "A month? That's not all that long."

He nodded and took on a far-away look for a moment, "Aye, it coulda' been worse. Local mage healed me, fixed the scars'n all. Coulda grown my hair back but I kinda like the look."

"It is quite dashing. Do you think this mage could help me with my scars?"

He looked me over, then shrugged, "I don't see why not. Yer scars don't look that bad..." He looked at me closely, "Aye, now who's ta say. Ye should talk to 'em yourself. Names Sebastian, an' he sets his kip up over by the foundry."

"Thanks," I glanced at the half-unfurled scroll in the glass case, "Now... as for your merchandise..."

"High magic, this is!" Cinder proclaimed proudly, "Pierce enemies with missiles of force, or surround 'em with crackin' spheres of the heavens distilled. Or mayhap a touch of madness be more to your liking..."

"Here, Dak'kon," I handed him a scroll when our purchases were made, "You might need this. An attack spell to soften a few enemies from afar."

His eyes slid over the scroll casually, "The ways of this form of Art are not known to me."

"All paths converge at some point. Besides, I'm of Mebbeth's school and Zerthimon's and I do just fine."

Dak'kon nodded and accepted the scroll, "That much is true."

"Speaking of which..."

Dak'kon nodded, and handed me the Unbroken Circle, "The Fifth Circle of Zerthimon is now open to you. I wish, as you do, that its wisdom may aid us in finding out companion."

I slid the plates into the configuration Dak'kon showed me earlier, and a new ring was revealed.

I began to read.

"Zerthimon was the first to know the way of freedom. Yet it was not he that

first came to know the way of rebellion."

"The knowing of rebellion came to the warrior-queen Gith, one of the People. She had served the illithids upon many of the False Worlds as a soldier, and she had come to know war and carried it in her heart. She had come to know how others might be organized to subjugate others. She knew the paths of power, and she knew the art of taking from the conquerors the weapons by which they could be defeated. Her mind was focused, and both her will and her blade were as one."

"The turning in which Zerthimon came to know Gith, Zerthimon ceased to know himself. Her words were as fires lit in the hearts of all who heard her. In hearing her words, he wished to know war. He knew not what afflicted him, but he knew he wished to join his blade to Gith. He wished to give his hate expression and share his pain with the illithid."

"Gith was one of the People, but her knowing of herself was greater than any Zerthimon had ever encountered. She knew the ways of flesh, she knew the illithids and in knowing herself, she was to know how to defeat them in battle. The strength of her knowing was so great, that all those that walked her path came to know themselves."

"Gith was but one. Her strength was such that it caused others to know their strength. And Zerthimon laid his steel at her feet."

I slid the plates closed.

"What have you come to know?" Dak'kon asked as he himself finished reading the scroll.

"There is great strength in numbers, but there is great power in one, for the strength of the will of one may gather numbers to it. There is strength not only in knowing the self, but knowing how to bring it forth in others."

"You have come to know the Fifth Circle of Zerthimon. With this knowing, I impart this to you." He took the Circle and with a deft motion, twisted one of the links so one of the plates slid forth. "Meditate upon its teachings, and the knowing of it shall give you strength."

"I would know more of the Way of Zerthimon," I intoned, as per the ritual we had adopted.

Dak'kon's fingers felt around the edges of the stone circle, and he twisted it clockwise, the links clicking until they had settled into a new configuration. He then reversed the motion, resetting the stone. "The next Circle of Zerthimon is open to you. Study it, then I will hear your words."

"Perhaps later," I looked over the new meditation of the Zerth. The Power of One... a strength-enhancing spell greater than any I'd seen.

A Harmonium guard stood next to the exit. His armor was that unusual construction with spikes flaring from the shoulders, elbows, and forearms. Though he seemed distracted with eyes wandering about the market, he nodded as I approached.

"Good day, citizen. I am guard Corvus. How may I help you, citizen?" He gave me a friendly look, but glanced over my shoulder.

"Who are you?"

He gave me a slight bow. "I am Harmonium guard Corvus, citizen. I help keep the peace here at the market." He glanced about for a moment, then looked at me.

"Tell me about the Harmonium."

"Our belief is simple: We are the light. We are the Way. We are Order. We are Truth. We maintain and enforce order here in Sigil. We police the city." He looked about again.

I followed his gaze. Glancing over my shoulder I saw Karina wandering nearby. Corvus seemed to have his eyes locked on her as she wandered about.

I smiled, "Her name is Karina."

He snapped his attention back to me. "I beg your pardon, you know her, citizen?" He looked at Karina again. "Voice of an angel and such a pretty young thing..."

I winked at him, and out of the corner of my gaze Annah rolled her eyes, "Yes, and she's also lonely... I'm certain she would welcome the company of

a gentleman..."

He glanced at me, then back at Karina. "Excuse me a moment, citizen." He stepped around me and headed towards Karina.

When Corvus returned he was smiling brightly. "Thank you, friend. A wonderful young lady..." He looked a little glassy-eyed.

I chuckled, my mood brightened, "Anytime, Corvus."

Of course, my mood didn't last when I stepped outside.

The air of the Lower Ward, though clear of the smell of garbage and rank, unwashed bodies, had a foulness to it that grew strong the deeper we went. While the edges of the ward were bearable, the monolithic Great Foundry squatted in the center, belching metallic fumes into the sky. The streets were pitted with the acid rain that fell, the walls of the buildings looked as if they had their surfaces peeled away. It seemed as if even the Razorvine struggled to grow here, though perhaps it was due to more diligent weeding by the locals.

The mark of the Foundry lay heaviest on the people. Yellow-skinned as a githzerai, no few of them were emaciated, or coughing into rags thanks to the slow poison being fed into their bodies with each breath. Such was the price of being a craftsman and enjoying the scant luxuries offered, and the peace that the Harmonium brought.

And then I saw her. Standing in the shadow of the large gate that surrounded the Great Foundry was a sickly githzerai woman. She was hunched and bent, and her constant coughing was obviously a source of pain to her - she held a handkerchief that was practically soaking with blood, tissue, and phlegm to her face. She spied us and hissed.

"Greetings."

She stared at me, and spoke a few mumbled words to Dak'kon.

Dak'kon glanced at me, "She cannot understand your speech. She says she is dying."

I reached into my coin pouch. There wasn't much left after purchasing those

spells, "Who is she?"

"Her name is An'azi. She says she used to work in a meat-curing house here until a half-month ago when the illness became too much for her to bear. She was abandoned, evicted from her home, and left for dead. Speech pains her and her illness has crippled much of her mind. She says there is nothing she can give you of value."

"And?"

"Know that she will not recover. I can put her out of her misery. That is all. As a zerth of the People, it is my responsibility to provide an alternative."

I was about to protest. Surely there was a healer at hand, or a potion we could fetch. A short quest would do well to help me forget about Morte's absence, if only for a little while.

But Dak'kon spoke with a rare, grim certainty that I found difficult to argue against, "Then be merciful, Dak'kon."

Dak'kon drew his blade, and waited for the woman to prepare herself. She touched the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon he wore for a moment, and her face was stoic. His blade is a blur, and when he has completed the stroke, she lay bleeding on the hard stone of Sigil's streets. Her face was blank... she felt nothing.

I swallowed and stepped back from the corpse on the ground. "I think... it may be best to separate. If only for a little while. If we spread out it'll be that much more efficient to find word of Morte." Dak'kon nodded as he focused, and the blood slid cleanly off of his blade.

"Ach, I'm not going to play fetch-quest for your mimir, cutter," Annah growled, "Jes come back to Pharod and say I'm done wit' yeh... 'e won't let go o' me ear until he hears it straight from yer lips."

"Please, Annah," I said pleadingly, "Just let us find Morte and I'll be happy to let you return to the Buried Village."

Her lip curled into a sneer, but she agreed.

"Aye. Fine, we'll look for that pet o' yours."

Chapter 46

Chaos.

It was something every githzerai lived with, what every Zerth stood against. Roiling, formless matter without, steel-cored essence within. United yet sovereign, ordered in the heart of disorder... paradox was the bread and water of the githzerai. Yet the alien angles and alleys of Sigil held a madness of their own, one that Dak'kon had yet to become accustomed to.

It had been so long since he set out on his own that he had nearly forgotten the unbearable weight of his burden, and for a while the clanging iron bands of a long-forgotten vow were a dim whisper in the back of his mind. How things had changed... how old aches returned fresh and burning anew.

Dak'kon looked down at his hands: they were wrinkled and worn rough by the sands of time, but already he could feel new blood pulse through his veins. Something was different about this life. Something different about this Nameless One.

Dak'kon looked up, surprised at where his footsteps had taken him. "Pawnshop," the sign said, scrawled in a desperate hand. The wood was weathered and pitted with age, uncared for and forgotten.

This was troubling. The last time he had allowed his mind to wander so it had led to disaster.

Yet with a heavy sigh the old Zerth entered, a speck swept by the currents of Limbo. He would save his strength to fight its shifting pull elsewhere.

The shop was haphazardly arranged. Useless trinkets and esoteric goods weighed the shelves down until they creaked. While they had been dusted and cleaned with a meticulous hand, the items sat inert on the shelves. Only one bored patron browsed the merchandise, and merely with a casual eye. Without him, the shop would've seemed fully becalmed.

A rotund woman, complete with shrewish eyes and a nasal voice brayed out as Dak'kon entered, "Now what have we here? A customer? Do mine eyes spy a customer?" Her voice was pitched and needy, and Dak'kon suppressed the sudden urge to step back lest she start pinching his armor and dragging

him deeper into the shop in a desperate attempt to make a sale.

A diminutive man grumbled, poking his head out from the back room, "Of course your eyes spy a customer! They see a customer all the time... customers on the STREET! We have no customers, we will never have customers, it is useless and forlorn to hope for- POWERS BE! Miccah! We have a customer!" he eyes sat alight and excited on the old gith.

"That's what I've been saying to you!" She lowered her voice and turned to Dak'kon. "What can we do for you?"

Dak'kon clasped his hands and bowed politely, "I see you, shopmistress, and would know who you are." It was said that outsiders make such introductions upon meeting.

Miccah spat bitterly, hands on her hips, "I? I am chained to this anchor of a pawnshop with a husband who doesn't appreciate me enough..."

Brokah interjected with heavy irony. "And I ask you, how could I not appreciate the mouth and figure of a creature as beauteous as this? Truly without discernment and taste am I..."

"Something I thought marriage could cure and which hope was entirely in vain. Ach!" she pursed her lips, "That fat and lazy sod is Brokah. He is my husband of twenty-some years, though his inconstant nature makes it hard to believe he has not strayed in that time..."

"It certainly does make it hard to believe!" Brokah shouted back, "All those chances, thrown away, when I could have been having the time of my life!"

"To be sure, the goats on the farm must miss your tender ministrations..." Brokah purpled and the two of them fell into what sounded like the latest in a long, long series of arguments. Their attentions were entirely devoted to each other. Dak'kon stood, flummoxed, not quite knowing what should be done.

Chaos. It was ever the fate of a githzerai to stand resolute in the eye of the storm.

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A charred metal tang curled my tongue with each breath I took. I coughed... it seemed as if the filth in the air tested even my immortal constitution.

While the folk were better-dressed than the poor sods in the Hive and real money clinked in none-too-limp purses, a dreary air still hung over the populace. Every other Sigilian's hands were rough and scraped, their skin was sickly. It was a choice between poverty and a short, sickly, and marginally prosperous life.

For some reason, I found myself thinking back to how good the soup was in the Gatehouse of the Bleak Cabal.

A merchant strode past, his horse trotting behind him pulling a cart laden with baskets of fruit. An artisan on the corner coughed into a rag and spat a thick wad into the street. An older man, decked in elegant robes blinked at me, his eyes bright and smile warm. He bowed slightly, and I approached.

"Good day, cutter. I am Sebastion, how may I serve you?"

I shook his hand, "Greetings."

"Greetings to you as well, cutter..." He seemed distracted as he looked over my scars. His eyes traveled along them and his eyebrows arched in surprise. He returned his gaze to me. "I was about to ask what I could do for you, but there is no need. I think I see why you came to see me, cutter."

"So you're the man who healed Cinder. Can help me with these scars also?"

He smiled at me and shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps, cutter, perhaps." He leaned forward and began to examine my scars carefully. He ran a finger along several of them, mumbling to himself. Finally he looked up at me. "Yes, cutter, I can help you. I cannot cure you, but I can alleviate the worst of your... condition."

"And your price?"

"Ah, yes... the price." He began stroking his chin and stared at me. I got the impression I am being weighed somehow, like a slab of meat. "I have a job that I think you could perform."

I nodded, "Go on."

"I have signed a contract with a certain creature. I am no longer able to fulfill the agreement; it is... beyond my abilities. However, the creature will not release me from our deal. Instead it has threatened me with death unless I fulfill the contract."

"Let me guess: You want me to solve this problem for you."

He sighed. "Yes. I cannot do it myself. My reputation demands that I fulfill the contract or face the consequences. I am at your mercy in this regard. Will you help me?"

With the multitude of demons, devas, and the whole bizarre assortment of other planars, I had to consider things carefully, "What kind of creature are we talking about?"

"An abishai named Grosuk, cutter." He paused to gauge my reaction. "I know this is a difficult task, but one I think you can handle. Also, the reward I offer you is great." He gestured at my scars.

"What were you contracted to do?"

Sebastion shook his head. "I cannot reveal that information, cutter. I am magically bound not to. That is why people come to me. They know that if I accept a contract, it will be handled with discretion."

I hmm'ed and rubbed my chin. "I see, an interesting proposal."

He looked at me hopefully. "Will you do it, cutter?"

Oh well. How bad could an abishai be? "Yes, give me the details."

He smiled at me and gave a sigh of relief. "Thank you, cutter. You will need a magic weapon to cause an abishai any harm, so check with some of the shops if you do not own one. A spell caster can harm it as well. Grosuk can be found to the east, beyond the siege tower."

"Siege tower?" I followed his gesture. Given the mash of architecture in Sigil it hadn't seemed out of place before, but the moment Sebastion pointed it out the tower in the distance took on a mystic, sinister air. It oppressed the buildings around it, seemed to crack the air and grind at the mortar with its

ominous presence. No one seemed to pay it any mind.

"Yes, over beyond the market. Damn thing just appeared one day, several years back. No one knows why and no one seems able to get inside it to find out."

"I see. Well... I had been hoping you could answer a question of mine..."

His smile broadened. "Ask away, cutter."

"I had a talking skull and he was kidnapped. Can you help me?"

He stared at me for some time before answering. There was an edge in his voice, serrated and sharp with fear, "A skull... well, if I were to hazard a guess, I would say that your skull is now in the possession of the Master of the Bones. Which means you should get yourself another skull, cutter."

I could feel the tension strung between our words at the mention of the name. 'Master of Bones.' It was its own siege tower in the midst of a conversation. "What can you tell me about the Master of the Bones?"

He frowned and glanced about for a moment. "His name is Lothar, and he does not appreciate the attention of others. I know nothing of him and can answer no questions about him."

"Where can I find this Master of the Bones?"

He fidgeted nervously. "A ruined house somewhere in this ward leads to his demesne. I know nothing more." I could actually see a hint of fear in his eyes. "Let us speak of another subject, cutter."

I turned away from him, "That's all right. I was just leaving." Grosuk the abishai, eh? Well... I had a dagger honed by sorcery and a noggin full of the most powerful spells money could buy. How bad could it be?

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"Jes get it done wit, and yeh don't have to put up wit 'is ugly hide any more..." Annah growled under her breath. Playing nursemaid for a clueless was hardly a good way to spend her time.

If Annah had learned anything in Sigil, it was that there was no mercy in the Planes. A sod could be cut open and left bleeding in the street without anyone batting an eye. Children could be left to prowl hungry and alone, living only by what they could scrounge or steal. Those brave, daft, or desperate enough made their jink on their backs, smiling against the stink of sweat and unwashed sheets.

Aye, kindness was a rarity in the Planes... the Mercykillers saw to that for those who escaped the relentless grinding of sorrow's millstone. If the fear of death didn't teach this piking bright-eyed sod that, there were plenty of other harsh lessons for him to face.

A snip of a string and a patron's purse fell into her palm. The marks were fatter here, though with the prowling Harmonium the dangers were greater. Still, Annah knew a good opportunity when she saw one, and the crowd was too preoccupied with the slave auction to really notice her slinking about. Might as well pull some coin while she gathered information.

"Annah?"

The tiefling spun around at the sound of her name. Her tail flicked, and in a foolish instant she had nearly reached for her punch-daggers when she recognized the voice.

"...Trist? Is that yeh?" Annah's heart skipped a beat at the sound of clinking chains.

A young woman stood in a cage in the middle of the square, tossed amongst a grimy and sullen-faced group of inmates - no doubt bound for the slave auction. Recognizing Annah, the young woman nodded, dew-eyed and cheeks pink with shame as she looked down at her old friend.

"Yeh stupid girl!" Annah hissed, "What've yeh done now? Yeh were supposed to escape this sort 'o life!"

Her old childhood friend glanced at the guards, and seeing them nod their assent she knelt on the edge of the podium, "It wasn't my fault, Annah! I did everything right- everything! I married, we had a home and enough money to buy our way into the upper wards. I swear, Annah... it was a fine life!"

"Then what are yeh doin here?" Annah's fists tightened. The memories were

dim, nearly forgotten over the years. They were smudged by the dragging of countless corpses, scarred by the many slit purses and stained with the blood of rivals. A bag of coin, scrounged, stolen, and saved up so that one of them could escape the poverty of the Hive. Pharod had not been happy when he realized how much had been taken from him.

"I- I was never as brave as you, Annah. I wasn't as clever or quick..." Trist was, however, kind and pretty, soft enough that she would've withered to nothing with another few years of that life, "But my husband... oh! Please, you must help me..."

A meaty hand gripped her wrist. "Come, girl. The auction is about to start. Let the patrons examine the wares up for bid. And sway yer hips a little... the bigger a price ye fetch the more it'll go to pay for your debt."

"Please, Annah!" Trist cried as she was led away, "Help me!"

Too shaken to soft-step her way through the alleys, Annah ran. The pavement pounded beneath the tiefling's boots, Annah's eyes searching for that one who was mad, determined, and naive enough to lend a hand. Kindness had long since been slain and left bleeding into the cobblestones, but for the first time Annah hoped she was wrong.

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My neck hurt.

Standing at the base of the siege tower, I arched back to take in a good view of the squatting monstrosity. Its walls were scarred and pitted with the wounds of countless wars (and looking at my own scars now, I must say I felt a bit of sympathy), and on each of the four walls rusted blades protruded. Each knife was tarnished, its edges snaggle-toothed like the fangs of a morbid beast. The shadows of those blades seemed to cut into the ground where they were cast, and even I was a little careful in stepping between them.

Circling around, I found my target.

Next to the chain of a drawbridge hunched a reptilian creature with a snake like-body, four clawed feet, leathery wings, and a draconian head. The scales covering its body were a vile shade of green. The abishai stands upright on

its hind legs, balancing with its prehensile tail. As I approached its eyes narrowed to slits and it begins to hiss.

"Greetings," I offered.

The air around the creature began to radiate heat and its scales took on a pale sheen. It gave me a hungry look and appeared ready to strike. Suddenly it released a flurry of hisses and relaxed its stance a bit. "Sssssss! Go. Grossssuk no talk, told wait... Ssssssss..." It glared at me as its tail lashed back and forth.

"What kind of creature are you?"

Every muscle on the creature seemed to tense as it released a storm of snarls. It started to reach for my scarred flesh, then stopped. Hate dripped from its eyes when it spoke. "Grosssuk no talk. Sssssssssss. You lucky human. You go while ssstill lucky. You ssstay, Grosssuk ssshred!"

"Uh, Sebastian sent me."

The creature relaxed quite a bit and the air grew cooler. It held out a clawed hand to me. "Ssssss. Give Grosssuk information." He looked at me expectantly.

Oh crap. I needed to stall. "What information?"

It was hard to read facial expressions on a reptile, but I was certain that Grosuk was rather annoyed with me. His tail began to lash furiously and the air grew warm again. "No quessssstion. Give Grosssuk information or die. Grosssuk then take information from body."

"I need to know which piece of information is for you. I run errands intended for several people, you understand."

He glared at me for a moment while he thought. Finally he gestured at the nearby tower. "Sssiege tower. Ssssss. How get inssside. Sssebastian say he divine way..." Grosuk took a step toward me and held out his hand. "Now give!"

Maybe I could just back away... "Oh, that information. I'm sorry, Sebastian wanted to deliver that one in person. He'll be along soon."

The air around Grosuk began to radiate heat and his scales took on a pale sheen. He gave me a hungry look and appeared ready to strike. Grosuk opened his mouth to reveal several rows of razor sharp teeth. "No... Grossuk think you lie! Give information now Grossuk kill quick, not ssssslow. Not give, Grossuk take time. Remove you insssidesss. Let you watch!"

I was probably going to need a lot of burn ointment after this encounter. Wryly I wondered if Sebastian's offer of healing would at least counteract the wounds I would be receiving. "Fine, Sebastian sent me to kill you anyway," I grunted, and brought a finger to my lips as I began an incantation...

## Chapter 47

I could feel my face shattering as I slammed against the wall. Broken shards of bone scraped against one another, setting bolts of pain lancing through my head. I felt a gush deep inside, and something salty trickled into my mouth. My lips had been shorn off in the fight, and my grunts of pain wheezed through chipped teeth.

Despite the horrific injuries, the battle wasn't as bad as I'd expected. I'd seared Grosuk with bolts of Elysium's fires and scuttled under his claws when he slashed. Though my dagger's enchantment was sufficient to pierce his hide, melee would've been a poor, stupid, horrible strategy.

Grosuk's serpentine tail twined about my ankle, and he unceremoniously dragged me towards him as I stabbed uselessly at the flicking appendage.

Like I said, stupid.

One claw clutched me around the throat, and Grosuk dragged me up to look me in the eye. His breath reeked of rotting flesh.

"Grossuk kill manling slow, eat flesh!" he snarled, "Strew out remains across Gray Waste!"

I gurgled.

"What manling say?" Grosuk snarled. His claws, already stained black by the blood of his prey, dug into my throat.

"'agic 'issle." I pressed my fingers against his jaw.

The resulting blast knocked us away from each other, though his talons drew ragged wounds along my neck as we flew apart. The burst of sulfurous blood clouded my vision, and when I leaped to my feet and wiped my eyes there was Grosuk, howling as the scraps of what remained of his jawbone clicked uselessly.

Disoriented, he clambered after me, but I was quicker. I rounded about him, leapt aside when he swiped. If he were wiser and calmer, he might've surrendered and promised to leave Sebastion alone. No, a fiend is a vengeful creature, else he wouldn't have threatened the mage in the first place.

He got a few good scrapes in despite my dodging, and when he fell I could feel my life hanging by a thread.

All this had better be worth it.

Sebastion smiled at my approach, though his lips immediately curdled at the sight of my ruined face. "Good day, cutter. I presume you have completed your quest?"

"Yesh, and I'h cong hor haht is due 'e."

"One moment please, cutter." Sebastion reached into his robe and removed a small crystal ball. He gazed into it for a moment before returning his attention to me. "I cannot thank you enough, cutter. I shall live up to my part of the bargain. Are you ready?"

I nodded, "Yesh."

Plucking a vial from his belt, Sebastion poured a viscous purple liquid into his



palm. Murmuring a complex chant, he drew an arcane sigil in the puddle. Where his finger traced the liquid the pool began to glow, bubbling bright and violet. With a burst the magic was released, and traces of the stuff flooded into my flesh. My skin bubbled, and a hot burning itch flowed through my body as I felt wounds knit shut and my scars recede. I gasped, licked my newly-regrown lips.

"It is done, cutter. Once again I thank you." Sebastion bowed deeply to me.

I looked at my body in wonder. The gray pallor remained, but many of the puckers of twisted flesh had receded, if they hadn't disappeared entirely. "Thank you and farewell, Sebastion."

~~~~~

The ladle clacked against the walls of the cauldron as it stirred the plague-yellow broth. It was thick and opaque, a diseased green with nary a single bubble marring its surface.

"See how easily the flesh falls from the bone?" the old man rasped. His fingernails were long and white, and delicately gripped the handle of the ladle. Pulling it up, he scooped out a freshly-cleaned skull. The last traces of once-petrified meat sloughed off, dribbling back into the vile brew like melting butter.

Morte whimpered and shivered in his cage.

"Most of my prized pieces do not need eyes to see, nor a tongue to speak with. Can I say the same of you?"

"P-p-please... just let me go." Morte braced himself for the pain, like that bolt of blinding agony that left him spinning on the ground and screaming until the world went black. It was the first and last time he mouthed off here. Yet the old man barely raised his head as he touched the skull with the tip of one talon.

"Awaken, skull, for you now bear my mark now and forevermore. Speak, else I will call upon the Whispering Chorus and the Rattling Legion to whip your shade until the Planes grind to dust..."

The skull wheezed, as if taking its first breath. Age-yellowed teeth clacked.

Its voice was honey-sweet, effeminate and soft as down. It was frightened.

"Who... oh light of Atun! This is not the River of Golden Reeds!" she moaned. "Why am I here? I have laid sacrifices thrice a year, sent gifts of incense to the Alabaster Temple! My body was embalmed with resin, myrrh, and packed with natron in the manner of the Old Ways. My lover placed a coin upon my tongue as was the custom of his lands. Why do I not rest with him in the afterlife?!"

"Silence now, until I bid you speak!" the elderly sage snapped. He plucked a mummified head from the shelf by the ragged remains of its linen wrappings. Its shrunken eyes had been pressed flat into their sockets by two coins clinging as if glued to the dry flesh. Its lips were curled into a grimace. Gold glinted past one chipped tooth. The sage dropped the grim parcel into the brew with a splash.

"Your lover will join you soon enough."

The female skull was muted by Lothar's command, but Morte's shrieks echoing against the walls were enough for both of them.

~~~~~

I whistled a merry tune as I waited for Annah and Dak'kon, happy to be whole again, lips and all.

Sebastion's healing was astounding. My skin lost many of the subtle itches and tugs I had never known existed, and ancient aches in battle-scarred bones were gone. I had lived with them as long as I could remember (though granted my memory only stretched back a few weeks) and to have them gone... well, best I could describe it was that it was refreshing since I have nothing else to compare it to.

"Fine day, isn't it?" I said cheerfully to a passerby.

"Pike it, Clueless."

Hrmn.

A slim, bony finger tapped me on the shoulder.

I turned to face a man with rough, leathery skin with the same pale yellow cast as Dak'kon and other githzerai I had seen. Yet his features were more gaunt, skeletal, as if his skull had been drawn downwards. His face was angular, his nose small and highly placed, and his ears tapered to points and slashed as if by a ritual knife. A tracery of tattoos and scars covered his body. While Dak'kon's manner of dress was more austere, this one was dressed in strange, gaudy leathers that look more ornamental than combat-ready. His eyes were like two small black stones and they pierced me with their unwavering gaze. "You are the human seeking memories," he said, flatly. "I can help you."

"Who and what are you, stranger?" He seemed githzerai, but lord he was ugly.

"I am Yi'minn. I am a githyanki angler. My people are the undisputed masters of the Astral Plane, where the gods go to die and the memories of the dead float like leaves in a pool. My duty is in retrieving the memory cores of the dead and gleaning them for information. I can locate your memories. You have only to pay the price."

"What price would that be?"

"It is a matter of a mere few coins. The price is negotiable. I ask for two hundred. You will determine the value of the memories I find and pay accordingly."

After splurging on spells and items my coin pouch might've been a touch too light for his request, but the githyanki seemed quite generous with his terms. "Sounds good. What do I have to do?"

His beady eyes glanced side to side a moment, "If I am to bait my hook for your memories, I will need some of the memories you currently possess. I also require a place of concentration and quiet. If you will follow me, we will journey to one such place and I will make you whole once again. We go alone, with no companions."

I nodded cheerfully, "I suppose they can wait for me to return. Lead the way."

The streets were cobbled in what once might have been luxurious blue stone. Patches of polished azure still glinted, though they lay like scattered

puddles on the bottom of a riverbed. The bare red clay had been revealed by years of acidic rain and heavy footsteps. While this ward may have been luxurious once, it, too lay in disrepair and ruin.

"So... what can you tell me about the githyanki? I've never heard of them before. Are you bretheren to the githzerai?"

Yi'minn paused a moment, glancing back to me out of the corner of his eye. The air was pregnant with an awkward tension, and my mouth dried a little. "In... a manner of speaking..." his lip curled into a half-grimace.

I sighed in relief. "So... where are we headed? If there's a bar nearby perhaps I could buy you a drink."

Yi'minn shook his head, "No. Such business is best done away from prying eyes and ears. After, perhaps, or when I return with our catch."

I remained silent the rest of the way. We passed a couple of buildings, down one block, and turned into a dim corner of the ward. Yi'minn turned to face me as we stood near a collection of ancient barrels, shaded by the tight confines.

To my right, another gaunt, yellow-faced githzerai stepped from the shadows, clad in garish orange and clinking with chains and jewels.

To my left, another stood. In his hand he held an unsheathed dagger, its blade gnarled and twisted. No doubt the wounds that weapon caused would be grievous indeed.

Slowly more of Yi'minn's companions filtered in, long-fanged and garishly clad. They held themselves with a warrior's confidence, eyes narrowed to slits and slitlike noses curled as if something malodorous stood beneath them.

As for Yi'minn... the githyanki's mood had turned into something much more ugly than its previous arrogance. "Now, human, drop your painted shield and tell us what you have said and done for the githzerai dogs within Sigil's walls."

I looked at the small crowd surrounding me. These weren't the average Hive alley rats that I had disposed of so easily. Their stances were heavy with the

weight of decades, razor-honed with practice. Silently I cursed myself for my naivete. "Weren't... weren't we going to go look for my memories?"

"The only way you shall travel to the Astral Plane is in chains, human," one behind me hissed in disgust, "You have one more chance to tell us what you have said and done for the githzerai within Sigil's walls."

"I- we merely relieved a githzerai's woman's pain."

Yi'minn's voice was cold and iron-hard. "You lie like a githzerai dog, human. You are their quisling and their leech. We will do you a favor by killing you." He drew his weapon.

Well, I could've used a little rest.

Yi'minn's blade slashed across my throat and I fell to the ground bleeding. My tongue writhed as I tried to gag, each pulse flooding the cobblestones with another spurt of blood. I lay there, mouth working like that of a dying fish's, and as my twitchings slowed the gang stood over me and began to speak again. "Did he truly know nothing, Al-midil?"

"His words were those of an enemy of the people. Even were that not true, we have cauterized his ignorance with death's iron."

My eyes rolled upwards to gaze at a githyanki female who nodded in agreement, "Let us leave him here for the Collectors to scavenge. We have gathered enough information on the githzerai dogs for this trip. They shall lose another fortress before the sevenday is out."

Yi'minn spoke again, his tone final, "The walls of Vristigor shall fall."

"If you believe our knowledge is sufficient, then we shall go. Gather our warriors and let us join our war party in Limbo."

That was the last I heard before the darkness took me in once again.

## Chapter 48

"-up, yeh bag of bones an' ugly!" The words flitted on the edges of my consciousness, like a moth batting against the dimly-lit glass of a lantern, "Wake up, I said!"

There was a sharp ache in my side that hadn't been there before, and when the firm toe of a boot cracked against my ribs again the ache flared anew.

"I'm awake," I groaned, pushing myself off of a congealed puddle of my own blood. I felt my throat for the wound that the githyanki had made. All that was left was an itching scar, and even that seemed to be healing over nicely. Even with Annah's sunny voice ringing in my ears, this was possibly the best out of all the times I'd resurrected.

"Ach, I leave yeh alone for two hours and yeh just get yerself killed agin. Lucky I have a knack fer squeezin' in places most o' Pharod's other sods ignore, or I'd never have found yeh stashed here."

I took in my surroundings. By the look of it I had been flung behind the barrels in this musty old alley and left to rot in the forgotten shade. Good thing, too... I didn't relish another trip to the Mortuary or having to explain myself to a Collector if I awoke in transit. Annah stood above me, panting as if she'd run around half the Ward looking for me.

"Are you all right, Annah?"

She paused a moment, crouching down but taking care not to let her tail drag in my blood. It flicked a little, betraying the stern countenance she slid on. Annah was nervous.

"I... need yer help."

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"I'd hate to keep Dak'kon waiting," I mused as we strode down the street.

"Ach, th' pasty-faced gith can take care o' himself."

I nodded. That was true enough, "Annah, I'm curious. I know you've seen

worse in Sigil than slave trade... what makes this one so important?"

"I already told yeh what ye need t' know," she muttered, "Jes go with it."

"Is it something personal?"

Annah bristled at that, and added an edge to her walk like a cat stalking its prey, "Ach. I wish that ol' mold-skinned gith were here ta bind yeh in his chatter."

"Dak'kon doesn't talk much."

"No," came the hoary voice from behind us, "But I hear your words."

I was surprised that Annah didn't draw her blades. Turning around I froze. A well-formed bruise around Dak'kon's eye had just begun turning green at the edges, and a small cut on his cheek was beginning to dry and scab over. He stood stiffly however, arms crossed in meditative calm.

"You... got in a fight?"

Dak'kon set his coal-black gaze upon me, rigid and keen as steel, "A... dispute. It would be wise to know that words may set motion to blades, but it is the blades themselves that do the harm."

"Are those pottery shards caught in your armor?"

"We will speak no more of it."

I shrugged, and flicked a clot charm to him, "In any case, we're off to free a slave."

There was no mistaking the throng on the podium for anything but slaves. They were glassy-eyed, outcasts of a city that heaved a fatigued sigh at the sight of poverty and lazily brushed them into a corner. As they swayed on aching legs and bent with slumped shoulders, a boisterous auctioneer stood out in front of them. He was very animated and did a lot of shouting, yelling, and stomping, carrying a flair for melodrama like a medal-lined sash and curled his cheeks into many strange facial expressions.

"Greetings."

He glanced at me and motioned to the crowd that he was taking a break. "Well, a thousand greetings do I bestow on you, sir!" He winced at the sight of my scars. "You know, I take one look at you with my discerning eye, and I see a man in the market for some healing charms."

Granted, we were a bit low on them, but other matters needed tending, "Who are you?"

"Deran's the name, friend! Can it be you have not heard of me? I'm wounded, verily I am!" He smiled wider at the feigned wound. "No one finer or more well-known for bringing people who want people a little closer together." He pointed to the rear of the auction block where the group shuffled in their chains. "Do you be wanting someone, friend?"

"Hrmn. I heard you sold slaves."

He shook his head. "No, sir! These are indentured servants, not slaves. For the most part they are guilty of minor crimes. The proceeds from their sale go toward paying their debt to the city. After their term of servitude, they will be free citizens once again."

"You bandy words and toy with semantics," Dak'kon murmured coldly. His voice was like an ice-cold river trickling over rough stone, "Such a thing is the definition of slavery."

Deran gave him a bright smile. "I don't concern myself with such thoughts. My task is to sell their contracts as given by the courts of Sigil." He lowered his voice as he leaned in closer to me. "And collect a percentage for my efforts, you understand." He straightened.

"You said they were guilty of crimes, what crimes did they commit?"

He shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated way. "I don't know for certain, but I would guess theft, assault or not being able to pay their debts. Those are the most common transgressions."

"I would like to look over your slaves, then."

Deran's lips pressed tight and bowed with a flourish, "Well, look if you wish, but the auction will take place quite soon."

"This way," Annah said, leading me by the arm.

The woman we spoke to wore shoddy clothes but her demeanor was one of elegance, unlike that of the people who surrounded her. Her skin was clean and smooth, lacking the yellow tint of the inhabitants of this ward. Her face was awash in relief when we approached, and she smiled at Annah.

"I thank the powers that you returned, Annah," she sighed and looked to me, "My name is Trist, and I am in need of the services of a mercenary..." She paused and examined me more carefully. "If appearances are any indication, you would seem to be such an individual."

I nodded. The title was somewhat militant, but it would suffice, "What exactly is it that you want of me?"

"The heart of the matter is that I am to be sold into slavery for a crime I did not commit. I am in need of a champion, someone who will help me prove my innocence and free me from this fate..." She paused and looked at me expectantly.

"Tell me exactly what's going on."

Trist sighed as she began her tale. "My husband died recently and left me his business. I am not business-oriented so I decided to sell. Not long afterward I was contacted by a lender saying a loan on the business had not been paid..."

"I examined all the documents my husband kept and found that there had indeed been a loan taken, but it had just recently been paid in full. I explained this to the lender and, a few days later, he asked for a copy of the document... It was nowhere to be found." She looked concerned and paused to think.

"Well, when I could not prove that the loan was paid, the lender took me before the court. My monies were taken and applied to the balance owed. Since it did not pay off the loan, I am to be sold on the block to try and recover the remaining amount due." She gave me a forlorn look.

"I don't understand, why sell you into slavery?" Dak'kon scowled at the mention of the word, and Annah's lips pursed.

She shrugged. "It serves many purposes. First, it keeps the prisons relatively clear of all but the vilest criminals. Second, the sale of the convicted is used to pay for any damages, costs, or fees involved in the case. Finally, the convicted still serves a sentence from which they are eventually released... supposedly as better citizens."

I was in over my head. She was talking to someone who woke up in a Mortuary and slept in the gutters for the good part of two weeks. I was no lawyer, and if she expected me to navigate through red tape and paperwork... "This is all fascinating, but I don't see how I can help you."

"I... I need someone to find the missing document, the one that proves the loan was paid. Or if you could purchase my contract, I could pay you back..." She gave me a pleading look. "I can't spend the next five years of my life in this ward, cutter. It will kill me! Surely you've noticed the illness shared by all who live here?"

"Yes, the yellow skin and coughing..."

Trist nodded her head. "Yes, cutter. Please, can you find it in your heart to help me..." She glanced at Annah, then looked at me nervously. "Please..."

I placed one hand on her arm to soothe her, "Yes, I'll help you. I have some questions though... could you have misplaced the loan document?"

She shakes her head. "No, cutter. I am a very meticulous person. I kept the document in a lock-box in my husband's study. It never left that room..."

"Do you think the loan document could have been stolen?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Why would anyone steal that, yet leave other valuables be? It makes little sense to me."

"Well..." my voice took on a suspicious edge, "Maybe the lender stole the document so that you'd pay for the loan twice..."

She looked at me in shock. "That... that is a terrible thought!" She hesitated and then began to tap her chin with a finger as she thought. "But also a most ingenious one, cutter. This Byron Pikit does strike me as a knight of the post."

"A what?"

Annah sighed, "A thief or a cheat. Yeh know, knights o' the post. Who practice th' cross-trade."

One of these days someone should compile a book of this Sigilian slang, "So this lender is Byron Pikit?"

"Aye, I know his name well, cutter. After all I have been through, I will not likely forget it..." her eyes took on a far-away look and then she shuddered for a moment. She paused for a moment. "And his associate may be someone named Lenny."

"Who is this Lenny?"

She thought for a moment. "There was a small, feral-looking man who came to court a few times. He would sit behind Pikit and whisper to him occasionally. I remember him because he always seemed to be uncomfortable in his clothes. He would pick at them as if they were new, as if he were not used to wearing them." She paused again. "On one such occasion Pikit told him to sit still and stop fidgeting. He called him Lenny."

"Where can I find Lenny?"

"Ach, I ken find the sod," Annah said, "Yeh learn to notice the signs of a thief's passin' with enough experience."

"I'll trust that, then," I turned to Trist, "Where can I find Byron?"

She thought for a moment. "I think he can be found in or around the open-air market. Forgive me, but I am not certain."

The name of Byron Pikit was well-known in the market. An old woman bent over a tray of withered figs spat in disgust, as if the name was rancid on her tongue. A plump merchant selling brass cookware turned pale and shoed us away.

But eventually we found him.

We approached a well-dressed, middle-aged man browsing the wares, only

half-interested. When he looked up his eyes seemed to be scanning the crowd with a practiced eye, and his robes were neat and well-trimmed azure. Despite his clean-cut appearance he was slightly plump around the middle, and his demeanor was... oily somehow, as if his personality exuded grease. I needed to wash my hands.

He gave me a slick smile and a barely perceptible nod. "I am Byron Pikit, moneylender. May I help you?"

"Moneylender?"

He nodded again. "Yes, I cater to the needs of merchants. Want to start a business? Keep one afloat that's down on its luck? Or perhaps expand a business? In either case, you come to me for the funds." He looked me up and down. "I doubt that you are a merchant, sir, so what can I do for you?"

"I'm a merchant," I lied.

He smiled and looked away for a moment. "A merchant of death, maybe, but not the kind I do business with." He frowned. "If you insist on monopolizing my time, please come to the point of this visit."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Annah sneaking behind the moneylender. I needed to keep him talking, "Can you tell me about your business?"

He frowned and shook his head. "No, I see no reason to..." He looked me up and down. "You are obviously not someone I conduct business with. I think you should leave."

"Wait, I have some questions..."

He sighed just as Annah began rifling through his pockets. "Very well, make it quick."

"I want to talk to you about Trist."

"Ah, Trist..." He frowned and looked away. After a moment he looked at me and raised his eyebrows. "What about her?"

"I'm trying to find a missing document for her."

He sighed and shook his head. "There is no missing document. That was a ruse instigated by Trist to cast doubt on her debt. This matter has been thoroughly investigated by the Mercykillers, and they found no evidence of any such document."

"The Mercykillers?" Annah withdrew her alabaster hands, finding nothing. She did, however, snip his purse-strings for good measure.

"Yes, a faction of fanatics dedicated to uncovering the truth in criminal cases and handing out justice. They are often used as investigators by the courts of Sigil. They are quite thorough, and they found nothing..." He glared at me.

"They could have missed something."

"That is a possibility, but not very likely. You obviously are not familiar with the Mercykillers or their methods for you to make such a statement. If they could not find the document, then it does not exist." He sniffed.

A muscle in my cheek twitched, "Someone could have stolen the document and then destroyed it. That way the loan would be paid twice..."

For a moment he looked as if he was about to be furious with me. His eyes widened, his lips twitched, and then a gloating smile crossed his face. "What a terrible thought... pity there is no proof of any such activity..." He continued to smile at me.

"Yes... a pity. So tell me, why have Trist sold into slavery? Couldn't she pay you your money in the form of a loan?" Even though Annah stepped back I could see the cold fury burning at her cheeks. His backside must've been a tempting target.

"Yes she could, and I did make that offer to her." He looked at me sternly. "However, she turned me down. I don't allow second chances. No one turns me down without suffering the consequences. No one..."

He waved me off, "I have had enough of you to last a lifetime. I will answer no more of your questions. Now, pike it sod." He turned away.

"Did you find anything?" I asked as Annah stepped to my side.

"Nothin'. The snake had only a wee touch o' coin on him. 'E must keep 'is papers elsewhere," she glanced around, "Somewhere safe."

"Lenny, then. We'll get our answers from him."

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"What do you know of Vristigor, Dak'kon?"

My friend and mentor glared down to me as I squatted at the street corner resting my legs. His blade flickered when I uttered the name, bright like a bolt of recognition.

"How... did you come to know that name?"

My throat itched at the memory of a jagged silver-edged sword tearing through cartilage and meat, spilling a crimson tide that flowed across the cobblestones. I flicked my fingers and conjured a few sparks of flame... a cantrip or two would ease my mind, "A githyanki mentioned it to his comrades as he stood over my body. They thought I was dead."

The blade flickered again, black and serrated. For a moment Dak'kon pondered in silence and scarlet swirls bled along the karach, as if it were eager to dip into the belly of a foe. Dak'kon's face was calm as stone.

Silently he took the Circle of Zerthimon in hand, running shriveled yellow fingers along its edges. The plates clicked slowly as he worked the pattern. I waved away the flicker of flame dancing at my fingertip. Five times already I'd seen him unlock the Circles of Zerthimon, and five times I was eager to learn the truth. But the air carried a black omen now, and my throat was dry when he handed the Circle to me.

"Upon the Blasted Plains, Zerthimon told Gith there cannot be two skies. In the wake of his words, came war."

"Upon the Blasted Plains, the People had achieved victory over their illithid masters. They knew freedom."

"Yet before the green fires had died from the battlefield, Gith spoke of continuing the war. Many, still filled with the bloodlust in their hearts, agreed with her. She spoke of not merely defeating the illithids, but

destroying all illithids across the Planes. After the illithids had been exterminated, they would bring war to all other races they encountered."

"In Gith's heart, fires raged. She lived in war, and in war, she knew herself. All that her eyes saw, she wanted to conquer."

"Zerthimon spoke the beginnings of that which was against Gith's will. He spoke that the People already knew freedom. Now they should know themselves again and mend the damage that had been done to the People. Behind his words were many other hearts of the People who were weary of the war against the illithid."

"Know that Gith's heart was not Zerthimon's heart on this matter. She said that the war would continue. The illithid would be destroyed. Their flesh would be no more. Then the People would claim the False Worlds as their own. Gith told Zerthimon that they would be under the same sky in this matter. The words were like bared steel."

"From Zerthimon came the Pronouncement of Two Skies. In the wake of his words came war."

I folded the plates shut as Dak'kon waited for my answer, "I know that Zerthimon's devotion to the People was such that he was willing to protect them from themselves. He knew the illithids had come not to know themselves in their obsession with control and domination. So he chose to stop Gith before she carried the People to their deaths. There must be balance in all things, or else the self will not hold."

"You have seen the words and know them." Dak'kon's voice slowed, and his hands gripped the edges of the Unbroken Circle. He twisted it clockwise, and there was a click as two plates slid forth. Dak'kon stared at the two plates in his hand - he made no move to hand them to me.

"Dak'kon... is that second plate for you?"

Dak'kon remained silent. His blade has ceased shimmering, the film freezing upon its surface. He was staring at the second plate, paralyzed.

"Do you know the Sixth Circle?"

Dak'kon looked up, but his coal-black eyes didn't meet your gaze. "know

there is nothing more I may teach you. You know the Way as the People know it, and it shall give you the direction by which you may know yourself."

"That's not what I asked. Do you know the Sixth Circle or not?"

Dak'kon was silent for a moment, then spoke, his voice slow and careful. "It has come to pass that I do not know the Sixth Circle of Zerthimon. Once, I knew it, but I know now I only saw the words." Dak'kon's eyes stared through me. They ached with ancient memory, of nostalgia unfulfilled. "That is all. It is my path that I no longer know the Way of Zerthimon."

I thought carefully back to the First circle, the Second... all the pieces began to come together, snapping one by one like links in a chain. "Dak'kon... there is one other thing I would know. Why is Vilquar's Eye in the Circle of Zerthimon? It seems strange. It tells of how the People benefited from a treachery from their own. It seems... "

Dak'kon's eyes flashed. "I have told you it is part of the telling of how the People came to know freedom. Do you not listen?" His voice flattened, as if he was reciting a passage from memory. "It tells the People that even in the greatest treachery, a greater knowing may be achieved."

"It doesn't sound to me like you believe that. I think there's another reason Vilquar's Eye is in the Circle of Zerthimon. It is set there because of the Sixth Circle and the Pronouncement of Two Skies. It's there to justify Zerthimon's treachery to the People upon the Blasted Plains."

Dak'kon was silent, and his blade bled into a dead-black, teeth rippling along the edge.

"He divided the People upon the Blasted Plains, Dak'kon. He divided your race, when they were on the path of victory. I would like to believe that it was because he wished to save the People from themselves - but I don't think you believe that."

Dak'kon was silent for a moment, then he spoke, slowly. "I... do not know the Sixth Circle as it is known to others. I fear that the Third Circle, the Fourth Circle and the Sixth Circle are more closely linked than many know. It is in that knowing that I have lost myself."

"In the Third Circle, Zerthimon submerged his will to deceive the illithids,



then in the Fourth Circle, it speaks of the benefits of treachery. Then in the Sixth Circle, Zerthimon divides his people before they exterminate the illithids. Do you think Zerthimon's words may not have been his own?"

"know my words, and know the wound that lies upon my heart: I fear that when Zerthimon was upon the Pillars of Silence, he did not submerge his will. I fear his will was taken from him by the illithids. And when he spoke upon the Blasted Plains, it was their words he spoke. I fear that what he did was not for the People's sake, but for our former masters."

"It's possible, but know it doesn't necessarily mean that h..."

Dak'kon's sudden fury was the rumble and crack of a glacier splitting in two, his voice like a knife. "Then know this and speak of it NO MORE. Know that I shall never know the TRUTH. There is NO resolution to this matter, for I shall NEVER know Zerthimon's heart upon the Blasted Plains." His coal black eyes glared at the stone circle in his hand. "And so I do not know myself because of the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon."

"Dak'kon-" I started, but the slim figure of a flame-haired rogue slid into view from around the corner.

"Ach, I'd hate t' split whate'er lover's spat there is between yeh two, but I found him."

I stood as Dak'kon's face smoothed to stillness, silent waters covering the churning storm beneath. He tucked the Circle away.

"All right, let's see what we can beat out of this Lenny."

## Interlude

"What's gotten the gith's knickers in a knot?" Mikon bellows drunkenly, "Tha' Dak'kon sounds like a fine warrior, 'e does... 'oo needs to concern 'imself o'er a pile o' moldy ole words on a platter?"

Epetrius' sharp nose wrinkles in disdain, "Good Harmonium officer, I grant you the benefit of a doubt that you wouldn't say such things when sober, since that is the stupidest thing I have ever heard. And that is speaking as a member of the Fraternity of Order (as well as Twenty-Fifth of Two Hundred and Twelve Keepers of the Keys of the Eighteenth Great Library in Mechanus and High Scribe to the Libris Occultis on the Prime World of Tedrecon), for I will say that I have sifted through my share of nonsense by merely rifling through the first three alcoves of the Great Library."

Out of the corner of your eye you've been noticing the yellow-skinned gith slipping in. They came in small groups, huddled together and dressed in austere orange-grey robes. Their faces are stern, their weapons simple. One carries a halberd whose blade shifted and flowed, blue as the sea one moment and silver-green the next. Without a doubt she is a zerth, perhaps one returning from a rakkma band from the way she stands so proudly. Naturally, the githzerai, perhaps ten to fifteen in all, crowd against the wall of one end of the tavern, while the githyanki do the same on the other.

The tarnished side of the coin had always sent a chill down your spine. You had served with githzerai before, fine, noble warriors. But the githyanki...

Where the githzerai listen with meditative calm, the githyanki stand tense, chuckling at some points, snarling and spitting at others. Their clothing is elaborate to the point of gaudiness. Their tattoos, piercings, and slitted ears mark a high resistance (or perhaps love of) pain. Needle-tipped teeth jut through their skeletal maws and their eyes are beady and black as a fiend's heart.

You sip your drink. It's a wonder the two groups haven't burst into fighting by now.

"Githzerai dogs!" one of the githyanki spits, "They never should have been cut from the leashes of their illithid masters!"

"Githyanki rats," the zerth proclaims calmly, "unfit to feed even the fungal fields."

Though some in the crowd that had been seated between the two rival groups shift uneasily, most merely sit back and wait for Epetrius to continue. Perhaps they are Clueless, or powerful adventurers, or they have full trust in Shara Six-Blades to break up any brawl between the two rival groups. If a fight did break out, githzerai and githyanki alike would have to carve a path through a hundred densely-packed patrons to get at each other.

"Now, to append your statement, good Harmonium officer," Epetrius nudges his spectacles back on the bridge of his nose, "It should be quite clear to any planar that thought shapes the planes. To begin with, material substance is produced by the Inner planes: the four basic elements along with the forces of creation and destruction. These filter through the ethereal, condensing to become the Prime worlds like an infinite multitude of dewdrops at the dawn of the Multiverse. The worlds give rise to sentient life, and the Prime, acting at this point as the junction between material and ideal substance, give rise to thought and idea. Beliefs bud and branch through the latticework of the Astral, into the Outer planes.

"To any planar with a whit of thought it therefore becomes clear that thought is a potent force, especially in the Great Ring. I recall a colleague of mine, Factor Guthren Yevedrenski... bright fellow, I must say... he once wrote a thesis regarding the top-down control of sentient thought and how it might trickle down the nascent cascade of-"

A half-full bottle of wine shatters on the back wall of the stage.

"But regarding the githzerai in particular," Factor Epetrius flicks a sliver of broken glass from his shoulder. Xoraskavitt perches on the stage and gestures, adding pantomime and motion to the Guvner's words, "Clarity of thought is their lifeblood. Githzerai blades are honed by focus. History paves their streets and traditions are the bricks and mortar of their temples. I do not mean to be poetic, quite the contrary. Indeed, the Nameless One would soon discover this for himself..."

## Chapter 49

He was a feral-looking man, ill-mannered and draped in shoddy clothes. Mousey eyes darted about, scanning his surroundings as he slunk through the alleyways. Sigilian life had compounded the burden of time's cruel weight... while his face seemed that of a twenty-year-old lad, his hazel eyes ached from having seen too much.

I rounded the corner to face him, and in an instant his hand twitched, as if he were hiding something.

"Greetings. You must be Lenny."

He looked me up and down, then glanced about. Returning his attention to me, he gave me a wicked grin. "You'd best have a good reason for disturbing me, berk." An undercurrent of trepidation trickled through his voice.

"I have some questions..."

He laughed. "I ain't no tout. If you've got questions, go find one. You'd best push off before I have to bleed you."

"What if I told you Byron Pikit sent me?" My lips pulled back in a cold smile. Posturing. It was as easy as putting on a second skin.

He stopped smiling and examined me for a while. His eyes lingered on my scars, and he swallowed slightly. "Pikit... sent you? Why?"

"He said you could answer some questions..."

Lenny frowned and backed off, stiff-shouldered. A muscle twitched in his cheek and his hand ducked casually into his pockets. I nearly missed the ruffle of cloth as something slipped from his palm. "What questions..."

"I'm not interested in stray coppers that've been clinging to your fingers, Lenny. No, I want to ask you about the papers you stole from Trist."

He swallowed hard and those hazel eyes were locked onto mine. Lenny put one hand on his hip in a nonchalant manner, but by his posture he was wound tight as a spring. "I don't know what you're talking about, berk. You'd best be off."

I smiled wickedly, "You know what I'm talking about, Lenny. Byron had you steal some papers from Trist. I'm here to collect them."

He swallowed hard and the corner of one eye started to twitch. He glanced again at the scars patterning my body, a tapestry of flesh that screamed pain enough for a hundred lifetimes. His lips trembled, and desperately he tried to meet my gaze. His neck was stiff as it craned back, and his eyes crawled up along my flesh, but that was all. The alley rat couldn't even look me in the eye

"Collect them... I... I destroyed the papers after I nicked them, just like Byron told me to."

"Really?" I sneered, stepping towards him, one hand on my knife. Even if he wasn't hunched over I would've stood more than a head taller than him, "Then why are you so nervous, Lenny? Let me guess: Byron thinks you destroyed the papers but maybe you didn't. Maybe you kept them. A little blackmail material, perhaps?"

He stared at me for just a moment, then suddenly turned to run.

"Oh son of a-

Just as he was about to bolt I leapt forward to grab him. He deftly slid out of my reach and began to side step me, trying to slip past a sliver of space in the narrow confines of the alley. Seeing my quarry about to escape I made another, more desperate lunge. I wasn't the most agile of creatures, but I bumped him, hard.

Off-balance, Lenny stumbled forward as Dak'kon burst from around the other corner, striking Lenny in the chest with an open palm. The rogue was slung backwards, boots-over-brainbox, and by the time he landed two punch-daggers were wrapped tenderly around his throat.

"Hairy little rat, aye? I can give yeh a nice, close shave fer two coppers."

He yelped as the blades dug into his throat, "All right, I didn't destroy them! I'll give them to you, just let me go."

"Ease up, Annah."

"Nay, I think a little off th' top would suffice for putting Trist through tha..." she hissed.

"I said ease up. Give him the chance to speak."

Annah pursed her lips, then sighed as she slid the blades back into her cuffs.

Lenny felt along his neck as I spoke, "Why did you keep them, Lenny? Blackmail, I assume."

Regaining his composure, he snorted and gave me a defiant look. "I kept them so I could turn stag on your boss Pikit and keep Trist off the block!" He shook his head. "Blackmail my arse..."

I blinked, "Why turn stag on him?"

He looked at me with some pride. "I may be a thief, but I do have some standards. I won't kill some poor sod, and I won't do what Pikit did to Trist and her husband." He shook his head and looked away. "I told your boss that what he was doing was wrong, and he laughed at me."

"So there is honor among thieves after all..." I scratched my chin, "Well, you'll be happy to know that Pikit is not my boss."

He stared at me in disbelief. "You serious? I thought... but you said..." He watched closely for a moment and then laughed. "You gave me the peel so I'd spill the chant to you!" He shook his head and looked at me with respect. "Good job, cutter."

I smiled, "Let's go get the papers, Lenny."

He shook his head sadly. "We can't, they're in the warehouse and they're not open for business right now. Rumor has it there's some sort of management change going on... but I don't know if that's true. In any case, I can't get the papers." He looked at me sheepishly. "That's why I haven't helped Trist myself, cutter. I can't get the sodding papers."

"I'll look into this and get the papers myself then." Dak'kon nodded in approval and Annah hissed impatiently.

Lenny smiled. "Go to the warehouse and tell the clerk 'I'm here for a loan' and he'll give you Trist's papers. If you then tell him 'I gave Pikit the laugh' he'll give you a bonus... "

"What bonus?"

He laughed. "Evidence, cutter. It'll take Pikit off the streets for a long, long time if you give it to the right person. If there's someone in the Harmonium you think you can trust, give it to them."

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"Welcome to the Vaults of the Ninth World! How may I serve you on this fine day, Sigilian?" the voice boomed. A large stone head floated behind the counter, horns jutting from its temples and eyes lit with a pale light.

"Uh, what is this place?" The warehouse was piled high with boxes. Crates lined the walls, metal lockers were squeezed into whatever corner would afford it, and even then the crevices seemed strained with the load. Winged imps across the room checking inventory, writing records on scrolls that looked to be too large for them to carry. The flap of wings set a droning sound through the air, but the Voice of the Ninth World was deafening above all else.

"The Vaults of the Ninth World is pleased to serve as a warehouse for the Lower Ward and all the sentients of Sigil! Our motto is: 'When one world just isn't big enough!' We provide storage space for those that have little to spare. Our prices are competitive! Our service exemplary! And our courtesy to customers is known throughout the planes!" there was a grin in its voice.

"Is this place really as big as a world?" I asked. Out of the corner of my eye I could see a milk-white tail flick as Annah rifled through some of the nearby crates.

"No, it's just a marketing exaggeration. There's a lot of space here, but not that much."

"How much to store some goods?"

"I'm sorry! We seem to be full up at the moment! Can I do anything else for you?"

I looked around and furrowed my eyebrows, "I thought this was supposed to be a huge storehouse."

"Well... yes." The head sounded a little embarrassed. "Only we ran out of space and there's something a little fishy going on around here and I don't know what. The gist of the matter is this: We don't really accept items for storage anymore."

It came as it always did: a distant hum that seemed so familiar, an itch at the back of my skull, a flicker at the very edge of my vision. Occasionally these little annoyances occurred when I was simply walking down the streets or even lying awake at night, too terrified of the yawning void to sleep. But they came, always, like the pressing urge before a sneeze.

It wouldn't fade away and leave me wanting this time. I seized the echo, and with will alone began to bind the nostalgia and made it mine.

"Sir?"

"I'd... like to claim something."

"And what was it you were looking for, exactly?"

"I was looking for a large bag of coins."

"We have a bag of coins like the one you describe, sir! I'll just need to find out one thing from you: How much was in it?"

My cheek twitched as I unraveled the memory. There were no shapes, sounds, or visions to it, but rather a vague intuition. Somehow, the guess felt right. "1,123 coins."

With a clink of copper an imp dropped the bag on the counter. "Here you go, sir! Thanks for storing your goods at Vault of the Ninth World! Can I get you anything else?"

I smiled. Well... now that it looks like I could withdraw things after all... "I was told to tell you that I'm here for a loan."

The head sounded immensely cheered, "Ooh! One of my secret passwords!

Here are the papers you want, sir! Thank you! What else can I do for you?"

With that another imp flew by, dropping a scroll on the counter as I rifled through the coins.

Dak'kon unraveled it for me and read. "This..." he sounded satisfied, "is an invoice that confirms Trist's tale... the loan was paid in full."

Annah snatched it from Dak'kon's slim hands, "Aye? Aye, 'tis! Ach, we need ta get this t' the auction quick as can be."

I nodded then turned to the head, "But first, I was also told to tell you that I gave Pikit the laugh."

"I certainly hope so, sir, whatever that means! I'm just a big dumb rock head! Here are your papers, sir, and here! Thank you! What can I do for you?"

I looked the floating head up and down, rubbing my chin in consideration. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in joining our merry band?"

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Deran's eyes flitted across the page. After a moment he sighed, then folded the document and put it inside his shirt. He turned to Trist, who had been nibbling on her fingernails the whole time. "It seems the courts owe you an apology, Lady Trist. From this moment you are free and I will make all the arrangements to have your status and property returned."

"Thank you, Deran."

"No, thank you," he smiled at me, "It's a rare individual who will do what you have done. Now excuse me, I must speak with the magistrates. Farewell."

With one delicate hand on her breast Trist sighed. Her eyes were dewy as she took my hand, "You are my savior, cutter. I will forever be in your debt."

"I was happy to help you, Trist."

"Thank you all," Trist took a step as if she were about to embrace Annah, but

the rogue's stern countenance dissuaded her. Trist nodded, her happiness sobered. Whatever they had once held between them had been lost in the gulf of years. She faced me again, "You have saved me from certain death, cutter. A slow, painful death... Please wait here, I shall return shortly."

When she returned she was draped in fine silks and her face had been washed and powdered. Her hair was still in disarray, but a few pins had tamed it somewhat. She wore the garb of a merchant taking her first step back into comfort and wealth. "This is not much, but it is a well-deserved reward for what you have done." She handed me a purse.

"Thank you, Trist," I replied. I resisted the urge to squeeze the bag, but the weight already told me it meant a month of good living.

"No, I thank you. Farewell, cutter," Trist smiled and turned to Annah, "I hope you stay with this one. He has a good heart... maybe the Planes can change after all."

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Corvus stood at his usual station in the marketplace, the memory of a smile on his lips. Though most drew a wide swath between themselves and the Harmonium, many seemed a little less wary around him. With his head in the clouds, the Harmonium officer seemed a little unfocused on his job.

"Good day, Corvus. How are you and Karina doing?"

He smiled broadly. "We are doing well, thank you. I owe you for your kindness, friend."

"Do you know someone named Byron Pikit?"

At the sound of the name Corvus frowned, and warily he nodded his head.

"Yes, I am familiar with Byron."

"What can you tell me about him?"

"Officially, nothing." He paused for a moment before answering.

"Unofficially, he is suspected of being behind most of the criminal activity here at the market. We believe him to be responsible for the murder of a merchant named Zac. His list of suspected crimes is quite long."

"Well, you'll be happy to know this then: I have evidence that proves he is involved in criminal acts here in Sigil." I handed him the papers in question.

He examined the papers thoroughly, lips thinning and eyes widening more with each page. When he finished he folded them and tapped the shoulder of another officer standing next to him. They spoke quickly, in low voices, to keep word of the evidence from spreading and alerting the moneylender.

When they were finished the other officer left with creaks and clanks of armor.

"Excellent work, citizen," Corvus said with a satisfied nod, "These documents are quite detailed in their content. I personally will see to it that Byron Pikit is taken before the courts."

"Never thought I'd be happy t' hear tha from a Hardhead," Annah smirked as we left.

Dak'kon faced me as we left. "You mentioned that you know of an attack on a Githzerai Fortress. Now that this duty is done, I would implore you to warn our people."

"Just what I was thinking, Dak'kon. Do you have any contacts among the Githzerai? Any old allies?"

A shadow crossed his face when I spoke, and his eyes dulled, and when he replied it was in a low voice, creaking with age, "I... would have you speak to one on my behalf."

I nodded, not ready to question him just yet, "All right. If that's what you wish."

"There are forms that must be followed... you must learn the ways of the People. Know that the speech of the People has its foundation in history. All things are as story to us; metaphor is a tool, and an inspiration to the strength. Know when we speak of Toryg's table, we remember that Toryg was noted for his hospitality and good will. When we speak of Selqant's heart, we recall the lecherous and cruel nature of Selqant."

"I understand. Will you teach me?"

Dak'kon quickly taught me some of the common forms of speech as Annah scouted for a Gith: A wise man was said to have "wrote the book of the Anarchs," while to accuse another of treason was to remember "Vilquar's Eye." It was said of generous people that their "cupboards are bare." Common greetings included "Hail, sword-ringer," and "Zerchai's kin bow to you" - to which one should respond, "And the traveler is pleased." Dak'kon was a skilled teacher; and by the time Annah returned, I felt capable of exchanging proper greetings with other githzerai.

"Ach, I found one o' yer leather-skinned kin around th' way," she pursed her lips. The girl seemed much more agreeable with helping me ever since we rescued Trist, "Has a blade all fancy-like like Dak'kon's."

"All right. Come with me, Dak'kon. You'll be able to help translate if necessary."

As we neared the gith, Dak'kon suddenly gripped my arm. "I would have you hear me."

I blinked, "What is it, Dak'kon?"

"It is my will that we not speak to this woman."

"Why not?"

His coal-black eyes were ever placid and featureless, yet then they flashed with the familiar sharpness of a wounded animal. He always spoke so proudly of his People and their ways, but the moment we came too close to his most deeply-rooted traditions or his past he withdrew as if from the prick of a knife, "She is a zerth. Our wills are crossed blades. We have no common ground."

"We have no choice, Dak'kon. If she is a zerth she is our best bet to get a warning to Vristigor."

He nodded, and trudged behind me slowly down the street.

The woman had the same yellow cast to her skin and severe features. Tattoos covered her body, and she wore a long blade at her side. Her eyes were like two small black pearls. As I approached her, they followed

Dak'kon's movements and ignored mine entirely. Dak'kon gave her a slight bow, which she dismissed as well.

Her voice cracked like a whip as she snapped at Dak'kon, the words of the githzerai tongue piercing like a dozen daggers. "Why do you insult the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon by continuing to wear it against your heart? You are not numbered among the People, betrayer of Shrak'at'lor! The Anarchs and the zerths have spoken and their words shall be obeyed. You are not to speak your mind to me... or to any zerth."

Dak'kon bowed his head when he spoke, "Will you hear this human when he speaks?"

Her nose wrinkled with her annoyed grimace, "His words carry the weight of yours and have the shape of Limbo's form. I will not hear you, Dak'kon."

"He travels with me, Kii'na, disciple of Zerthimon. He comes to you to hear the words of Zerthimon which you as a zerth must impart. Will you hear him?" he pressed.

"The words of Zerthimon are not for the ears of a hu-man to be heard," Kii'na snapped, "Their minds are not as one, and they bring division wherever they travel. This one wears a shirt of scars and blood, and he travels with a traitor. Vilquar's heart beats within your chest if you ask if I will hear him."

My eyes widened. Vilquar's heart? Dak'kon?

"Will you close your mind to his words? Know your words before you speak your mind, Kii'na, zerth of Zerthimon."

"I will not hear him. He will hear me."

"That is sufficient." Dak'kon bowed.

The gith woman turned to me, her black pearl eyes glinted dangerously. "You are not known to me, but your trappings speak ill of you, human. Your body is a book written in scars and blood, and you walk in the shadow of a pariah that claims to speak for Zerthimon himself. Speak your mind!"

I ignored the castigation and bowed in the hopes that I might calm her,

"Greetings, sword-ringer."

She hissed in irritation. "Your pleasantries are as dust. The sign of mourning draws near - time is short, human. I would know your questions, then it is my will you leave."

I gave Dak'kon a quick glance and turned back to her. "What did you mean when you said I walk in the shadow of a pariah?"

"You walk with a pariah and you know not his history? He is quick to speak other words, but of his history he has remained silent? Ask him of Shrak'at'lor, of the fall of a mighty fortress to the githyanki, and see what his divided mind reveals to you. Ask him how he speaks with Zerthimon's words, but his karach is as mist."

Though her eyes met mine Kii'na was speaking past me. Each fierce word was slung like a barbed arrow, and with each successful strike Dak'kon's eyes became more downcast. His skin seemed to pale, and his karach blade became as ash-gray as his eyes. A chill snaked its way along my spine, and my heart seemed to stop. In that instant I could see my eyes mirrored in his own, my deepest wish echoed back in the sigh of his blade wicking the air.

Dak'kon wanted to know himself again... but he also wanted to die.

"It is not Zerthimon's words that lack conviction," his voice was quiet but firm, "It is their echoes that have been distorted."

Kii'na was just as resolute, "There is no doubt in how Zerthimon's mind is spoken. Generations of zerth are as Rakma's Jewel, of one mind on this matter. Your stance carries with it a divided mind. The doubt is yours, an echo cast from your own faithlessness."

"Your words speak not the mind of Zerthimon. They are shaped of angles and hate, as if molded from Gith's mind itself," Dak'kon murmured. It was a whisper that resonated more than a battle cry, one that bent the ear toward him in its softness.

"You shall lie with the dead of Shrak'at'lor in shifting chaos, for you see all with Vilquar's Eye. Your mind is divided, your karach weak!" Kii'na howled. Like a bolt of lightning from a clear sky both zerth whipped free their blades, each flowing sword keening as they cut the air.

I leapt between the two, "Stop this! This is madness! Are you two going to repeat the Pronouncement of the Two Skies?!"

Dak'kon spoke to me without breaking the gaze he held with Kii'na. "Hold fast, and do not stand in the way of our blades."

"Dak'kon, I order you to stop this."

Dak'kon reluctantly lowered his blade, chastened. Kii'na stared at him incredulously for a moment, and then a sharp grin split her features. "The truth at last. Your mind is not divided. You are... a slave to this human. He speaks with an Anarch's authority to you, and you listen."

"Your mind is cast in Gith's mold, Kii'na," he repeated quietly.

"I will not slay you like the dog you are. No... live, Dak'kon, traitor at Shrak'at'lor. Live like our ancestors did under the heel of the illithid filth. I pity you," she said coldly.

"Oh shut up, Kii'na!" I yelled. Several passerby had crowded around us by now, whispering and eager to see some bloodshed or to witness the Harmonium dragging off a couple of gith and a nameless burn victim, "We came to you with open arms and all you can think of is to thrust a blade between them?! We came to warn you about Vristigor!"

The humor melted from her face immediately, and Kii'na looked at me - hard. "How did you, who walks in the shadow of a pariah, come to know that name?"

"A group of githyanki are planning a raid on the fortress within the sevenday... murmured the plot right over my bleeding body as I lay in the streets when they thought I was dead. They are on their way there even now."

I had never seen such a look of shock on a githzerai's face before. Abashed, a pale orange blush rose to Kii'na's cheeks, and she stepped back, sheathing her blade before she pressed her hands together and bowed deeply. "You... speak the truth. I apologize, humbly, and seek your forgiveness, stranger. Know... know you have my gratitude... you and this zerth. Know this shall not be forgotten." She turned to Dak'kon, and this time regret sheathed that

steel-cored spirit of hers. "...And know that this will NOT atone for the fall of Shrak'at'lor. The Anarchs' verdict stands still."

She turned and rushed off to relay the message, and slowly Dak'kon slumped to the ground with a deep, tired sigh.

"Dak'kon...?"

He didn't say a word, pausing instead for a moment before soberly rising back to his feet and sheathing his blade. His eyes did not meet mine as I thought ahead to our next destination.

We slowly turned toward the south to find Lothar, the Master of Bones .

Chapter 50

Light filtered through multihued slivers of glass set in the window, lighting up the broken-down hut in half a dozen colors. Like a ruined cathedral, it held an ephemeral sort of beauty, and for a moment I savored it in childlike awe, watching a single mote of dust drift among the rays: first blue, then red, then violet as the night.

Annah hissed and nudged the grim ladder with the toe of her boot. The way down was paved with death: bones from dozens of creatures, picked, boiled, and polished clean so that they shone with colors pooling at the edge of the purple patch. Each handle was clammy at my touch, and the parlor beneath smelled earthy, and ancient as a tomb.

We descended in grim silence, and with each step I grew more anxious. There was power here... I could feel it thrumming in the air and ringing in my soul like a glass struck with a silver spoon. The chill of the grave kissed my skin, lapping away pinpricks of nervous sweat like the tongue of an old lover that had been spurned for too long. Long-faded memories lay buried here. It was a tomb for dead dreams.

We must've gone down ten, fifteen feet beneath street level when we reached the parlor proper. Dozens of shelves lined the walls of Lothar's home, and on each shelf sat hundreds of skulls. Many were humanoid, a few were twisted and feral, a cross between the bestial and the demonic. I could even pick out the angled jawlines of a few githzerai skulls.

In one corner a cauldron bubbled, and on the worktable beside it sat a batch of severed heads that had yet to be cleaned. The fire offered little heat, and by the time that smell of boiled death reached me it was already cold and impotent.

"Ch-chief?" a frightened but familiar voice whimpered.

"Morte?" I scanned the shelf, and was drawn by the familiar twitch of his hazel-gray eyes.

"Thank the Powers you're here, chief. Get me outta here."

I blinked and reached up. Damn... top shelf, I'd have to get a stool or...
"What are you doing up there?"

"Those wererat vermin nicked me and brought me here! Come on, boss... we got to get out of here! This place is bad news!"

"Why don't you just float down?" I growled, and motioned to Dak'kon and Annah to help me drag an adjacent divan over.

"I tried!" Morte whispered in a quiet panic, "Look, just get me down before-"

Gray smoke drifted along the floor and in a moist crack that sounded like splintering sinew, a withered old man stepped forward.

His face was weighed down with wrinkles, a long gray beard trailed down his chest. Lothar's robes were the color of old blood and one hand was curled around a curved staff rattling with several skulls. His eyes flashed with power as he addressed Morte. "Have we visitors, skull?"

I pulled myself away from the seat and placed myself between Lothar and the shelf.

"Oh... no." Morte whispered furiously to me. "Do NOT offend this blood, boss... he'll dead-book you faster than you can spit."

"Should I worry about that?" I muttered out of the corner of my mouth.

The old man ignored Morte and pursed his lips a moment before he spoke to me. "Greetings, traveler. Who might you be to enter Lothar's humble salon without invitation?"

"You've kidnapped my friend," I growled, "Give him back. Now."

His eyelids crept up at my tone, "Kidnapped? Your friend? I have done no such thing. Where is this friend?"

Morte spoke up. His voice sounded miserable, scared, and deferential with a whine that that of a dog that had been kicked too many times. It was obvious that, in Morte's opinion, this Lothar character was no one to cross. "He means me. Look, sir, just let me go and we'll let this go. Water under the Ditch, hey?"

"I did not give you permission to speak, skull!" Morte quailed under Lothar's grim voice. His lip curled into a cold grimace. "Hmph. You stride into my parlor, arrogant with chest bared. Where others grovel and plead for supplication you have the gall to demand of me as I stand in my home. Just for that I should tear your soul asunder and grind the last scraps of your dying consciousness beneath my foot." He glanced at Morte, "However, the skull you speak of has been a thorn in my side the full day it has been here. Standard spells have been impotent in silencing the thing. It pesters me."

"Ach, sounds like th' skull all right."

"Scarred one, if you wish the skull back, you must fetch me a skull of greater value from the catacombs below. I will not bargain for something that is already mine. Accept or not."

"He was never yours ... or anyone's... to begin with. Your men stole him off the streets!"

"Your ignorance is astonishing," he scoffed, "You truly know very little about very little. Now: Fetch me another skull to replace him or say goodbye to your friend."

"Just let him go."

Lothar's hands tightened on his staff. "The skull is MINE. If you press the issue, I will take yours as well."

"You can damn well try..."

"Boss, don't push it! Let it go!" Morte yelped.

Lothar nodded, "The skull speaks wisely. Heed it."

I growled, but Morte might've been right. He was shifty, annoying, and was an impressive liar, but I could feel the power rippling from Lothar in waves. "Very well, then. How do I find a greater skull?"

"Move aside the divan in the center of the room, and pass through the portal on the eastern wall in the chambers below to the catacombs. The portal will remain active for your return. In the catacombs lie many skulls. One of great value lies within the interred crypts of the Dustmen, beyond the Drowned Nations. Bring that skull to me - as my wererat minions have failed to do - and I will see to it that your friend is returned to you. Perhaps I shall even answer some questions for you."

I shrugged nonchalantly, "I've been to the tomb you speak of. It is empty."

"What is the meaning of this?" Lothar hissed in frustration, and I took no small measure of delight in savoring his consternation, "The tomb was so well trapped, so well-defended from scrying magicks, that it was a challenge even for me! There must be some explanation for this, and," he drew out his words angrily and slowly, "YOU will provide it to me. Go through the portal in the chambers below and seek the answer."

I chuckled, "It was my own tomb."

"Your tomb? YOUR tomb?" He eyed me carefully, and for a moment I gulped thinking I had spoken too much. The man might just have the magic to tear my skull free and keep it polished and picked clean on his mantle, "We shall investigate this more carefully. Fetch me another skull, then, as you seem attached to yours, and we shall see what answers I can provide. Our agreement shall be as before. Do not try to deceive me with just any bone,

either - I am something of a connoisseur. Return when you have something of value to me."

I sighed in relief.

The caverns below Lothar's residence were rank with the smell of old filth and offal. The scent was sharp, like a foul aged cheese in a cold basement. Mildew-yellow stone undulated in crests beneath my feet so that the hard sole of my boots see-sawed between the peaks and troughs with each step.

I should've recognized the stench of wererats.

It leaned against a support post for a small bridge. In one hand it held a skin of wine with streaks of blood marring the leather; it had likely been looted from some poor sod that had crossed the creature's path. Finishing off a deep swig the wererat wiped its muzzle and looked at me with feral red eyes. There was a cunning danger about it, and the voice that issued from its mouth was oily and insinuating. "So...a biped comes slinking into the nest of Lothar's servants. What do you want, man, and where do you intend to go? Step lightly, intruder, and speak the truth to Mantuok."

Dak'kon's hand rested casually on the hilt of his sword and Annah crossed her arms, looking remarkably casual while her hiding the fact that she was ready to pull out her daggers.

I stood bold enough to seem a threat, but not so haughty as to be issuing a challenge. "Who are you?"

"I am Mantuok. I am the voice of Many-as-One and the emissary of Lothar, Master of the Bones. I speak here and you answer. What do you want here?"

I cocked my head. "You work for both of them? Doesn't that test your loyalty?"

"And why should it, hm? The Master knows the secrets of power, and the Many know the secrets of the city. Perhaps someday I shall play them against each other and become the greater for it," a sharp bucktoothed grin split his features, and I knew that this was a dangerous wererat was more treacherous than all the others I had come across. "Many-As-One sees many advantages in such an arrangement... and the conversion of the Buried

Village dwellers can help to extend the reach of Lothar and Many-As-One. All benefit, yes? Now... what is your purpose here?"

"We're on a quest for Lothar. He needs a skull retrieved."

The rat-man ducked his head at the mention of Lothar and hissed at us. "Send a hairless one to do the job of the Kin? Impossible!"

I shrugged, "Nonetheless."

Mantuok hissed at me again. "Begone, then, and return when the skull is in your hands." He paused and looked at me suspiciously. I could feel his simmering hatred burning into my back.

I never thought I'd have to crawl through this dank maze again. At least I had someone to fill the silence other than Morte and his yammering.

"So, Annah. Tell me a little bit about Pharod."

"Ol' stutter-crutch? He's me Da... well, not me real Da. He found me when I was a wee girl..." Annah shrugged. "'Ee needed a Collector to crawl into places the rest of his fat gullies couldn't squirm, so he took me under his crutch."

I nodded, "I didn't think you and him looked much alike, anyway."

Annah's eyes narrowed, and her tail began to lash back and forth, stirring up small clouds of grave-dust. "And what do yeh mean by that, then?"

"I meant that he doesn't look much like a tiefling."

"Aye, he doesn't... and if yeh knew one thing about tieflings other than what yeh'd heard from any half-grinnin' Hiver on the street, yeh'd have the sense to know that none of us tieflings look a-like, jig?" She shook her head. "No hope for yeh, that's for dead-sure."

"I didn't mean that as an insult. You both look so different. I mean Pharod's... so... Pharod, and you're not."

"Oh, now what coulda tipped yeh off to that? My hair? Me skin? I can't think of anything else..." Annah slapped herself lightly on the forehead, then

sneered sarcastically. "Maybe it was the tail? Oh, aye, that might have been it! Yer so much sharper than I am, yeh are. A real gem."

"What in the hells is your problem?!" I scrubbed my fingers through my hair in frustration. I could feel the heat flooding my face as my voice rose, "I make a simple statement, and you twist it like a dagger!"

"A dagger's a dagger, so it is," the flick of her tail accented the snap in her voice.

"All's I was saying is that you and Pharod look nothing alike. The two of you don't have much in common. It's hard to see any resemblance between that ugly, stooped, greedy, smelly gutter-troll and you."

Annah's face flushed a deep red and her coarse brogue grew to a fiery hiss. "Oh, is that so? And how do yeh see that?"

I've eyed Annah. I'll readily admit it. For the most part it was a matter of paying attention to her hands and worrying whether or not this firebrand was about to suckerpunch some poor berk or unsheathe her punch-daggers. But it was hard to avoid noticing her confident poise, the self-sure quirk of her obsidian lips. Flame-red hair framed a face begemmed with sharp green eyes. The curves of her alabaster flesh were held in delicate rein by tight demonhide. Annah was water when she moved, possessing a feline grace that other girls could only ever clumsily feign. That fluid sway of her hips was natural to her, and it drove her body like the flame in the heart of a star.

"I think you're pretty!" I snapped.

Oh, brilliant.

Annah just stared.

"So- uh... that- that's all I meant," I stuttered, "When I said you and Pharod look nothing alike."

Annah nodded, still staring at me. She didn't even blink. I looked around, and Dak'kon had discreetly scouted ahead of us.

"Um-"

Annah suddenly leaned in, and clasping her hands around my head she pulled me close, biting me sharply on the neck, giving a soft hiss. Rather than pulling back, she pressed closely into me and whispered into my ear. "D'yeh fancy yer chances?" Her tail began to lash slowly back and forth, but the rhythm was more hypnotic than angry.

I could feel Annah's heart beating fast in her chest, and the color rising into her cheeks. Her skin was smooth and soft against mine. The tight embrace she held me in was pressing the heat of her body into mine. "I want tae tell yeh something, an' yeh can't poke fun at me."

I licked my lips. "All right..."

"Do yeh know I like the way yeh smell? Oh, aye - it drives me barmier than a Chaosman, it does." She sniffed up the side of my cheek and gave a low, eager hiss. "I see the way yeh look at me, and I like it. Yeh've got hungry eyes, yeh do. It makes me a-fire."

My breathing quickened and my jaw fell slack at her caress. Slim fingers traced white-hot lines along my flesh, searing an electric tingle along my scars.

"I want tae bite yeh, soft-like around the neck..." She teased the side of my neck with her teeth, never breaking skin, and with every whisper, I could feel her breath along my ear. Her hand slid up around the back of my neck, and tightens, and I could feel her nails digging sharp crescents into my skin. I gasped, the pain sobering and drawing me out of that lusty haze and into Annah's grip. "I want ta drag me nails along the back of yer neck, and force yeh to kiss me."

"Oh powers above..." I whispered.

"Do yeh know I can smell yeh from fifty paces, that smell of fermaldyhe pouring offa yeh like one of them dustie shamblers. Maybe if yeh cleaned yerself up some, yeh'd be a right prize." Her eyes flashed. "I'd make passion with yeh so hard yeh'd be knocked off the spire." Annah stepped back then, her tail flicking lightly against my leg, and gave me a hard stare. "So... d'yeh fancy me?"

Oh what the hell.

In a flash, I wrapped my arms around Annah's lithe form. Her eyes widened in surprise, and before she could squirm free I wrapped my lips around the nape of her neck, grazing my teeth along her firm, lily-white skin. I milked a gasp out of her as my tongue raked along her flesh.

Annah tensed suddenly, and hissed. Pushing my shoulders and clawing like a cat, she tore away from me. "I was only teasin' yeh, yeh scarred vampire! L-I-leave off!" Despite her protestations, however, her face was flushed, and she was breathing heavily. "An' watch yer mitts next time!" She crossed her arms. "Yeh makin' me red, yeh are!"

Standing there sobered, I blushed. The air in these halls was colder than I realized as they lapped the lingering warmth from my skin. "You bite me, I bite you.," I grumbled. "If you don't like it, then don't DO it."

"I'll do what I please, so I will." Annah sneered; she still seemed to be a little flushed. "Yeh jest keep your mitts offa me, yeh hear?"

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"So many skulls..." Annah sighed. She sounded a little louder than normal, a little bolder, as if she were forcing her voice to sound casual. "An' he needs a bone-box that's special. Like findin' a gem-speck in a desert."

"Surely a skull that would meet the Bone-Master's needs could be found in these grim halls," Dak'kon intoned, running his hand along a coffin. A touch of annoyance laced his voice. He knew that something had happened between the two of us, and knew that that was why Annah and I maneuvered to keep him between us, "Hundreds of the dead, each unique among the rest."

"Aye, a hundred flavors of dust there are. Yeh jes don't know. All th' wealthy bubbers have private tombs, some off-Sigil in th' Outer Planes. All that're buried here are muddy Hivers an' lost souls."

I nodded with a grunt, trying to focus on the matter at hand. Reaching out with the Stories-Bones-Tell discipline, I could hear the sigh of plebian pasts. All the bones that lay here had struggled under common lives, and the old creaks of that burden echoed through each body even after it lay down, fatigued and weary for the only true rest these poor souls would ever find.



"Besides, most o' these coffins 'ave been overturned an' looted. I've waded about in 'ere before. After a scrape or two with a ghoul I slunk back out," Annah's lip curled,  
"What do yeh hope to find here?"

"Nothing. That's why we're headed to the Dead Nations."

"The Dead-"

I pointed down one long hallway that branched down from our path. At the end stood those old iron gates. I strode down, pushed them open with an ominous, heavy creak.

Annah tensed at the sight of dozens of undead toiling to keep their nation of bone and gauze intact. There were skeletons replacing old tiles in the mosaic floor and dusting the walls. Zombies pushed desecrated bodies for re-wrapping to preserve their quiet dignity. Ghouls had half-eaten wererat corpses slung over their shoulders to present to their brethren. Their mouths and claws were bloodstained, and their eyes seemed sated, if only for the moment.

"Come along," I beckoned to Annah, "It's safe. They won't hurt us."

Her eyes were wide as saucers, but she slowly approached and padded silently behind me.

"Ahhh the manling returns," Acaste hissed, "Bold as brass and proud. And so succulent..."

Standing face-to-face with her I squelched the small giddy urge to spill the secrets of the Silent King. 'He's dead as a doornail!' I'd say with mixed glee, and loose the ghouls against the rest. I would never betray Stale Mary or Hargrimm of course, but it was strange how such secrets could tickle at the back of your mind.

"You have your offerings," I growled, pointing at the wererat corpses that lay at her feet. Small dead cranium rats had been added to the pile, "Now leave us be. We wish to speak to Hargrimm."

The old skeleton-priest stood in the central chamber, proudly watching over his people. But he turned when he saw me approach, and a timorous flicker

in those cold eye sockets dulled his regal edge. Perhaps he'd felt the same temptation before.

"Greetings, Hargrimm. We seek your aid."

His eyes seemed displeased at my return, but he forced his voice to sound sincere. "Thou hast returned. And to what purpose, I ask? There is nothing for thee in the Dead Nations."

"We are in need of a skull. One that is unique, its history and life of value above that of the common citizen."

Hargrimm's finger bones tightened on his staff just a little, "I care not what thy purposes are, but this one will not allow the desecration of placid graves for thy selfish purposes."

"I have to do so to save a friend. The chattering skull, remember? One of your own."

"Dost thou speak of the one who vexed the fair female zombies of our nation? The one who pestered them as they toiled and invaded their skirts with greedy eyes and a slaver's tongue?"

"Oh good. You do remember."

The crack of the staff against the tile sent a thundering boom through the halls, "Thou hast done much for the good of our great nation, Nameless One, but such is not an excuse to commit a crime against the heart of the Dead Nations!"

I bowed, somewhat abashed, "I'm sorry, Hargrimm. I know it was much to ask... I'll leave you to your duties now."

"What now?" Dak'kon said, looking up at me.

"Well. Now all that's left is Stale Mary. Unless you'd like to try talking to the Silent King again."

When you watch the elderly walk the streets, backs hunched and faces sagging, you know they have little time left. Each old crone was a withered flower waiting to shed its last petal, and any day you'd expect to hear word

of her collapsing and whispering her last breath. Each day ticked by, one closer towards that half-expected tragedy when you would have to begin mourning, missing the matronly touch of their hands and the softness of their words. It was how I felt towards Old Mebbeth, who healed my hurts and taught me the Art.

So it was strange to think that matronly Stale Mary, mending her shambling charges and laying the sleeping ones to rest, could potentially outlive you.

"Guh-guhruuuhhh..." <Greetings.>

"It's good to see you, Mary, but I come on a dire quest and I hate to ask this of you. My companion has been kidnapped by a powerful man who demands a 'greater' skull for my companion's release. What should I do, Mary?"

"Huuu?" <Who?>

I sighed, "It's Lothar, the Master of Bones."

She stood swaying there, as if in a daze before she spoke again. "Uuu nuuuu hnnn... prrrrvuhhhlll. Dnnngruuushhh. Hllldz skll frnnn." <I know him. Powerful. Dangerous. Holds skull friend.>

"Yes, Mary. I know I can't take any of the skulls in these catacombs. But- I need your advice. I need a skull that would be fitting for Lothar."

She stood silent, gazing past me. For a long moment Stale Mary seemed to consider the problem, and finally with a slow, careful nod, she gripped her head in both hands. "Tuh-tuh-tuhk muhhh ssskuhl..." <Take my skull.>

I was aghast. "Take... your skull? But that'll kill you."

Mary slowly shook her head side to side - her splitting lips formed what might've been a sad smile. "Kuh-kill? N-n-nuuuh. Mmm uhhhlrrruhhhdh dhhhud." <Kill? No. I'm already dead.> Her hands remained at her temples, awaiting my reply.

I pressed my hands against hers, parting her arms. "No, Mary - I just can't. I'll find another way."

Mary nodded. "Y-y-yuh hhhuf uhhh kinnd hhhuhhrt." <You have a kind heart.>

It was such a simple solution standing right in front of me, but how could Stale Mary have thought that I'd have been able to bear it? Did she think it would've just been one more regret set atop the pile, one more scratch along the pillar? We had limited options, truly. We could take one of the lesser skulls and hope that Lothar finds it fitting somehow, or steal a choice one from the Mortuary if we could somehow get past the guards. There was murder, or... perhaps even switching out the Silent King's skull for another. I cringed in disgust at the thoughts... so cold, calculating, and practical... they floated through me as if they weren't my own.

"Suuughhhh..." <Soego...> Mary gurgled.

I blinked, "They- the ghouls. I thought they'd destroyed the body."

She shook her head, slowly, "Nnnh ulll. Hrrrgnnn uuuz zzz wrnnng. Nvhhh hrnnn duhd nuuuhshngz." <Not all. Hargrimm used it as a warning. To never harm the Dead Nations.>

"I-" I almost kicked myself for not thinking of it earlier, "I would be in your debt if you could help me. I think Lothar may accept that as a solution."

Mary nodded, and trudged off to speak to the Triumverate.

## Chapter 51

With Mary gone, there wasn't a whole lot to do but sit and wait. We sat in the same guest room/cell that where we had spent our time on the last visit. My mind had been full of questions ever since we talked to Kii'na - questions about Dak'kon's past, and the weight of it which seemed to burden him more and more.

"We need to talk."

The words came, unbidden, with the solemn weight behind it heavy on my heart. Dak'kon looked up at me, and caution swam in those coal-black eyes.

"What is it you wish to know?" he murmured, but in those eyes I could see that he already knew the question. It had hung over us for too long, swinging like a sword dangling over the head of a long-forgotten king whose name had been lost to the aeons.

"When Fell was describing the tattoo on my arm, you said you knew the symbols."

He was hesitant when he spoke, "The symbols speak of four you have traveled with in the past."

I nodded. Those words echoed those of that old fish merchant in the Hive, who had seen me once, long ago. "What four are these?" Something sounded in the back of my mind... the murmur was nearly inaudible, but it felt like a dozen flies were crawling in my skull..

"The tattoo speaks of four minds. One was a woman, who loved a man who knew her and knew not love. The other was a blind man, who saw things no mortal eye could see. Another was a familiar, a mage's pet, bought and bound. And the last was a slave."

"What can you tell me of the four?"

Dak'kon's eyes took on a far-away gaze, staring through me and into a life long ago, when another incarnation had walked in my skin. "The woman was young. She worshipped time, for in her blood, she knew of things to come. The archer was a blind man, and he could see things that no other one could see. The path of his arrows always led to the heart of an enemy. The familiar and the slave I know little of."

"See things to come? The woman's name wasn't Deionarra, was it?" The name on my lips brought the memory of her back to me: an azure gown rippled by an unfelt wind, and crystal-blue eyes bright with unshed tears. Her hair was white like the foam of the sea, her pale lips were pursed with the need to whisper my name and trembled with the sorrow of not knowing it.

Deionarra.

Dak'kon nodded, "Know that Deionarra was the name she carried."

I felt cold. "What do you know of the archer?"

"I know little of him. I know he was a soldier. I know that alcohol had taken a portion of his life. In blindness, he had come to know a different sight. In knowing this, he had become strong. Yet he did not know his own strength."

"Do you know what his name was?"

Before Dak'kon could respond, I suddenly knew the answer. The crawling sensation in the back of my skull returned, and I felt the name surfacing, as if from beneath a great muddy ocean.

"His name was Xachariah... he was blind, but in blindness, he had gained a second sight that allowed him to see things hidden to others. He was an archer, and where his arrows flew, they found the hearts of their targets."

"Know that Xachariah was the name he carried. And know that his name pierced the heart of many enemies."

"And which one of them was you, Dak'kon? Were you the slave?"

Dak'kon was silent for a moment, and the surface of his blade swims, as if in turmoil. "Know that this one owed you a service. In owing this to you, it became as slavery."

"It was at Shra'kt'lor wasn't it, Dak'kon?" The name was hissed by Kii'na, who spat it out like it would've cursed Dak'kon to the bone.

Dak'kon was silent again, and when he spoke his voice trembled, and old wounds were reopened. "Know it is the place where I died my first death."

"What is that place?"

"It is one of the great homes of the People. It has suffered many wounds in its life. One of its scars is by my hand."

With each mention of the city my scalp crawled. I fought off the urge to run

my hands through my hair. "How did this come to be?"

"Know the tale is long. The matter is between me and the other that was once you. know that if you hear it, know it shall be a long tale."

"I would hear it."

Dak'kon sighed, and ran his hand along the wall beside us. His fingers caressed the blue-gray stone, trying to conjure up old memories of his ancient homeland. He spoke, and it came in a quiet intonation. I found myself leaning forward, eager to catch every word. "Upon the rolling Plane of Limbo, the People shape cities from the chaos with their thoughts. Know that there is no place for a divided mind." Dak'kon raised the blade from his shoulder and held it before him. As he stared at it, it sharpened until it was almost as thin as a piece of paper.

"A divided mind is an unfocused mind. A divided mind fractures walls and weakens stone." As Dak'kon spoke, the edges of the blade corroded slightly, the metal misting and melting along the edges. "Many divided minds may destroy a city.

"Long have I known the words of Zerthimon. Through my voice, many have come to know the words of Zerthimon. The zerth protect the community from all threats, whether to the body or the mind. They are the guiding stones in the chaos. So it came to pass that I spoke the words of Zerthimon without knowing the words of Zerthimon. It came to pass that I no longer knew myself."

"So... you doubted the words?"

"No." Dak'kon's voice was edged, and his blade sharpened in response. "I knew the words. Yet it came into my heart that perhaps others did not know the words as Zerthimon knew them. And so division formed. As my mind became as two, as my mind became divided, those that looked to me as a guiding stone became divided. Many scores of githzerai, many hundreds of scores of githzerai... doubted. Shra'kt'lor died that day."

"So... those that followed you came to doubt the words as well, and the city was weakened."

Dak'kon's fingers tightened on the hilt of his blade, and he closed his eyes.

"The enemies of Zerthimon came. Know that their hatred of his words and the People lent their blades strength. Know that they sensed the weakened city, and they brought war with them. Many githzerai drowned in the chaos and beneath the blades of our enemies." Small beads of metal appeared on the surface of the blade, as if it was blistering. "Know this happened long ago."

"What happened to you?"

"As I fell from the walls of Shra'kt'lor, know that my self was broken. My blade was mist, my mind divided. I was adrift upon Limbo's seas, and I wished to drown. I died for days, my mind awash in division, when death finally came to me. It wore your skin, and it had your voice."

I blinked, licked my lips. The chill that ran down my spine was a cold prickle born separate from the warm tingle in my scalp. "Me?"

"You asked that I hear you."

As Dak'kon said the words, my vision bled outwards, and the crawling sensation begin to worm its way up through the back of your skull... It was unbearable, too powerful an urge to be denied. I felt nauseous for a moment, and my vision was suddenly as chaos, smeared, twisted, and you are someplace else, someplace in the past...

I surrendered to the memory.

~~~~~

I have to watch my thoughts.

Everything around me is in turmoil - my vision is hazy, swirling, dizzying, all at ONCE... there is mist, pockets of fire, islands of mud, stone, and ice-covered rocks swimming through the Plane like fish, impacting and dissolving, droplets of water arcing through the howling air and lashing my skin like teeth - I choke back my nausea, and I steady myself; this is the Plane of Limbo, all is chaos, nothing is stable...

The battle had waged for days. From my perch I had heard the distant screams, the chorus of metal clashing against metal, silver astral steel against karach. Bodies of warriors had been pinned to walls, which bled and

melted in the ensuing dischord until stone became ice, then sublimated into buffets of wind which scattered the corpses like rags before coalescing into raw, crimson magma, wrapping flesh and bone into an ashen caress. Smaller bodies, githzerai children perhaps, had been flung into the misty void, drifting like broken dolls. They had died long before the chaos could've suffocated them. I took small comfort in that.

When the walls of Shra'kt'lor had been breached, when the slim barrier between order and chaos crumbled, it was not only the metaphysical substance of the realm that had flooded in, wild and fey and giddy. No, it was joined by the chaos of war: githyanki came howling with razor-toothed ululating screams, illithids shambled in armed with thoughts that pierced like lances. The slaadi swarmed along the once-pristine walls and formless nimbus screams drove the inhabitants mad with terror, softening them up to be devoured by the ravenous blades and talons of their enemies.

I am silent as I tread along the broken island, two whole blocks of the city that had broken off and had been sent floating into the misty void. Overhead the realm of Limbo plays itself out in pretty random smatterings of transsubstantial matter. Ashen snow flutters down onto the remaining streets, as if some latent psychic residue wept in lament.

There is only the distant roar of the chaos above and the sandy crunch of debris beneath my boots. I walk past the bodies, the blood, the utter and absolute ruin. In a few days the lingering psychic will of the Anarchs will sputter and die out and slowly this islet would dissolve, yielding the corpses to the embrace of mad oblivion.

I stop. There he is.

I focus on the dying man that lies before me. Kneeling, I examine the zerth to see if he still lives.

The survivor (if one can call him that) is a githzerai, his body embedded in an earthen pocket that swirls around him - unconsciously, he has formed a grave from the elements, and though bits of fire and water lick at his face, he does not respond. His hands are ashen, his coal-black eyes focusing on nothing - his emaciated frame speaks of starvation, but I know it is the least of his wounds. It is faith that dealt him the mortal blow.

I look for the blade he carries.

In his limp left hand is a twisted mass of metal, its surface having melted around his hand like a gauntlet. As I watch, it steams and hisses, like a diseased snake. The githzerai does not seem to be aware of it... but it is that weapon that has brought me here.

The memory flares, and I hear my voice echoing across the barrier between life and death, from one incarnation to another.

"Dak'kon, zerth of Shra'kt'lor-Drowning, last wielder of the karach blade, know that I have come to you with the words of Zerthimon, carved not in chaos, but in stone, carved by the will in an Unbroken Circle."

At the word 'Zerthimon,' Dak'kon's eyes roll in their sockets, and they attempt to focus upon me. With effort, he cracks his mouth to speak, but only a dry hiss emerges. I bring forth the stone from my pack and hold it before him so he can see.

"Know that the words of Zerthimon inscribed upon this stone are true, and know that your divided mind need be divided no longer. All you must do is take the stone and you shall know yourself again."

Dak'kon's eyes flicker over the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon.

"Take it..."

For a moment, I think that he might be too close to death to recognize it. Then the right hand twitches, and he pulls it slowly from its earthen prison, the clumps of earth streaming off it become water in Limbo's chaotic winds. His skeletal hands clutch the stone, like a drowning man grasping a branch, and his eyes flash.

"Know that I have saved your life, Dak'kon, zerth of Shra'kt'lor."

Dak'kon's eyes turn from the stone and flicker over me, and he hisses again, throat too dry for a moment to muster the words. He blinks, slowly, then speaks, his voice barely above a whisper, but the words are what I wanted to hear. "My... life is yours... until yours is no more..."

I smile.

~~~~~

I was amazed that I didn't collapse and vomit when I returned to the present.

Dak'kon was silent, contemplative in the silent seconds when the memory had swept over me. "I heard your words. The chaos in my mind became still. I knew myself again."

I swallowed hard, trying to clear the taste of ash from my mouth. "Tell me about that other 'me'... the incarnation you knew. What was he like?"

Dak'kon's gaze traveled through me, and he fell silent.

"Dak'kon?"

"Know that he was different. Know that the differences were not marked on the skin, nor in the Way of the weapon, nor in the attire that cloaked him. Know that he was different in the way of thought and the means he acted upon his thoughts. His WILL became substance. Know that he saw others and did NOT see them. He knew only how they could serve him. His heart was treacherous, and it was cold, and never did its coldness burn him."

My voice was a whisper when I asked. "Did it ever touch you, Dak'kon? Did he betray you?"

Dak'kon's blade began bleeding into a dull, flat black, and I watched as edges, like teeth, began sprouting from the edge of the blade. His face clenched, and he spoke through his teeth. "It is not my will you know of this."

"Tell me, Dak'kon. Did he ever betray you?"

"I surrendered my WORD to him. I surrendered my SELF."

"What are you talking about?"

"The People do not allow themselves to be enslaved to another in deed or chains. If we find ourselves in such a cage, we ACT to free ourselves, even if it means we must endure another cage for a time. You performed a great service for me. In so doing, you enslaved me. I acted to free myself. Know

that I surrendered my word and my self to act in your name until your death."

"My... life is yours... until yours is no more..."

The chill at those words needled into my bones, "But... I can't die."

"That was not known to this one. I surrendered my word to him. I surrendered myself. Know that there is now nothing left that I may surrender except my life. Know now that I follow you only so I might die."

"Don't say that, Dak'kon..."

"Is that a command?" he murmured bitterly. Karach rippled and crackled, like bent steel.

"No! I mean- Dak'kon... you got the Circle from me, correct?"

"Yes. In knowing its words, I knew myself."

"But did it save your life, Dak'kon? Or did it divide you further once you studied the Circle?"

Dak'kon was silent for a moment, but his blade writhed, as if in pain. He was slow to speak again, and when he did, his voice was somber. "It divided me."

"Then did I save your life, Dak'kon? Or did I only add to the pain you already felt? Those words... those words of Zerthimon's - they only seem to divide you more. I see it when you pour over the teachings."

Dak'kon was silent.

"I say that I NEVER saved you, Dak'kon... I only raised you from near-death so that you might die again. If you had died at Shra'kt'lor, then you would have known peace."

His blade bled black as night, but was still. The words came with great effort, dry and old. "Your words carry the weight of truth. The death I would have died at Shra'kt'lor - that would have been the last death. Every day I have lived since is a new death."

"You need serve me no more, Dak'kon. I never saved your life; I only killed you twice. You owe me nothing."

"No..." Dak'kon's forehead creased in pain, and his eyes stared through me. "It is not your word that carries the weight, and your word will not free me. The word that chains me is mine. The torment is mine. I know in my heart that the chains remain. Words will not free them."

"Is there any way you can be freed?"

"You must die a final death. Yet your path is not death's path. There is no resolution to this matter."

"I swear I will find one, Dak'kon. I will find one that sets you free. You are my friend, and I this I vow to you for the harm I've done."

Dak'kon's voice became ragged, as if he had suddenly become sick. "Know you have added other words to my words." His expression was pained, and his gaze met mine. "Now you have chained us both."

The two of us glanced up at the sound of soft footsteps and the crack of staff against stone. Hargrimm approached, with Stale Mary shuffling beside him. In her hands she held the head of Soego: the skin had grown puffy and gray with decay, and there was a slight sheen to the skin. His mouth was parted in a post-mortem wail, and his red-glintoned eyes had rolled back, staring at nothing. A spider crawled along his cheek, and began binding his lips together with its silk.

"The Triumverate has spoken," Hargrimm said grimly, "Take the head of Soego, traitor to our cause, and ye may leave in peace."

## Chapter 52

I hated the fetid smell of wererats.

It was the musty stench of an old cupboard, stale with the dust of mold spores and old dried-up vermin droppings. At the very least the wererats were intelligent enough to not live and eat where they defecated, but it was little consolation when I did have to make my way back through their caverns. How Lothar could trust them, I'll never know.

The planks of the wooden bridge creaked under my feet as I crossed, and I suppressed the urge to take a few test hops on it to see if it would splinter under my weight. Even if the Dabus came down here to fix things up it'd be a matter of putting patches on a mass of rags and trying to pass off the travesty as wearable garments.

They said the Planes would always turn, but seeing Sigil going to hell in a handbasket for as long as it existed, I wasn't sure if this was a good thing.

"Have you retrieved the particular skull the master wants?" Mantuok chittered. His whiskers twitched.

"Yes," I grunted, "from the wererat Soego."

"Give it to me, and I shall take it to the master. Your services are no longer required."

A muscle in my cheek twitched. "No, I think I'll take it to him myself."

"You misunderstand..." Mantuok's claws clenched and unclenched, and his tail began to sway. "It was not a request. Give me the skull. We do not wish trouble... here of all places, biped. Such troubles even one such as you would be hard-pressed to deal with."

I looked him straight in the eye. The man-rat towered over the others, his fur was laced with pitch-black streaks and his armor was first-rate. There was something dangerous about him, a cunning and terrifying ambition beyond what a lycanthropic wretch could normally muster. He hated me, that much I could tell, from the way his gaze seemed to bore holes into my skull.

"Look, Mantuok..." I said carefully, "All I'm doing is trading one skull for another. Getting a friend of mine back."

"I do not give a whit for you or your friend!"

I reached into my pack and grabbed Soego's head by the mane of hair. Part of me expected it to pull out, loosened by the decay, but while it slid a little in my fingers the grip was still firm, "Take it to your master. Just know that I'm leaving the moment I get Morte back... you can work under Lothar all you want. I'm not interested in playing fetch-servant under that old graybeard's heel."

I tossed it to him. Mantuok rolled the head in his paws and sniffed at it critically. "Many, many places in catacombs, biped, no? Many places where one may be walled in for all eternity and screams are never heard. To one of those places shall you be taken and left to suffer." He turned to his fellow wererats. "Stab the biped until he falls. Take his corpse to the catacombs and bury him alive."

My eyes widened, "But- I am not trying to usurp your place here! Lothar has no need of me!"

Mantuok's squealing cackle pierced my ears, "Stupid manling. Being Lothar's trusted hand was only part of the matter. I kill you regardless."

"But- why?!"

His fangs were long and yellow, and a slim tongue flicked out to wet his muzzle, "Because I hate the way you smell."

"You diseased wretch!" I growled. Annah's punch-daggers snapped into her hands, Dak'kon's blade was drawn with the soft sound of silk against steel.

"It is no disease!" Mantuok laughed as the wererats began to surround us, "It is a blessing! I am far greater than you, a thing more a corpse than a man!"

"As my betters," I sneered, beginning to goad him, "I suppose it is your privilege to squat in sewers, feast on filth and the occasional deader to stay alive, and dress in resplendent rags with your naked scaly tails dragging in

the muck behind you? You're vermin, shadows of people, desperately wishing to be human. Pathetic!"

"No, we- we are your superiors!" foam flecked his muzzle as he snarled, "We are predators. We hunt bipeds. You are food for us! Mewling prey!"

"You're target practice for me."

I tell you, four hundred pounds of rabid wererat diving at you is something you'll never forget.

That juggernaut of armor and fur barreled into me, lifting me clear from the floor and slinging me against post of the bridge. Wood cracked, I could feel a long shard of the splintered wood impale my viscera. The smell of ozone filled the air, left behind by screaming bolts of eldritch fury. I could hear the sound of battle, the squeal of rats as they fell and the clang of crude steel against karach.

I coughed. There's that taste of blood again.

Gripping my beaded dreadlocks, Mantuok smashed my head into one of the planks of the bridge. It splintered under me. He lifted my head, angling enough to crack me into another plank. And another.

There was an upper limit to how many wooden planks the human skull can endure, and I was reaching mine. My eyes rolled lazily in their sockets, the world spun. I could feel the thrum of raw power far beneath me. It was that green swirling energy in the depths of the chasm, crashing against the stone and pulsing with a deep, hungry light. As if from a long tunnel there was the distant hiss of Mantuok's voice, his breath reeking of rotting meat and old cheese.

"What treasures do you have, manling? What objects of power might I pry from your miserable, half-embalmed corpse?"

"Before ogling other people's treasures," I groaned, "You'd better protect your own."

And with a thrust of my leg, I brought my spiked kneepad into his crotch.

Mantuok drew a sharp breath, his beady red eyes shrank back as a shrill,



small whine leaked from his maw.

Quick as a whip I drew the dagger from its sheath and stuck him, right in the throat. Mantuok reeled back, confused, castrated, trying desperately to staunch the flow of blood with one paw as he tried to grope for his axe.

No dice.

I stuck him, in the slim border between one plate of armor and the next. Too shocked to claw at me Mantuok could only kick a little as I grabbed him by one tall spine of his opulent helmet, driving him head-first into the post behind me. Flesh and bone smashed repeatedly until his face was a ruined mass and the post was painted a fresh new shade of red. I wasn't sure if he was alive or not, but I took some small measure of satisfaction when I booted his worm-tailed ass into the chasm.

"Everything all right?" I said as I stumbled a bit trying to stand up properly. Already Annah and Dak'kon were looking themselves over for wounds and cleaning their weapons.

"Ach, jes fine yeh sod. I dinnae know if we coulda faced tha big one fully armed, but yeh egged him on right yeh did," Annah smiled.

Dak'kon glanced at the bloodstained post. "A great tragedy. To begin one moment a king, and end it as a corpse."

"Mantuok can gripe about tragedy when it's not being stuck in him every twelve hours." My foot bumped against something, and I looked down. It was a thick tome, sour with the smell of decay. When I picked it up the leather seemed to crawl under my fingers, as if it were uncured human flesh left out in the sun.

And yet... something whispered at the back of my mind to open it. It wasn't the familiar tingle of a nascent memory bubbling to the surface, but something more... enticing.

"Are yeh all right?" Annah's nose wrinkled, "Yeh don't look good."

"I'm fine," I grunted as we walked, shaking off the urge to open the book then and there, "All I want to do is get Morte back. The void he's left is putting me in a mood, I think."

"Well I'm jes sayin' yeh should probably give a sit and heal up a bit, aye?"

I prodded the side of my head where Mantuok had introduced it to the bridge. My fingers came back wet with blood.

"It's nothing... probably a bruise, maybe a skull fractuyeuplu nyyehtzouppppay-"

There go my speech centers.

Thud.

And there goes my motor control.

## Chapter 53

By the time Annah and Dak'kon were able to drag me back to Lothar's lair, I had healed up enough to form coherent sentences again. Moving was a bit of trouble, but even if I stumbled a bit Dak'kon was good enough to help prop me up.

Of course, Lothar didn't have the courtesy to be there when I returned, and Morte had been removed from the shelf.

With a grunt I sat down. "Well, I suppose we wait then."

"Psst."

I looked up, "Annah? Did you say something?"

She blinked, "Nay. Are yeh addle-coved enough from th' blows ta th' head ta be hearin' things now?"

I looked up to Dak'kon, about to ask the same. No, if he wanted to get my

attention (and he never did) he wasn't the type to psst at me.

"Up here."

I looked up to the shelves.

The skull's voice was low and raspy, the sound of flint and steel. "I... I think I've seen you before, stranger."

I hobbled over. The fellow was well-polished, though yellow and snaggle-toothed. "Where have you seen me?"

"Curst. Gate town to Carceri."

I blinked, "Curst? Gate town? Carceri?"

"What are you, clueless? It's a gate town, on the rim of the Outlands, the doorway to the prison plane of Carceri. It's a place of backstabbers and traitors, and it's full of schemes as a baatezu's undergarments. Being right next door to Carceri's apt to change a burg's nature; I wouldn't be surprised if the town were about to slide over."

"Slide over? What do you mean?"

"When a gate town's beliefs get too much like the plane it borders, the force of that belief is enough to make its bordering plane swallow it whole. Happens all the time - at least when the Anarchists are involved." He spoke this last with a grim kind of pride.

"Hey I know about you! You're that faction that's trying to throw Sigil into chaos."

"Well... that's an oversimplification really," his voice bloomed as he spoke, "We are a secret society, cells of members who work alone or through directives passed through the network of informants and leaders-who-remain-hidden. Our goal is to tear down the power structure, to free people from the lies of politicians and powers, to let all lead their own lives of their own volition. We work in secrecy - worked in secrecy - and changed our routines constantly to avoid infiltration. My time was decades ago, and so all the secrets I knew are no longer valid, except for the faces I can remember - and even those must have changed by now."

"You sound like a paranoid bunch," I replied dryly.

"If a society you belonged to thrived on intrigue, infiltration, and the hatred of the established power-mongers, you'd be careful too. It's not paranoia when they really are out to get you. In our line of belief, someone involved in a triple-cross is an amateur."

"You mentioned you saw me once. In Curst."

"Hmm? Oh, that. Yes. Long, long ago. I remember someone painted with ugly and scars."

"What was I doing there?"

"What were you doing there?" the skull chuckled, "You were babbling something about some berk trying to kill you and wandering into all the wrong places. Well, you were obviously barmy and all, so me and some of my friends rolled you. Stuck a shiv in you and divvied up your stuff. It was right after that that I was betrayed, but not before I hid some of that stuff."

It was hard to be angry over a crime against me that occurred centuries ago, to another incarnation. All I felt was a vague sense of unrest over knowing only those scant details.

"Well where's my stuff then?"

"I ain't telling," the skull said petulantly, "Maybe someday I'll get a body back and go for it myself, and maybe I won't, but right now it gives me great joy to see you wondering. Good luck finding it."

"Damn."

"Ah, don't let him get to you. The useless sod never achieved anything in life and now he's just trying to get under your skin," came another voice. The skull rested on an adjacent shelf, and it had a deep voice and a jocular tone, "Greetings. I am Stern, one of the great practitioners of personal peace through intensive redirection of hostilities."

"You mean you're a wizard, an assassin, and a poisoner," the first skull hissed.

"However you choose to define it, Grimscalp," Stern turned his attention back to me, "I was the best of the lot, so it's said."

"Then how did you wind up here?"

"Funny you should mention that. I had a black book given to me in order that I might puzzle out its secrets. I unlocked its powers at a terrible price - one I would gladly pay again! - and sharpened my edge considerably. Little did I realize that the book would betray me to another - a mewling rat-thing that overwhelmed me in a wave of rodents and tore the flesh from my living bones. The rat went through a series of disciples, each of them betrayed by the book, until it wound up in the possession of the rat-man Mantuok. If you find this book, accept its powers and be rid of it before you suffer the same fate."

The urge to toss my pack to the ground was overwhelming.

"...My thanks. What can you tell me of Lothar? I need to speak to him."

"What can I tell you of Lothar? I will tell you nothing. Even this bare existence is better than the oblivion he promises should I speak his secrets."

"You can tell me..." I said sweetly.

I got the distinct impression that Stern's skull was sneering at me. "And gain merely your friendship? Bah. There is nothing you can offer me, no service nor item, that will impel me to betray Lothar to you. Begone!"

"Now hold on, if you won't tell me about Lothar, what will you tell me about the other skulls?"

"Of the skulls that will speak to you, I can offer no good words. Their experiences have not been shared with me; indeed, we have spoken precious little until your arrival. Perhaps," it said with a smirk in its voice, "there's something special about your very presence."

I wasn't sure if he was referring to the Stories-Bones-Tell, but I didn't care to pry any further.

The third skull I spoke to exhaled languorously and spoke in a sultry voice,

"Why do you disturb my rest? There has been so much happening of late, and while I welcome the sensation, I must confess to desiring the sense of quiet."

"Tell me about yourself."

"I am... I was... Ocean-before-the-Storm, a Sensate. Now, alas, I am merely decoration."

Something itched at the back of my mind at the word. "A Sensate? What's that?"

"A Sensate is a member of the Society of Sensation - one of the factions of Sigil, located in the Civic Festhall in the Clerk's Ward - which holds that the universe can be understood and manipulated only through the senses, and therefore we should accumulate as many varied experiences as possible. I believe I've reached the quota on sitting on a dusty shelf - my boredom threshold is low."

"Can I do anything for you?" I asked with a touch of sympathy.

"No, but you're kind to ask. Once I threw myself off the shelf and shattered. Next thing I knew, I was back on the shelf and we were all glued here. When Lothar tires of me, he'll dispose of me."

"I know the feeling. Well, of the first thing I mean. What are you doing here?"

She sighed, "Why, I sit on the shelf and gather dust until one of Lothar's rat minions takes it into his head that I need brushing. I answer questions for Lothar, and... that is the extent of this miserable existence."

"No, I meant, 'How did you get here?'"

"It's a long story, and I'm not supposed to say anything to you about it until you've completed a task for Lothar."

"What could he possibly do to you?"

The skull stared at me, and I got the impression it was shivering. "There's a remarkable amount of pain one can feel without nerve endings. Not all pain

is physical, and not all emotions mental. Those are sensations I do not care to duplicate."

"I'm sorry..."

She sighed, "Well, it's quite all right. I've gotten accustomed to it over the years."

"Well, I do have the skull Lothar wanted. If you would please indulge my curiosity..."

She paused a moment, but continued with a slow, careful tone, as if trying to savor the experience of speaking to me, "It's a long story that has to do with Ravel Puzzlewell, the night hag. Would you like to hear the whole story?"

"Yes."

"Very well. I was working in the Civic Festhall - the headquarters of the Sensates - in the sensoriums. Ravel Puzzlewell, may the powers curse her black soul, had been coming there to find answers to riddles she had encountered. She was a masterful solver of puzzles - those that left our best minds baffled were but gauze to the force of her reason - yet she had found difficulties that required outside answers. I heard that she was there to unlock the secrets of Sigil itself.

"Horribly ugly, she was, taking no pains to use her magic to disguise her form - as I've heard she does, or rather DID, from time to time - and that fiendish exterior frightened off many a potential factioneer. Still, I had to ask her what she was about, and whether she could teach me what she knew."

"That sounds like it could have been a mistake."

"It was. She offered me a bargain, for she dwelt and dealt in riddles. If she were to answer my question, I must agree to answer one of hers. If I missed the answer, my life was hers. I agreed. She told me she intended to unlock the puzzle of the Cage, to open it to all who wished to enter - powers, fiends, celestials, modrons, and slaadi, not to mention any inner-planar beings who chose to come along. The most important part to her was that all should know that the mystery that had baffled them for so long was unraveled by Ravel.

"She asked her question. I could not answer it, though she assured me the answer was plain as the nose on her face. My fellow Sensates found me screaming in the sensorium when they arrived the next morning. I begged them to kill me, and they complied. None even suggested that I relish the new experience, so horrible was it. And... here I am. Now I must rest."

I was hesitant to ask, but I needed to know. That sense of familiarity welled up, like a bloated boil in the back of my mind. "What was the question?"

She was quiet for a moment. When she did answer, her voice was tired and sad, "It was: How does one change the nature of a man? I thought hard on her answer, and said, 'With love.' She said all people love themselves too much to be changed by something as simple as love. And then she... she... I must rest now." In the back of my mind, I could almost see a hook-nosed figure with ebon skin asking me a similar question... but I couldn't remember my answer.

We only waited a few moments more before a thunderclap and a billow of smoke heralded Lothar's arrival.

He set his steely gaze on me, unsurprised at our presence, "Have you come to reclaim the chatterbox yet? Its endless yammerings weary me."

I nodded, and pulled the severed head from my bag. "I have the skull of Soego, a wererat Dustman missionary and spy."

Lothar took the head of Soego from me and examined it carefully. His gnarled old fingers pried apart loose lips to check Soego's teeth, lifted the lids to gaze into pale, vacant eyes. "A Dustman missionary and spy, eh? This will be satisfactory." His fingers twisted through an arcane gesture. "Your friend will be waiting for you above ground, where you came in. Now leave, I have work to do."

As much as I wanted to see Morte again, Lothar seemed to be one that could offer answers, "Now hold on... you collect the memories of the dead. Perhaps you can help me find the answers I seek."

Lothar's lips thinned, drawing a long crease across his aged features, "Very well, scarred one. Perhaps we can talk. Come."



At the other end of the room, Lothar cradled the head over a cauldron, bubbling with an opaque green soup. His fingers kneaded Soego's rotting cheeks, tugged open his mouth. "There is wisdom in bones, scarred one," he said reverently, "Brain matter rots, hearts wither, souls sublimate into nothing. But bones endure, carrying in their ivory-pale curves secrets best left forgotten, regrets and loves unnamed. Memories that sank deep into the core of a man are fossilized for as long as the skull lasts."

"Lothar..."

He ignored me, and his eyes opened wide in recognition, "Ah... I see. A man who lost his lover to a predator's cruel fangs, who sold his soul for her return, and whose body was torn asunder by creatures of ravenous frenzy. I have heard this tale before... from a foolish young bard on an isle a world away, who sang his lover's name even as the waves swallowed him."

He dropped Soego's head into the cauldron with a splash, "Well, this one will reveal a few Dustman secrets, at least."

The mane of raven-black hair swirled among the green foam like seaweed. It bobbed a moment. The foul broth trickled into the open mouth, driving a small spider out from its nesting place as it flooded. It dashed along the forehead, needle-like legs circling the perimeter where boiling-hot soup ate away at the edges of that shrinking island of flesh. Eventually that pale haven was consumed as the head sank and the spider flailed, scrabbling at nothing as it died with agonized futility fueling its final twitches. It only took a moment for its body to dissolve, and in the bubbling green foam its slim legs drifted as flotsam on the surface of a pond.

Annah wrapped her arms around herself as if chilled, too nervous to draw a circle over her heart to ward off harm as she usually did. But despite her superstitions and her fears she crept close at my heels as Lothar led us upstairs.

His bedroom was decorated much as I expected - a cage craft from a creature's rib cage, a wall lined with animal skulls. He sat down in a chair craft from several tusks, his staff still in hand. "Keep it quick, scarred one. I cannot tarry all day."

"Why am I immortal?" I asked, crossing my arms.

Lothar looked me over, then cocked his head as if it were a simpleton's question, "Your mortality - your soul, if you will, that which allows you to live and die - is gone from you. It was stripped from you by magical means, by the night hag Ravel Puzzlewell. Your mortality is the key to your existence - when you find it, you will find your answers."

"I've heard a little about her. Tell me about Ravel."

"Ravel Puzzlewell is an enigma, even among the night hags. Some would call her barmy; others say she plays a deeper game than any can see through. She is evil, through and through, making the fiends you'll see in the area seem positively divine when compared to her," he said this plain-faced, as if he didn't notice the irony, "She is out of the reach of men now, thank the powers, for she was mazed by the Lady of Pain."

I blinked. This... was going to be difficult. "Mazed? How do I find her?"

"Mazes are like pocket dimensions... small places between places. To reach one, you need to find a portal and a key. I do not know where the door or the key are. Perhaps you should seek some of your old acquaintances - you have certainly left a trail of them behind. They will find you, no doubt - pray they mean you well. Perhaps you should visit the Civic Feshall - they have many answers there."

"What did she do?"

Lothar sighed and stared past me, resting his head on a knuckle. He spoke with casual authority about this Ravel, as if she was once an old acquaintance, perhaps a rival, "She was a maker of toys and puzzles, a solver of problems that didn't need solving. She decided that Sigil, the Cage, was the largest puzzlebox of all, and set herself to undo it - to let in the armies of fiends at her disposal, no doubt, to upset the balance of the city and turn the entire burg into a charnel house. Pray to any power you hold dear with thanks she did not succeed."

When I was satisfied with my answers, I returned to the parlor and made my way up that grim ladder. It was good to see color again, the splash of multihued light dappling the floor. I turned my back on Lothar's parlor, leaving that abominable world behind as we left.

A distant scream echoed from below. It was an incoherent sound, perhaps a woman's name filtered through the depths of cruel green waters.

I ignored it.

## Chapter 54

The cold night air muted the stink and the smog somewhat. Stepping out from the ramshackle hut I breathed a sigh of relief at seeing Morte bobbing happily right at the door.

"Morte!"

"If this the part where I cry your name and we hug, can I do it with Annah instead?"

"How do yeh even get a chance to take a breath when yer talking so much?" she growled and flicked her tail.

"I stopped breathing the first time I saw you, fiendling."

I chuckled, "We're just glad to have you back."

"Ach. I'm not, don't yeh speak fer me."

I was going to be squeezed between quick-witted yammering on one side, insults spat in a tongue-curling brogue on the other. I smirked. For the moment, at least, it was a good place to be again.

"I don't suppose you learned anything at Lothar's? Or did you spend all that time chattering?"

"Hey! Chattering's my best trait." Morte rattled his teeth for a moment, then 'grinned.' "Eh? Eh?"

"Yeah, I know about the Litany of Curses, Morte - I'm more curious about what you got while you were down there."

"Well, I made some friends when I was sitting on the shelf in Lothar's waiting for you to bail me out - thanks for taking your sweet time about it, by the way - they said if I needed any help, I could just call on them."

"Friends? What do you mean?"

"Well, I just whistle, and they kind of show up. They're a good bunch of bashers - bite like snakes, too."

It sounded useful.

"Well," I said awkwardly as I turned to our resident tiefling, "I know you didn't have to stay with us until we got Morte back... thanks."

Annah's blood-black lips curled and she rolled her eyes. "Ach, yeh put me through skillet an' fire and have chats with bashers best left buried. Ye've got th' Lady's shadow on yeh, ye do," her expression softened, "But... I guess that's why I couldn't leave yeh a blade down. Idjit like yeh would get killed twelve times o'er without a skilled aul sneak at hand, aye?"

Escorting Annah back to the Buried Village was the least I could do. Any other girl like her would've spat in my face at the offer, but when we walked together back to the Hive, she didn't complain.

"Annah... didn't I meet you in the Hive, before I found Pharod?"

She nodded, a little warily. Her tail flicked. "Aye, yeh did -- I haven't forgot yeh."

"What were you doing by the Mortuary?"

"It's me territory - I was lookin' for deaders, I was." She looked me up and down, then smirked. "Found a walkin' one, I did."

"When I asked about Pharod, you told me he was south and west of the Mortuary - when he wasn't," my lip curled wryly, "It was a nest full of cutthroats."

"Aye, I did - and yeh'd have done the same if some scarred wreck came to yeh an' asked where he could find your Da." She shrugged. "Yeh found him anyway, so I don't want tae hear yeh carryin' on about it, I don't."

"All right, all right..." I put my hands up defensively. "Can you tell me anything else about him?"

With a twist of her hips, Annah flicked her tail sharply so that it speared the foramen along Morte's base. Caught trying to take a gander at her goods, Morte attempted to stammer out an excuse of some sort when with another twist Annah flung him squealing into an alley. There was a crash, the squeal of a cranium rat or two, and a series of curses that I filed away for later use.

Ah, it really was good to have him back.

"Been at the Village longer than I," Annah said without skipping a beat, "Came there a stone's age ago, maybe even found the place, some o' the villagers say." Annah frowned. "Pharod's a shrewd one, he is. Has a way of squeezin' more outta copper than most, an' he never was at a lack for jink."

"Was he searching for that bronze sphere all that time?" I asked as Morte bobbed over at my side, keeping me between him and Annah. He shot her a sour look and flicked his tongue, as if he were lapping at certain unmentionables of hers.

"I s'pose." Annah shrugged again. "I don't know why he was all a-fire tae get it, I don't. I could smell it as soon as yeh brought it to him." She wrinkled her nose. "Foul custard smell it had. Still... it must have been something right valuable for him tae carry on about it like he did - almost a half-score o' Collectors got penned in the dead-book tryin' tae fetch it."

"I think he was searching for it because he thought it would save his life."

She blinked. "What d'yeh mean?"

"Pharod didn't lead a good life, I gather," I said, repeating what I remembered of Reekwind's tale, "He was once a 'Guvner' in one of the Upper Wards. He apparently used his position to lie, cheat, and hurt others in the process - so much so he was destined to go to the hells when he died. He thought the bronze sphere would save him somehow - so much so he

threw away his title, his wealth, and his position to try and find it."

"Really?" Annah became silent for a moment, then shook her head. "No accountin' for Pharod's foolishness, there isn't. A trinket won't save yeh from fate's hand. If the stains on yer soul are black enough, no amount o' washing will get 'em out." She paused. "Still, if he thought it could save him, maybe it was important somehow... or at least worth a bit o' jink."

A bleak air had settled on the Village when we arrived. The lanes were quieter than usual, and the villagers hid in their huts and tents. The flick of curtains revealed half-obsured faces, gazing out in fear for a moment before vanishing behind age-yellowed cloth. The few that ventured out looked over their shoulders when they didn't glance at me and hustle into trash-filled alleys.

It was as if a plague had visited the Buried Village for the streets to be so sparse of thugs and blades and for silence to echo along with our footsteps.

"Somethin's wrong..." Annah whispered, and her pace quickened.

"Kelm, What's been goin' on here now?" She asked one of the guards.

Kelm's eyes shifted uneasily, "Oh, Annah. You're back... we... didn't expect to see you again so soon..."

Annah frowned, "Wot's got the village creepin' on eggshells? I've only been gone a day or two an' get greeted back as if we've been carryin' the plague."

"Oh, uh-" Kelm stammered, "It isn't you, Annah. Really."

"Ach, yeh say that but yer eyes haven't crept below me neck." She glanced at me from the corner of her eye, as if I had brought this on the village.

"Hey I'm always happy to take up the slack, there," Morte clacked his jaw as his eyes crawled over the milk-pale curve of her thighs, "Not that there's much slack that I can see."

Kelm bit his lip, "No, it's... I don't know. Pharod had just closed Illwind Court, demanded that no one disturb him. And soon after..." he trailed off.

"What? Spill it, aye?"

Kelm glanced at the other guard, who was perfectly content to remain silent. "Annah. Something's... colder about this place. One moment I'm trading dirty rhymes with Vruk here and the next I feel this chill down my spine like someone's dug and smoothed my grave."

"You do not feel it?" Dak'kon muttered to Annah, "The echo of bleak oblivion, like a null point in the foam of Limbo, where thought and spirit bleed dry."

She bit her lip, and I began to feel it too. It wasn't the emptiness of the village that was unsettling... it was the dark air that emptied the village: regret and hopelessness, thick enough that I could almost taste it.

"We need to speak with Pharod," I declared.

For just a moment Kelm paused, as if by instinct he wanted to repeat Pharod's edict that he not be disturbed. But with a tired gesture he waved us past the gate.

There are chills that prick at the flesh, like needles of ice. They cause one's hairs to rise, they settle into the skin and numb it. When the cold creeps into one's flesh it becomes paralyzed with shivers, when it seeps into bone and joint it carries the creaks and weariness of age.

And then there are chills that burrow past the flesh, and into the soul.

Pharod's mangled body lay limp at the base of his blood-spattered throne.

"Da!" Annah choked out, "What happened? Who did this to yeh?!"

Like lightning Dak'kon's hands shot out and grabbed Annah's wrists. His skills were considerable if they could match the speed of Annah's hands.

"Look away," he said softly as Annah struggled in his grip.

"Pike off, gith!" Annah snarled, "I should shiv yeh right now!"

Dak'kon adjusted his stance and held her tight. Those thin, frail-looking limbs held a deceptive strength, "It is a kindness for some things to not be seen. It is a mercy for some things to not be known," his voice was like the

murmur of a stream, calm, placid, "You know the fate of your father. Let that be enough."

She collapsed into his arms in tearless fury, nails digging into his skin and drawing blood. Dak'kon didn't flinch.

"I hate yeh, yeh mold-faced gith," she growled with a cold fury, "I hate yeh so much..."

"Uh, chief? Maybe you shouldn't do that," Morte chittered nervously as I knelt beside Pharod's body.

"I'll be fine," I grunted.

I turned him over, lifted the bloodstained cloak that his body had become tangled in. I winced. It really wasn't pretty. Dak'kon was right to hold Annah back from seeing this.

"He didn't struggle," I said, "His arm is still clutching the orb... and there isn't any fresh damage to his crutch. I can only hope that it was quick."

"Jes take it," Annah growled, "Doesn't 'elp him now, and it isn't any worse than he's done ta others in the past."

I stuffed the orb in my pack, and the crawling sensation it left on my palm only added to my sense of unease.

"Annah, do you have any idea how Pharod might've died?"

"I..." She shook her head and rubbed her wrists. That spitfire fury had quelled enough for Dak'kon to let her go, "I donnae. No one with half-a-mind would - Pharod got a long shadow, he does. Yeh cross him, an' yeh end up getting th' stick, yeh will."

"You don't have to accompany me anymore, Annah. If you need to stay with the Buried Village, I -"

"Nay..." Annah interrupted me. "I don't need tae be in the Village - an' I was wonderin' what I'd do if Pharod got penned in the dead-book, I was." She snorted. "Oh, well; he's probably mounting someone's wall in the hells, he is."



My jaw dropped, "But... he's your father. Don't y-"

"Not me real Da, he wasn't." Her eyes took on a hard look. "He was greedy, an' he was stupid, an' he was selfish, an' he was weak. An' now 'ee's dead. And that's all."

I sighed, hefting the crutch in my hand. The rickety wooden staff had a crosspiece nailed across the top, itself wrapped in rags presumably to keep the damn thing from jamming too sharply into Pharod's armpit when he leaned on it. Not surprisingly, the crutch smelled terrible, and every inch of it was covered in dirt, sewage, and unidentifiable remains.

Something about it made me wonder: despite its fragile appearance, it had held up rather well. I even tested it with my weight and it held up without so much as creaking. Considering Pharod's scavenging nature, the crutch probably had some value beyond its surface appearance for him. Perhaps it was a weapon (even if he didn't defend himself in the end), or...

I wandered around the Court, holding the crutch in one hand, pointing and gesturing and hobbling on it. I only had to search for a few minutes before....*WHOOOOOSH.....*The air before me cracked open into a familiar blue portal.

Brilliant.

The air took me by surprise when we entered the portal. It was musty and stale, but clean of the foul sewage stench of the Buried Village. High, graceful alcoves contained books, books, and more books, all indexed and placed in neat order among the shelves. They were free of dust, subject to meticulous cleaning by a hand that knew how to arrange things. I pulled a few tomes out, looked over the faded ink. A few had patches of yellow-brown paste carefully applied to mend tears.

This was Pharod's hidden side... a library deep beneath Illwind Court, the sad remnant of what glory this place used to bear.

How often had Pharod closed off Illwind Court so he could walk these halls undisturbed, reading ancient books and sighing wistfully over his lost days as a Guvner? Did he try to rebuild something he once had here, patching up lost annals and archives?

I put the book back.

"Ach, so this is Pharod's great treasury, aye?" Annah sniffed, "Well, I might as well pick up me inheritance while we're at it."

Morte clicked his teeth as he floated along the shelves, "Something tells me the old fart should've bought you that pony when you were a kid, tiefling."

There was scant little to be found in the Treasury, or Pharod's gold was too well-hidden for me to find. A few scrolls, a smattering of charms, even a wedge of brick-hard cheese.

When we were done, we looped back around for the exit.

## Chapter 55

Old Mebbeth's small collection of charms and spells, once rare valuables, were mere trinkets against the forces I had been facing as of late.

I rolled up a scroll and placed it back on her table. By now such spells were mere cantrips to me.

"Hrmph. Too good enough for ye, child? Was once a time when ye crawled ta Old Mebbeth for aid, there was," she scoffed, handing me another bowl of stew. I sipped it slowly. It was bland and starchy. Rich pleasures weren't for someone with Mebbeth's years.

"You were an excellent teacher, Mebbeth," I blandished, "I wouldn't have survived the trials I went through recently if it weren't for you."

Her pale lips curled into a grimace, "I don't like the trouble ye find yerself in child, I don't. Ye've crept out from under my wing and left the nest for treacherous skies ahead. In the Hive I can protect ye, but out there..."

She shook her head, "I'm sorry, child. I can offer ye nothing, it seems."

"Not true. You can offer me your wisdom, as always."

"Go on n' ask, then."

"Have you ever heard of someone named 'Ravel,' Mebbeth?"

"Pah!" Mebbeth hissed and made a semi-circle over her heart. "What no-sense-nothing ye goin' on about! Sayin' such a name in me presence!" She wagged her finger at me. "Evil, evil, sayin' such a thing brings evil to one's door."

"What do you know about her?"

"Ravel? Pah! Myths and scaredy-tales told ta childrens." Her voice dropped, as if warning me. "Listen, child: NO Ravel was there, not at ALL... and iffen there was, ye got no needin' to be rattlin' that Cage."

"I need to know all you can tell me about her, Mebbeth. It's important."

Mebbeth frowned... she didn't seem to want to meet my gaze. "Bad things... bad things in a name..." She looked back at me. "In Ravel's queer hagheart, many shades of evil and badness, all a-crossin' and a-twistin' like snakes. No more need be said, let be, let be!"

"Do you know where she is, Mebbeth? I have to find her."

"Where does one find a fairy's tale?! Mebbeth doesn't know!" She hissed. "And iffen I did know the knowin', would I tell ye? Nay, ye'd try and dig her up, and I can't have that on me mind, I can't..." She seemed heartbroken. "But, child... if ye need to know, if yer dead certain that it's near to eatin' ye up inside, then... aye, then, I'll tell ye."

"Please... I have to find her, Mebbeth."

"Ravel..." Mebbeth sighed. "Ravel, cruel Ravel, lies in the Lady's keepin', she does, in a prison, a maze... it's said she was put there so long ago, so very long ago... but findin' it? Mebbeth knows not the way." She sighed. "Ask in the Clerk's Ward, mayhap. One of the graybeards there may have the dark of it..."

Annah shuddered and drew a symbol in the air, and set aside her half-finished bowl. Dak'kon sipped his own calmly.

"Do you know anything else about Ravel... something you can tell me before I seek her out?"

"Child..." Mebbeth spoke, but her voice sounded tired and broken. "...if ye seek evil in the Planes... ye need not travel far." She coughed. "Witch knows witch, power knows power, yet there is none who knows all Ravel's branchings and twistings. Learn yer skills well, and keep yer lids open when new sights don't be seeming right. Trust yerself, and do not be a-trustin' her, hear?"

I nodded, "I will. Thanks, Mebbeth."

Mebbeth sighed. "I wish no ills upon others 'cept that one. Glad she's gone, I am, and the Cage is better for it. Again, will I say this, child, let the past rot where it lays. Let lie, let lie."

We finished our stew and headed off.

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"Welcome to the Clerk's Ward, chief."

Well-cut paving stones nestled next to each other like scales on a fish. The buildings had been erected with clean-cut stone, colorful and polished. Graceful tiers pierced the arch of the sky, and not a patch of razorvine marred the walls. On the contrary, flowers and vines had been pulled and craft from delicate sheets of bronze, and on some walls the metallic foliage branched upward and outward, as if daring the abyssal weed to compete. Well-dressed men and women would glide past one another like swans on a lake, bedecked with brocade robes of a dozen colors. The air was clean, the colors vibrant. I never knew colors could be so bold without a veil of yellow-brown smog obscuring everything.

There was the smell of sizzling meat wafting from a streetcorner kiosk: real meat, instead of a boiled rat impaled on a stick. In one corner a group of street performers tumbled over one another while the music of flutes and bells played in rhythm with the acrobatics.

Sigil truly was a city of wonders.

An older, stern-looking woman passed by, and with a glance her eyes narrowed. She stopped, studying me with a disapproving, tight-lipped frown. The red-armored guard at her side stepped behind her, crossing his arms across a barrel-thick chest as he stared down at me.

"Good day, milady..." I said with a slight bow. That is what they did here, I assumed: bow to each other.

The woman nodded curtly, speaking in a tone cold as ice. Her voice seemed to cut the air, as if she were accustomed to making speeches or proclaiming edicts. It was cultured, crisp, so unlike the mush-mouthed curdle-tongued brogue I had been subjected to in the Hive.

Annah's tail flicked idly.

Not that there was anything wrong with an accent, though...

"What is your business here? And watch your words, for I am Diligence, Fourth Magistrate of the Ward."

I blinked, and my lip curled in annoyance, "Something troubling about my appearance?"

She huffed, "I should most certainly think so! Should the Apparel Regulation Act be passed, people of your sort won't be permitted to traipse about in such a manner, half-naked and filthy as you are."

"This look is all the rage in the Hive, you know. Perhaps you should try it; it just might suit you."

"Oh definitely," Morte added, "Though you'd better watch out when he's trying to dress casual."

The woman's eyes narrowed even further. "Do not jest with me; I have no patience for it. Now what is it you want?"

I blinked, my good humor gone, "You're quick to judge one by their appearance, aren't you?"

"You would tell me, then, that you are not a wanderer, meandering about the city asking questions of all those you come across, engaging in more than the occasional combat to the death with those who cross you?"

"Eh... well..."

The faintest hint of a sneer appeared on her lips. "I am quick to judge, sir, because I am a magistrate by trade."

"All that aside, madam, I'm quite clean, and... meaning no disrespect...some cultures might find your clothes offensive."

She examined me skeptically for a moment, then nodded. "Your point is well-taken... sir. Still, though, you cannot deny you are a rather rough-looking sort of fellow."

"My appearance is merely a product of my environment, madam, and a difficult life. I shouldn't be held accountable for that."

"Oh, but you should!" her voice took on a tone of pity. There was no arrogance behind it... if anything, she sounded like a mother voicing her disappointment in a child who could've been so much more, "How easy it is for one to blame one's life, one's surroundings for their every failing! I can see by your manner you are well-educated, sir, yet you appear to insist upon a lifestyle of wandering and senseless violence. Why not settle in Sigil, become a contributing citizen, rather than some bloody-handed nomad in its streets?" The guard behind her shifted his weight, as if to remind me that he still stood at her side.

"The choice is out of my hands, I assure you."

"Oh? How so?" Her coldness melted away into a look of curiosity.

"It is difficult to explain..."

"Nonetheless, I would bid you to do so, sir."

And so I told her my story... what I knew of it, at least.

When I was finished, Diligence looked shocked. "That... that is quite a tale,

sir."

I sighed, "Were it only a tale, madam. It is my life, and I've the scars to prove it -- as you noted when we first met, I believe."

"Yes, yes... quite so." She smiled slightly... I had begun to wonder if she was even capable of such a thing. "I wish you luck, sir, in your undertakings. May you find yourself once more."

I nodded, "My thanks. Farewell, Lady Diligence."

Annah kept close to me as we walked, tail twitching, "Yeh best watch yerself 'ere now... no trouble. This place has Harmonium up to yer eyes..."

"So I guess I can count on you not nicking any purses, then."

"Hsst!" she scowled, "Don't yeh be sayin such things aloud."

"She's right, chief," Morte bobbed in front of me, "The Clerk's Ward is a safe place... it's made for all the berks born with silver spoons and gilded knickers. They run the show in Sigil for the most part. Law's pretty strict, but that means they guard the richest fun."

And rare, wild fun it was.

Skewered meat in one hand and a penny ale in the other, we explored the Ward, enjoying the street music, heckling the poets, trying to tip over a performance artist or two. Such mischief wasn't unknown in Sigil, indeed, it was almost expected since our antics had earned us a scolding from a Harmonium officer or two. They growled at us with the poise and preparation that had to have come from dealing with hooligans a dozen times before.

I almost burst into laughter at as Morte hovered right behind a Harmonium officer, accenting the castigation with flicks of the tongue and wild rolls of his eyes.

By the end of the day Annah was hiding a smirk, and even Dak'kon seemed less morose.

"Can we, chief? Oh please can we?" Morte pleaded.

'The Brothel of Slaking Intellectual Lusts,' the sign said.

I gave him a flat look, "Did you even read the entire sign?"

"Do I have to?"

"Point taken."

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A cool, perfumed breeze trickled over us the moment I opened the door. Lavender, perhaps, with a hint of exotic sweetness that melted the tension from my body. Flowers stood at either side of the second arch, bursts of color in ripe fullness. Though the portal had a distinct feminine touch with its delicate arabesques, the firm curved couches seemed austere in comparison. Each element contrasted the next, accentuating both, and as I entered my eyes were drawn along the transitioning decor.

And then they landed on her.

She was a stunning golden-haired woman, dressed in an azure and violet dress. The cloth was prim, proper, speckled with silver-gray stars. It hid curves that left plenty to the imagination, though it didn't take much to fill in the blanks. While her skin was a fair shade of peach, nothing about her could be considered plain. Those features were flawless, and I was instantly drawn to her azure eyes. So much so that I almost missed the two long, elegant wings draped across her shoulders. She was surveying the room with a slight smile... and she was easily the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

Morte's jaw dropped, until it fell off entirely and clattered on the floor.

The sound drew her notice immediately and she turned to look at us, a confident smile on her lips greeting us as if we were old friends.

My guttural voice cracked a bit when I spoke to her, "Gre- ahem... greetings."

The woman turned as I addressed her. She took my measure, then nodded slightly... "Well met, traveler." She reached up to brush back a stray lock of



golden hair. "How may I help you?"

"Who are you?"

"I am called Fall-From-Grace." She studied me for a moment. "You are new to Sigil, are you not?"

"No, I suspect I have been here for quite some time, actually."

Fall-From-Grace raised an eyebrow. "Indeed?"

"Yes... but that is a long tale, perhaps longer than I know," I looked around, "I'm more interested in what this place is."

"This is the Brothel of Slaking Intellectual Lusts." She studied me for a moment. "I take it by your question that you did not intend to partake of this establishment?"

I licked my lips, not quite knowing how to answer that with anything but a question, "'Brothel of Slaking Intellectual Lusts?' What kind of brothel is this?"

Fall-From-Grace smiled, "I established this brothel to give those lustful fevers that strike the mind more avenues of expression rather than the simply carnal. Much pleasure can be had in conversation and engaging in the verbal arts with others."

"Sounds dull," Morte grunted, testing his reattached mandible with a few quick bites.

She turned to Morte, with that everpresent whisper of a smile and spoke as if unsurprised to be talking to a floating skull, "I assure you, it is not. Tour the brothel, see for yourselves."

"So this is a brothel... where there's no intercourse?"

"Only of a psychological nature. Rest assured, it is still quite stimulating."

Indeed, at that moment a woman approached from around the corner with one hand wrapped around the arm of a middle-aged man. She was beautiful, with skin as pale and cool as marble, but all the man seemed to be

engaged in was lively, if friendly debate. "I have to ask: Why did you establish such a place?"

Fall-From-Grace raised an eyebrow. "That is an odd question." She frowned. "I don't think anyone has ever asked me that. At least, directly."

"My apologies, Lady Grace. I didn't mean to be so direct. I was merely curious."

"Oh, no apologies are necessary," her smile returned, "I am more than happy to discuss the reasons with you, if you wish."

"I would like to hear them, yes."

"Part of the answer to your question requires that you know that I am a member of the Society of Sensation. Our faction believes that one should experience as much of the multiverse as possible." The word sent a tingle along my spine.

"And that is why you established this place?"

She nodded, "This brothel is intended to slate the lusts of even the hardened intellectual. It is designed to stimulate the mind, to heighten one's awareness of themselves and others, to create new ways of experiencing another person. It is for those who seek something more than the shallow physical pleasures that fill the Hive and Lower Wards."

"Well, I wouldn't exactly call it shallow..." Morte clicked his teeth.

"I see. So this establishment just encourages intellectual fencing rather than, uh, well the other kind of fencing," my eye followed the prostitute as she circled around the other curve of the hall, "The women here must be special, indeed."

Fall-From-Grace nodded with no small amount of pride, "The women here are aspiring Sensates. They have come to me in search of instruction, to prepare themselves to enter the faction. Also, many of them have a natural grasp of language that can shatter the crust of the most hardened individual."

"And the girls here are in training to be Sensates?"

"Yes. I hope that by learning the art of language and its subtleties that the patrons and the students here may learn more about themselves. One is only as limited as their command of the language. To be able to employ language to evoke emotions in others is a tremendous skill."

"Interesting philosophy. Could I join the Sensates?"

She smiled. "To join the Sensates, one needs only be a student of life."

"I meant I was interested in joining their faction." That itch pricked the back of my skull again. Something was hauntingly familiar about the philosophy... taste, touch, smell, hear, feel... if the sensation could trigger a memory, then it made sense that I would have to work my way into the faction somehow.

"Of course... forgive my teasing." Grace nodded. "If you wish to join the Sensates, I would inquire at the Civic Festhall. Someone there should be able to help you."

"If I may ask, Lady Grace, the wings on your back... you are not human, I take it?"

"She's one o' the fiends," Annah spat. I've heard her curse and snap, but never with so much vitriol dripping from her voice, "one o' the succubi, she is. She'll take yer measure, then she'll take yer soul to the Lower Planes, so's she will."

"Your companion is correct. I am a lesser tanar'ri, more specifically, a succubus." Grace gave a soft sigh. "I'm afraid we're a little too common in the Lower Planes and elsewhere for our own good. Most of my race spend their time seducing mortals with various pleasures of the flesh."

"And you...?"

Grace's reply was unperturbed, "I'd like to think that I have distanced myself from that... it is ultimately a trivial and non-productive way for one to spend one's time here in the multiverse. There is much more to life, wouldn't you agree?" The soft smile returned.

"Have you ever heard of a night hag named Ravel?"

"I am familiar with the name." Fall-From-Grace paused and thought for a moment. "Rumors cluster thickly about that name, and most tend to discount her as myth, but I suspect that she did exist and that she made quite an impression in the Cage during her stay here. Why do you ask?"

"I intend to seek her out."

She raised an eyebrow. "Truly? I find myself compelled to ask why."

"I need information that she has."

"Is this information available from no one else?"

I nodded soberly. It was such a simple thing to say... but chasing down a myth would be much harder than digging my way into Pharod's nest. "I suspect that only Ravel possesses the knowledge I need."

Fall-From-Grace rested her hand lightly on my arm. "Consider this - if Ravel does indeed exist, then she is extremely powerful and cunning. If a fraction of the stories of her activities are true, then she is a creature that has discovered new meanings of evil. To search for her is not a quest to be undertaken lightly."

"I realize that," I said flippantly, still naive of how black a hag's soul could be, "Do you know anything else about Ravel?"

"She was said to be one of the hags of the Gray Waste, and that she was believed to possess powers and a cunning far beyond those of her sisters. She came to Sigil long ago, and in addition to the evils she committed during her stay, rumor has it that her actions threatened the Cage itself. Now she primarily exists only as fiction, a figure in children's stories." Grace paused. "I imagine the Lady of Pain dealt with her as all threats to Sigil are dealt with."

"What is the Gray Waste?"

"A blighted plane that lies effectively 'between' Baator and the Abyss. It is frequently a battleground in the Blood War," her expression warmed again as she sat down, gesturing for me to do the same. The cushions were firm, a little too much to fall asleep or even nap properly, but the curves were comfortable against my back. "I must say, this is indeed an intriguing conversation," her lips curved into a rosy smile, "Perhaps you would like

some refreshment?"

A small teapot had been propped above a small candle flame on a countertop, keeping the tea warm up until serving. Porcelain clinked as Fall-From-Grace set up the table. Annah snubbed her cup, Morte didn't seem interested, and Dak'kon merely held his cup to warm his hands, but Grace still poured a serving for each of us if only to be polite.

I sipped the amber tea. It was... exotic. Very complex, hot yet cooling on the tongue, with the barest whisper of fruit and sweetness that left me thirsty for more.

"Arborean peach blossoms," she said warmly at my expression, "With white peppermint and a drop of fire blossom honey to accent the flavors."

"It's very good," I chuckled, and nibbled on a biscuit, "Nice job you have here... you get to mix business with pleasure so seamlessly."

She smiled, and peered over the edge of her cup mysteriously, "Sir, pleasure is my business."

Annah's tail flicked as her expression soured. I chuckled, "Well, as wonderful as this is, I came here looking for help. Perhaps you can help me."

Grace blinked, "Help? What kind of help were you looking for?"

"I seem to have lost my memories... in so doing, I've lost myself."

"You have been stricken with amnesia?" she looked pained. She set her teacup down on the saucer, "How terrible! Do you have any idea how it happened?"

I shrugged, "Not really... at least not that I can remember. I woke up on a slab on the Mortuary, and everything before that is black."

"You awoke in the Mortuary?"

"I think the Dustmen mistook me for being dead... or I was dead... or something. All I know is that I regenerate wounds quickly. I could be immortal, but I don't even know that for sure."

Fall-From-Grace seemed to be appraising me with renewed interest. "Those scars on your body." She reached out a hand, as if to touch me. "May I?"

While any other man would've been left blabbling at the request, I merely blinked at the question. I was wearing a bone sash and a kilt of all things... there was no room to be modest. "Uh... sure."

Fall-From-Grace dragged her finger across my chest lightly, tracing the edges of my scars and following the curves where they blended into some of my tattoos. Her touch left a warm, electric trail along my skin, and I trembled a little at the light caress. She seemed fascinated. "These scars do look as if they would have taken several lifetimes to accumulate."

"They certainly do... though some are more recent."

Grace leaned back. "Some of those wounds would have been fatal. To a normal man." She tapped her chin, thinking. "What do you intend to do now?"

"I don't really know. For the moment, I'm just searching for clues to who I am and what happened to me."

Fall-From-Grace was still thinking, her finger tapping on her chin. "I must say, I've never met a man who had lost himself in the literal sense." She raised an eyebrow. "Forgive me, but your condition is intriguing."

I laughed, "It is that."

She nodded. "If it will help, you are welcome to tour the Brothel. Several of our students are well-versed in the verbal arts. Perhaps some of them will be able to re-kindle your memories."

"Would you like to join me on my travels?"

Annah stiffened, then started muttering under her breath. "Who's to say she'll be comin' with us? We donnae need the likes o' her, so's we don't."

"Bar that, fiendling!" Morte clicked his teeth together. "I'm ALL for the succubus coming with us... the Powers know you're about as fun as passing a caltrop through your bowels."

"Ye'd best latch yer bone-box, skull, or I'll rattle yeh so hard they'll be pickin' yer teeth off the spire --!"

"Travel with you?" Grace smiled slightly. She seemed to be ignoring my companions. "That's rather forward of you."

I could feel the heat rising to my cheeks... I had extended the invitation on a whim, blurting it out like an eager-to-please boy. "I'd rather be honest with my intentions. You seem extremely pleasant and well-versed in the ways of the Planes. A companion with that kind of knowledge would be welcome."

"Hey, wait just a minute!" Morte protested, "I'm the one well-versed in the Planes! That's my job, chief!"

I grinned, "Having two people knowledgeable about the Planes in our band seems pretty smart to me. Besides, I said, 'pleasant,' too, Morte."

"Pleasant on the eyes, maybe! Looks to ME like all some chit has to do is show a little skin, and you'll sign her right up!" Morte fell silent. "Not that I mind that really, I just thought I'd mention it."

"Noted, Morte. Look... Lady Grace, excuse me if I'm being too forward, but would you care to travel with us?"

Grace pursed her lips and arched her eyebrows, "I appreciate your candor. I shall counter with some of my own: Why should I travel with you?"

"Lady Grace, I intend to travel to places perhaps no one else has ever been to... or could reach. Would that interest you?"

"That would, indeed." She cupped her chin in her hand and thought for a moment. "Yet..."

I grinned, "You mean you wouldn't be interested in traveling with an immortal amnesiac who is searching the Planes for himself?"

"Oh, I would be extremely interested." She smiled slightly. "Such a suggestion is intriguing, make no mistake about that."

"Then you would like to travel with me, then?"

"If you wish me to, then there is something you must do for me. There are ten students in this establishment. I would like you to speak to all of them, then return to me with your thoughts. Then we shall see if we shall travel together or not."

I nodded, "I will go speak to them, then. I will return when I have spoken to all of them."

## Interlude

The night wears on with the heavy clink of coins adding a metallic chime to the slow strumming of Oudilin's lyre. While the hungry crowd had thinned somewhat by the fading day, the seats were still packed and many were left to enjoy their supper standing like ancient Stoics.

For many it is a choice between fish soup and lamb stew, with a thick piece of bread and a wedge of cheese. The light clack of porcelain on the wooden countertop heralds the arrival of your own dish: a dozen snails, baked with cheese and herbs. A light snack for the evening.

Your fingers curl around one shell and the two-tined fork pierces the belly of the critter as the voices begin to rise.

"Aha!" a garishly-clad woman proclaims, swelling with pride "I knew it! There were records of the Nameless One as a Sensate!"

"What are yeh talking about?!" G'mir snaps, rattling the table as he squirms in his bonds, "The man knew what he wanted, knew what to do, and 'e did it! 'E was a Cipher he was, mark me true!"

Scii-Tavakis is the third to speak, and her voice is smooth as a serpent sliding through the sands, "Oh please. I would wager a full measure of water that he was a Doomguard. The ruin and destruction his presence has rained across the Planes would match the efforts of armies."



A white-haired old man in dingy clerical robes scoffs, "Bah, everyone knows he was Athar... if not he was one at heart. The man's power has bent the Planes and challenged the gods. What more proof do you need?"

One of the Signers scoffs at the first speaker, "A Signer! Is this some test of my convictions? Archived in my memories of the Hall of Speakers there is clear evidence of the Nameless One's presence."

"No, a Taker!" another growls, "Haven't any of you heard the tales of his ability to seize what he wanted from the weak? His prowess is legendary!"

"Xaos iS as Xaos dOes dID he rUMble nImiC StaRs! foUR leAVes fALLinG tHe cAScaDes dO TELL sHlveRing liEs."

"Shut up, all of you!" Factor Epetrius snaps, "My word this is worse than the half-baked squabbles of Namers in the City Court. I would think that faction representatives would exercise an iota of restraint on claiming him as a mascot until real evidence was presented."

"Well wot was 'e then?"

Epetrius' lips thin with impatience and slowly, very slowly, he knuckles those smoked-glass spectacles back onto the bridge of his nose. You sip your ale, hiding a chuckle with your mug as you bring the speared mollusk to your lips. The flesh is tender, the butter rich with garlic and herbs.

Epetrius heaves a sigh. "In truth, none of this squabbling is explicitly incorrect. Tales of the Nameless One scattered like sawdust and there's no doubt that whispers of him have blown into many a faction's doors.

"True, there is one faction that this particular incarnation of the Nameless One had joined, but first he had to deal with the task ahead of him. And oh what a pleasant task it was..."

## Chapter 56

"So... if these prostitutes peddle dialogue... am I sampling their 'wares' by talking to them?"

Morte bobbed beside me, "Eh, if it isn't pillowy and covered in honey, I wouldn't call 'em wares."

The dark-haired young woman in the first room was staring listlessly off into space, sighing miserably and occasionally picking at the seams of her green velvet gown. It was difficult to discern whether she was depressed or simply bored. Jewelry jingled at her wrists and emerald cloth hugged her shapely figure, especially accentuating her breasts. She would've been pretty if it weren't for the fact that her eyes were half-lidded in petulant longing.

"Greetings. Lady Grace has asked that I speak to each of you in turn."

She gave me only the briefest of glances before staring off into the distance once more. "Greetings, yes... I am named Juliette. How may I... oh, never thou mind. Leave me be, please." She gave an exasperated sigh.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing at all. Only that I spend my days gazing into the face of mediocrity, seeing if anything can erase its dreadful, tedious passage."

"Is your life so tedious?"

"Alas, it is." She sighed again, closing her eyes and massaging her temples. "Dreadfully boring!"

I chuckled, "I'm certain I could add some excitement to your life ..."

"No, no... 'tis kind of thee to offer, though. I am already with a man, sir, and I do love him dearly. 'Tis just that I wish..." She tapped her finger against her chin. "...something more of our liaison."

"Is the relationship lacking, then?"

"The only thing it lacks is excitement, sir. Our families took the news of our

courtship splendidly, his siblings love my siblings, and our friends think our union to be blessed by the Powers themselves. All fine and good, but things are going..." She frowned. "...so smoothly. 'Tis not right to have such a trouble-free courtship."

"I don't know about that..."

"Dost thou not? Hast thou ever had such a courtship?" She glanced briefly at me. "T'would seem that thy life is filled with a variety of problems, judging by the pallor of thy skin."

A face flickered in my memory, of a pale ivory-haired woman, her sea-blue gown whipped by an unfelt wind, "I can't remember any courtships I have had. The remnants of the ones I have encountered suggest that I may have had some problems."

Juliette ignored me and continued, groaning, "'Tis just that all my friends have such interesting relationships... ones fraught with turmoil, feuding families, daggers at one another's backs, poison, mad siblings and irate fathers with large swords. I have a lover whose family loves me and whom the world loves." She sighed again. "A great source of annoyance. How I wish I could formulate some way to spice things up..."

Morte floated close to me, whispering: "I feel sorry for her lover. He doesn't know how bad he has it. A chit like this is nothing but trouble."

"That doesn't sound wise, Juliette. Relish what you have."

"I wish to experience troubles, though. I wish to experience the up and downs of courtship... but with him, no other. Ah, such a thing is love. It can be as dull as a club, and is of no use to an aspiring Sensate."

"What did you have in mind to spice things up?"

"I am not sure. Some element of danger. Or jealousy. Something intense."

"I can pretend to be a jealous suitor, if you want."

Juliette glanced at me, then scoffed. "Oh, I highly doubt th- hmm. Actually, that idea 'tis not half as addled as I had first thought. Thou dost certainly look dangerous enough." She looked me in the eye, as if appraising a horse.

"Art thou as rugged and tough as thy appearance would indicate?"

I grinned, "They don't make them any tougher than me, I assure you."

"Thou shalt do this for me, then?"

"Yes, I'll do it."

"Excellent! My love, Montague, may be found within the Civic Festhall. I thank thee!"

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She came gliding down the hall when I first met her, tall, elegant, with her sharp features and a regal demeanor, a striking example of aristocratic beauty. Her clothes appeared to be spun of silver thread, and a small phial dangled from her necklace. Flame-haired and commanding, the prostitute was perfumed with an exotic, erotic scent that seemed to draw me towards her. That aroma dominated the air without overwhelming my senses, as if it were her entourage.

"Greetings..."

She looked me over, arching an eyebrow with what I sensed to be disdain. "Greetings. My name is Vivian; am I to presume I am being summoned?"

"No, Lady Grace just asked me to talk to each of you in turn..."

She nodded imperiously. "Go on, then."

"What's that incredible smell?"

She smiled at me. "I thank you for your compliment... but I assure you, this particular aroma is a bland and paltry odor in comparison to my personal scent." She sighed.

"Your... 'personal' scent?"

"Yes, I have a particular scent that seems to have gone... wandering. 'Tis somewhat... difficult to keep in one place. I hope that someone did not take it by accident... though you never know, with the 'ladies' around here." She

frowned. "So... by any chance you have smelled it somewhere?"

"You smell quite nice right now, you know..."

She scowled for a moment, then in an instant smiled at me. "Yes, yes, and I thank you for your compliment... but I assure you, this particular aroma is nothing to my personal scent."

"How can a scent go wandering?"

Vivian shook her head. "I had meant to infer that it had been taken. The 'ladies' here are a bit jealous, at times, and have been known to take my various perfumes for themselves. This time, though, someone has absconded with my own, personal, scent... I worked on that scent, perfected it, and now poof! 'Tis gone! I need not bear such annoyances!" Vivian stomped her feet: "I want that scent back, and I want it now!"

Tch. Women. "How would you know it if you found it?"

"You would know it by smell, I assure you. 'Tis quite striking, especially to men."

"I can help you..."

Vivian seemed dubious. "Are you certain? I do not wish to impose."

"No imposition. I am pleased to help such a lovely woman as yourself."

Annah mumbled something angrily; and my ear twitched at the words "piking" and "idjit-stick."

Vivian smiled and nodded to me. "You are too kind. Very well... if you run across it, please let me know. I am somewhat anxious to get it back. A one-of-a-kind scent, really."

~~~~~

The petite, attractive young woman was smiling blissfully and humming to herself. Her wide, pale blue eyes seemed to constantly drink in her surroundings as she looked about. Her arms were tucked at her hips, which moved to an unheard beat, swaying back and forth slightly as if she were

humming in her head. Such a restless, perky girl.

"Greetings."

She curtsied gratefully and looked up to me, smiling. "Well met, good sir! I'm Nenny! And how are you this fine d-?" She suddenly noticed my scars and placed a gloved hand over her mouth. "Oh my! You're hurt!" She blinked. "All over!"

Morte spun around me, mocking the girl's obviousness. "Powers above, chief... she's right! I never noticed before... you're covered in scars!"

"They're all old scars," I reassured her, "I'm fine."

She nodded quietly, lowering her hand.

"So I was hoping we could t-"

"Huh?" She couldn't seem to tear her eyes from my scars. "Oh, how shameful of me! Don't mind my rude staring! I am named Nenny," she made another little curtsy. "And it is my great pleasure to welcome you to our Brothel for the Slating of Intellectual Lusts." She returned to staring at my body. "You have tattoos under those scars, too! What's that one?" She pointed to one of my tattoos.

"That one's-"

"Looks fascinating! Look at the way the lines of ink...I think that's ink..." She squinted, then reached out to touch my skin.

I let her. Nenny's hands were delicate as they caressed the wound-puckered flesh. Her fingers were adept at drinking in the sensations.

"I think that's ink." She traced a finger around the edge of the tattoo. "Is it ink? And what a pattern! Look at the way the lines intersect here." She touched the center of the tattoo. "That's simply amazing..." She pursed her lips and frowned in disappointment. "I could make it out better if there weren't so many scars..."

"There's nothing to be done about the scars; they're permanent."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry... pox on me for even mentioning them!" She cringed. "But I have to know... are you absolutely sure you're all right? I'm looking at you, and I can't help but believe that you're not in some pain."

I shrugged, "I have amnesia, but that is all."

"Amnesia?" Nenny blinked, then brightened. "Loss of memory! You are so lucky," she chimed perkily. "Everything must be so new to you."

"That's... an angle I hadn't considered."

Nenny clapped her hands delightedly. "I'm so pleased I could open your mind to that idea! I've heard that's what being a Sensate is all about... bringing new experiences to others."

"I'm trying find Vivian's scent... do you know where it might be?"

"Hmm." Nenny frowned deeply. "I... uh..."

"What?"

"Oh, I just can't! I can't say anything bad about anyone! I'm just no good at it!"

"It's not bad to point out a thief, Nenny."

"Oh, but I don't know if she's a thief..." Nenny bit her lip and looked at me with pleading eyes, as if she just wished I'd leave the topic alone.

"Look, why don't you try and say something not nice about her."

"Oh, all right." Nenny put her hands on her hips and frowned deeply, almost exaggeratedly. I had to resist the temptation to laugh. "Ooooooh, I dislike her very, very much." She paused for a moment, then looked at me out of the corner of her eye, as if gauging my reaction. "Was that convincing?"

This... was going to take a while. "No, not really."

Nenny frowned. "I knew I wouldn't be any good at this!" She looked up at me, depressed. "Do you know how hard it is to say bad things about someone?! It feels so wrong."

"Why don't you practice on me, Nenny?"

"I suppose I could try..." She looked dubious. "You big mean nasty brute!" She put her hands on her hips. "Meanie!" She looked at me. "How was that?"

"Put more accent on 'brute.'"

"You big mean nasty brute!"

"Better. Now hit me."

Nenny clamped her hands over her mouth, looking shocked. "Oh, I couldn't! I musn't!" She blinked. "How does one hit somebody, anyway?"

"Go ahead. Do it lightly, if you have to. Remember: I'm a mean, nasty brute. I deserve it."

Nenny slapped me; I barely felt it. She still looked shocked and frightened that she hurt me. "Oh, I'm sorry! Did that hurt? Tell me you're okay!"

"Don't break character, Nenny. Come on; show me what you've got. You can say something bad... just let it all out."

"Oh... I mean, oh!" Nenny drew her tiny frame to its full height, balled her hands into fists, put them on her hips, and scrunched up her face in a cute scowl. "Oh, damned be you! You deserved that for all the indignities you put me through! Going out late at night," Her eyes roamed up and down my body. "Getting into fights and getting all scarred up! What are the kids going to think, hmm?!"

"Uh... kids?"

"What?!" Nenny's fury rose another notch. "Have you forgotten our children?! Are you so sodden with drink that you can't even remember that we have children?!" Nenny threw up her hands in exasperation. "You're hopeless, clueless and a lot of other 'lesses' I won't mention right now."

"Excellent," I said approvingly.



"Oh, don't you 'excellent' me, like I'm some backlicker looking for your approval! I am my own woman, and this woman is about to walk out of your life unless I get some solid commitment!"

"All right... that's enough out of you, Nenny."

Nenny punched me. I barely felt it. "Take this." She punched me again. "And this!" She punched me again, promptly turning into a little fist-flailing whirlwind.

"Okay, okay... ow!" I yelped when she started pinching, "time to let go of the anger."

Nenny sighed tiredly and rubbed her hands. "Whew. That was easier than I thought!"

"No kidding."

"And I'm sure I'll do better next time! I'm so excited to have learned something new... thank you!"

"So, I don't suppose you can tell me who took Vivian's scent?"

"Maybe... I saw that mean, mean Marissa sneaking out of Vivian's room one night. Now I'm not saying she took it, but I know Marissa's not a very nice person, and that sure sounds suspicious, huh? I'd go ask her about it." Nenny nodded at me.

"Well, chief. You made a right banshee out of her," Morte cackled as we left Nenny's room.

"Next time I'll just send Annah on the girl," I smirked.

~~~~~

The striking young woman had skin the color of burnished copper. A translucent white dress, held precariously by golden clasps, was draped carefully over her shapely form like two silver-white streams of milk curving around her breasts.

"Greetings..."

The woman nodded and smiled briefly, but offered nothing else. The scent of her hair, sweetly perfumed, filled my nostrils.

"Who are you?"

She smiled and curtsied, but offered no response.

"Can you speak?"

She shook her head and smiled sadly at me.

Morte laughed, "I love this chit already!"

I batted him away and continued, "Can you write, then, or pantomime? I'm supposed to talk to each of Grace's students."

The girl pouted, shaking her head. That was all.

"May I ask why you can't communicate?"

She sighed softly and nodded.

"Why-" I started, but sighed. Hopefully this would be enough for Fall-From-Grace.

~~~~~

My shin cracked against a table. Biting back a curse, I continued bumbling through the darkened room. I would've left long ago if it weren't for the sound of quiet breathing, or the cruel chuckle that came from the shadows. Circling around I squinted at the figure behind a partition, I could barely able to make out a shapely female form in the darkness. She turned to me, but I could see nothing of her face.

"Hello. Lady Grace sent me to speak to each of you."

The figure answered in a voice that was slow and deadly, like a steel dagger drawn across stone: "Yes? Come to speak with Marissa, have you? Quite rude of you to enter a darkened room, storming behind my partition like so... rude, and foolhardy." I could hear a faint whispering sound, like a slight

breeze... or the hissing of serpents.

Morte whispered quietly, "Whoah... creepy chit."

"My apologies, my lady... I wasn't sure if someone was here."

The woman gave a slight hmph. "But it would seem there is someone in this room, wouldn't it? Shall you be on your way, then?"

"Why is it so dark in here?"

"To prevent any unwanted... and embarrassing... casualties. Now what is it that you want?"

"I was told you were seen sneaking away from Vivian's chambers, recently... is that connected with her missing scent, somehow?"

Marissa said nothing, though an angry hissing issued from the darkness around her. "Yes, I've been known to creep into Vivian's chamber for some of her perfumes... though I doubt you'll meet another here who hasn't. If you're implying that I've got her personal scent, well... feel free to sniff around. You'll not find it on me or in my chambers, I assure you. Perhaps whoever took my Crimson Veil took Vivian's scent, as well."

"Your veil has been stolen?"

"My veil... my Crimson Veil. Have you seen it, perchance?"

"No... what's it for? Is it just a normal veil?"

Marissa sighed quietly. "Not, not quite. It aids me in communication... face to face communication, that is."

"Why do you need to hide your face?"

"Enough with these asinine questions!" she growled, "Now get out!"

## Chapter 57

Ash-gray skin draped over a firm, voluptuous body. Those rounded curves were held loosely in rein by a scant violet gown... I'd seen more wool in a single washrag than this. A thick mane of wavy, raven-colored hair draped over graceful shoulders. Shimmering, crimson eyes burned like fire-lit rubies. Though she wasn't beautiful in the typical sense of the word, her features were exotic and not altogether unattractive.

"Well hello, miss."

The woman's voice was deep and sensuous: "And my greetings to you, sir." Her burning eyes roamed over me. "I'm Kesai-Serris. So tell me: what might I do for you, hmmm?"

"Anything!" Morte cried. "Do anything you want to me!"

Kesai laughed heartily, revealing canines long enough to be considered fangs. She shook her head and smiled at Morte. "Truly, though, please... what can I do for you?"

"Well, what do you usually do for patrons?"

"Talk, of course! Usually about dreams, often those erotic in nature... but not always!" Kesai winked at me, smiling. "So! Would you like to tell me yours? Don't be shy; I've heard everything, you know. Nothing will shock or surprise me, and I so love to hear people's dreams. We can trade if you'd like, too - but you must go first."

I was suddenly very aware of that half-healed scar within me, like a half-healed wound, "I... don't have dreams, actually."

Kesai arched her eyebrows in surprise. "Truly? How sad! Even fiends and devas dream, you know. Are you certain you don't?"

"Quite certain. No dreams, at all."

"Hmm. Too peculiar! I'm at a loss as to what to say..." she pouted in sympathy.

"I'm trying find Vivian's scent... do you know where it might be?"

"No, I don't." Kesai frowned. "Most of the women will say she's prissy, but she's always been nice enough to me... complimenting me on my eyes... and she smells so good! I hope she finds her own scent again, soon. Try asking Nenny about it; she's everywhere at once and might have seen something."

I smiled, "You do have very lovely eyes, you know."

"Why, thank you! You can see them glowing in the dark, you know... bizarre, no?" she paused to look at me. "You've some nice eyes too... so dark, and mysterious! So full of character."

"Tch." Annah sneered, rolling her eyes. "Idjit."

"Don't be upset, Annah... you're just as lovely," I shot her a cocky smile, laying it on just thick enough without being cloying.

"An' what's that supposed ta mean, yeh pikin' tard?! Didja think me jealous o' this chatty tart? Yeh sod!" Annah spat and looked away from me. The slight blush at her cheeks gave her away.

~~~~~

If there was something that Annah wouldn't have gotten all snippy over, it was this.

Two strange, cubic creatures stood calmly beneath a verdant bough at the indoor garden. They seemed to be as much machine as they were organic - they had 4 skeletal arms like polished copper, and equally metallic wings perched on their top side. As I approached, one of them silently stared at me with wide, unblinking eyes. Its face didn't have the slightest trace of emotion on it.

"C'mon, chief!" Morte groaned, "We're in a building full of some of the sexiest chits this side of the multiverse and you're stopping to talk to *modrons*?"

"What can you tell me about them, Morte?"

Morte made a noise of utter disgust. "What's there to say? Annoying little

clock-work pests... they're always working to impose law and order upon the multiverse. Not good, mind you... just law. Let's just forget about 'em and go chat up the ladies, eh?"

Morte groaned, exasperated, when I approached it.

"Hi."

The modron's voice had a metallic, reverberating quality to it, as if it were more a sound played out on some warped musical instrument than true speech: "Your greeting is returned." There was a soft click as the creature blinked. An awkward silence hung in the air between the two of us.

"I had some questions..."

"Identify yourself to us," it droned.

"I'm... Adahn," I lied.

The creature tilted slightly forward, then back, on its metallic legs - whether the movement was meant to indicate a bow or a nod, I was unsure. "We would identify ourselves as modrons, quadrone type, winged variant, to the subject, Adahn."

"What are you doing here?"

"Our purpose here is observation."

I looked around. There were no busty modron females around, and thank the Powers. The idea was somewhat disturbing, "What are you observing?"

"We are observing one of the establishment's staff."

I blinked, "Who?"

"As previously stated, we are observing one of the establishment's staff."

"Yes, but who exactly are you observing?"

"The object of our scrutiny is named 'Dolora.'"

I hadn't met her yet...

I wasn't disappointed. Dark-haired, pale-skinned, and swishing with a firm, steady stride, Dolora carried a cultured, refined look. As she turned to me, I noted that her eyes - which I had previously thought to be gray - were the color of brushed steel.

"Greetings..."

Her voice was soft, calm, and without inflection - it had a certain 'far-away' quality, as if somehow not attached to her. "Greetings... I am called Dolora. May I serve you, somehow?"

I leaned forward with a smile, "In what ways can you serve me, Dolora?"

She blinked her eyes, then touched her hand to her heart, bowing her head slightly. "I am able to debate any scholarly or academic matter quite proficiently, if that is your wish. I am also well-versed in various games of strategy, should you wish to play something - though I have the materials for few such games, here."

"Debate, you say?" I smiled. It might be interesting to banter philosophy with someone new for the first time.

Someone lovely.

Dolora nodded. "That is correct. I am neither a tome nor a tutor; I have no desire to educate my patrons. Should you have a matter to discuss, however... the fifteen factions and their effect on Sigilian politics, the most effective battle stratagems for warring in Acheron, the meaning of existence itself... I would be most pleased to choose a counter-point and engage you in debate."

"Sounds fun."

I chose a topic and began... the debate lasted a long time as the two of us exchanged points and counter-points, each attempting to methodically undermine the other's position. In that time Dak'kon sat and listened quietly, Annah sat in the high branch of the tree, swinging her legs and enjoying the shade. In the distance I could hear the yelps of some of the women as Morte tried to sneak little looks under their skirts.

But as I spoke, a strange feeling began to come over me... a memory, trying to surface...

~~~~~

*The hollow echo of music through the banquet hall had become a distant hum. The acoustics of the main auditorium of the Hall of Speakers are poor. It is an empty shell compared to what is available at the Civic Festhall, yet such petty details are unimportant for what is happening here.*

*Well-dressed elites mill about, discussing politics and philosophy over glasses of wine. Across from me is a small, impeccably dressed fellow with a golden medallion glinting on his chest, emblazoned with the strange draconic symbol that is the seal of the Sign of One. The two of us stand in a circle of onlookers who had gathered to listen to our debate.*

*"But... but that's impossible!" the man says, looking perplexed.*

*"Oh, but it is." I reply with a knowing smile. "I've made several inarguable points and given you a number of examples. You simply don't exist."*

*He sobers, the confusion giving away to helpless shock, "But... you can't! Were I to accept that, I'd... I'd..."*

*"Yes. You'd cease to exist."*

*And without a flash of light or puff of smoke - with no fanfare of any sort - the man is simply gone.*

*The onlookers ooh and aah, some begin to clap, until the aristocratic adulation grows into polite applause. I give a flourishing bow, adjust the collar of my velvet coat, and walk away with a small, satisfied smile upon my lips.*

~~~~~

I suddenly realized Dolora was watching me closely. "Are you feeling well? We might finish our discussion at another time, should you like..."

"No..." I worked some moisture back into my mouth and licked my lips, "let's

continue the debate..."

As hard-pressed as I was to beat Dolora's infallible sense of logic, I eventually won out. She merely nodded in approval. "You are a most skilled debater; this there is no denying. I do feel, though, that had I time to perform some research, you might not have bested me."

I smiled, "Perhaps, perhaps not. I'd consider that an unfair advantage, though."

Dolora nodded. "If you would like, we can debate once more upon the same topic... I could argue your position this time, should you desire it."

"Are you always so ruthless in a debate?"

Dolora nodded. "Mistress Grace instructed me to show no mercy, for another of her students always allows a patron to win after a lengthy debate. It was Mistress Grace's desire that I provide a different sort of experience for the clientele."

"Hmm. Could we play a game, then?"

"Of course. Is there anything in particular you wish to play?"

I shook my head, "No... I don't really remember any games..."

"Here, then - allow me to show you one." Dolora brought out a thin, lacquered box, which unfolded into a small board marked with a grid. The contents of the box proved to be a number of polished stone chips... half of them black, half of them white. "This game goes by many names. Shall I explain the rules to you?"

"Yes, please."

Dolora explained the rules of the game - how the chips are moved, how one bests one's opponent. It seemed, somehow, faintly familiar to me. "The rules are simple, yes? But a great deal of complexity lies within the game, itself. It takes a great deal of time to master. Shall we play?"

"Yes, let's."

As I played, I came to realize that I'd done so before. Various plays and strategies came to mind that have won me previous games, and I found myself trying every trick I knew to beat her. Suddenly, a strange feeling came over me... another memory, trying to surface...

~~~~~

*A smoke-filled field of battle lays sprawled out before me. Atop a great hill overlooking the fighting I sit, mounted upon a massive, four-legged beast. The braying of horns carries my orders to the troops below.*

*Even as I watch, my forces divide, fleeing left and right as the foreign army fights its way up the hill to slay the enemy lord - me.*

*"The fools," I murmur to myself, lips curling into a wicked smile. Soon my knights shall charge down the hillside and stop their advance in an instant... and at that very moment my 'retreating' footmen will fall in to crush their flanks! Ah, yet another victory soon to be mine...*

~~~~~

I suddenly realized Dolora was watching me intently. "Are you feeling well? We might take up the game another day, if you so wish..."

"No..." I cleared my throat and shook off the last vestiges of the memory, already gone from me like smoke at my fingertips, "let's continue the game..."

Dolora played excellently, counter-acting all but my most crafty moves, but eventually my feints and calculating maneuvers won over her well-crafted strategies. She nodded approvingly as she began to put the game away. "You are a fine player, perhaps a master. I commend you for your skill."

"Just a fluke, I guess." I thanked her and moved on to the next room.

~~~~~

"You useless half-wit! Stoneless eunuch!" I stepped back at the snarl that filtered half-muted through the door.

"Y-yes mistress!"

There was the meaty sound of a set of knuckles striking flesh.

"Get down there! Lick it!"

"mmph mmmh-"

"Bah, forget it you pale-bellied hollow-skulled idiot. Get out of my sight!"

The door swung open and a slim little man scurried past. He sported a fine black eye and a trickle of blood ran down his nose, which made the half-smile on his lips all the more out-of-place.

I wasn't going to relish this.

The wild-looking tiefling girl met my gaze with an angry scowl. Her tattooed body was practically naked, covered by only a narrow leather thong, a black cloth brassier and armored shoulder pads that appeared to serve more as decoration rather than actual protection. Her spiked hair - as well as the thin fur that covered her goat-like legs - was brassy white, and numerous silver rings dangled from her ears, nostrils, lips and brow. She wore a leather collar around her throat with the inscription "Kimasxi Addertongue."

Kimasxi bared her teeth at me. "And just what are you looking at, you banged-up sod?"

"My friend thought you were attractive, but whoah! Was he ever horribly mistaken!"

She sneered at Morte, then looked below him, where a body would normally be. "Sharp tongue... for a stemless deader."

"Like I'd let mine anywhere near if I had one! What, did you hear the word 'brothel' and think you could make some jink here, you flea-bitten gutter-whore? Hah! Can't believe they even let you in the door, what with all those ticks hopping off your shaggy legs!"

"Ticks?! The only annoying insect around here is you!" She suddenly turned to me. "Hey! You here to talk to me, or what?"

"Or what?' What else can I do with you?" I crossed my arms. Some of the

patrons might've enjoyed being horsewhipped by a tiefling, but I knew I could dish out as much crap as she could throw.

"What did you have in mind, you sodding jawbox? Go ahead; give me a reason to say 'no' to you."

"The Lady Grace said I was to talk to each of her ten students. Though apparently she needs to raise her standards."

The tiefling rolled her eyes. "And what makes you think I care? Why don't you lick my backside?"

"My tongue's not wide enough... and I don't like hair in my mouth."

"Well, you seem to like the taste of offal in your mouth, you dung-breathed cretin."

"Only because it's like kissing you, you mangy stink-pot," I grinned. Annah hid a chuckle behind her wrist.

"Kiss me?" She made a retching sound. "I'd rather kiss a bloody mass of phlegm than lay my lips on you. No thanks!"

"Don't thank me... thank the Powers someone actually wants to kiss you."

Kimasxi looked at a loss for something to say. For an instant, a smile threatened to crack the grimacing mask of her face - then she became more of a basilisk than ever. "All right, what do you want of me?"

"What do you usually do for patrons?"

"I'm a practitioner of abuse."

"What's that mean?"

"I'll show you." Her hand lashed out to slap my face, but I managed to barely dodge the blow. Kimasxi pouted visibly, then scowled. "Oh, well."

"Say..." I said looking sideways at Morte, "Can you teach my skull friend here to be more abusive?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Now that's an unusual request. I don't know, it seems pretty foul-mouthed already..."

"He! That's 'HE seems pretty foul-mouthed,' Kimasxi 'Bladderdung'... you scruffy, goat-gammed harlot!" Morte snapped.

"You wish you had legs like mine, you pitiful wretch of a bone-box! I can walk, run, dance... what do you do? Bob around wishing you had a pair, goat's or otherwise!"

The two of them laid into one another, exchanging barbed, blistering insults and clashing with razor-edged tongues. More than once I was tempted to cover my ears, and even Annah looked impressed at the battle.

At last the two stopped their bickering, and an eerie silence settled over them as they eyed one another hatefully. Finally, the tiefling made a grudging admission to Morte: "You're not bad, really. Not bad at all."

"Better than you, perhaps?" Morte waggled his eyebrows at her. "Eh? Eh?"

Kimasxi narrowed her eyes at Morte. "Don't push it, skull."

"I won't, tiefling. I will admit I might have learned a thing or two, though... good thinking, chief!"

~~~~~

Clad in an earthen peach-brown gown, the next fetching young woman had a far-away look in her soft, sea-green eyes. Her honey-blond hair was pulled back and coiffed in a high, elegant style and was decked with fine ornaments that served only to frame her lovely face further.

"Greetings..."

She nodded to me, "Greetings. I am Yves, the Tale-Chaser."

"What a coincidence! I, too, chase tails," Morte chirped.

Yves continued, unperturbed. "Have you come to trade tales?"

"Why are you called the 'Tale-Chaser?'"

She stared past me, and recited a story long-practiced and enchanting, "Once upon a time, a girl came to an oracle who was rumored to know many things and asked of it a boon. Her life was in need of direction, so she asked this oracle as to what would give her purpose...

"Now, the oracle was not evil, but it was vague and tended towards drink, which caused it to be obscure in many matters of judgment and focus. Its only answer to the girl's question was that within one story that she would hear in her lifetime was the truth that she sought. The girl went off and collected stories, which she chases to this day, not knowing which of the thousands hold the truth.

"Such is the danger of a foolish question and the wisdom of an unspoken one."

We traded stories then, one-for-one. I told her of my stint in the Mortuary, of the Alley that gave birth to a new segment of the city. I spoke of Reekwind's odiferous curse, of the guttered segment of the Hive that became the Alley of Dangerous Angles. With a heavy heart I recited the tale of Pharod, whose lies had damned him and who sought salvation in vain, the story of Ignus whose heart burned with the love of flame.

She taught me new stories in turn.

'Chapters of Dust.'

"There are chapters in the Dead Book, the massive tome in which the Dustmen keep that records the passing of all that lives into the Eternal Boundary. In this Book, there are chapters that are naught but dust, and it is believed that the names therein are lost souls who cannot die, but must suffer life eternally until history itself dies and grants them release."

'The Clock and the Quadrone.'

"Once upon a time, there existed a modron. It was newly-created, its logic fresh and untested, and it had come to Sigil, following the commands of its modron superiors.

"It knew of nothing but commands and dictates, of obedience and passing along the orders of its superiors. For you see, modrons are only aware of the

commands of their immediate superiors - they have no grasp of a higher authority. Until this one.

"One day it came upon a small shop, within which there was a small clock that could no longer tell time. It was cracked along the edges, the wheels of its hands broken. The modron immediately set itself to work at getting the parts to fix the broken clock.

"It made a new wooden housing for the clock's parts, replaced the bent springs, carefully filed and oiled the clockwork machinery, and carved new hands from the sparse metal available to it. The newly-repaired clock's precise ticking reminded it of the great gears of Mechanus, and it comforted it as much as any thing may comfort a modron.

"And what the modron never came to understand was that it truly **loved** this clock that it had worked on, and for reasons it could not explain, elected to remain in Sigil and be with the clock for the rest of its years."

'The Gilded Tale.'

"Upon the Plane of Ysgard is the Gilded Hall, where those Sensates that seek the pleasure of gullet and loin can be found. They indulge these passions in earnest, never realizing that the doors of the hall never open and that there is no clear path back to the Civic Festhall. They are the unwanted Sensates, the ones that do not truly believe in the faction, but instead seek only pleasure for pleasure's sake. Are prisoners who do not realize they are such truly prisoners?"

'The Lady's Suitor.'

"The tale concerns a suitor of Lady of Pain, one of many over the years. He was a young man who was obsessed with the Mistress of Sigil. He saw her everywhere, in every corner of her city. He would hear the rustling of her robes, the scrape of her blades, and grew infatuated beyond all reason. He hoped that if he worshipped her, that he would at last be able to see her... and so worship her he did.

"He was found dead on the blood-soaked steps of his own home, grievous stab wounds covering the whole of his body... but his eyes were open wide, and upon his lips was a triumphant smile."

'Memories of Beauty'

"Once came a man who had experienced the most beautiful thing in the multiverse. It was his intention to place the experience within one of the Civic Festhall's sensory stones - magical devices which held feelings and memories for an eternity, leaving them for others to partake of.

"But he thought about it: wouldn't its being shared dilute the experience? So he held it to himself, precious thing that it was, and aged with the memory. But as he aged, the memory became tarnished and beaten, and he could no longer recall the glory of the experience."

'The Execution.'

"Once, a murderer roamed Sigil's streets, a black-hearted man by the name of Kossacs. He had been blessed by his Abyssal mother so that no one could strike him with an intent to harm or they themselves would die. He reveled in his blessing, using it to start fights and murder anyone who crossed his path.

"During one of his murderous rages, he was captured by the Harmonium with nets and brought before the Guvners. The trial was short, final, yet Kossacs laughed at the proceedings, knowing that no one among them could harm him without dying horribly. At the final day of his trial, he was proclaimed guilty and sentenced to death.

"Kossacs sentence proclaimed by the Guvners was this: 'Confinement for thrice-thirty days, during which time you shall give up your life, be declared dead, and your body removed when all signs of life cease.' Kossacs laughed and dared any of them to try and harm him, yet the court was silent.

"The Mercykillers led Kossacs to their prison and locked him in a dark, empty cell. There was no cot, no lights, and the only door was a steel grate in the ceiling.

"As they lowered him into the cell, the Mercykiller told him - 'in the corner of your cell will you find a chalice. It holds poison. Your death will be swift.'

"'Aren't you going to execute me?' Kossacs snarled at the guard.

"'No one in Sigil shall lay a hand on you with intent to harm,' came the

Mercykiller's reply.

"Then I spit on your cowardice!' Kossacs laughed, feeling for the chalice in the darkness, then hurling it at the wall and shattering it. Its poison dripped from the walls and dried, until it was no more. 'Come then - you will have to try and kill me now.'

"But there was no response from the grate in the ceiling. It was then that Kossacs noticed the cell had no cot. No lights. And no food and water. All that remained was the shattered chalice, the poison gone. And for the first time, Kossacs knew the icy touch of death's approach.

"In twice-thirty days, the grate opened, and Kossacs' body, now cold, was taken from the cell. It had given up its life, and the execution had been carried out."

Eager for another story, I looked to my companions, "Annah... do you have a story to trade?"

"Aye, I'm a no good at telling such things, I'm not." She frowned, and waved her hands as if trying to shoo away the idea. "Donnae be asking me fer such nonsense, now."

Yves smiled at Annah. "But I would very much like to hear your story..."

"Please share your story, Annah..." I urged.

"C'mon already, fiendling. You already have one tail you won't part with," Morte grumbled.

Annah looked uncomfortable, her tail lashing slowly back and forth. "Well, I know one story..." She suddenly became angry, glaring at Yves. "...but yeh might not like it, yeh won't, so don't be blamin' me fer yer chokin' it outta me!"

"Go ahead, Annah..."

Annah scowled, then finally relented with an exasperated sigh. "I heard a story when I was a wee lass.

"This berk's walkin' home real late, near anti-peak, an' passes an old

toothless crone in a dark an' otherwise empty street. 'Where yeh goin'?' she asks him.

"'Home, to me wife an' kip,' he says.

"'Near the Slags?' she asks him.

"'Sure enough,' he says.

"So she asks him a favor... ta take a box she's got ta Deader's Pit an' give it ta the woman there. Now this berk's a real sap, too nice ta say no despite the fact he's sure somethin's not quite right about this old crone, and agrees. 'But what's the woman's name?' he asks. 'Where does she live? Where should I look fer her if she's not by Deader's Pit?'

"The woman hands him the box - a wooden thing, wrapped in colored cloth - an' tells him ta just go, an' she'll be there. Finally, she warns him: 'An' whatever yeh does, do NOT open the box!'

"So he takes it home with him an' hides it in the rafters, thinkin' he'll bring it by Deader's Pit when it's light out. His wife, though, seein' him hidin' the box, gets right jealous thinkin' it's a gift fer a lover or somethin', an' opens it up as soon as he's not lookin'.

"Well, turns out the box was full o' gouged-out eyes an' severed male members with the hair still on 'em. Her scream brought the berk runnin'... he remembered what the crone said, got right scared and wrapped the box back up.

"He went out straight away ta Deader's Pit, an' sure enough there was another old hag waitin' there for him. He hands her the box, an' she says ta him: 'This box has been opened and looked into.'

"The poor berk tries ta deny it, but she gets this dreadful look on her face. 'Ye've done somethin' horrible!' she tells him, then disappears. That done, he hurries back ta his kip.

"He's feelin' ill when he gets back, an' takes ta bed. His wife bitterly regretted openin' the box an' all, but it was too late... the next day he died of a rottin' disease, an' the first things ta go was his eyes an' stem." Annah nodded grimly, her tale complete.

If that was the kind of story Annah grew up around, that explained a few things.

Yves smiled. "That was a wonderful, tale Annah; you should never hesitate to share it. Now I've one for you and your companion - 'The Parched Land.'"

"Once, a large village was struck by a terrible drought. A farmer journeyed to the Worshipping Stone, and again implored it as to the cause of the drought. He asked the Stone why it did nothing when the fields were parched and dying, why the animals and the people suffered while the Stone did not a thing. 'Have we not given enough offerings?' the farmer asked, begging almost upon his hands and needs. But the Stone did not respond; it merely sat, and cast its shadow."

"Dak'kon... do you have a story to trade?"

"Ach! Are yeh some kind o' pikin' tard? Clappin' and squealin' for storytime?"

"Ah, don't listen to her, chief. She's just jealous that her mams aren't as nice as Yves' here," Morte dodged away before Annah could grab him to do something horrid.

Dak'kon nodded solemnly in response. "I shall impart the tale of 'Ach'ali Drowning.'"

Dak'kon told the story of Ach'ali, a foolish githzerai of myth who had become lost in the chaos of limbo. Normally, a single githzerai may use their focus and mental discipline to form the chaos around them into a small, habitable environment. Ach'ali, however, asked so many useless and unfocused questions in her quest to return home that her isle of matter dissolved around her, and she drowned.

Yves smiled. "Fascinating, Dak'kon. Let me share with you and your companion another version of your tale that I have heard..."

Dak'kon looked attentive, and perhaps a little surprised.

Yves continued to tell a different version of Dak'kon's tale, in which Ach'ali was driven from the githzerai city of Shrak'at'lor for her constant, useless

prattling...

"One day, she encountered a slaadi on his way to the spawning stone. She hastily erected a wall of chaos matter, which even the ravenous slaadi found difficult to break down. Hungrily, it waited, and spoke to her through the wall. She asked it questions, and as she became more absorbed in her pointless queries and the slaadi's answers, her own wall decayed and collapsed upon her... and thus she drowned in the matter of Limbo."

Dak'kon was silent, mulling those words over carefully.

I grinned at Morte, "Your turn."

"Me?" he groaned, "Why do I have to tell a story?"

I sighed, "Forget it, then."

"No, no, I'll do it... I just thought I'd complain a little out of convention. 'Sides, I love the attention."

I stuck my tongue out, "No way, Morte. I don't want to hear it."

"Please! Come on? Pleeeease? It's a great story! Lots of characters, action, foreshadowing and a startling denouement!"

"What's a denouement?"

"Beats me! But it sure sounds impressive!"

I rolled my eyes, "Fine, go ahead."

He grinned cheerfully, then sank his voice down to sound as serious as he could be, "An elderly man was sitting alone on a dark path, right? He wasn't certain of which direction to go, and he'd forgotten both where he was traveling to and who he was. He'd sat down for a moment to rest his weary legs, and suddenly looked up to see an elderly woman before him. She grinned toothlessly and with a cackle, spoke: 'Now your third wish. What will it be?'

"'Third wish?' The man was baffled. 'How can it be a third wish if I haven't had a first and second wish?'

"'You've had two wishes already,' the hag said, 'but your second wish was for me to return everything to the way it was before you had made your first wish. That's why you remember nothing; because everything is the way it was before you made any wishes.' She cackled at the poor berk. 'So it is that you have one wish left.'

"'All right,' said the man, 'I don't believe this, but there's no harm in wishing. I wish to know who I am.'

"'Funny,' said the old woman as she granted his wish and disappeared forever. 'That was your first wish.'"

My blood ran cold.

Chapter 58

By now I had spoken to nine of the prostitutes. Juliette, the troublesome lover. Vivian, the perfumed beauty. Nenny Nine-Eyes who was so boistrous and keen. The pretty mute girl (who, through some inquiries later, I would learn was named Ecco). There was cruel Marissa, the voluptuous dreamer Kesai-Serris, the scholar Dolora, and Yves the Tale-Chaser and Kimasxi Adder-tongue, neither of which needed further adjectives.

Nine. Morte was all too eager to help hunt down the tenth.

"Yeh could always try the secret door in the back," Annah said with a smirk after the third time we circled around the brothel.

"...Secret door?". She indicated a wood paneling near the back, which cleverly swung to the side to reveal a staircase downwards.

Oh.

I had seen many wonders in my short time in Sigil, but this left me

speechless.

A giant statue towered over us, of a naked woman frozen in the steps of a dance. All about her earthenware pots hung from the ceiling which cradled masses of vines, each decked with leaves and blossoms like emerald and violet gowns. The air was fresh: moist and cool like a forest glade.

A slim little man with owlish eyes looked up at me, nudging his spectacles back to the bridge of his nose. He gestured at me with his watering can, "Greetings, sir. Might I ask how you came to be here?"

"I just came down from those stairs... through that strange door I found."

"I'd best work on concealing it a bit better, then," he shrugged, then smiled at me. "I'm the Brothel's caretaker, by the way. You're not supposed to be down here, really, but it's all right if you look around a bit."

I gazed upwards at the graceful arches of the foliage, "Can you tell me what this place is? It's beautiful."

He smiled, "Why thank you. I do my best, you know. This is the Brothel cellar, where the ladies' sensory stones are kept... they use them as diaries of a sort. You won't be able to use them, if that's what you're thinking... each of them is attuned to one particular student of the Brothel, so that only she may access that stone."

Slim silver rings bound each sensory stone like the fringes of a bodice, accentuating the soft curve of the glass globe within. They hummed with the unwavering gaze of a woman's thoughts and memories, mysterious as her gaze and held in rein only by a slim layer of crystal. I reached out, daring to allow my fingers to hover near the surface of one. It didn't so much as flicker.

Each sensory stone had the name of a prostitute inscribed into its base, nine prostitutes in all.

And one more. Held in the mesh of engraved silver bands, it pulsed with that same soft light as all the others. Something had once been inscribed into its base, but the writing had been scoured away.

Damn.

Well, I had other things to do anyway.

"Hey, Nenny."

"Good day to you sir! Oh it's lovely to see you again. Would you like to sit down for a good chat now?" she smiled cheerfully.

"Actually, I was hoping you could help me. I'm trying find Marissa's Crimson Veil... do you know where it might be?"

Nenny's eyes shone bright with recollection. "I'll bet I do! I saw that nasty Kimasxi Addertongue sneaking out of Marissa's room one night. They're both meanies, you know, but Kimasxi's really awful! Anyway, I'd talk to her, first."

I knew that hairy goat-assed hag had something to do with this.

We stood outside. I hummed to myself, trying to drown out the exchange of curses with a lewd drinking song I had picked up in the Smoldering Corpse. Morte pressed his occipital bone to the door, his eyes flicking back and forth as if he were mentally taking notes.

Eventually the door burst open and knocked Morte aside with a yelp, but the man storming out was too red-faced with fury to notice.

"Well," Kimasxi said with a curled lip as I entered, "What was the abishai eating when he squatted in front of my door and squeezed you out?"

"I came here to ask you something Kimasxi."

She rolled her eyes, as if bored if she couldn't get a rise out of me, "Make it quick then, you ugly sod."

"I was told you were seen sneaking away from Marissa's chambers, recently... is that connected with her missing veil, somehow?"

Kimasxi's eyes flashed, and every hair on her puffed out as she flew into a rage: "WHO TOLD YOU THA-" she suddenly fell silent, glaring at me through narrowed eyes. "If I was there, berk, I didn't take her filthy veil... search my room, if you'd like. I catch you sniffing at my britches, though, I'll see to it

you're never allowed in here again."

I blinked, "Why would anyone ever sniff at your britches?"

"Beats me. Someone's nicked more than few pair of them, though. My favorite leather brassier, too, with the iron studs." She hmphed angrily.

Someone was stealing from Kimasxi too? I went back to Nenny's room.

"Kimasxi said someone's been taking things from her room, too. Have you seen anything odd?"

Nenny's eyes suddenly went wide. "Oh! That's right! You know, once I saw a man sneaking out of Kimasxi's room while she was out talking to a patron... I watched the front doors all that day, but he never, ever left! Isn't that odd? I don't think he could have made it out a window, and so I never figured out where he went. And then I totally forgot about it! Weird, huh?"

Annah flicked her tail and crossed her arms. "Now we do things my way."

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"This doesn't seem right..." I grumbled as I pawed through the drawers. Annah pulled the stopper from a bottle of perfume and sniffed. By the look on her face she wasn't too impressed.

"This couldn't seem more right!" Morte countered as he watched me pull out a nice, lacy green gown, "Hey I wonder how Annah'd look in this one..."

"Rattlin' yer bone-box isn't gonna get yeh results," Annah replied, "'Sides, yeh could use a lesson or two in the cunnin' ways."

"Do you think Dak'kon would really follow through with this, chief? I mean, sods that old either love young girls' undergarments or never give 'em a second glance. And he doesn't seem the type to join in on a good old-fashioned panty raid."

I grunted, rifling through the clothes. Who in the planes needed so many clothes? I've only ever had a kilt and a belt made of bones. Toss in a stout pair of boots and that was enough, "Trust me, he'll do whatever I ask of him." And besides, the man had taken wounds and fought in battle for me.



Standing guard wasn't exactly out of the question for him.

"Eeeeh I guess, chief. But if you ask me, I don't trust the gith. Better keep an eye on him."

Don't trust the skull...

As I made to search the armoire in the corner of the room, its handles suddenly yanked out of my grasp and the drawers slammed themselves shut. A disdainful "hmp!" issued from the cabinet...

I blinked in surprise. "Hello?"

"'Hello,' indeed." The armoire gave another hmp! "So, what have we here? A rogue after some lady's frilly undergarments, hmmnn?"

"You talk?"

"Do I? Why yes, I do." Its voice was slightly pitched and just a touch nasal, but the armoire had an air of well-spoken aristocratic dignity to its voice.

"Who are you?"

"I am Luis. And who are you? Thoughtless, uncouth fellow, rummaging about in other people's things..."

"Never mind that. What are you doing here?"

"Well, sir, if you must know... I am being an armoire."

"But why are you being an armoire in this brothel? Are you a Sensate?"

"I happen to have become an armoire because I *want* to be an armoire, thank you very much. It's not to watch the ladies undressing, nor to have them place their soft, sweet-smelling undergarments in my drawers where they can rub against my skin. Such accusations are an insult to a practitioner of the magic arts... I am merely soaking in the experience of what it means to be an armoire. The sights, the smells, the sensations..." his hinges rattled with pleasure.

"I like this sod already," Morte sniggered.

Annah crossed her arms across her breasts, "So all th' women know about this, then, aye?"

"Yes! Yes, they do, and they wholeheartedly approve of... well, not with their entire hearts, exactly. And while they have not spoken of their approval in my presence - since they are not exactly aware that I am an armoire - I would not want them to know that I am anything but, and so have not been able to inquire upon the matter."

"Can you return to your normal form at will?"

The armoire seemed to think about this for a moment. "I have no need to share such secrets with the likes of you! And besides, there is no cause to change back at the present moment, since I have not yet experienced the full sensations of being an armoire. It is a complex thing, to hold and sort soft frilly clothes, smelling of wondrous woman-smells." A drawer slid open and closed, the sound mimicking a pleasant sigh.

I raised an eyebrow, "Uh... wow. I'll need something from you to keep quiet about this one."

"Very well! Posh! Open the third drawer, you scalawag." As I reached my hand into the drawer, it slammed shut on my fingers with great force. Searing pain raced through my hand as I withdrew my battered fingers. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out, and tears leaked down my cheeks.

"Ha ha! Cretin! Idiot! 'Open the drawer,' I said, and you reach in--" He slammed his drawer again for emphasis, then began shaking with laughter.

Morte's cackling withered under my piercing glance, "Well, sorry chief. But you gotta admit, he's really pulled one over on you." Even Annah looked like she was swallowing a snicker.

I gave the leg of the armoire a swift kick, "I'm going to chop you up for kindling."

"You'll do nothing of the sort! Why, even the most common of men knows that one can't commit an act of violence within the Brothel... you'll simply be cast out. And even if that were not the case, I assure you my command of

the Art is quite impressive."

"Fine, then... I'll just go tell them about you."

Luis barked a laugh, "First, I would tell you this one thing: I have been popping in and out of the Brothel for a good, long time... I'm quite knowledgeable regarding both its occupants and their activities. I assure you that talking about me is utterly worthless; not only will you lose me as a potential source of information, but I'll simply disappear before someone comes to investigate your claims, leaving you looking the fool."

Well for someone who claims to be so competent, he did get seen. "Nenny told me she saw a man leaving Kimasxi Addertongue's room... I think that was you, Luis."

There. Wounding his pride had finally set him off. Like an ember landing on a pile of dry twigs Luis exploded into a full, rabid fury, "You think? THINK?! How could you be so alarmingly rude, so ludicrously presumptuous, as to spout forth such an accusation without being absolutely certain of your charges?! How dare you! Impertinent, brassy cur! Why, I ought to..."

As Luis railed and cursed, his drawers opened and closed... revealing a small bundle of crimson cloth tucked alongside some clothes. The repeated opening and closing of the armoire drawers was going to make it difficult to grab, however.

And with only one good hand left, I hesitated before grabbing the edge of the drawer.

"Wh- stop! You filthy, hideous brute!"

I grunted, planting a foot against the varnished door, "Annah! I could really use some help here!"

An amused grin spread across her face, "Oh no thank yeh, I think I'll just stand back 'ere and watch..."

"Don't look at me, chief. Lack of hands and all that."

I tugged and pulled, my firm little yanks beginning to lose against his. The slim crack of the closing drawer was getting to be almost too narrow for my

fingers...

"Dak'kon!"

In a flash the door slammed open and Dak'kon leapt into the room, blade drawn. His eyes widened at the sight of me struggling with an armoire as it let loose a girling shriek, but without questioning anything he swung the blade in a full arc, stabbing it into the slit and using the leverage to pry the drawer open. Together we strained, grunted. I cursed under my breath, sweated and pulled. Hinges rattled and the lower drawer shot open, cracking against my shin and bruising the bone. Luis flung everything he had at us... panties, brassieres, small bottles and makeup kits, one of which caught me in my immortal jewels. The pain was numbing, and the flurry of undergarments blinded the both of us as Luis unleashed a bloodcurdling shriek.

"AIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!"

"Morte! Think it's wide enough?!"

"I'm on it chief!" and with a giddy shout he dove into the drawer as Dak'kon and I fought to keep it open.

"Mmmph. Stop! Stop, I say! Watch the handles! Don't scratch the finish! Curse you, you prying filth!" The armoire continued with his valiant effort. Morte on the other hand, was taking a little longer than he needed to...

"Gods dammit Morte!"

With that a round, hard skull leapt out of the drawer and caught me in the chest. Dak'kon pulled his blade out of the armoire in that same instant as I fell back and collapsed breathlessly onto the floor. A translucent, crimson veil brushed over my chest, and as one fold fluttered over my face I couldn't help but smell a light, exotic, and most pleasant fragrance wafting from the cloth.

"Sorry, chief. I was just taking a swim."

"Damn it! You rogues! Blackguards! Scoundrels! You give that back this instant! That's not yours! That is an exceedingly personal garment that belongs to a lady of this establishment, and they would not appreciate you

fondling their private things!"

I sat up, shaking off the strain and cracking my wrist, "Oh, but it's all right for you, you wooden pervert?"

"I'm not doing anything so criminal and malicious as you are! I am merely soaking in sensations necessary to my growth as an individual."

Luis' quiet griping was at my back when we left, pulling undergarments that had become tangled in our apparel. I unhooked a brassiere that had been caught in a spur of my bone sash, Dak'kon pulled out a frilly pair of panties that had been caught in a chink in his armor.

It was then that I looked up and noticed the small crowd of patrons and prostitutes staring at us covered in an array of undergarments. Morte paused in the middle of tugging a thong from my belt with his teeth.

"Uh... carry on."

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Vivian greeted me with a polite half-smile. "Had you any luck in finding my scent, perchance?"

"Yes... I found it in this red veil..."

Vivian's eyes lit up. "Oh, how simply wonderful!" She took the veil from my hands, muttered a few words over it, and returned it to me. She shook out her crimson hair and, in moments, we were surrounded by the most intensely exotic and arousing scent I had ever had the pleasure of smelling.

I swooned, "That smells... great..."

"It does, does it not?" She smiled at me. "And as you have done a favor for me, so I wish to perform one for you. Stand close to me, scarred one..."

I stepped closer to Vivian. She took my hand and, turning it over, took a single cautious sniff of my wrist. "Phew!" She wrinkled her nose. "Vinegar! Or... embalming fluid? Here, I will remove this smell from you..." She muttered a few strange syllables, and a light tingling sensation spread over my skin. In moments, the chemical reek lessened substantially. "There - how

is that? People should be less eager to avoid conversation with you, now."

I smiled, "Thanks, Vivian. Farewell."

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Marissa's cold, cruel voice hissed from out of the darkness. "It returns! You have a reason for coming this time, I trust? Or just more of your pointless questions?"

"Actually, I've brought your Crimson Veil..."

"Then would you please hand it over?" She didn't sound as pleased as I'd hoped.

"Of course. Here you are..."

I held the Crimson Veil before me, and felt her take it from my hands. "Ah. Yes, much better." Two shining points of red light appeared as she opened her eyes. "So that's what you look like... perhaps I would have been better off with my eyes shut."

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I returned to Fall-From-Grace. The lack of a tenth student left a discomfiting void in the back of my mind, yet I hoped my answer would suffice, "I spoke to nine of the students, as you asked... but I could not find the tenth."

Her smiled softly, and her tone was coy, "And you could not find the tenth student? How curious."

"I'm thinking the tenth student is me. In which case, I have spoken to all of them."

She nodded. "Very well. And your thoughts?"

"I have learned what it means to aspire to be a Sensate, and that it is better to go in search of experience rather than have it come to you."

Fall-From-Grace nodded again. "Very well. I will travel with you, if you still

desire my company."

"I do."

"Oh mistress high-and mighty will be joinin' us?" Annah grumbled, "Ach, what do we need her for?"

Morte bobbed and clicked his teeth, "You couldn't possibly understand."

"I wish she would fall from a great height... I might even bump her off meself."

Grace smiled and bowed her head, "Well, if you excuse me, I have some arrangements to take care of before we leave."

"While you're at it, you should probably get rid of all the armoires in the Brothel and use them as firewood."

"Ah!" Fall-From-Grace laughed softly, and her eyes sparkled. "A practical thought indeed."

I grunted, "Luis is in serious need of a carpenter to trim that libido of his."

She smiled, "I do believe I will enjoy your company. I'll only be a moment, please, have some tea until I return."

Chapter 59

"There you are, sir... four Arborean firewines and a shiftspice tea." The paunchy little man behind the bar smiled as I dropped a handful of coins into his palm. Everything in the Clerk's Ward was a good deal more expensive, but I'd never seen glasses so clean.

"Here you go, Annah," I handed her a glass of wine. She had been sulking behind us a bit ever since we left the brothel, and I could feel those eyes

burning into my back as we walked, "So..."

Annah just looked at me as I addressed her, and she frowned. She didn't take the wine, "Aye? What do yeh want now?"

I blinked, "Are you all right?"

She just glared at me.

"Er, I was hoping I could ask you about a few things-"

"Why don't yeh ask the stuck-up-ubus yer questions, then?" Annah's eyes narrowed to slits. "Why are we even traveling with her? We don't NEED her, we don't."

The other patrons glanced at us with practiced nonchalance, but their conversation halted. The silence was thick with the mass effort to ignore our little spat. "Annah, please. You're very important to me, and I need your help."

"Oh, aye, and why is THAT then? This should be rich, it should. Yeh pity me, is that it? Yeh think I slow yeh down? Go on, say it!" I was surprised she didn't slap or shiv me then.

"I don't pity you, and you don't slow me down - you're quick, you're skilled, and I really need all the help I can get."

Annah frowned, her tail flicking back and forth. "Aye... well... know I'll gut her if she starts sizing us up for a feast, I will." She glared at me. "And don't get any ideas I'm staying cause yeh want me to - I'm just helpin' yeh out, I am."

"Fine. Now... we need to think about where we're going."

"Aye?" she snatched the wine roughly from my hand, and a few splashes dribbled down the bulbous crystal. She took a good swig. Silently I wondered if her rough drinking habits had to do with her life in the Hive or if she just wanted to get a little alcohol in her to put up with me.

As our conversation lowered into a flat simmer, the other patrons began speaking again. Chats about the weather to get the ball rolling, and moving

on from there. The denizens of the Clerk's Ward sure had some class. "I know you've picked up a lot of stories in the Hive. Have you heard any stories of Ravel Puzzlewell?"

At the mention of the name, Annah spat three times and made a semi-circle over her heart. "Hsst! Are yeh daft?! Don't be mentioning her name, if yeh value yer life!"

"Why?"

"She's the evilest o' the Gray Ladies, she is." Annah's voice dropped to almost a whisper, as if afraid of being overheard. "Filthy mean, an' with more power tae toss around than some Powers. It's said she's all a-brambles through and through - even her heart. It's said yeh can NEVER kill her, 'cause her body's like a tree - yeh lop off one limb, an' there's always another still growing somewhere else across the Planes."

"You speak as if she's still alive."

"A-course she is. She has t'be." Annah's voice dropped again. "How would yeh kill a thing such as her? That's why the Lady had to MAZE her, so it's said."

Annah was a bit more tight-lipped after that, and left to lean over the bar and swish her tail as she ordered a bitter-black ale. I cocked my head a little, gazing a bit at the firm crescent of her rump.

Damn that Morte for rubbing off on me.

"Remarkable girl," Grace said with a sigh, "Such a fire in her... perhaps it is the fiend blood in her veins."

"What's born in the bone will be bred in the flesh, eh?" I grunted.

Grace gave me one of those mysterious smiles, and gazed at me over the rim of her glass, "Well, I am hardly one to speak on the role of heritage."

I nodded, "True. What can you tell me about the tanar'ri?"

"The tanar'ri are fiends - some call them 'demons.' They have embraced evil for chaos' sake. They dwell upon the poisoned planes of the Abyss where

they feed on their own rage and lash out across the multiverse, despoiling all they touch. They forever seek to tempt others into committing crimes of passion and vice."

"And how did you come by the name 'Fall-From-Grace?'"

"The meaning of names is a complicated subject. There is much to be said, and a great deal that is better left unsaid."

I turned to face Grace just as Annah struck up a conversation with a patron... a Sensate, by the look of it. "Is Fall-From-Grace your real name?"

"Perhaps." She smiled slightly. "Perhaps not. There are names which are given and names which are earned. Who is to say which is the real one?"

"I'm not sure I attach any value to a name."

Grace looked at me curiously. "Truly?"

I shrugged. "A name is a cloak of letters thrown across a person, nothing more. A name can sometimes tell something about a fraction of the person, maybe even help define that person, but that's not who the person is."

"Your point is well-taken," Grace allowed with a nod.

"So why are you called Fall-From-Grace?"

"Would it matter?" She smiled. "It is but a cloak of letters."

"It matters to me. I would like to know how you came to be called that."

Those warm blue eyes looked away from me, and she stared into her glass in the aching contemplation that I had seen so much in others. Grace, with such poise, such self-assurance and wisdom, seemed lesser somehow. Neither Sensate nor mentor at that moment, Fall-From-Grace's tender demeanor was that of a woman's, more so than any I'd seen. "I have fallen from my people... some would say risen from my people, perhaps, but 'fall' feels more right to me." She looked at me questioningly. "Does that make sense?"

"Yes, it does. After all, 'fall' carries with it an underlying sense of loss."

Fall-From-Grace was silent for a moment, then nodded thoughtfully. "Yes... perhaps that is why it felt as it did. I... came to terms with the loss long ago, but the name has remained."

"Are you sure you've come to terms with it?"

Fall-From-Grace met my gaze, and I was once again struck by the brilliant shade of blue of her eyes. It was turbulent, like the ocean before a storm. "I had thought so. Yet, in speaking to you, you have caused me to realize some things." She smiled. "You have my thanks."

"Well, if you want to talk about it, let me know, all right?"

She nodded. "You are most kind. I will do so."

There was a thick pause, and I shifted awkwardly, not quite comfortable putting weight on one leg or the other, not knowing what to do with my hands. But Grace was patient, gazing into the distance as if musing on her own thoughts until I chose to speak again. "Can you teach me anything of the Art, Grace?"

Fall-From-Grace looked up and shook her head slightly. "No, I do not believe so. The Art... and the disciplines I practice are different."

"How do you mean?"

"My 'powers,' as you see them, stem from my faith, not from manipulating energies as the Art does. The Art is a mechanism by which the power of the multiverse may be harnessed, through gestures, rituals and devices. My 'powers' come to me through a different means. My faith and the nature of my belief allows some of the multiverse to reveal itself to me."

"The nature of your belief? What do you believe in?"

Grace's wings unfurled, and her bosom heaved as she took in a deep breath, "I believe in Experience. I believe a person may be changed - for the better - the more of the multiverse they are allowed to perceive and the more the multiverse is allowed to perceive them. My belief in the nature of Experience allows me to..." She paused for a moment. Her sigh was sensual

but her lips pulled back in a chaste smile. "I suppose the best explanation is that my faith allows me to see things differently. When you see the multiverse in such a way, you learn how to 'change' things - mending wounds, seeing a person's heart, and so on - just by willing them to happen."

"But those 'changes' you make seem a lot like spells - how do you learn to do those things? Do you have a spell book?"

"No, my 'spells,' as you call them - they come to me after I have rested and centered myself. When I sleep and awaken, I can focus myself once more. The amount of faith required to 'Change' the multiverse around me can be quite taxing on the psyche, I'm afraid. Just being able to see how to Change things is not enough - you must have the strength to make the Change happen, and last."

I nodded and leaned in, curious. "Can you teach me to see things the way you do?"

"I cannot teach you to see the multiverse in such a way. One must learn to see it... and in their own way, not through the eyes of another." Her smile never wavered. "I do not think you or all people need my guidance in such a matter - I find myself beginning to learn much more from you than you from I."

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Acrid fumes stung my nostrils, and my eyes watered anew. I narrowly avoided bumping into an abishai while walking down the street. The arch of the sky was overcast with the acrid yellow fog, and while it mimicked the run-of-the-mill prime world at least superficially, I had gotten so used to seeing a city when looking up that it was disconcerting to the point of claustrophobia.

The Clerk's Ward was too costly to live in, the Hive had no answers... all that was left for now was the noxious purgatory of the Lower Ward.

Giltspur the auctioneer had an errand for me – to deliver a note to someone in the Great foundry, and I was happy to oblige if it meant I'd make some connections to help get some answers.

The man I ran into on the way towered over me. Slabs of muscle were layered over his thick frame and a solid, well-worn axe was strapped to his back. Though he stood with the resolute dignity of a warrior, he didn't appear to be in the best of health. The man's skin was pale yellow and there was an occasional pustule along his arms.

"Greetings."

He turned and glanced at me from behind hollow eyes. His eyes narrowed in suspicion as he continued to glance around. "What d'ye want from ol' Korur?" His voice was raspy.

"I have some questions..."

He turned his attention to me. "Why ye botherin' me for? I look the part of a tout?"

"You seem to be a knowledgeable individual that I can learn from."

He sighed. "What ye be wantin' to know?"

"Are you feeling all right?" my eyes were fixed on a particularly large blister on his neck, practically swimming with white pus inside. I forced myself to look away. Getting a second tasting of the cranium rat I had for breakfast wasn't going to leave a good impression.

"Nothin' a few years o' death won't cure." He coughed and looked up. "Air's been getting worse in th' Ward o' late. By my reckon, it should level out once th' Great Foundry settles... or a wind blows through from the Spire."

"What is with the air here?" the smokestacks of the Great Foundry belched in the distance, "It can't be all from the Foundry."

He nodded, "It's mostly 'cause of all the portals." He had a coughing fit and then returned his attention to me.

"What do you mean?"

"Lots of doors to the Lower Planes here let'n in bad air an fumes an such from who knows what layer of the abyss. That's why this here's the lower ward." He laughed. "A jaunt through this area is like breathin' in a meal. Salt,

smoke, pipeweed... it's all yellow-blankets of smoke and stinging sulfurous gas that this Ward spits out." He gave me a gap-toothed smile.

"Pretty-pretty, hey?"

I forced a grin, and it was like smiling back at a shark. "Tell me about the Foundry. I have a letter to deliver there."

"Centa o' the Ward, pretty much. Look for the stacks. Them Godsmen make a buncha' things out o' iron; nothing fancy, but they work. Add to the bad air, too."

"Godsmen?"

"The Believers. Have their kip in the Great Foundry, banging and singing and chantin' their barmy silliness on being Powers in the next ten upon ten and a buncha other ten lifetimes." He rolled his eyes, then spat a brown mass from his mouth. "All's they do is suffer and slave and work... I slave twice as hard, and no way am I going to be any sort of Power, you understand me, berk?" He laughed hollowly.

Korur's eyebrows climbed a little when I found myself examining his meaty frame. His hands were heavily callused, and old scars were slashed across his arms. Those old battle wounds, however, didn't reach his face or the bare chest that I could see... this man was skilled. "I want to be a better warrior. Can you help me better my skills?"

"Well... What exactly do ye want training in?"

I whipped out my favored knife, "Teach me how to use daggers."

"Daggers, eh? Well... I can teach ye if ye want."

"Yes, I'd like to learn to use this weapon."

It was a solid couple of hours of practice. I adjusted my stance, learned to grip my knife better, refined the good old gouge-twist-pull action that was the cornerstone of knife fighting. When we were done Korur leaned back and nodded, his duty done. "Well... nothing more I can teach ye right now. Not unless ye've devoted yer whole life to bein' a warrior. Ye've got to specialize in bein' a warrior if ye want to get better. Ye've not got that devotion t' the fightin' craft. Only when ye've turned yer body into a weapon

can ye learn more from me."

"Thanks, Korur. I wish you the best."

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The Mortuary squatted in the middle of the Hive like a necrotic boil... bleak, festering, unwanted. The Dustmen's whispers ate away at the edges of the Hive, consumed the denizens and reanimated their bodies as the faction's own. The Gatehouse clutched the vagrants of Sigil against its breast, doling out whatever pity the Bleak Cabal could afford to spoon out. They were the cathedral to what inevitably will come to pass, and the sepulchre to regrets of what might've been.

The Great Foundry was a different matter.

I showed the message to be delivered to the gatekeeper and with a stern nod he let me through with a gesture. Past the iron gate Godsmen guards jogged in formation like ants scurrying around a hill. The high smokestacks of the Great Foundry dominated this region of the Ward: the weight of it pressed away the surrounding buildings and seemed to leave them squat and cowering at its might. Open windows blazed with the inner light of the forges and howled with the rhythmic clang of metal on metal, and the guards circling the court swung their weapons in tandem. It was the sound of iron tortured and fired until it was reborn, the chorus of what could be, if one has the will to act.

The din of metalwork was greater within the Foundry itself. Deafening clangs reverberated off the walls, and the Godsmen in charge had to bellow their orders over that and the roar of the furnaces. I stood in awe at the radiance of the great crucible, which portioned out rivers of molten steel like soup. The heat of the inferno blazed against my skin, the fire had me mesmerized. It felt good.

For a while I found myself contemplating the rumble of the gears, each turning rapidly with perfect smoothness and a steady song of clacking metal teeth. Like a child I reached out and touched one gear with a finger as it spun. The metal grazed against my fingertip until it went numb with the warmth of friction.

The Godsmen themselves were tall, well-muscled, and their skin bronzed

with the heat. Sparks and oiled sand flicked harmlessly against the bare arms of the forge workers as if the embers were motes of dust. Their eyes blazed with the spark of potential divinity, waiting to be hatched in the warmth of the forge.

Of course, not all the Foundry workers were so high up.

So significant were the fires and the anvils that the main hall of the Foundry was second to the forge. The air was cooler here, and lacked the choking fumes of seared oil and white-hot metal. The floors were paved with the same heavy gray stone as in the forges of the Foundry.

Godsman guards stood at attention, and glanced at me suspiciously as I walked past. By one of the arches a young woman stood, with chalk-pale skin and graceful curls of brown hair. She approached, her elegant violet dress trailing behind her, and her eyes stared into mine. They were examining more than my eye color: her gaze seemed to penetrate far deeper than that, and I shivered a little when something seemed to barely brush my soul, like the flutter of a moth's wing.

"Greetings, stranger. How goes your day?"

"Well enough. I would like you to answer some questions for me."

She merely stared at me when she spoke, surrounded by an impenetrable calm, "What answers do you seek, half-man?"

I blinked, "Why do you call me half-man?"

"I call you half-man because I cannot see your spirit. All other mortals who pass through my life show their spirits to me as a shining spark or a smoldering ember. You show nothing at all. I call you half-man because I cannot see your spirit as I see those of others. Whether this is because you have no soul, or because you have transcended, I cannot say. One way or another, you are but half a man. What the other half is, I cannot say." She recited it as if she had practiced it many times before, but the sureness with which she held herself showed that she knew who she was, in a way deeper than most of the people I've met in Sigil.

"Who are you?"

"I am Sarossa, daughter of Sandoz, one of the factors of the Godsmen."

"Tell me of your family."

"My brother Saros is a child of the Foundry, yet I fear he has never embraced the philosophy of the Believers of the Source," there was nary a twitch of her lip, but I could barely detect the disappointment in her voice, "My father is a factor here - and his travels have led him far from the Foundry and into realms most mortals never even dream of achieving."

"Tell me more of your brother."

"Saros is a brash, impulsive lad, easily given over to his manhood. He is eager to prove himself equal of anything on the planes, full of the aggression of youth. I believe he feels himself more Sensate than Godsmen, further vindicating my belief that the Sensates are the most immature of all the factions of Sigil." Fall-From-Grace's demeanor never wavered, and Sarossa didn't even acknowledge her presence, but I could feel Grace's contemplative amusement.

"Why are they the most immature?"

"Why are they the most immature? Because, like children, they do not understand that there is more beyond the world of the senses, beyond what one can see, hear, taste, touch, smell. Look around you. You are in the Outer Planes. This is belief made solid - but that does not mean this seemingly rough matter can be comprehended by the senses. This is belief - no mere physicality can match it."

I chose not to debate the point.

In the lecture hall past the entrance I bumped into a sandy-haired youth. He was on the cusp between adolescence and adulthood, and from his eyes, it looked like he was trying to be as adult as possible without having the slightest idea how - in other words, he seemed innocent. "Hey, stranger. What can I do for you?"

The young man held a clear resemblance to Sarossa: the same sharp nose, the same curve of the chin, but the likeness ended there. His eyes were boyish, and his lips playful. His skin was a slightly coppery hue, and his demeanor so far removed from his sister's pearly calm. "You're Saros, aren't

you? Sarossa's brother? Tell me about yourself."

He blinked, then nodded, "That I am. I grew up around here. Got to run through the Foundry, playing with stuff... I like pretty much everyone here, except for Thildon. He keeps saying I'm not raised right and that my father is a poor parent. All I know is that Thildon's the biggest sod I ever met."

"Tell me about the Great Foundry."

"I grew up here. I played in the main foundry area and ran through the barracks. It stinks and it's loud and people can be like Thildon... but it's still home for me."

"The Godsmen seem pretty impressive," I said with no small measure of confidence, "They are so sure of themselves, like they've got a goal in mind, and even if they don't know how to achieve it they'll work towards godhood."

Saros harrumphed. "They're smiths and workers. I think they mean well, but they're all so earnest and boring. They need to liven themselves up a bit. Like, say, the Sensates."

"You like the Sensates, huh?" I smiled.

"They know how to live life. They know what it's all about. Not like these people. They keep pretending there's some big noble purpose to it all, but I don't see it. My sister says that life is more than our senses show, but I don't see how she knows that, since all she knows is through her senses. I just don't get why people make this stuff up."

"I've met her. She seemed... well, very straightforward."

"Sarossa?" Sarod grumbled a bit. There was a touch of bitterness in his voice. It was the sulky disgruntlement of living in a sibling's shadow, "She can just look at someone and see what needs adding and what needs taking away. I don't know how she does it. My father always said it was something about her ascending to another level. He said she was a born Godsmen."

A sturdy man stood behind the podium, who looked like he was just bursting with vitality. His face was tanned and lined, and his black beard was beginning to show hints of white. He was tapping down a ream of notes

when I approached, getting them straightened for the next lecture. "Hail, stranger, and well met! What can I do for you this fine day?"

"I have a message for you from Giltspur the auctioneer," I pulled out the letter.

"A message, eh?" He took the note from me. "Very well. You can tell him the message is delivered. Was there anything else you wanted?"

"Tell me about yourself."

"My friend, I am Keldor of Durian, one of the factotums of the Godsmen, and nominally in charge of this place while our true high-ups are gone in conclave," he smiled broadly as he stared me firmly in the eye, "I know that look. The Foundry is impressive, isn't it?"

I nodded, "Very. What are the beliefs of this faction?"

Keldor stood up straight, proud and happy at the chance to explain, "We believe that the universe is a giant testing ground, a place where we prove ourselves through a series of tests. These tests continue throughout your life, throughout your many lives. Each step in each day may well be a test for you, and your reward in the next life depends on how well you learn your lessons in this life. We believe that a body learns from experience... and that experience extends through your lives, making you into something greater than just a single life.

"So. Life is a test. We take the test. When we pass, we move on to a new form. This might be the form of an archon, of a fiend, or of a power. The choices we make in this life, as always, help chart our course. Whether we have free will or not is still under debate." He smiled. "Of course, I'm on the side of the free will people... I hate thinking that my choices have already been made for me."

"So what's the point of it all?" I asked.

"We're not entirely sure. After all, we haven't gotten to the end of it yet, have we? The best we can figure is that we muddle through our lives, seeking to find the answers that are right for us, and in the end, we move on to godhood and beyond. What waits there is anybody's guess.

"It's commonly believed that we were founded by Perrine, before the Great Upheaval, when all the factions became fifteen in number. During the Upheaval, Augy of Faunel tightened the faction's beliefs into what they are today - she had been reincarnated a thousand times, and could remember each one of her reincarnations. She taught us how to treat our intuition, and led us to a new era. These two were the most important figures in our faction - we have plenty more stories, but those are the bare bones."

I nodded, "Are there those who oppose the Believers of the Source?"

"We don't have enemies, per se. Still, it is true that there are some who oppose our beliefs. The Bleak Cabal scoff at the idea that we evolve toward something more perfect. I figure that if they don't think there's a point, they might as well get it over with... like the Dustmen ought to. The Dustmen think that life is an illusion, preparing for the Big Death, and our belief champions the cause of life. They promote death, we celebrate life. What could be more opposed?"

"What do you do, anyway?"

"Well, we run the Great Foundry. We also run Harbinger House, where we train folks who seem to be powers-in-training... bashers who've demonstrated some sort of special ability that sets them apart from normal mortals. Some say we do it because we want a power on our side, but the truth is, we do it because we figure that's part of our tests as well. We do our best to make sure every creature faces up to its responsibilities - we want to see the multiverse move on," he paused and gave a moment to let it all sink in, "Are you considering membership with the Believers of the Source?"

"I'll think it over."

Chapter 60

Down past the lecture hall stood a bushy-haired man, clad in the height of fashion -- if one could consider fashion to have died fifty years ago. His clothing looked like they consisted entirely of tattered street urchin rags, and he affected a disdainful manner toward those around him. The man's lips were curled around a pipe, and he puffed away steadily, releasing a sweet blue-gray smoke. He didn't even glance at me until I approached, and then his eyes began searching my face carefully. "D'ya want something?" he drawled. He huffed, exhaling smoke through his nostrils.

"Er, hello. Who are you?"

"Who am I? I am Nihl Xander, great-grandson of the artificer Xero Xander, engineer, dreamer, creator. I am the engineer of all engineers. I studied under the tanar'ri smith Kazan, who tempered words on a forge of hate, quenched them in a trough of despair, and sent them forth to slaughter stupidity. Elements of phrases, caustic words, were brought to him, and he created weapons of terrifying magnitudes - weapons that would lay an enemy low and destroy the malformed ideas of others. I'm sure you've seen his work."

I blinked, "So you create evil weapons here?"

"Not at all!" he said with a hearty smile, spreading his hands out, "My forge is not built on hate, but on understanding. I have also studied under the archon artisan Terasaphirea, who created the healing touch of a gentle thought, ideas that would still any fiendish, spitting heart. He worked his will with love and devotion. My work blends theirs, as all mortal psyches blend elements of the demonic and the sublime."

"Are your co-workers as well trained as you?"

"Bah." he gave a dismissive wave, then spat out an angry puff of smoke from the corner of his mouth, "They do not possess a true fire. They speak of creation, and they boast of their potentials, but they do not create anything beyond the mundane. Their imaginations are poor, limited, obsessed with the small details. A true dreamer, I say, creates a grand scheme and then concentrates on the details. Starting with details is for the ants of the imagination... the small insects who aspire only to be fed," he blinked, "Say

stranger... what's yer name? You look familiar."

"I have no n- er, Adahn," I lied.

"No, no! I recognize you," he insisted, stabbing a finger towards my chest, "Of course! Argh, I should've known the moment ye set foot here. I have finished my great-grandfather's work -- the work that you commissioned -- the dreambuilder! Are you ready to claim the use of it now?"

"A dreambuilder? What's that?"

"It is both machine and ritual. It is a state of mind and a construct of steam and blood. It grants dreams to those who enter its confines. It was built for you, and it's waiting for you. Are you ready to finish it off? It has been waiting for you for decades."

I raised an eyebrow skeptically, "How do you know it was built for me?"

"Because my great-grandfather, Xeno Xander, set your face in stone so that we would know you when you returned for the work you commissioned. He always thought you'd return, but no one else truly believed you would. Our family completed it because we said we would... and now, here you are," he paused, looking me up and down, "Well, minus a few scars and that gods-awful hair, you're the spitting image."

I ran a hand through my bead-woven dreadlocks. What was so bad about my hair? "Do you still have this stone?"

He shook his head sadly, "No. It was stolen from me a year ago. I saw only a shadow flitting away. It was the only item taken from my home. I have no idea who'd take it, but I'd memorized the features."

A shadow. For some reason, the mention of it made my skin crawl. The thought had hit that primal, reptilian part of my brain that said something was wrong.

But to be able to dream again... after all those sleepless nights turning over in bed too terrified to face the gaping void of unconsciousness. To finally know what it feels like to encounter flights of fancy as I slept. Until now I'd been living like an amputee, resigned to the loss of that part of my soul. I had tried to adapt, occasionally fumbling at the ragged edges of my psyche

as one would finger a cauterized stump.

I nodded, "All right. Let's finish the dreambuilder."

"What I need to begin the final stages of the dreambuilder is a piece of your skin immersed in your blood, so the machine can familiarize itself with your physical essence. It must be in a blue-green bottle, to symbolize the dream sea on which you will float."

"Flesh, blood, bottle. Right. I'll be back."

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"So Grace, do you know where I might be able to get what Xander wants? I mean, unless you're willing to cut me up a little."

Grace shook her head, "I am no surgeon, and I do not possess the thirst for blood that the rest of my kin thrive on."

"I'm sorry Grace, I didn't mean to offend."

"Not at all," she beamed, "One must work with what he has. However, I believe Pestle and Kilnn may be able to help at their apothecary. The pair have no shortage of bottles and Pestle has the expertise to perform the operation with minimal damage." Her voice sounded unsure.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Well, a lady does not put too much weight into gossip, but I have heard rumors that the pair have been having troubles as of late," she smiled, "I suppose we shall have to see for ourselves."

A small silver bell chimed as I nudged open the door. There was the bitter scent of dried herbs and the chemical smell of alcohol and other solvents. Hideous leopard-spotted rugs were arranged with neat precision on the floor, the kind that forced the eye to wander so that the pattern gave you a headache if you stared at it too long. The rug squished under my boots, and even Annah seemed to need to find her balance the first few steps into the apothecary. The lighting was too dim, the air musty with old medicine and ancient leather. It was like visiting an unpleasant old aunt.

Standing at the counter was a wall-eyed fellow whose skin writhed and rippled across his entire body. He was smacking his chapped lips with a blotched tongue. As I watched, his right eye moved independently of the left, focusing on me. A second later, the left one flicked to look my way, then reverted to its original position. The right eye blinked. A strange gurgling came from his throat.

The man gave a lop-sided grin and pointed at himself with his right thumb. "Pestle, I'm called, the - gugh! - alchemist." He pointed at himself again, this time with his left index finger. "Da name's Kilnn. Hgrk! Need ye somethin'?"

In the back of my mind I filed away a few notes. For one, the fact that Fall-From-Grace had a knack for understatement despite her mastery of elocution. "Are you all right?"

"Aye, I am. Hgak!" His throat convulsed for a moment, then relaxed. A large, green-glowing pustule suddenly burst from the side of his neck. "Something ye needed then, sir? Ghok!" His throat clenched again, and a wave of quivering flesh swallowed the blistering green pustule back beneath the skin of his throat. He coughed violently for a moment, then relaxed. "Phew."

"Powers above, chief!" Morte hissed in my ear, "Let's find someone else. You're don't trust a skinny chef, and by the Hells you don't trust this berk to scratch an itch, much less play doctor."

"Point taken, Morte," I turned to the- well, the apothecary and something. Was an assistant buried in this lovely mess? "May I ask what happened to you?"

The left eye rolled upward in exasperation. The right eye looked askance. "Too much ta drink."

"Too much of what, though?"

"Potions, I drank. Too many potions. Fgaohg!" His mouth slid down beneath his chin; his left nostril formed another one. "Da most I ever drank, dat's for certain! Of polymorphin', dey were, an' brewed... Hgrk! ... in Limbo."

Dak'kon stared the man flatly in the eye, "It would be wise to exercise caution when you next handle that which is craft in the chaos of Limbo."



"Anything I could do to help?" I offered.

The man's eyes turned inwards to look at each other, then back to me.

"Dunno. Fng!" He shuddered; the mouth below his chin moved up to envelop the one his nostril formed. "This sort of thing happens quite often; we can't seem to - Fnug! - help but sample the stock. If ye find a way to help, the two of us would – guhkahk! - be grateful, sir."

"Yes, I was hoping you could help me..."

Half of his mouth curled downward into a frown; he shook his head. "Work in da stock-room all day, I do. Gaaaahk!" He shuddered violently; suddenly, a third eye popped open over the bridge of his nose... the left one shifted sideways as the new eye took its place. "I speak only of the - fnahk! - store, sir." That said, the skin of his face seemed to 'eat' the new eye, and the left one returned to its old location.

"The old engineer in the Foundry tells me I need to get a sample of my blood and skin for his machine to work. I need you to do that for me."

"A scraping? Very - schnik! - well." His right hand took up a razor blade; his left, a wide-mouthed bottle. There was something about the surgical removal of skin that was infinitely more disturbing than getting a knife to the guts. Maybe it was the deliberate precision to it: how it reduced my body to a fleshy machine, like I was some doll that could be taken apart and stitched back together. Nonetheless, I clenched my jaw as he removed a small section of skin from my forearm, placing it into the bottle along with a small quantity of blood. He then placed some gauze over my wound and handed me the bottle. "Ye need anything - guh-gack! - more, sir?"

"No, that's all. Thanks, and farewell."

Yech.

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"I've got it right here," I said to Nihl eagerly, "Take it. Show me my dreams."

Nihl rolled the bottle in his hands, nodding. "This was only the first step. The machine also requires a birdcage, adorned with razors, fine-wrought, to mimic the destructive power of dreams, and their ability to capture our

hearts and imaginations. Search in the Siege Tower for a cage I have commissioned."

I blinked. "The Siege Tower? That big razor-lined and acid-pitted boil squatting in the middle of the Ward?"

"It looks like a cancerous polyp on Sigil's anus," Morte retched, "How exactly are we supposed to get in there?"

Nihl's lip curled into a stern half-smile, "You have proven yourself to be resourceful. Find a way."

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"Ropes and grappling hooks?" I offered.

"Nope. Damn walls are lined with razors," Morte replied.

"Annah, can you break in?"

"Do yeh see any locks t' pick, yeh sod?"

"Dak'kon, I need your wisdom."

"I do not possess the knowing of the workings of the Siege Tower. I cannot aid you."

I sighed, "Grace?"

"Might I recommend the art of dialogue?"

"Pardon?"

She smiled, "Ask the locals."

The marketplace was abuzz with activity. Under the watchful eyes of the Harmonium the shoppers bumped and rubbed shoulders with relative confidence that no pockets would be picked today. Red-beaked fowl were hung by their legs, and large baskets of fruit had been set out, bright and plump delicacies gathered from the corners of existence. I selected a Bytopian pear and tossed the merchant a copper. With a mouthful of nectar

and a chin stained with juice, I prodded the merchants for clues. All things flowed to them from the rest of the ward, and eventually I'd find someone who would know something about the Tower.

Working at a furnace in the corner was a young boy with pale, yellow skin. His clothes were dirty and in need of mending, but he pumped the bellows to maintain the heat while the shopkeeper busily pounded away at a heated ingot.

"Greetings."

The boy turned and gave a half-smile as he set down his work. "Hail... do ya need some help?"

"Yes, I have some questions..."

"Aye, aye, I'd be pleased ta help ya if I could..." The boy looked grateful not to be toiling over the furnace. "Th' name's Lazlo. What is it I can answer fer ye?"

"Can you tell me about this ward?"

He nodded. "Oh, aye, this here's the Lower Ward. Common folk live here, like me an me Da." His eyes widened a bit and he looked excited. "Do ya know why it's called the Lower Ward?"

"It's the portals, isn't it?"

He nodded, "As it's reckoned, the ward's got a mess of portals ta the Lower Planes all riddled through it like cheese, so it does, so I s'pose that that's why the name stuck." He smiled proudly.

"Why are there so many Lower Plane portals here?"

He shrugged. "It's a mystery ta me as it is ta you, cutter. Not sure if there is a reason fer the Portals as much as just circumstances. Could be the Lady's will, could just be chance, s'pose." He shrugged again.

"What can you tell me about the Lady of Pain?"

Unlike others, Lazlo didn't shrink back at the mention of her name, "Don't

know much about her... she keeps the Powers out of Sigil, keeps the fiends out, and talks and deals with nobody... 'cept maybe the dabus. She'll pen ya in the Dead-Book right quick if ye worship her or try and hurt Sigil. Her face n' the blades surroundin' it would be the last ye'd see..."

"Interesting..."

There was that tingling feeling again, like a thousand insects crawling beneath my scalp. At the mention of a face surrounded by blades a memory forced itself into my consciousness.

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My boots slap against the pavement as I flee past the tailor's, past the closed-up eatery. I run past the abandoned carts, the shops and apartments whose darkened windows stare at me like jet-black eyes.

Not even the cranium rats are about... there's nary a squeak, not a groan of a vagrant or the sound of a footpad's knife dragging against a leather sheath. There is only my heavy breath, the sound of my footsteps, and the chill wind that blows through the darkened alley.

I lean against a wall. My lungs feel as if they had been raked with razors and my throat is raw. My legs collapse from under me, no longer buoyed by the momentum of my flight. I try to find the breath to sob as She floats towards me: an uncannily beautiful woman, her face shrouded in blades and her eyes cold as pure, distilled purpose. There is only the shudder of my breath, the pounding of my heartbeat, and the tender keening of her blades...

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The memory faded, and I was talking to the lad once more.

I shuddered, shaking off the phantom sensation of razors caressing my flesh, and tried to think of something, anything to focus on. I rubbed my chin and thought back to my encounter with Sebastion. The man was tight-lipped and would've offered nothing, and Grosuk was dead, so they would've been of little help. "Do any creatures ever come out of these portals?"

The boy's eyes grew a little wider. "Aye, they do. Most of 'em jest stoppin' through..." He swallowed nervously and looked worried.

"You look nervous, you've seen this yourself?"

"Aye, I've seen it..." He paused and swallowed again. "T'was just last week or so, I saw a couple abishai come through a portal. They talked a good bit an' then one of em went back through. The one tha' stayed is still there..."

"What were they talking about?"

"I dunno for sure, ta me it was just hissin' an such, but I think they was talkin' about the Tower." He shrugged.

Ah good, we were getting on the right track. "What do you know of it?"

"Tha's one of the strangest sights ta be in the Ward. No one really knows how long that scarred old tower has been around... ye can't get into it, y'know. Bolted up tighter than a chastity belt. I'd be curious ta know what's in there..." He thought for a moment. "The abishai was gesturin' at the Tower an the portal. They was lookin' for the key, I bet."

"I know of the abishai. But what of the key?"

"I's the key ta the portal tha' leads ta the Tower. Every portal has a key tha opens it ta somewhere. The key can be a gesture, an item, or even a thought... many 'ave tried hard ta get into the Tower. No matter how hard ya try, ya fail."

Suddenly a thought struck me. "Maybe the secret to getting in is to not want to get in..."

He shrugged. "I dunno, cutter. Maybe..."

## Chapter 61

It was high noon when we tried to enter the Siege Tower. Long shadows extended from the scarred and pitted base like the petals of a venomous flower, needle-tipped and edges razor-sharp.

With a little more prodding and a few coppers to set him at ease, Lazlo had been able to tell us where to go.

We circled around, and came to the same drawbridge where I had slain Grosuk. The ancient wood was splintering, its corners scarred black with flame and its surface was deep with the wounds of arrows and blades. Whatever this thing was, it'd seen numerous battles in its time, perhaps more than I had.

"Maybe the secret to getting in is to not want to get in..."

Given how much this thing had endured, I really thought I didn't want to get in at all, much less deal with what was inside. Really, if Nihl really needed a wrought-iron birdcage, perhaps I could just get it from someone else. The blacksmith at the open-air market seemed competent enough. Perhaps I should just head there for a commission inst-

Whoosh.

Well, it was worth a try...

We were immediately assaulted by the smell of oiled sand and burning metal. Flecks of soot and ash rained down like black petals scattered at ruin's triumph. In the heart of the Siege Tower stood an iron... creature. Its size was staggering; if it stood full height, it would've shattered the roof of the siege tower. Thundering echoes rattled the walkway as the creature hammered away on its forge, each peal struck with a force that could've shattered worlds.

"Greetings," I said, licking my lips nervously.

There was the screaming of metal on metal as the giant turned to face me. Girders, pipes, and huge bracers ran through its lower torso and into the walls, and the bottom portion of its body made up the forge. The golem was

built into the siege tower itself.

"What are you?"

The voice that thundered overhead sounded like the squeal of iron bending, the roar of metal buckling, I AM COAXMETAL. I AM IRON GIVEN PURPOSE.

"What purpose?"

I FORGE THE IMPLEMENTS BY WHICH THE MULTIVERSE WILL BE UNMADE.

I approached the edge, looking down at the forge. There, scattered about in ancient stands and barrels were stockpiles of cruel weapons. The metal was black as sin, and the wicked barbs and serrations of the blades looked as if they were inspired from primal fangs and barbs, teeth and nails. Savagery and destruction at its best. "You mean forging weapons? That's your purpose?"

METAL IS LIKE FLESH. BOTH CARRY POTENTIAL IN THEIR VEINS. WHEN TEMPERED WITH HEAT AND PRESSURE, THE POTENTIAL SURFACES. MY PURPOSE IS TO BRING FORTH THIS POTENTIAL. ALLOW IT EXPRESSION.

"Oh Hells, chief... this thing's a Sinker. Might not even be a namer, but it's a Doomguard to the core."

"What's a Sinker?" I winced at the sharp sound of squealing metal as Coaxmetal turned its head to gaze down at the two of us.

"The way the Sinkers see it, the multiverse is naturally winding down, and all they want to do is help it along. Kinda like the Dusties, but borderline psychotic instead of boring," Morte's eyes rolled up to look at the golem, "Though I think they just enjoy seeing crap blown to the Abyss."

I looked over the weapons again. Some looked like they were made makeshift from older scraps and rusted parts, but the design and the balance with which they were propped up told of expert craftsmanship. If an army was supplied with these weapons, it could easily crush a city, or gouge a deep scar within a plane. "Who do you make these weapons for?"

I FORGE THEM FOR THE SAKE OF ENTROPY. THEY ARE PAIN SEEKING EXPRESSION.

"Entropy?' But that's just- what does entropy need weapons for?"

BEYOND THIS TOWER, ORDER RALLIES ITS LEGIONS. THE MULTIVERSE HEALS ITS WOUNDS. IN TIME, ITS STRENGTH MAY EQUAL ENTROPY.

"The multiverse is your enemy? Why?"

THE MULTIVERSE BREATHES. IT GROWS. IT STAGNATES. IT FORGES ITS CHAINS AROUND THE PLANES LINK BY LINK. IN TIME, EVEN ENTROPY MAY BE CHAINED.

"And you're opposed to chaining entropy?"

WHEN A THING SEALS ITSELF AGAINST ITS OWN DESTRUCTION, IT MERELY DIES A DIFFERENT DEATH.

The words rang true in some small part, with the echo of old wounds and aches and the pattering of countless tears eating away at the edges of my conscience. "Except the death you seem to offer is violent and senseless -- without meaning."

ALL THINGS HAVE A COMMON GROUND IN DECAY. WAR IS NECESSARY. DEATH IS NECESSARY. DECAY IS NECESSARY.

"These things are never necessary," I protested, "To promote them and glorify the destruction they cause is wrong."

THERE ARE NO LIMITS. LIMITS ARE ONE OF THE LINKS IN THE CHAIN OF ORDER. LIMITS MUST BE SHATTERED.

"Even if death is the result?" Oh the irony.

ALL MUST FALL UPON ENTROPY'S BLADE. THE TIME NEARS WHEN IT WILL BE NECESSARY TO BREACH THE WALLS OF CREATION. ORDER WILL BE PUT TO THE SWORD. ITS CHAINS WILL BE BROKEN. THE MULTIVERSE WILL BE UNMADE.

"Why do you do this?"



THE IRON OF MY BODY ONCE EXISTED ONLY AS MINOR EXPRESSIONS OF PAIN. BLADES. SPEARS. AXES. ARROWHEADS. RIVETS IN CATAPULTS. FROM THESE IMPLEMENTS OF WAR WAS I WROUGHT.

"What happened?"

THESE MINOR EXPRESSIONS OF PAIN WERE MELTED TO FORGE THIS BODY. MY POTENTIAL WAS ALLOWED TO SURFACE. NOW MY PURPOSE IS TO BRING OUT THE POTENTIAL IN OTHER METALS.

"You said that someone melted those weapons and forged your body. Who?"

ENTROPY RAISED ME FROM THE PLANAR BATTLEFIELDS.

Eerie. "Then this tower... is designed to destroy the multiverse?"

THIS TOWER IS A SIEGE ENGINE. IT EXISTS TO BREACH THE WALLS BETWEEN PLANES.

"Breach planes? How?"

THE TOWER ANCHORS ITSELF UPON A PLANE. A WOUND IS TORN IN THE MULTIVERSE WHEN THE BRIDGE OF THE TOWER OPENS. LEGIONS MAY PASS FROM ONE PLANE TO THE OTHER THROUGH THE TOWER. WHEN THE PLANE HAS SERVED ENTROPY'S PURPOSE, THE TOWER ANCHORS ITSELF AGAIN.

All this time that we'd been talking, there was neither sight nor sound of anyone else. For such a massive complex it was empty, gutted like an ancient conch shell, the lone inhabitant within long ago dead and rotted away. "What happened to the legions that have used the tower?"

ENTROPY HAS UNMADE THEM.

"And what happened to the Planes the siege tower invaded?"

ENTROPY HAS UNMADE THEM.

Wonderful. "If this siege tower can travel the planes, why do you remain here?"

THE TOWER IS TRAPPED IN THIS CITY. THIS CITY IS A CAGE THAT IT CANNOT BREACH.

I nipped the tip of my tongue, thinking. It made sense... Sigil was a cage after all, and the only ways in or out were controlled by the Lady, for the most part. "How did the siege tower get in the city in the first place?"

AT ONE TIME THE TOWER LAID SIEGE TO THE PLANES. HOW I WAS BROUGHT HERE IS NOT KNOWN TO ME. HOW I MAY ESCAPE IS NOT KNOWN TO ME.

"Look, all I need is a heavy, decorated, wrought-iron birdcage. Do you have one?"

I HAVE SUCH AN ITEM. THE DREAMBUILDER CAME TO ME AN AGE AGO. HE PROMISED ME THAT MY DURANCE IN THE PRISON OF THIS CITY WOULD BE NEAR AN END WHEN THE CAGE LEFT MY POSSESSION.

"I...see. Can I have it?"

YES. TAKE THIS CAGE AND LAY WASTE TO THOSE WHO CREATE SUCH CONFINES.

Right.

~~~~~

"I've got the birdcage right here," I said proudly, handing it over to Nihl Xander, "Now give me my dreams."

"I need just one more item from you, and we can begin the final process of the Dreambuilder. I need a pillow that has lain inside a coffin -- it will stimulate a sleep so profound that you may as well be dead. It opens your mind to the emanations of the dreambuilder. It is, if I say so myself, a touch of inspiration on my part."

I do wish people would just write up a damn list for these things. "I'll get it."

~~~~~

The Sigilians of the Lower Ward were unfriendly enough already, but the moment I ran around asking for a coffin maker their overall moods soured even further. I was about to see why.

The shop was chill as the grave. A necessity, I supposed if you didn't want to be overwhelmed by the varnish fumes when there weren't any windows to leave open. Straight, sleek coffins were set up about the shop, and a selection of wooden planks were set along one wall.

Next to a counter was a rugged looking, square jawed man in the middle of a conversation with a customer. The shopkeep turned to me with a wide smile. "How are you, cutter, good day to you, good day indeed." He squinted at me for a second, then thrust his hand out to shake mine.

"Greetings," I said as my palm was wrapped in his crushing grip.

"Hamrys at your service, member of the Harmonium and the fashioner of fine coffins for the recently departed. I think I know you, do I not...? Let me see if I can place it..." He paused to think a moment. "Sharp with names I was in the Harmonium, let me tell you. Knew everyone on the entire Ward..."

"Er... you can call me Adahn," I lied, "I have some questions..."

"Ask away." He gave me a broad smile.

"Who's your friend here?" I asked, gesturing at the quiet gentleman across from us.

He glanced at the customer. "Dimtree?" He shrugged, like he hadn't considered the fellow before. "Quiet, doesn't say much - do you, Dimtree?" Dimtree didn't respond, but simply gave the same blank expression. A few seconds later, Dimtree nodded. Hamrys shrugged and turned back to me. "Wandered in one day a few weeks back, been a regular ever since. He hasn't bought anything, but he doesn't cause any trouble, so I let him stay. Seems harmless enough. You see, when I was serving the Harmonium, part of our work was to take people under our wing, give them a little shelter from the chaos of the streets, get 'em spruced up..."

"I need to buy a coffin pillow," I interrupted him.

Hamrys beamed. "Ah! You are here to purchase then. I assure you, what I do is a labor of love. The real value of my profession is in the building of the coffin... in doing it and doing it well. It is an act of perfectly ordered creation, every piece must fit just so for the betterment of the whole. It is much like a metaphor for the Harmonium philosophy... we create order, and it is beauty..."

"I just need a pillow..."

He nodded. "I need fifty coppers for the basic boards used in construction, though the expense doesn't cover the time. Usually, it's either whitewashed or painted some color of the person's choosing. The boards themselves are usually a sixteenth handspan thick, maybe even thicker depending on the nature of the corpse, whether it's a human being buried or not. Or whether they're worried that the person might get back up again." He laughed.

I blinked and tried to catch his attention, "I just need a pillow..."

He nodded at me again. "Some prefer Bytopian pine, which is fine and traditional, but I prefer the heavy Arborean oak materials, simply because they have a good weight about them. Even a twentieth inch of the oak is stronger than a sixteenth of a handspan of pine..." He paused for a moment.

I took the chance to slip a few words in edgewise, "I said, I just need a pillow..."

They fell on deaf ears. Hamrys only nodded and continued his incessant yammering. "From there, I might need about a score multiplied by a score of steel wood-screws, gauge about eight by one and a quarter inch, or so. Lots of shops around here carry them, not a big deal to acquire them. I'll also need some sort of metal pins for securing the interior lining, best to pick them up with the bunch. Then there's the matter of the battens and corner blocks, depending on how you wish to do it."

"Are you listening to me? I said I just need a pillow!"

He placed his hand on his chin. "And although I usually let the natural wood speak the color of the coffin for itself, sometimes the person commissioning it wants it painted special or engraved... I don't usually do the finer work for

that, though I am skilled, but contract it out..." He paused for a breath. "And the handles alone are another matter entirely..." He nodded knowingly.

I sighed, "What about the handles?"

"Big thing handles: everything about handles depends on how the coffin is to be carried: you got skilled men carrying the coffin at shoulder height, don't even need to worry about handles, professional pallbearers never use them, see. If you got your family and friends carrying the coffin, then the handles are necessary. You'll need some rope handles or even metal handles..." He gave me a satisfied look.

"That's fine and all, but I came in here for a pillow... Do you have any?"

"Let me give you an example: I think the most beautiful coffin I'd ever seen was this one of clear pine. I don't know where they managed to get it, whether from a place in Bytopia or elsewhere... Anyway, it was pegged together carefully and trimmed with this beautiful run of redwood. The effect was somewhat ruined by the crude amounts of thick hemp rope that surrounded the affair. Surely, something was needed for the pallbearers to hold on to, but to ruin the entire beauty of the coffin with such badly woven-rope..." Hamrys shook his head.

"I'm sure this is fascinating and all, but I just want a pillow..."

By the time I looked behind me for some support, I had noticed that both Morte and Annah had left. Only Dak'kon remained out of his stoic sense of duty, and Fall-From-Grace hid a smile behind her hand. Only a Sensate could possibly find this amusing.

Hamrys continued, "Then there's the matter of measurements. They can be tricky, and I try and do it myself, since occasionally a client will neglect to inform me as to the race of the deceased or forget something like the hip width... very important indeed. Also, if the client is still alive, I try and make precautions should the client 'fill out' before they die, you know?" He paused. "Then there's the construction itself..."

"Hamrys..."

"There's many different ways of attaching the sides and ends to the floor of the coffin, and to each other. Some use internal battens or corner-blocks,

with plenty of wood screws to secure it in place. You can also do the fiend's tooth method, and just cut alternating tongues and recesses all along the edges to be joined, so that they fit together, like a fiend's jaw. Requires a little more work and precision, but the result is neat and very strong." He paused to breathe once again.

"Hamrys..."

"Then there's the lid. The lid's gonna need a rim or lip all round its edge, made from a strip of wood pinned to the box or carved around the edge itself. Once you have some pilot holes drilled into the main box, then drill in the screws in the top of the lid maybe half a handspan apart..."

He wasn't going to stop talking. The man would never stop talking now that he was on a roll.

I growled, "If you don't shut up and give me a pillow I'm going to hit you... Hard."

That finally got his attention. He frowned at me with a confused look on his face. "Pardon?"

"I said, I need a coffin pillow. That's all, just a pillow. Do you have any?"

He looked relieved and smiled. "A pillow? Ah, I thought you might need the entire coffin." He put his hand on his chin again. "I'm so sorry, but I'm out of stock on pillows right now. I don't know when I'll have them again, what with the warehouse being closed and all..."

"I've dealt with the warehouse, I'll just go there and get a pillow."

He smiled broadly. "Excellent. If you deal with the issue satisfactorily you may have your pillow for free..." Hamrys began to get that lecture look on his face again, "That may not seem like sufficient payment, but let me tell you about the construction of those pillows..."

"No thank you! I'll just get started on this right away. Farewell." I said quickly, and looked to Dimtree as Hamrys turned his blathering to the fellow full-force.

Dimtree was tall, slender, with a glassy eyed expression. He seemed

engrossed in whatever tale that Hamrys was relating. Occasionally he nodded his head, but made no comments of his own.

"I can't see how you can stand that," I murmured.

The man turned slightly at my comment, just enough to acknowledge my presence. He was a little pale of complexion and rather gaunt looking, and gave nothing but a blank stare. Hamrys didn't seem to notice any of this and continued with his stream of useless prattle.

"Are you... all right?"

The man continued to stare at me and slowly nodded. For a moment I waited for any further response but he said nothing, only stared. I was about to turn away in frustration (and in worry that Hamrys might notice my lingering) when I noticed a strange, musty odor about Dimtree.

I stepped closer and sniffed, unsure what I'd find. As I did, a musty odor filled my senses, an odor I recognized from my time in the mortuary. It was the smell of dead flesh preserved by magic, muted by strong enchantments.

"You're a zombie, aren't you?"

The creature continued to stare at me blankly. Slowly, as if with great effort, he began to reply to me. Only my ability to speak with dead made him understandable. "Yes... I am... Dimtree."

"Why are you here, Dimtree?"

Dimtree slowly glanced at the shopkeeper and made a feeble gesture toward him. Seeing this as a sign of interest, Hamrys redoubled his efforts in telling whatever tale he is relating to the poor creature. Dimtree looked at me again. "Hamrys... He talks... Hamrys never stops... Wanders town... annoys Master, annoys everyone... Master create Dimtree... Tells Dimtree talk Hamrys... Now Hamrys stay in shop... Master happy... town happy. Dimtree sad..."

I winced, and my heart went out to the poor creature. "Is there anything I can do to help you, Dimtree?"

The creature paused, then resumed his slow speech. I could almost detect a

pleading tone in his voice. "Yes... Find master... Sebastian... Ask him release me... Please..." He turned his attention to Hamrys momentarily. "Please..."

"Why don't I just put you out of your misery?" I asked, tapping the knife at my belt.

Dimtree barely shook his head at me. "No... Master revive... Must ask master... Sebastian... please." He awaited my answer.

"Sure, Dimtree. I'll see what I can do for you."

I could almost sense a feeling of relief emanating from the zombie.

"Dimtree... thank you friend..."

"You're welcome. I don't suppose you could tell me anything else?"

The creature gave a barely perceptible shrug of the shoulders. "Know... nothing... Dimtree summoned... by master... Know darkness... peace... rest... Then Hamrys... Sorry... help you... if could..."

"I see... Farewell then."

## Chapter 62

Meanwhile, Annah had found a nearby bar – perhaps to find some time away from the rest of the group. She needed some time to think.

"Pikin' sod... probably couldn't keep 'is bone-box from rattlin' ta save his life," Annah grumbled, downing her ale in one gulp. The barkeep looked up from his ledgers and raised an eyebrow.

His lips thinned, "Hrmn. Been a while since I've heard that rough Hiver argot."

"Ach, mind yer own," Annah grumbled, tapping the counter for another.



"Yeah! Mind your own!" Morte interjected.

"Who said yeh could tag along, skull?" the clink of stolen coppers dulled the snap in her voice.

Morte clicked his tongue, "Hey, that Hamrys guy just couldn't shut up. You couldn't leave lil' old me to endure that yammering with everyone else, can you?"

"Th' two o' ye would make a fine pair, yeh would."

"I don't like the competition. Besides, the chief can take care of himself. And if he can't, well... we'll sew him back together and he'll be right as rain in an hour or so."

Annah sipped her ale. "I know when I'm bein' followed, skull. I have to. And yeh have that glint in yer eye like a sod who wants somethin'."

"Oh I'm just wondering."

"Wonderin' about what?"

"Just wondering."

In the back of her mind, Annah contemplated gouging his eyes out. It was possibly the only way he could hurt... that and his tongue were the only fleshy bits left of him, a pity really. Silent, blind, bumping into the walls. She sipped her ale silently, mulling over that nice, happy image.

"So you gonna tell the chief?"

A muscle in her cheek twitched, "About what, skull?"

"About- you know..." Morte said coyly, wagging what was left of his eyebrows.

"No, I don't, skull. If yer gonna say somethin' spit it out, or shut up an' leave me ta my ale already," Annah's voice softened to a mumble as she put her lips against the rim of the mug, "E'ery minute that passes I need a lil' more sauce in me."

Morte snickered, "Come on. It's the oldest story in the book. Boy meets girl, girl stabs boy, girl and boy share knickers for a night and have awkward pillow-talk in the morning. It's soooo obvious."

Go for the eyes go for the eyes- "I don't know what yer talkin' about!" she growled, her voice rising in pitch, "Do yeh think I like travelin' with him? Do yeh?! 'is life's a right mess it is, all scarred-up an' ugly like 'is skin."

"Thank the Powers he has a nice personality."

"One o' these days, skull, I'm goin' ta wire yer jaw shut," Annah snapped, downing her drink. She slammed the mug on the counter, "Do yeh have anythin' stronger?"

"You do whatever you want, tiefling," Morte's lighthearted tone dropped, and Annah looked up. For a moment he seemed- different somehow, "I've been with the chief a long time. I know a lot about him, and a lot about women, and trust me when I say this: he's not your type."

"Oh this is rich, it is."

"I mean it. Romance isn't for mortal folk. When you're young it's all about finding the right sod, going through this one and that, never quite finding the perfect one. And as the years go by and you start to sag all you can think about is that you don't wanna be alone. At that point you'll grab any berk you can find and you sink those talons into him... and that's the one you'll stick with for life."

Annah fell silent.

"Face it. For mortals, love is all about being desperate. You just don't have the time that he has to escape it."

Annah's lip curled into a sneer, "Every word yeh say just gets stupider, doesn't it?"

"Hey, fine, your choice. But if you do happen to do a sheet-warming session you'll let me watch, right?"

"Shut up, skull!"

~~~~~

"That- that girl!" I grumbled.

"You make it sound like an invective," Grace said with a sideways look.

"Sorry, it's just that I've never expected her to steal from me."

"Not at all... I am sure she only did so out for the practicality of the moment."

I twisted a finger in my ear, trying to dig the last bits of that useless prattle out, "That Hamrys could bore a stone. Though perhaps you think otherwise. Would you like to see how he does in the Brothel, perhaps?"

For a moment Grace's expression was unreadable, "Hamrys is simple enough to understand... while I'm sure there would be some benefit if he were to sit down with my students, it is likely to be one-sided," she drew an ivory finger along her chin in thought, "With Ecco perhaps."

"Ecco? Is that the silent prostitute?"

Grace nodded, "Though I trust that neither she nor Annah, nor Hamrys are truly on your mind right now."

"Am I that transparent?"

"On occasion... though instances of clarity from an enigma such as yourself are a rare delight," Grace smiled.

I sighed. It was a relief to finally find someone to talk to about this, "I wanted to talk about our companions..."

"Who in particular did you wish to discuss?"

"Morte."

"Morte is most peculiar... I have seen a great deal in my life, but nothing quite like him. He behaves somewhat like a mimir, but unlike any kind I have ever heard of."

"I've heard the term 'mimir' before. What else can you tell me about him?"

"Mimirs are encyclopedias of knowledge. The owner may ask them questions, and if they possess the knowledge, they will inform the user of what it knows."

"And Morte is a mimir?"

"I don't believe so. Morte lacks the silvery metal that mimirs customarily have. And he seems to have an attitude of his own. Such qualities are not present in conventional mimirs." Grace shrugged slightly. "He may be one, but he's unlike any I've ever encountered."

I grumbled, "I don't believe Morte is a mimir, either."

"Perhaps there is some test to verify his authenticity... but I would not do one if you value him as a friend. If you do, then you must accept what he has told you."

When we found them, Annah was deep in the bub. Without a word she tossed the satchel of coins at me and steadying herself on the bar she tried to stand. I caught her as she stumbled... Annah must've had quite a few. She really wasn't a stumble kind of girl.

"Gerrof! Get OFF!" she snarled, ripping herself away from me, "I can stand on me own..."

"What's with her?" I murmured to Morte as we went on our way.

"Angry drunk," he said, bobbing with a shrug, "Probably just another mug away from shattering the bottle against the wall like a sopped-up harlot."

I chuckled, but beneath my grin I knew he was lying to me again.

~~~~~

Sebastian smiled at our approach. "Good day, cutter. It's good to see you again."

I cut to the chase, "Actually, I want to talk to you about Dimtree."

He stared at me for a moment and then sighed. "What about Dimtree, cutter?"

"He wants to be released from his curse."

He gave a surprised look and then waved me off. "I find that hard to believe, cutter. Dimtree doesn't have the mental power to desire anything." He frowned for a moment. "Did that idiot Hamrys put you up to this?"

"Think about it, Sebastian. Hamrys doesn't know Dimtree is a zombie, let alone who created him. Right?"

He glared at me in thought. "Hmmm. Hamrys is a lackwit. I doubt he could figure out who could have done this." He sighed and shrugged his shoulders in exasperation. "Hamrys could not have sent you. I guess poor Dimtree is more aware than I intended. A pox on me for my stupidity!"

"Why did you create Dimtree anyway?"

"Oh..." He laughed, shook his head, and then tried to adopt a more serious composure. "Hamrys loves the sound of his own voice, cutter. He would wander the market for hours, bending people's ears to his endless prattle. Businesses were failing. Dimtree provides him a willing companion to listen to his many tales and, more importantly, keep him in his shop."

"So, will you release him?"

Sebastian looked at me for a moment with conflicting emotions crossing his face, then sighed and threw his arms up in exasperation. "I cannot, sorry." He gave a pleading look. "I want to, mind you, but I cannot. I fulfilled a contract by creating Dimtree and I cannot break it, right or wrong. I am a man of my word, my reputation demands it."

"I understand your dilemma and agree with you. Could I release him instead?"

"That would be difficult..." He turned and began to look through a nearby box. After a moment he removed a book which he set down in front of me. "First, you'd have to have some magical aptitude. Second, you'd have to be able to properly speak the words you find on page twenty-three of this

book."

"Go on."

"Last, you'd have to touch Dimtree just as you feel the power of the words culminate within you." He turned his back on me and rummaged through another box. "I couldn't allow you to read that book, however. It'd be tantamount to my breaking my word through the actions of another." He continued poking through the box, ignoring me.

My eyes darted across the page that Sebastian indicated, fingertips zipping along the lines and acting as a guide. My mind was as sharp as ever, and after only reading it once, I knew how to free Dimtree from his purgatory.

~~~~~

I gave the coffin pillow a couple of squeezes. Fluffy down, yet with solid support, and silken to the touch. I had to admit, Hamrys didn't disappoint, and I wouldn't have minded laying down on this for eternity.

Hamrys smiled when I entered. "Good day again, cutter. Did you get the pillow you were looking for?"

"Yes. I've dealt with the trouble at the warehouse and got the pillow."

He smiled and nodded. "Well done, cutter. As I said, you may keep whatever you recovered from the warehouse as your reward. Thank you for your help."

"Gee, I sure would like to learn about coffins!" a chipper voice exclaimed outside, "Yep! Nothing I'd like better to hear some blowhard yammer on about coffinology until the Planes grind to a halt!"

"I, too, wish to know this foreign art... it is the tradition of the People to cremate our dead before scattering the ashes to the pebbled winds of Limbo."

"I do find that the topic has much potential. I've yet to experience the subject."

"Yeh are all a bunch o' daft sods, yeh know that?"

Hamrys quickly scurried outside, managing only a short "Excuse me" before leaving me alone with Dimtree.

The zombie turned to face me slightly as I approached. I could feel a sense of expectation in the air about him. "You... find master? Dimtree release?"

"Yes, Dimtree. I know how to release you now."

Dimtree turned to me fully and gestured, "Please friend..."

I paused to gather my thoughts and then carefully spoke the words Sebastian taught me. The grim power over life and death thrummed through me, tickling my flesh and sending a cold chill deep into my bones. I reached out and touched Dimtree lightly on the forehead.

"Rest well, Dimtree."

There was the feeling of something being plucked and snapping within him, and with a sigh the zombie collapsed at my feet. I thought I almost heard a fleeting "thank you, friend" as he fell to the ground.

Moving a dead body is much harder than you'd expect. It isn't the weight alone that makes it tough (though really, a hundred and fifty pounds of flesh and bone is a task in itself). No, it's how the weight is distributed. You have to deal with the flopping limbs, the way the head gets in the way when you try to get a solid grip. Worse still was how the blood had pooled in Dimtree's legs, and how so much of the weight lay there.

This really was a two-person job.

"I cannae believe that actually worked," Annah chuckled, still a bit tipsy as she wandered in.

"Hey chief, we pointed the blowhard down the street. He should be wandering around for a couple of hours."

"We'll send them our condolences later. For now, help me move this body."

We dumped Dimtree unceremoniously into one of the caskets before closing the lid. Hopefully the embalming fluid meant he'd keep for a few

days, and by the time Hamrys found him going south he'd have forgotten about this entire affair.

I just hope the next deader they send to talk to him isn't quite so conscious.

~~~~~

"I have the pillow for you," I declared, waving it as I approached Nihl Xander, "Let's get on with it."

He took it, his lips tightening. His eyebrows rose a little as he examined the pillow, satisfied, "Any time you're ready for the dream key, scarred man, give the word and I'll pass it to you."

"I'll take it right now."

He paused, as if gathering errant thoughts. "Close your eyes and stretch out your hand," he said. "You have to feel this key before you see it or it won't function."

I closed my eyes, and felt a touch in the palm of my calloused hand. At first I could barely feel it, but it rapidly grew in solidity in moments, until finally Xander spoke, "Open your eyes." When I did, I looked down to see a simple black feather in the palm of my hand. "My work is finished," said Xander with the satisfaction of completing four generations of work. "Use that key on the leftmost door of the Foundry and the dreambuilder will open to you. I must go now... I have work to attend to."

I blinked, "A feather? All that work for a feather?"

"It's the final safeguard on the Dreambuilder, sod," he said with a huff, "D'ya think I'd want just anyone waltzing in? I ain't stupid. Do you want something else or can I get back to work now?"

"I'll leave you to your work then. Thanks."

~~~~~

"You sure about this, chief?" Morte chirped, "It looks kinda... spooky."

The archway was sealed, blocked off by an inky black film and framed with

sinuous curved stone. In the periphery of my vision I could almost see the crests swirl and dance like fickle motes of dust in the air, but the moment I focused on that movement it ceased as if it never existed. The darkness, solid and unyielding, made no noise as I tapped it with the tip of my dagger.

"I think I can trust Xander," I stepped back to take the arch in fully, "If this thing was supposed to hurt me he wouldn't have made me jump through those hoops."

"Four generations of devotion is a noble endeavor," Dak'kon said softly, "Githzerai honor may stretch that far, but this is the first I have seen such toil from humans."

"Go on then," Grace added softly, "But take care... dreams have a poor habit of coming true."

Annah was silent, but she hid her dark lips behind a curled ivory finger.

I stretched my hand out with the feather-key in my grip. The moment the feather brushed against the surface the darkness rippled. The watery sheen beckoned, tugging gently at the feather until my hand was enveloped. The space at the other side was neither warm nor cool, and there was a feeling of emptiness at the other side. Not the emptiness of a missing piece or the disappointment of an unfilled box... I mean that the nothing behind the veil, the screen behind the mirror echoed with unbridled potential.

I stepped through into my dreams.

~~~~~

*It was with a vague nimbic sense of falling that I floated to the shore, the singing of the fish in my ears. It is the sound of water and motion and the tug of the tides like a million little soft strings. There were twenty of them each. It is soothing.*

*I dig at the beach with my hands, neither land nor sea but someplace in between. There should be a door here, beneath the moist sand as it trickles between my fingers. He said there would be one. There is a door beneath every beach.*

*The sky is gray with unkempt clouds and the wind is cool against my*

*brindleskin. Waves wash their languors against the beach and wet my boots.  
I do not like it when my boots are wet.*

*Blue dress blown on the winds. Silken gown like waves and hair pale as the  
clouds. Skin ivory white and on the beach she dwell, cold hands that reach  
heaven from hell.*

*I can feel her coming.*

*I am afraid.*

*Wind blowing blue gown. Pearl white woman, dead pale like fishbelly skin.*

*She is coming.*

*I unlock the door and descend, the song of the fish behind me.*

~~~~~

*It is under the hangman's noose that I danced the hempen jig. Now I am the
one tonight.*

*The voice breaks the silence, cold and wretched and crackling like rolling
gravel.*

"You dream again? Again! Again!"

*The door clicks and locks behind me. There is the vague sense of being
trapped, unseen eyes staring at me from behind no matter how I turn. My
fingers itch to claw at the walls, the screams seize up in my throat. My legs
are frozen, leaden, still as stone.*

Calm down. Calm down.

*The only way to escape would be to let it take me. My body felt strangely
light and airy as I let myself go, like I've lost control of it. The winds will blow
me where they will.*

~~~~~

*Valiant intruder shell-breaker wall-piercer. The walls curl in around me, twist*

*and braid until the rope lashes the space around me, cut off from reality in my own bubble.*

*No. Not my bubble.*

*Walls twist and curl and sprout like plants, wiggling in the air with new and eager life. Walls creak but hold still as roots pierce planar mortar and placental space.*

*I recall old advice I was once given.*

*Beware the shadows of the woods. Do not walk the space where trees cast their dead.*

*I know I've stepped in the wrong spot and I pause. It is silent, but I know that the air shivers and rattles and laughs at my error.*

*Creatures of nightmare pull themselves from the ground and walk, rip at my flesh with black barbs. Cold numb pain dances along my flesh as my head rolls back in contentment. Yes yes yes.*

*Sounds of wood and fury, creaking limbs and the squeal of branches. I spiral deep into the darkness.*

~~~~~

The ground smolders beneath my footsteps, and ashen smoke curls along the cracks of the forsaken earth. Overhead the sky is red as blood, pierced with crackling black sin. In the distance a storm bubbles and brews, and within the hour the rains will come: fat droplets of despair that pierce the skin and weather the soul until hope and happiness are gone.

Rattling teeth. Jabbering screams.

The tower of skulls babbles at me, but I cannot understand the words. I want to understand, to sort the voices out from one another and unveil the secrets held in each precious curve.

And just as I hear a familiar, pitched cry coming from within, a clattering from behind distracts me, and I turn to see a battalion of blood-fanged fiends.

The pain is quick this time, and the night cloaks me again.

~~~~~

*She holds me against her, the warm press of her flesh, the soft perfumed scent of her hair. I can feel her smiling against my chest, and I return the gesture.*

*We float in the white void, she and I, weightless and dancing like the intertwined veins of a leaf on the wind.*

*And it was with a deep sense of duty, with boundless purpose that I wrapped my hands around her skull, and twisted. There is the crack of bone, the gush of spinal fluid and crushed neural tissue. She dies quickly, the soft smile never leaving her lips.*

*All, all, I've killed them all. No sound of flies or wriggle of warm maggots in sweet sores and wounds. The sour stench of offal and flesh, raw and cold. There is nothing here to take them nor consume but blood-hungry roots.*

*A cold wind wails through the maze, whipping my ruined flesh with countless accusations. The guilt pierces, tears me up from within like a bellyful of razors. The ashen, coal-dust taste of shame on my lips.*

*Vines curl and ground swallows like a water dirge, and the cackling voice breaks in once more in perfect clarity, like the snap of bone or the creak of old wood.*

*"Oh, my pretty little puzzle, you have killed them and so many more that I have lost count of them all."*

*My voice is trapped in my throat, not even the softest whine escapes.*

*"Come to me, my poppet... come to Ravel in her black-barbed maze. Come dream with me..."*

*And then I awoke.*

~~~~~

When sensation and warmth began to flow through me again, I stirred from my spot on the floor. The nightmarish visions were fluttering away already, like the brush of a moth's wing. Much of the sights and sounds were half-remembered, already slipping through the cracks of my mind and into oblivion.

I sat up, contented. There was a crick in my back from lying on the cold floor, but it was a good little knot, the kind that you twist and it pops from your joints and leaving you all the more satisfied.

"Well? How was it?" Annah asked as Dak'kon helped me up.

"I think... I just met Ravel."

Chapter 63

When you strip everything away, Sigil isn't a place, per se.

On its own it isn't a place any more than a road is a realm, or a bridge or an arch is a domain. No, Sigil is the junction between destinations, and calling it a place is like saying there's a meaning to the pause between words. It's like how four walls by themselves don't make a home. No matter how ornate a building is, how many rooms it has, it isn't a home until there's one simple requirement met.

An idea.

It's belief that turns a tent into a living space, a house into a home. The idea that you own this little square of land, that this is a place to return to after a weary day of work. Ideas are what shape reality by giving a label to naked space, bedecking it in robes and regalia as a domain complete with king or queen. It's rampant belief that makes Sigil more than a waypoint or a road.

And so it was Factions, with their piety and philosophies, that populated Sigil and made it into a city. They crafted laws, carved out domains of power, saw

value and worth in what they held, and yearned for more. It was time for me to join one.

It only made sense, really. Factions had power, resources far beyond what a group of five can achieve in their lifetimes... even if one of them was an immortal. They had knowledge, networks. And more importantly, they tied me to Sigil and gave me a place to come back to.

The Godsmen had been good to me, even if the fear of commitment pricked at my soul. The commitment to a cause and to its followers... I might've been born yesterday (well, recently anyway) but I wasn't going to peddle away my individuality so easily and wind up a fanatic.

But so far they were the best option. The ability to cycle through lifetimes, to test oneself through each incarnation and, hopefully, be better for it in the next life. Granted my soul stays in one spot throughout the whole process, but I have the added luxury of living and dying again while carrying the same lessons of the past. I'd bet not many Godsmen have that.

"If you wish to join the Believers of the Source, you must complete three quests," Keldor had told me, "The first quest is this: You must go to the forge, and create an item. This will show that you are capable of seeing the possibilities inherent in even a base lump of iron; that you are capable of bringing forth something that will stand the test of time. It measures your vision and your ability to make the potential actual. Talk to Alissa, the Foundry Supervisor, in the Main Foundry to see how it all works."

Easy enough.

In the heart of the Foundry was a short woman with slight horns in her forehead and ears that curved sharply back on her skull. She smelled faintly of sulfur, even over the reek of the Foundry's fires. She had eyes like steel, and her gaze snapped onto me with an authority that made me wonder if I should salute or something, "Greetings. What can I do for you?"

"Who are you?"

"I am Alissa Tield, supervisor for this area - this area being the main foundry area of the Great Foundry, where much of our current, public work takes place. The Foundry is larger than this, of course, but we have a large contract we're working on, and we've been sworn to secrecy, so most of the

work area is off-limits. My apologies."

"Keldor told me I need to use the forge."

She nodded simply. I would've thought she'd at least stare at me a little, size me up for my worth, but Godsmen apparently weren't so discriminatory as that. Everyone had the spark of potential divinity in them, after all.

"Certainly. Just make sure you have the proper items for it: Protection from the flames, tongs, hammer, and, of course, your iron ore."

"Where would I get those items?"

"If you can't find them lying around somewhere, then you'll have to buy them from the clerk... for a nominal price, of course."

~~~~~

The clerk was a wizened old man with trembling hands and a cunning face. For a Godsmen he seemed somewhat meek, less than he might've been in the past. There was a hunched-over humility that reminded me of Dhall. The man looked up from his scribbling and examined me, carefully, before speaking: "Hel... uh... have I seen ye before? Ye seem familiar to me somehow."

"From where? Do you remember where?" I prodded the back of my mind, searching for an old memory, but found nothing.

"Not so fast, lad. Takes a while for the mind to warm up to a task like this. I've lived a long time, and seen a lot more faces in that time, and it ain't so easy to remember. Memory's a fleeting thing, and that's some ye can bank on."

"Tell me about it, 'lad'," I muttered under my breath, "Then can you tell me who you are?"

"Me? I'm Nadilin, Godsmen fighter extraordinaire!" He sighed. "At least, I used to be. Now I'm a clerk in the Foundry, breathin' in this sooty air and hastenin' my dyin' day along. Was there something else y'wanted?"

"I'd like to pick up some gear for the forge."

"Ah, ye're wanting to be a smith now, eh, lad? Very well. Ye'll need an apron - ten copper - some tongs - another ten - and a hammer - which'll be twenty. That comes to, let me see, fifty copper."

I checked the math in my head again, "I'm sorry, but that sounds more like forty copper to me."

"What am I thinking? Of course it is. I tell you, memory's an insidious thing."

"That it is. Give me the stuff."

"Don't forget to pick up some ore from Thildon if ye're wanting to work the forge. He's a miserly bastard, but he's the only person to get ore from."

~~~~~

Stomping about in the middle of the Foundry was a slab-stomached man with thick arms and a scraggly beard. He smelled as if he hadn't washed in ages... the man was practically enrobed in the smell of ash and soot and sour sweat. His breath didn't do much for my breakfast either. He was in the process of ordering around subordinates as I approached him, and he dealt a quick cuff to the ear of one of them. He turned to face me, hitching up his belt. "What d'you want?"

"Are you Thildon?"

He nodded, "Thildon the Grey, supervisor for this yard. My job it is to make sure my laborers get their jobs done - and to make sure people like you don't distract them. They work little enough as it is, the little sods, and they'd manage to lose the rest of the day in idleness if I weren't here. I'm tough... but I'm fair. Ask anyone."

"Why do they call you 'the Grey'?"

"Because I'm covered in soot most of the time from those blasted furnaces. It's a nickname my laborers have given me... out of affection, no doubt."

My lip curled, "Sure. That must be it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he growled. I acted like I was impressed... hard not to in front of someone with that much rumble in his throat.

"It means that I'm agreeing with you."

"Well, good. The multiverse would be a better place if everyone did. Now I have to get back to work."

"I need to use the forge. Can you give me some ore?"

"Seems like they'll let anyone be a Godsmen these days," he grumbled. "Ain't like the old days, when you had to show real potential to be a member. You want this iron for your poncey test? Take it, then, and get mazed." He thrust a lump of cold ore into my hands.

~~~~~

The apron was heavy over my chest, the stiff leather cold against my skin. For a moment my mind flashed back to the feel of the mortuary slab... cold, flat, rigid against my back, but as I approached the forge the blaze burned it away. I squinted a little, letting my eyes adjust to the hot yellow light. The heat buffeted my arms in waves, flushed my cheeks and sweat popped from my pores, tickling my puckered scars as the droplets crawled down my skin.

I picked up the ore with my tongs.

Coaxmetal had said that metal was like flesh... that both carried potential in their veins. There was the potential to create, like the hammer that I held in one hand, and potential to destroy, like the weapon I was about to forge.

To see the potential, and make it actual.

I thrust the ore into the forge. It reddened, then glowed a brilliant white-gold of hot iron as the pinching fingers of the tongs blushed with the heat. My hands were slick with sweat.

My hands rang with a haunting familiarity as I hammered. White-hot sparks danced through the air, sizzled as they pricked at my flesh and left tender, pink spots like a dozen insect bites. I ignored those little flashes of pain. The wounds would heal soon enough. The puckered surface of the ore flattened with each blow, until it became a smooth ingot that I stretched and shaped to my will.

I stretched the ore and gave it a spine with which to anchor its limbs.

I flattened out one plump end and gave it wings so that it may fly.

And when it was cool enough to handle, I took it to the grindstone and gave it a fang so that it might bite the flesh of my enemies.

I gave my creation a few test swings, then held it up to the light. The balance was excellent, and the tempering couldn't have been done more perfectly. All that it needed was a little burnishing and an acid-etched insignia and it would've fit the hands of the finest warriors of the Planes.

Like all parents I was proud of my child, and anxious for the criticisms that lay for it ahead.

"I have finished forging my creation."

Keldor took the battle axe from me and examined it carefully. "That is, without a doubt, one of the better pieces I have seen a recruit forge. You'll go far, my friend. Are you ready for the next test? I certainly hope so..."

I grinned, surer now that I had chosen the right faction. The memories of my past incarnations would be useful as I explored the Planes, and in concert with the Godsmen philosophy, would serve to temper me for the trials that lay ahead. "I suppose I am..."

He continued grimly. "A murderer has struck in the Foundry, and I am forsaking the usual test in order for you to track this killer down. Go speak to the supervisor, Alissa Tield, in the main Foundry and proceed from there. When you have completed your investigation and are ready to name a culprit, come back to me."

"Why me?"

"Because you are an outsider. There is no real possibility that you could be the murderer."

"There's no real reason to trust me, either."

Keldor's eyes were firm, but he was cautious and spoke softly. For someone with such a hearty voice, it sounded unnatural, the way a child might mimic

the stern countenance of an adult, or a grown man might attempt to emulate the soft trill of a boy. "We have heard some rumors of a scarred man who awoke in the Hive. A good and honest, if clueless fellow- forgive me for saying so. I have heard that you have a keen mind. You will need that."

A distant rumble stopped the conversation there.

The stone floor pounded beneath my boots as we raced out to the Foundry proper, and my skin tingled with a panicked flush.

The forges were silent, the voices of the overseers were mute. For a moment the heartbeat of the Foundry paused, and the absence of the rhythmic pulse of a hundred hammers striking in concert echoed through the chamber. There was only the low murmur of a crowd that didn't know what to do at the site of a tragedy, before someone could come in and give orders on what was to be done.

And there she was.

"All right, everyone, you've seen enough!" Alissa snapped, "If you lot are just going to stand there like idiots I'll be charging five coppers a glance!"

Slowly the crowd dispersed, though a few glanced back to absorb a few extra details.

Machinery was so fragile. One halted gear or one wrench tossed into the cogs and the entire thing falls apart with clangs and squeals and the smell of burning grease. Flesh, however, wasn't nearly so strong.

I'd seen plenty of death, but nothing quite like this. There was something natural and easy about dying in battle: the way the body lies, still recognizable as humanoid. There was dignity there, a quiet nobility that one had had a chance to survive in the struggle, even if he faltered and failed.

It was nothing like this, a pulped bag of guts and splintered bone, pink-white and exposed like porcelain shards. The limbs were splayed as if independent of the body; the only thing recognizable was one upraised arm with fingers slightly curled. The poor sod's mouth was open in a distended O, the jaw set at an improper angle as the head had been crushed... his scalp barely held in the pink mash of his brains. Strangely enough his skin was the most intact

out of everything... aside from a few long, ragged scrapes, it held the organs in like a pink leathery pink shroud.

Alissa was rubbing her temples as I approached, "You again? Either get the guards to clean this mess up or get out of my sight. I'm in no mood for dealing with newcomers."

"Under Keldor's authority, I'm investigating the murder that occurred here. What can you tell me about it?"

She hissed, "Well, no one saw what happened here, I can tell you that. But you want to know what I saw the night of the murder? Well... I was working late, when I heard the sound of a scuffle. When I came out, I saw a shadowy figure slip out the door into the meeting hall, and I raised the alarm."

"Do you have any other details?"

"I only know three people who had access to the building that night. They were Thildon, Saros, and Bedai-Lihn. The three of them have dramatically different builds, but in the haze of the foundry, I couldn't see clearly."

"How do I know you didn't do it?"

"I have an alibi. Not to mention that Keldor already ascertained the truth from me. I have nothing to hide. Apparently Thildon, Saros, and Bedai-Lihn do, though, because they wouldn't go under Keldor's spell."

~~~~~

Thildon shook his head, the rumble in his voice low as he spoke, "Shame about that poor smith Avildon, really it were. Still. He weren't one to keep himself to the grindstone. He weren't dedicated. 'Tis the way the planes turn, mark my words... every basher gets his due. Ah, well. What can ol' Thildon for you?"

"What were you doing the night of the murder?"

"What was I doing? Why, I was... I was sitting in my room, with a nice loaf of bread and jug of wine, staying in. Didn't go out that night. Didn't see no need."

"Do you know anyone who can swear otherwise?"

"No. Never saw the need to make sure of it. One place you might ask, if you're really looking for leads, is Saros. That little thieving knight goes everywhere, what with his father being such a high-up here. He always was into new experiences - boy's practically a Sensate, if you ask me. Probably wanted to kill someone and see if he could get away with it."

That fresh-faced lad... "Saros, eh? I'll remember that. In the meantime, I had some more questions..."

"You want answers? Like what?"

"What drew you to the Godsmen?"

"They took me in and trained me to be what I am today, and I got to thank them for that. They took my raw talent and shaped it into skill. I tell you, I'm a favorite of the factol's, and someday he'll show everyone just how important I am to this organization. They tell me that everyone has godliness in them. It's true for me. I think I'm closer than most folks, to tell the truth. That gives me the right to act like a god, and to expect total devotion from my inferiors. I'm learning t' take power and move mountains with belief in myself. When I rule the cosmos, you can bet I'll remember every one of the berks who stood in my way."

Hrmn.

~~~~~

On the second floor of the inner chambers stood a severe woman with flaming red hair pulled back tight, giving her face a stretched, nervous look. She appeared to be deep in thought. At my approach, she glanced up. Her eyes were thin and weasel-like, and they bored into me as if she were wondering if I was worth her time, "Can I help you with something?"

"Who are you?"

She pursed her lips and spoke in a cold, determined voice. There was no pride in it, nor any pleasure. Just steel and conviction, edged and smooth. "My name is Bedai-Lihn. I'm a magical engineer - not a mage, mind you, a theoretician."

"Tell me what you know about the murder."

"Let's see... I asked the guards to head out for the night because I was working on some delicate engineering on the project in the next room, and I didn't need their psychic emanations fouling up some very crucial work. It was with some dismay that I found the body when I emerged from the room. Being as I have no other alibi, I realize I'm a suspect - and I suspect you've already found that I wouldn't consent to going under the spell to answer. The reason for that is that it would be violating the oath of secrecy I swore to protect the project."

"I think I'll check on that with Keldor."

"You do that. He'll verify what I've told you - he administered the oath to me, so he knows its power."

~~~~~

Poor Saros paced back and forth. If he was unsteady and young-looking before, he looked even moreso now, like a child terrified of being caught doing something wrong.

"That poor smith... I can't believe what happened to him..."

"Do you have any idea what might have happened, or have some leads?"

He blinked, "Who told you? The supervisor? She's right. I come in here at night sometimes when there's no one around." He looked around conspiratorially for a moment, and lowered his head toward me. "I saw Thildon, creepin' out of here. The main reason I know it was him is because he dropped something." He handed me an awl, with the name 'Thildon' etched into the wooden handle.

I wish things had been that straightforward.

~~~~~

I approached Thildon with a swagger and a firm, scolding tone, like a smarmy investigator seeking to rattle his suspect, "Saros - you remember Saros, don't you? - gave me an awl found near the body. Oddly, this awl has

your name etched into the handle. How do you explain that?"

He looked momentarily flustered, and then his cheeks flushed pink with barely-suppressed fury, "Saros is a thief. Odds are he stole it from me. 'Fact, I been missing my awl for some time now - never mentioned it to anyone 'cause I figured I'd just lost it. Now I know that Saros stole it to frame me. Better go get him before he gives you the laugh." Seeing my expression, he added, "Before he escapes."

"Ah. Right. That sounds a little too pat. I'll just have to ask him about it"

~~~~~

"What have you found? Are you going to let me go free?" Saros asked nervously.

"Thildon says that you planted the awl at the murder scene, and that you're trying to frame him for the murder because you two disagreed."

"Of course he'd say that! Just 'cos he's guilty and he wants to make you look someplace else! I saw him kill that man! Sure we disagreed, but that doesn't mean I want him dead. Just because he's a total berk doesn't mean he should be arrested. He should be arrested for killing Avildon! Tell him he needs proof!"

~~~~~

"What'd Little Lickspittle tell y'now? I'm sure it were all lies."

"He tells me that it's not a frame. In fact, he says that he personally witnessed you killing the poor sod."

"He WHAT?" his meaty hands were balled into tight, pink fists, his knuckles were pale white. His cheeks were flushed just the same, and in the heat the musk about him seemed even more pronounced. I hoped he was the one... the man was tempermental and unhygenic, two things I'm not too fond of, "I tell you that the boy's a thief and a murderer, and you don't believe me? What if I told you the lad's an Anarchist, too, a member of the Revolutionary League?"

It took a moment for me to process the accusation. True, Saros seemed to

be a fickle lad, but surely he couldn't go so far as to betray the Faction he grew up with... and his sister possessed a powerful, frightening perception, "Why should I believe that?"

A pious look crept onto his face. "'Cos I say it's so. 'Cos I'm about to say something that'll make a criminal of me, but I'll say it to see justice done." He paused. "I know he's an Anarchist because he tried to recruit me. Him and that engineer Bedai-Lihn. I told 'em I'd do it so's I could trap 'em, but then I realized I didn't have the stomach to harm poor Saros. I turned 'em down, and now they're trying to cover their tracks. That's why they want me gone. They're the killers. Not me."

"Assuming I believe this, why shouldn't I have you imprisoned too?"

"What? You're accusing ME? But I didn't do anything! Berk, you've got the wrong man! Please! I didn't do it!"

~~~~~

Sarod sat, one leg twitching, his eyes owlsh and wide. The boy was so twitchy I was impressed that he hadn't wet himself by now. "Well?"

"Thildon tells me that you and Bedai-Lihn are Anarchists, and that you're trying to frame him because he turned down an offer to join you."

Saros paled, and his lips parted in surprise. I was grateful there wasn't a warm trickle on the floor by now... fetching someone to mop it up would've been another trip in this as-of-yet fruitless exchange, "She has nothing to do with this. I did it on my own. But the truth is, Thildon shoved Avildon into the gears. I put the awl there to make sure everyone would know he was there, because I'm just a kid and no one would believe what I was saying. All right? I admit that I planted the awl. But I only did it to make sure he got punished for his crime."

"Why? Why should I not think that you're doing this to get back at him for some other crime?"

"Because... because... I don't know why you'd think that. But I promise... go talk to him and tell him what I said, and then you can decide for yourself," the poor boy was on the edge of tears.


~~~~~

Bedai-Lihn was no happier to see me than she was the first time, "What do you want?"

"Thildon says you're an Anarchist, and that you're trying to pin the crime on him."

Anger sparked in her eyes - but a look of scorn replaced it so quickly I wasn't even sure I read it right. "An Anarchist? Right. Here's my other leg. Pull that one, too. Did you have some real questions, or can I get back to my work?"

"What was that flash of anger?"

She smiled slightly. "You don't miss much, do you? Allow me to put it this way: How would you feel if you were falsely accused? My anger stems from that, and nothing more." She seemed honest about this...

"I don't buy that."

"You'll have to, because you're getting no other answer from me." She turned stiffly away from me. "Farewell."

~~~~~

"He says that he planted the awl on the body, but only because he wanted to make sure that you'd be implicated in the death. He says you're a murderer, and he wanted to make sure you got caught."

The supervisor's face drained of color. "He ... what... he... I... he admitted he's an Anarchist?"

"Yes. He seems to believe you're dangerous to everyone around you, whether they be Anarchist or Godsmen, and that someone needs to stop you. He's willing to admit to his own crimes in order to ensure that you meet with justice," I twisted the accusation like a curved knife in his belly, "What was that you said earlier? That poor Avildon 'weren't dedicated enough?' That 'every basher gets his due?'"

His beefy face grew red with apoplexy. Rage flooded his veins, rolled off of him in waves like the radiance of the forges. "You're accusing ME? But I ain't

the murderer! I'm just trying to expose Anarchists, berk! Damn you, you can't do this to me! You can't trust anyone who says they saw me do it, so you can't say I did it!"

I had to set my lips rigid to squelch a giddy smile. I almost wanted him to kill me on the spot, so that I could sit up again an hour later and make a testimony of his guilt in person. "Would you say the same thing under oath and under spell? I'm betting Saros would."

"Bugger. Can I at least take my stuff and give this place the laugh? Ol' Thildon'll make sure you won't regret it."

"Only if you can beat it out of here before I make it to Keldor. I don't make much of your chances."

And with that Thildon the Grey scuttled off in flight, tail between his legs as the noose was being measured. He's taken his test, was weighed and measured by the Planes. It could've been punishment enough... one day a Godsmen, the next a failure. Nothing more pathetic than that.

Chapter 64

Keldor's eyes stared into mine, "Well? Have you found a culprit for this heinous crime? Do you have evidence?"

"Thildon did it. He had personal problems with Avildon, and he was trying to frame Saros for the crime. Execute him."

He shook his head. There was never any satisfaction in condemning one of your own, "I would never have believed it of Thildon. I trust your investigation was thorough... and I trust you. Allow me to summon the guards."

"Take your time."

Keldor's face was dry and heavy when he returned, and for the first time since I met him he showed the weight of age. "It is done. My thanks for resolving the investigation. You have but one task remaining to you. Sandoz, father of Sarossa and Saros, one of our more vital members, has returned from a harrowing journey. He has locked himself in his tower room and is threatening to kill himself. Speak to him. Stop him."

~~~~~

Despite the expert craftsmanship of the furniture, there was a marked austerity to the sitting room. Deep and elaborate vines were carved into the wood, and the shelves were lined with odd knickknacks and gleaming treasures... a fiend's paw, an ornate bronze dagger. It was decorated by a man who went through the motions of the high life, a dry and hollow attempt to appear stoic rather than a mark of pride.

Two guards flanked the solid wood door, and they greeted me with a salute.

"Greetings, sir. Did Keldor send you? Sandoz came up here and he's been raving and muttering behind the door all day. I hope you can do something for him."

"We'll see about that." I called through the door, "Sandoz! I need to talk to you!"

A muffled voice came out from the bedroom, shrill with a choked sob. "Go away!"

"Are you Sandoz?"

The voice snapped, "Who else would I be? These are my rooms, this is my faction." It laughed bitterly. "This is where I'm going to die."

"Tell me about yourself, Sandoz."

"You want to talk? Is that what you want? How about you listen?" The voice paused, and then gathered steam. "What's the point of it, that's what I want to know. Why do we do the things we do? What's the thing that keeps us driving, hm?"

"I don't know, what?"

"Pride! Pride and ego! We keep telling ourselves that we can be something, that we mean something, that there's a reason we're here, but in the end... in the end it's all just blackness. I've seen that final blackness and there's no reason to deny it. Yet we keep pushing on out of foolish pride. There's no reason to it."

It was like balancing a glass globe on the tip of a spear, trying to be delicate yet not patronizing, firm yet not scolding. Any moment he could hang himself, and I needed to keep him talking, "Look, I'm here to help. I'm here to listen."

"I see... send a concerned stranger to talk me out of it, eh? Ha!" The voice dropped to a conspiratorial tone. "Did they tell you could join 'em if you just came to talk to me? Did they think it would make you care more? If you had seen half the things I'd seen... just half the things I'd seen..."

"What have you seen?"

"I have seen horrors beyond imagining. I have seen a twisted, tortured god, bound by laughing fiends. I have seen a layer of the Abyss distill itself into the essence of a single individual... I have seen all the laws of nature perverted and I have seen all the truths of man turned upside-down. None of it makes sense to me anymore, and I cannot bear it any longer! What's the point, I ask you, what's the point?"

I tried to smooth my voice, make it softer than the normal low, guttural growl, "You have no idea what I have seen, Sandoz. I've lain in the sands of the Silent Shore, felt the icy waves of the River Styx lapping at my cold flesh. I've seen the darkness at the end of every nightmare, felt the hollow where a man's essence should rest. You don't see me threatening to kill myself."

There is a short, sharp breath from behind the door, and then a low, unamused chuckle. "You're not much on tact, are you? What if I told you I had my head in a noose right this instant?"

"I'd tell you that if it's done wrong, it's a particularly uncomfortable way to go. Trust me, I know from experience," granted, I hadn't quite died by hanging yet, but I've had my neck snapped enough times to know, "So why don't we just talk?"

His voice was low and quiet, "About what?"

"Did you ever consider that you became a Godsmen for a reason?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why did you join the Godsmen?"

His voice strained as he searched for an answer. That's what this whole ordeal was, a quest for an answer, "Because I thought there was meaning. I was wrong. There is no meaning. Love, family, wealth, accomplishment... it all means nothing."

"All of it? Is there anything that could prove you wrong?"

"Find someone who can persuade me otherwise, someone who can tell me differently. You can't, it seems... find someone who can." the floorboards creaked as he walked away from the door.

~~~~~

Sarossa gazed at me with those soulful eyes, her chalk-white face smooth and still, "Greetings, wounded man. What do you need of me?"

"I need to speak to you about your father."

"What of him?"

"He has locked himself into his tower, and is threatening to kill himself. What can you tell me of him that will allow me to keep him from doing so?"

Her eyebrows furrowed and her lips twisted into a sneer. Even in a fury she was elegant, terrifying like a storm. "You lie! My father is traveling! He is not expected back for days, at least!"

I almost took a step back, "Even so. Speak to Keldor if you don't believe me. I require your assistance if your father is to live."

"I will, you can be sure." She paused and stared at me - hard. There was a sensation of something caressing my soul, delicate like the brush of a finger, "You speak the truth, don't you? I see no deception in your heart on this

matter. Very well. This is what I wish you to tell my father: All life is a test. One cannot expect to skip to the end directly. That is not the answer. Only the Doomguard and the Dustmen believe in utter decay - and you have always held them in contempt. Remember this."

~~~~~

"Sandoz! We've got to talk!"

Sandoz' voice was muffled by the thick door. "What do you want?" The voice sounded desperate and lonely.

"I'm here to tell you what your daughter said."

There was a pause. The voice came, more brittle than before. "You talked to my daughter?"

"Yes. This is what she said: 'All life is a test. One cannot expect to skip to the end directly. That is not the answer. Only the Doomguard and the Dustmen believe in utter decay - and you have always held them in contempt. Remember this.'"

He laughed, hollowly. "She said all that, did she? Give me a minute."

"Take all the time you need."

When Sandoz spoke again, he sounded a little more balanced. "Go down and tell Keldor you've talked some sense into me. I'll want to see him eventually... but you've done your job. Go on now."

~~~~~

I wasn't one for ceremony. Take a vow, wrap it up in pretty words, and repeat it before an approving crowd and that was all. It was worth little to me and, I suspect, less for any other initiate, but the Factors flanked me, heads held high with pride as I approached the podium. The incense stung my eyes, and the sight of my companions sitting at the benches was blurred as I teared up.

Dak'kon gazed at me with a plain, level look. Annah's tail flickered in boredom, and Morte looked back and forth, restless, while Fall-From-Grace

smiled, as if hiding something behind those rosebud lips.

Sometimes I really did wonder what went on in that woman's mind.

"Ahem," Keldor coughed, "The vow?"

I blinked, somewhat embarrassed that at my distraction, and raised one hand, repeating the oath from memory, "Life's tribulations are tests. There is nothing I encounter that is not a lesson. Pain is the multiverse's way of reinforcing a lesson. What I hate most in others is a reflection of what I hate most in myself. I will act to activate my potential, and to aid others in achieving their goals. I will remember that divinity's spark is present in everything. I swear loyalty to the Believers of the Source and their goals, never to forsake them."

Keldor smiled. "Welcome to the Godsmen, lad."

The small audience applauded as I left, reaching out to brush my bare arms in lukewarm, token affection. Saros shook my hand, whispering his gratitude in my ear for letting him off the hook.

"Hmrph," Morte grunted, "That ceremony was a wash. They could've at least included some paddles or a goat or something."

"What is that supposed to m-" I started, but at that moment Sarossa approached me.

"My father lives again thanks to you, and my brother walks free."

I nodded, somehow thankful she didn't feel the need to reach out and shake my hand, "It was nothing, Sarossa. Your brother is impulsive, but young. He only wishes to go his own way. As for your father... I understand how difficult things can be for him."

"Indeed," she said, and by her tone she seemed to be in full agreement, "But for your aid I would offer you my gratitude, if you would accept it."

"Of course," I paused, remembering that eerie gaze of hers, "Is this something to do with your gift?"

"Yes," she said plainly, "I know not how I came by it. It seems something that

has always been a part of me. I can only surmise that my past lives and my beliefs in this one have given me a special insight into mortal nature. I am gifted with the ability to see a piece of the potential within every being. By reading the true name graven on that mortal's very being, and by slightly mispronouncing that word, I am able to change the nature of that potential, thus changing the nature of its bearer."

"So... you can you change me?"

She nodded, "I can change you, but I cannot teach you - it is like teaching color to a blind man, or sound to a deaf man. And I will change you, if the price be right."

"What is the price?"

"Tell me. Do you truly subscribe to the philosophy of the Godsmen?"

"Yes."

"Then I feel no qualms in sharing my gift with you." She spoke an arcane syllable, one that shook me to my very foundation. My soul flashed like fire, beamed like the sun for a single moment. In a moment of pure ecstasy my being rang like a glass struck by a silver spoon.

The world seemed different to my senses now, more open and crisp.

"Thank you, Sarossa. I wish you well."

~~~~~

For a couple of good weeks I worked at the Foundry, crafting one masterwork after another. My palms grew hard and callused from hammering at the forge. My body grew fitter and my already heavy physique became ever more densely layered with muscle. Annah, normally restless, didn't seem to mind watching me work occasionally. Dak'kon sat in meditation in the austere quarters that had been set aside for us, and Fall-From-Grace seemed content observe, supping on the experience of what it meant to be a Godsmen.

With the stipend I made selling my work, I was able to supply us with better goods, and even picked up a minor Godsmen relic. Through it all Morte



whined about loaning him some cash for a visit to a proper mammy shack.

Life was good... until one day I met a most unusual woman while browsing the Clerk's Ward.

## Chapter 65

She was a tall, slender woman, willowy and delicate. It was clear she was out of her element: as she sipped wine from a small ceramic cup, her eyes looked about and she arched her neck high as if trying to look for someone. Her facial features were elegantly exotic and the woman's ears, though partially covered by her long hair, came to sharp points, like the wingtips of a bird.

"Greetings."

The woman turned to face me, violet eyes flashing like flawless chips of amethyst. Her speech was as music; a faint, musical tinkling, like a hundred tiny crystal bells, sounded as she spoke. Each word lingered in my ears, as if they were unwilling to relinquish the exquisite sound. "Nemelle turned to face the scarred, dour stranger. She asked what he wished of her."

"Wow," Morte ogled.

"Pah!" Annah sneered at him. "Stop yer droolin', yeh leerin' skull."

"My, what a hot-blooded little chit! Starved for attention? I could drool over you, too, if you're just jealous..." Morte started floating towards Annah, making wet slaverling noises.

"Get a hair's breadth closer, skull, an I'll see to it that not one o' yer chatterin' teeth lies within a hundred paces of another!"

With that Morte stopped abruptly, turning away while muttering unintelligibly.

"Are you looking for someone?" I asked Nemelle. The name sounded familiar.

"Where could she be?' Nemelle wondered. Her companion, Aelwyn, was supposed to have met her here days ago." The woman sighed miserably; the air around her grew chill with her sadness. "How long must she search this vast, foreign city before she finds her dearest friend?"

"I could help you find your friend. What does she look like?"

Nemelle clasped her hands together and bowed her head to me. "She would be so pleased to hear news of her friend! She told the kind stranger what Aelwyn looked like, so that he would know her should he come across her." Though she said nothing else, an image formed in my mind -- a woman who resembled Nemelle, but with golden eyes and hair of fiery crimson.

When the image faded, it came to me. Glyve had told me before I laid him to rest, with a trickle of clear, pure water. "I was told you know the command word for this decanter."

The woman made no move to touch or examine the decanter, but again, only spoke. "Nemelle took it from the stranger, turning it in her hands. Had she seen its like before, she thought? Perhaps... yes, she remembered now. She returned the decanter, whispering into his ear as she did so..."

"Uh..."

I felt a puff of breath that tickled my ear, and I realized that I knew the word, now: 'Nildenosaj.' She blinked at me. "Would the stranger leave her, now, satisfied with what she had told him?"

"Yes. Thank you, Nemelle."

~~~~~

Aelwyn was easy to find. There was no mistaking that same presence that Nemelle had: the glow of reality about her as if existence and will and word curled into each other.

Aelwyn was occasionally looking up from her cup of wine to scan the surrounding patrons and passers-by. Her facial features were as elegant and

sharp, like blown glass. Her eyes -- a brilliant gold in color -- caught the light, sparkling as she looked about.

"Greetings."

She regarded me carefully for a moment before replying. She spoke slowly and carefully, avoiding direct eye contact with me: "I, Aelwyn, return your greetings."

"Aelwyn? Your friend, Nemelle, is looking for you."

She began to smile, but then covered her mouth with her hand and looked down at her drink. "I, Aelwyn, am most pleased to hear of Nemelle. Might I, Aelwyn, persuade you to tell her of this place?"

"Of course."

She looked at me directly and -- for just the briefest of moments, before she cast her eyes back down to her drink -- my senses were awash with a warm, comfortable feeling: pure happiness. "I, Aelwyn, thank you."

"It's my pleasure. May I ask you about her, though?"

Aelwyn nodded slowly.

"The way she speaks, and what her words do... how?"

"I, Aelwyn, can only say that we come from another place, another world. We are not like the people here, whose words, thoughts -- very feelings, even -- affect nothing directly. I, Aelwyn, take great care so as to not affect those around me too greatly. Nemelle, she is new here, and cannot do so. It is something she must learn, should she choose to remain here much longer."

"But why?"

Her eyes stared into mine, suddenly sure and hawk-like. "There are many reasons. I, Aelwyn, feel it is not right to impose reality upon those without the ability to impose their own reality upon me, Aelwyn." With that she looked away, once again avoiding my gaze.

"Is there anything you cannot do by simply speaking of it?"

Aelwyn frowned; a strange, unpleasant feeling rose in the pit of my stomach. "Please... I, Aelwyn, would speak of it no more."

"Just one other question...."

She looked at me directly, my face reflected in the glittering golden discs of her eyes. "He would speak of it no more to Aelwyn, and thus would no longer force her to speak in such a way to him." I found myself unable to voice another question... the words caught in my throat like the spur of a fishbone as I tried to ask.

"Fine, then. Farewell."

Hypocrite.

~~~~~

Nemelle smiled as she greeted me, her beauty no less breathtaking than the first time I saw her. "Nemelle held her breath as the stranger approached her. 'Had he found Aelwyn?' she wondered."

I nodded, "I found Aelwyn. She was looking for you, too."

Nemelle's lips formed a perfect smile; an infectious happiness radiated from her, clinging to me like sweet-smelling warmth. "Nemelle was overjoyed to hear of her friend. Was Aelwyn close by?"

"She's at another cafe east of here, across this part of the Ward," I gestured, "I'd be happy to escort you, if you wish. Aelwyn said you were new to the city."

"Oh I'm sure she's new to lots of things..." Morte licked his teeth.

"Nemelle thanked the man for his wondrous news. Soon, she would go to visit her oldest friend, Aelwyn. Now, though, she would reward the stranger..."

"No, that's all right... I need no reward."

Nemelle touched her index finger to her lips, making a faint hushing noise. "She would draw the stranger close, laying her hand upon his chest and kissing the pale, leathery skin of his cheek. Life would flow into him, invigorating him... this, then, was to be his reward."

As I waited, there was indeed a light tingling sensation upon my cheek and chest. The feeling spread across the whole of my body, and I began to feel stronger, more animated.

"My thanks, Nemelle. Let's go."

~~~~~

Aelwyn clasped her hands together and bowed her head to me in thanks, tears of joy falling from her golden eyes. Just as my own eyes began to water, she wiped away her tears and smiled -- causing a wave of intense pleasure to wash over my entire body. The two women embraced, speaking excitedly in delighted, relieved chimes. "Aelwyn thanked the stranger! She had been reunited with her dearest friend, Nemelle!"

"It was my pleasure."

Nemelle performed the same gestured and looked up, smiling. Another burst of pleasure radiated through me-- the effect was almost dizzying. "Nemelle thanked the stranger once more; she only hoped he knew how happy she felt to be reunited with Aelwyn."

"I... think I do. Farewell, Nemelle."

They talked for just a moment, and as I was about to leave Aelwyn's fingers brushed my arm. I paused, looking back at her, and the warmth evoked by her smile faded away into pleasant memories. "I, Aelwyn, would tell you something now, stranger."

"Yes? Go on..."

She took a breath, little more than a sigh, but the air around us rippled with languor and distant regrets, "The name I, Aelwyn, chose for you -- 'stranger' -- is not so fitting. You and I, Aelwyn, have met before... in the Festhall. In a place you could not have been were you not a Sensate, yourself. Whether you recall or no, unless you betrayed the Society of Sensation at some point,

you are a Sensate."

I blinked, "I see... tell me more."

She nodded. "You and I, Aelwyn, have met on two different occasions. The first was no less than two centuries past, the last more recently. Perhaps no more than fifty years ago."

"That's quite a long time ago..."

She nodded again. "My, Aelwyn's, people are extremely long-lived, Forgetful One." Aelwyn sighed unhappily, causing a chill to descend over me. My skin prickled, and a tingle ran up my spine. "You seemed a different man, then... less grim, less scarred. So eager to see all that the multiverse had to offer. You courted me, Aelwyn, then, and was nearly taken as a lover -- but then you disappeared."

"Where did I go?"

"I, Aelwyn, was told you had been slain... murdered." She looked up for a moment to peer curiously into my eyes. "I met you only once more after that."

"Did I remember you then?"

"No." She shook her head sadly, then touched her throat. "No, you did not. You lashed out at me, Aelwyn, made to slay me. Screamed how I, Aelwyn, could not fool you, would not ensnare and murder you..."

I winced. Do I abuse and abase all my past lovers? "What happened?"

"We had met in one of the northern towers of the Festhall, on the seventh floor. Before you could choke the life from me, I, Aelwyn, used my powers and bade you leap from a window to your death. When I, Aelwyn, finally went in search of your broken body, you had already gone..."

"You did *what*?"

She nodded, the guilt and regret running down her cheek in a lonely trickle, "That is the whole of my, Aelwyn's, tale for you. We were not strangers, once, but have now become so. Farewell, stranger, and may fortune walk

with you in your travels."

"Thanks, Aelwyn. I..." I tried searching for the right words, something to lay to rest whatever had been between us. Lost love, guilt, regret, shame... there was no way to compress all that into a single sentence. In the end I could only offer a tepid reply, and hoped that that was enough.

"I wish you well."

Aelwyn nodded, neither happy nor sad, neither relieved nor anguished, and said no more.

~~~~~

It was still early in the day in the Clerk's Ward, and I took my time sampling its wares. Street performers and acrobats carved out little domains, brightening the hodgepodge urban sprawl with life and color. I chewed on a fried lizard on a stick, the skin salty and crispy, its flesh tender and moist. The smell of sweet herbal tea from the cafes perfumed the air. There didn't seem to be such a thing as Carnival Season in the Clerk's Ward... who needed a day of festivities when there was celebration at every street corner?

I was picking the meat from the lizard's bones when we came to the "Curiosity Shop". Rumors had abounded of this place. Not the nasty kind, mind you, just vague mentions passed through the grapevine that this was the place for talismans and spells.

I wiped the last bits of grease from my fingertips and entered.

Something was funny about the air, sickly-sweet like honey laced with poison. The alluring fragrance masked any venom that lay beneath I could almost taste it.

A downtrodden little man scurried about the shop, dusting, cataloguing, and moving things about for the place's proprietress. He smelled faintly of onions. He glanced up at me nervously, "Please, sir... I cannot speak with you. I've work to do, and my mistress simply won't allow it..."

"I just had a few questions..."

"I'm sorry sir, but I can't. Please, leave me be, before my mistress notices me talking to you..."

"Your mistress?"

The little man nodded. "Yes... Mistress Vrischika. I am Standish, her servant... her slave. I committed a crime and was sentenced to slavery, then purchased in the Lower Ward, like many of her slaves... most of whom she keeps at her manor. Now please - I beg of you! Leave me be, or she'll become angered and beat me unmercifully!"

"Now Standish, I will not have you telling such nasty lies to customers," said a sweet, prickly voice.

I glanced off to the side. She was a demoness, sharp-featured and attractive though her appearance was somewhat disturbing. Her blue-black skin was smooth like cobalt, and bright yellow eyes glistened like a cat's. As she examined me, a small pair of bat-like wings unfolded from her back, then seem to settle back into her skin. Her eyes slid over to my companions and her lips pulled back into a cruel, treacherous smile.

"Well, well... a floating, disembodied, prevaricating skull, and Fall-from-Grace... or whatever it is you call yourself, now. Truly a pleasure to see you here. What do I owe the honor of your visit? I thought that you rarely trafficked among our kind, any more." She glanced at me for a moment with the same faint sneer. "Or is your assignment here almost finished?"

Fall-From-Grace bowed her head and spoke sweetly, "I do not know what assignment you are referring to, Vrischika, though your presence here brings with it many questions. Last I had heard you were a standard-bearer for the Company of the Vulture. How did you come to Sigil?"

She replied curtly, firing a question back like an arrow: "By choice. And you? Where will your orders take you next?" She suddenly turned to me. "You see, little man..." Vrischika smiled, as if savoring the words. "...the best temptress is one that can make you buy into the illusion of being both promiscuous yet virtuous at the same time; a prostitute-priestess, as it were. Mistress Grace is among the greatest..." She turned to Fall-From-Grace. "...are you not? You would not think that a score thousand years of slavery had left their scars, no?"



Fall-From-Grace spoke with a coldness I had never heard before. The air almost became ice as she dissected Vrishchika with her gaze. "That is enough."

"Very well. Though you are the ones who came into my emporium." Vrishchika looks to me and narrowed her eyes. "You... you're the scarred man, who's been going around asking all the questions?" She looked me up and down. "You sure look lost. Did you want to come in, really, or are you just casing the place because you have nothing better to do?"

"Because Vrishchika..." She indicated herself "...can help you."

I eyed her skeptically, "How can you help me?"

"I travel and trade extensively. I hear a great deal, I purchase a great deal, and I own a great deal. Perhaps I can make you a great deal. Is there anything that you desire?"

"Only answers to some questions..."

Vrishchika pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes into dangerous slits. "I'll entertain any questions about the merchandise, but I'm not going to be drawn into one of your famous twenty-questions-about-anything-around-the-spire, understood?"

"What are you, Vrishchika?"

Vrishchika sighed loudly. "An alu-fiend... a half-demon. My mother was tanar'ri, a fiend, and my father a great king of mortals. Such a rude question... but then, you're rather rude-looking yourself, aren't you?"

"What did you mean by calling Morte 'prevaricating?'"

"Prevaricating... misrepresenting, perjuring, dissimulating, lying... oh, did I say that? I'd meant a floating, disembodied, pontificating skull. As in dogmatic - always stating an opinion in a self-important manner." Vrishchika smiled innocently.

"You and Fall-From-Grace seem to care little for one another..."

"Oh, that baatezu camp follower whose made her home in Sigil? Curious, no? But then, what better a place to train her agents than that little 'brothel' of hers..."

"Baatezu camp follower?"

"Ever since her mother sold her into slavery, she has been a plaything of the Planes for many a century. She claims that she was able to free herself from her chains, but you may give that word as much credence as you would give the word of any other tanar'ri. Myself excluded, of course." Vrischika lips pressed tight in a dark, pursed smile. Every word she uttered was a piercing barb, hitting home as much as they were casually tossed. Some demons destroyed their targets by seduction and honey-sweet words. Others did so by slipping poison in the subtle wounds they carved.

At least Grace was pleasant.

"It is the truth -" Grace started, but was interrupted by Vrischika's fiery tongue.

"Truth?! Truth?! One does not 'win free' of baatezu contracts, you whore cloaked in human skin. You speak lies, and all the tanar'ri hordes know it, from the lowest legions to the other comfort-suckling succubi as they cavort across the planes. 'Fall-from-Grace was but a baatezu slave from the moment she was born, and so shall she always be.' You still are an indentured plaything of the baatezu, to be tortured and commanded as they see fit." Vrischika sneered. "You even behave as they do."

Grace's voice was sweet balm over the cankers Vrischika spread, "One may win free of baatezu contracts if one is wary of the wording, and if one realizes that the baatezu are beholden to keep their own word. One must simply beware of any meanings that may be twisted to their ends... and I am well versed in language and its subtleties. Even so, it was not an easy matter..."

"Enough! I do not care to hear you speak your lies in my presence!"

Fall-From-Grace maintained her flawless composure and simply nodded... though when I caught her eye, she gave a slightly exasperated look, then smiled.

"What was it you said about her training agents, Vrischika?"

"Yes... they are her eyes and ears in the city of Sigil and across the Planes. What they do not see or hear they may coerce from another man that has seen and heard. And who could think humans capable of such deception and trickery? Oh, Grace is indeed a clever one. Not as clever as her mother, perhaps, but clever nonetheless..."

Grace interjected softly, "That is not the purpose of my establishment..."

"Oh, but of course not! Did I dare suggest such a thing? But perhaps you should let the man judge for himself." Vrischika turned to me, eyes blazing. "Do you not wonder, little man? Does the mephit of reason and curiosity ever enter your mind as to this matter? Does not the arrangement at the brothel seem strange to you?"

Vrischika went on before I could answer. "Occam's razor can leave a scar, but it can remove the cancer so often caused by poison of liars and imaginers. And now here she is, traveling with you. Most curious. Why would someone, a proprietress of such an establishment, leave it for any reason? And for a man she barely knows? Questions, questions..."

She hissed, "The answers may be painful, indeed."

Grace stood proudly, hands folded demurely in front of her, "He is well aware of why I agreed to travel with him, Vrischika... when he asked me to do so."

"Oh, I'm certain he did ask... what man could resist?" Vrischika sneered and looked away in disgust.

I sighed, "Perhaps I should just look at your wares."

The exotic goods sat behind clean glass cases on stands and velvet pillows like a woman's collection of jewelry. A demon's tongue lay moist and glistening, a stained lens, a small assortment of bottles, each with labels whose names were enigmatic, as plain as they were.

A bottle labeled as 'Elixir of Horrific Separation' caught my eye.

Smiling, Vrischika unlocked the case and presented it to me. "This stuff was

compounded by a scholar who'd found she possessed a darker half - a side of her which took control, at times, and bade her do awful things. This potion was to have 'split' the darker half away from her, creating two separate beings. Mercykillers, however, found and executed her for a string of depraved murders before she could use it. I'd charge you only two hundred copper commons for the Elixir."

I knew the perfect use for it. "I'll take it."

"Yes," Vrischika purred, "a wise choice." The copper I poured into her hand seemed to disappear the moment it touched her palm; she handed me the item. "Please, enjoy your newest acquisition."

~~~~~

The bitter smell of herbs greeted me again when I entered the apothecary. The air was dusty, bitter, and aged. Behind the counter was Pestle Kilnn... his chaotic features made moist squelching noises as they shifted. He - or they - were as eerie to look upon as ever, as his flesh constantly changed and crawled across his face and body. "I welcome ye - snrf! - back, sir."

"I've got this Elixir of Horrific Separation... do you think that'd help you?"

Both his eyes suddenly snapped to the small bottle in my hands. He nodded, smacking his lips.

"Here you are, then..."

Pestle Kilnn took the bottle in both his hands and placed it beneath the counter. His left eye focused on me, while his right eye and hand concentrated on scribbling furiously on the countertop. "We can use dis ta make somethin' dat'll fix us - hgrk! - right on up. Now if you'll gives us a moment, when we got it all worked - gak! - out, we'll makes ya some healin' stuffs fer a reward." He turned to head to the back of the shop...

There are some things a sod shouldn't ever have to hear. The cursed bellow of a tortured god. The rattling breath of the undead. Cats yowling in heat in a dark alleyway, their cries like the shrill, terrified screams of a baby being tortured. The wet gags and gurgles that came from the back room were probably third down from the list. There was the warm slosh of guts, the sound of flesh tearing like paper. Part of me wanted to peek in and satisfy

my own curiosity... there would've been a strange sort of comfort in that. It would've definitely been better than the horrors my imagination conjured to fill in the gaps. Seeing what was actually happening could only have soothed my overactive mind, like tearing off a bandage to see the wound beneath wasn't as bad as you feared.

When it was over, a rotund little man walked out. With one hand he wicked away the perspiration dewing on his forehead, then wiped his palms on a mustard-green shirt. The man closely resembled Pestle Kilnn, though without the crawling skin and constant, subtle mutations. He smelled like licorice root and pepper.

"Greetings again, sir, and well met. Now, what is it I, Pestle, can do for ye?"

"I was hoping to get some healing concoctions."

He smiled, "Yes, of course; yer reward, aye? Let's see, now... I'll manufacture them for ye for nothing, of course... but I'll need the proper ingredients. Hmmm... an oni's heart, or powdered hematite, or the hair of a deva, or a thread from an aasimon's robe, or the blood of a regenerating creature, such as a troll or..."

"Actually, my wounds heal very quickly."

Pestle raised an eyebrow. "Do they, now? Well, then, your own blood just might do. Here... give me a sample, if you would."

I nicked my forearm with my dagger.

After drawing a small quantity of my blood and retreating to the back of the store, Pestle returned with a number of what appeared to be hardened drops of blood - clot charms. "Placed upon one's tongue, these will heal existing wounds and aid the in the prevention of new ones, for a time."

"Farewell, Pestle, and thanks."

Chapter 66

I had often seen the palace of the Society of Sensation, piercing the sky and shimmering with colored glass like a tantalizing beacon across the entire Ward. Its buttresses curled around the towers and shyly linked one pinnacle to another. It was for more than support: they acted like the lace of a woman's gown, or at the cuff of a gentleman's sleeve, accenting and enlarging, making the whole building look all the greater. The barest corner, most hidden-away window, the plainest wall or support beam was more than utilitarian. No, the whole building breathed with art.

"The planning of it took decades," Fall-From-Grace had said, and her words came with a pedagogical tone, "And a century more to build. It took all that time to find the dozens of different kinds of stone, the hundreds of kinds of glass. Just counting all the kinds of cloths and banners would take years, woven by the hands of artisans across so many planes you could string them together like pearls."

If dancers and performers were abundant in the Clerk's Ward, this was where they made kip. Music haunted each corner. The motions of twirling, twisting bodies snagged the eye like a hook. The walls were of so many textures and were carved in so many sultry shapes they begged to be touched. Kiosks and stands were set apart just enough to give the performers plenty of room, and the smells of spiced delicacies made me wish we hadn't just eaten.

"Marinated snails, sir?" a slip of a girl asked me, holding out a tray of them still in their shells, "Fresh from the gardens of Thyrydin and the Kliggan Woods, and buttered with eight herbs from across three planes. Two silver pennies for a taste."

Okay, maybe not.

I was like a desert dweller, suddenly and inexplicably terrified by the lushness of the forest, afraid of the rich mysteries cupped in each shadow. But familiarity plucked at my soul and I answered the call, which was the sound of celebration.

The streets and walkways were broad enough, however, to permit the nobles to mingle freely while peddlers (a crude term for people selling such

exotic goods) carried trays with samples of food and drink. The gentlemen and noblewomen happily plucked the goods with delicate fingers, dropping coin into open palms without a thought as they chatted.

One man stood out to me, snapping in a deep, sonorous voice some anecdote or another, a staff in one hand and a goblet in the other, "Well I had enough of that and her thrice-damned skim milk. So I cursed the mouthy cow!"

He was tall and thin as a flagpole, dressed in heavy crimson robes, and had sharp, pinched features. There was a perpetual crankiness about his face, as if the creases had been kneaded in with years of sour moods. He paused, arching his heavy eyebrows as he looked me up and down, then bowed regally as I approached him. "I am Salabesh, oft-called Salabesh the Onyx, future mage-tutor for the Civic Festhall. You've business with me, I take it...?"

"No... just some questions..." Fall-From-Grace had been too busy attending to the Brothel to keep up with the Festhall's activities as of late, so this gentleman seemed the next best thing.

"About what, hmmm? Not the Ward and the like, I hope... plenty of more common folk could answer such questions, and I'd just as soon direct you to one of them."

"Why are you called 'the Onyx?'"

"A long tale, which I'll shorten to save my breath. In my youth, I was once called Salabesh the Golden, for I was said to have a heart of gold... small, hard and yellow. Well, I cursed the fool who started that so that he could only speak from his arse and defecate through his mouth. The 'Onyx' appellation - along the same lines as 'the Golden,' though admittedly somewhat less clever - soon followed. In any case, I'm a much kinder fellow now... far less prone to laying curses and the like. I'm not certain if I deserve the name any longer."

"You cursed him so that what?"

"Oh, yes... you heard right." Salabesh sighed happily and chuckled to himself. "That sort of thing is why I'm known as the Master of Curses, you know."

"What did you mean by 'future mage-tutor of the Festhall?'"

"It's a prestigious position, to be an official tutor in one the Festhall's training chambers. It's my intention to one day take the position of mages' tutor, but the title's currently in the possession of the Lady Thorncombe. If only I could somehow prove that I'd be a superior tutor..."

Curses, eh? "Do you know of a cursed man called Reekwind?"

"Reek...? Hmmm." Salabesh's eyebrows suddenly darted up. "Oh, yes... Jumble Murdersense cursed that man, if I recall correctly. Why? Seeking to get his curse undone? Good luck... only Jumble can do that, you know."

"Where would I find this Jumble Murdersense?"

"Within the Civic Festhall, I suppose. A short, portly fellow with a leering smile. Never speaks, so you'll be hard pressed to get anything out of him."

It looks like I have business with more than just one person here today.

The inner court of the Civic Festhall was just as resplendent as the outside, if not moreso. Tapestries and banners were dangled from poles, and the floors were tiled with a thousand colors. Servants carried trays of hors d'oeuvres here as well from outside, to keep the rich scent of cooking from tainting the delicate scents of perfume and incense here.

The doorman greeted me with a nod. His golden skin sparkled slightly, almost as if it were metallic - whether it was his actual flesh or merely painted on, I couldn't tell. He regarded us coolly as we approached, giving a respectful bow as I drew near. "Welcome to the Civic Festhall, traveler; We are Splinter, doorman to the Festhall and Priest-King of Ur. How may We help you?" Despite his humble offer of aid, his voice was powerful and commanding, a deep and rumbling sound that resonated throughout the chamber.

"Priest-King of Ur? What are you doing here then?" my query came with a cock of the head.

"There is little to say that We have not told you. We are the Splinter, doorman to the Festhall, demigod son of Isahar and Priest-King of Ur.

Planewalkers came to our world and told Us of the Society of Sensation; We were fascinated and returned with them. We left Ur in the capable hands of our queen so that We might come to this place and experience 'servitude' and 'humility' for a time. As time does not pass here as it does in Ur, the century We have spent here will be as a mere several months in our own world. After another decade or so, We imagine We shall be ready to return to Ur and rule it once more."

"How can you help me?"

"We do many things in this fine hall, traveler. We answer questions guests might have regarding it or its inhabitants. We direct both visitors and members of the Society of Sensation alike to the sensoriums or lecture halls. We also accept new members into the Society. Lastly, it is through us that purchases from the Society's vaults are made... spells, items and such."

"Tell me about the Society of Sensation."

"The core of a Sensate's belief is that the multiverse can only be truly known through the senses. If one cannot sense it, then a thing isn't. Only through experience... through experiencing all the sensations to be had... can the full Truth of the multiverse be revealed. The Society of Sensation, then, is where experiences gather and are shared with others, usually via the sensoriums."

"Might I become a Sensate?"

"In order to join the Society of Sensation, one must be willing and prepared to share their own experiences. Five are required - one from each of the senses. Alternately, one may contribute a single experience that has strong elements from all five senses. These must be either new sensations, or improvements upon our current stock. Should We find them acceptable, they will be placed into sensory stones and you, having become a Sensate, will be taught the Sensory Touch. It will allow you to draw other's wounds onto yourself, healing them by accepting their suffering."

"What if I already was a Sensate? I haven't come to this place in a long time, but I assure you... I was a Sensate."

Splinter bent down a ways to examine me more closely. "We do not recognize you... but We see no lies dripping from your tongue. Very well. We shall grant you access to those privileges allowed only to members of

the Society of Sensation... if you can show Us what sensations you have gathered recently."

"All right... I'm ready."

"We would ask for five sensations, then, each pertaining to one of the body's senses... or a single experience which has strong elements of all five senses."

I had the perfect one in mind. "I'd have a single experience to contribute, then: I woke up, not knowing where I was, on a cold, blood-slicked iron slab in the bowels of the Mortuary, a place where the Dustmen or the corpses in their care have seen..."

Splinter nodded. "Go on."

"My entire body reeked of embalming fluid, but even the smell of that was not enough to match the coppery scent of gore around me. Dozens of bodies lie on countless bloody slabs like the one I rose from, all in the process of being gutted, flayed, and the like by nightmarish clockwork devices for reasons unknown. The only sounds were the squeals of labored metal and the unsteady tread of undead workers as they pushed the slabs about the Mortuary on rusted iron tracks."

He nodded. "A disturbing experience."

"And I even left out the part about the chattering skull that flew at me as soon as I was upright. Will it suffice, Splinter?"

"Yes. We welcome you back, traveler, and grant you access to those privileges allowed only to members of the Society of Sensation."

Terrific. Now as much as I would've liked to view the goods available to honorary sensates, I had other business to attend to. "There was someone I was looking for, here..."

"Who was it you were seeking, traveler?"

"Montague, a factotum here."

"Montague is a busy young man; he can usually be found moving between

this chamber and three that lie along its eastern wall."

Montague was a handsome young man, with a crimson sash draped over one shoulder and a wedding band on the ring of one finger. He seemed lost in thought, his brow furrowed and a slight frown marred his lips.

"Greetings..."

He nodded, his accent clipped and proper, "And to thee, sir, hail. What dost thou wish of me?"

"Who are you?"

"I am named Montague, factotum of the Sensates."

"What are you doing here?"

"I work as an assistant for one of the faction's administrators. Though, more often now than the past, I find myself perplexed by one of life's strange ways."

"Such as...?"

"Problems of the feminine variety."

I blinked, "You're a female?"

The young man gave me a long look. "Nay."

"What's the problem, exactly?"

"I don't know what's bothering her. I have tried to cheer her up. I don't know what could be the matter."

"How are things between you two?"

"Other than this bout of discontent and humdrums, everything is splendid! All that orbits around us does so with tranquillity... our families are more than satisfied with our potential union, and her siblings love me. There is nothing wrong," he sighed, "Ah fair Juliette, I know not what to do."

I feigned surprise, "Juliette? What good fortune. I need to speak with you about her."

"Oh?" He gave me a puzzled, slightly suspicious look.

"I demand her love. And I demand that you withdraw your false protestations of love before I mash you into tiny bits."

"Thou love her so that thou wouldst fight me?"

I stood up straight, puffing up proud like a villain from a cheap novel, "No, I don't love her, but I will have her. And if you are foolish enough to fight me, I will pummel you, abscond with your lover, and please her in ways you can't."

He studied me for a moment, eyeing my muscles, examining my scars and my callused fists. With a gesture of spun-glass delicacy he sighed, "Thou art passionate about this matter, I see. Passion stems from love. Thou lovest her, and I could not deny her a love such as thine. I shall from this moment onward hold no claim on her; thou mayest do as thou wish."

Ghk- I had not expected that. "Hold a moment... you aren't going to fight for her?"

His eyebrows narrowed, and those firm lips pulled back into a frown, "If thou art disappointed that thou wilt not get the opportunity to fight me, understand that I do so out of honor and respect for thy passion. I am more than capable of defending myself, so think not that I yield out of fear that you might 'pummel me' and 'please her in ways I can't.'"

"No, no, no-" I grumbled, rubbing my forehead, "This was all a ruse."

He looked taken aback, "A ruse? Of what sort?"

"She wanted to provoke you into fighting for her."

"Oh? Did she think my love so boundless that I would engage in fisticuffs with a brutally-scarred man of thy stature? Perhaps she thinks my devotion to her a little high," he sighed, "So... what should be done about this ruse?"

I shrugged, "Turnabout is fair play..."

Morte was more than eager to jump in, "I say ignore the chit... act distant and unconcerned. That'll spice things up considerably!"

"Truly?"

"Trust me, kid. Start ignoring her, create some friction, leave 'em wondering, and they'll be clawing all over to discover what the matter is. Right, chief?" he grinned.

"Yes..." I said with a smile, "She'll think something's wrong, and for once, he'll be playing the game rather than being the target."

"Thou art saying that I should feign disinterest so as to peak her interest. Assuredly, that is irony. I shall agree to what thou suggest and observe the results."

"Good luck - I hope it works out. Farewell."

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He was a short, balding man, with an orange tunic and rather sizeable gut which gave him the look of a walking pumpkin. He was absent-mindedly patting his large paunch with a slow rhythm, as if it were a drum. The man's odd, crooked smile and a strange gleam in his eyes made him look a bit mad.

"Greetings..."

The man gave me an exaggerated, flourishing bow, and presented a small card which read only 'Jumble Murdersense - Xaositect Xorceror X-traordinaire.' He then snatched the card from my grasp and proceeded to eat it, grinning wildly all the while.

"Somewhere, an asylum is one barmy short," Morte whispered.

"I had some questions, Jumble..."

Jumble yawned and looked away, drumming on his belly with the palms of his hands.

"Jumble? My questions?"

Jumble rolled his eyes. He turned to me, smirked, then bit his thumb.

"Are you mute? Is that why you won't answer me?"

Jumble cocked his head and gave me a stupid grin. Slowly, he shrugged... then shut his eyes and stuck his tongue out at me.

"Fine. But I'd like you to remove Reekwind's curse."

Jumble pretended not to hear me, instead belching loudly and resuming his belly drumming, his eyes wandering around the Festhall.

The frustration steadily crept into my voice, "Is there anything I could do so that you'd remove Reekwind's curse?"

Jumble wouldn't look at me, but shook his head.

That's it. "Remove Reekwind's curse, Jumble, before I'm forced to hurt you."

Jumble raised one eyebrow and took a step back. He opened his mouth abruptly, and - though his lips or throat didn't move to shape any words or sound - a torrent of incomprehensible babbling began to pour forth.

"What the...?"

Jumble shut his mouth, and the babbling ceased... he peered at me through narrowed eyes, a self-satisfied smile on his pudgy face. Suddenly, I hiccupped.

And hiccupped. And hiccupped. And hiccupped again.

Jumble Murdersense merely turned his head and waved me away.

"Uh oh... looks like you just got a curse thrown down on you, chief..."

Annah stepped back, drawing a circle over her heart.

"What -hic- have you done to me, Jumble?" I clutched my throat.

Jumble ignored me entirely.

Oh gods gamn you \*hic\* Jumble....

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"Hmm. Again you stand before me..."

"You mentioned you -hic- were a Master of Curses? Perhaps you could -hiccup! - help me..."

"Help you?" Salabesh sneered. "Doubtful." Before I could respond, he sighed, shaking his head. "Well... perhaps I could. What troubles you, then?"

"Jumble Murdersense cursed me," I spat out the words quickly, and right after I hiccupped once again.

"Jumble Murdersense? Hah! That sputtering mooncalf could never best me! Oh, the battles we used to have, though..." Salabesh frowned. "But I'm past all that, now. No longer my sort of thing, you see. I really don't know what I could do for you... after all, it's his curse. Not the sort you'd find on an item or somesuch, you know, that you could remove with simple magicks... he'll have to remove it, and willingly."

"Well, could you teach me a curse, then, that I could use on him? Maybe that arse-talking thing?" I hiccupped, and I could taste the bile bubbling into the back of my throat.

"Hmm. Well... I don't normally do that. I keep my curses to myself, you know. And besides, even a single curse would take one a long, long while to learn - more time than I'd care to spend on it."

"I could -hic- pay you for your trouble..."

"No, no... I've simply no desire to do it." Salabesh looked directly into my eyes. "Now kindly drop the subject, sirrah, before you begin to annoy me."

I stood, frustrated and forlorn. Morte eyed me, twitched towards Salabesh as if in a gesture, and then it hit me. "Perhaps you're just worried your curses aren't good enough to best him, anymore..."

"You what?! Of all the ridiculous... now look here, you knuckle-dragging sack

of scars, Salabesh the Onyx is the MASTER of Curses, and there is no other! Why, I could give you but a single phrase that would render that nincompoop's cursing wholly impotent!"

I pursed my lips and raised an eyebrow, trying to look skeptical. Grace hid a smile behind a lily-white hand.

"That's it! You've made me do it!" Salabesh uttered a short string of impossible syllables... words of power, which I noted mentally for later use against Jumble. "There! See what that does to him, and tell me Salabesh the Onyx isn't the Master of Curses, then!"

"Thanks, Salabesh; I'll do that. Farewell."

Jumble frowned at my appearance, biting his thumb in my direction and waving me away.

"Jumble, I need you to remove the curse you put on me."

His only response was to roll his eyes and yawn pointedly.

"Remove the curse, Jumble, before I'm forced to hurt you."

Jumble Murdersense made a show of examining and cleaning his fingernails, and that was all.

Well, that's that then.

I wasn't about to give him a third chance, and with no small amount of glee I threw the curse Salabesh taught me at him.

Jumble stared at me with a somewhat skeptical expression as I spoke the arcane syllables of Salabesh's curse. The power buzzed over my tongue, and my teeth tingled. After a moment of awkward silence, the Xaositect mage noted that nothing seems to have happened... and an evil grin spread across his face.

Oh dung.

He opened his mouth to retaliate with another curse of his own... and his eyes grew wide. Jumble clutched his throat, hips lips writhed. He rocked

back and forth, rolling like the big pumpkin he was, and looked up to me, mute as a stone. Salabesh's curse had removed Jumble's ability to speak, and destroyed the Xaositect's ability to curse others. He huffed, not even able to emit strangled gasps. The panic welled up in his eyes.

"Looks like the tables are turned, Jumble. What do you think'll happen when anyone - hiccup! - you've ever cursed finds out you can't speak - or curse - anymore?"

Jumble dropped to his knees, a pleading expression in his eyes. He looked ready to burst into tears.

"Will you - hiccup! - remove the curse you placed on me? And swear never to curse another who didn't mean you harm?"

Jumble placed his hands over his heart and nodded vigorously.

I didn't know if I could trust a Xaositect to be consistent, but I suppose I was going to give him this third chance after all, "Very well. I'll remove the curse, then..."

Jumble sighed with relief as I removed Salabesh's curse from him. He, in turn, removed his own, and my hiccups finally stopped. He then bowed humbly and cast his eyes to the floor.

"I'd like you to take your curse off Reekwind, as well."

Jumble nodded, pouting, and with a wave of his hand, removed Reekwind's curse.

"Thanks. Farewell, Jumble."

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The smell of the Hive was foul as ever: hints of sulfur and the rank stench of rotting garbage and the musk of mildew flourishing in every corner. But when I approached Reekwind I was pleasantly surprised. His eyes no longer had their bug-eyed stare, and he was no longer assailed by the twitching spasms from before. The fecal stench was gone, and that alone was like a gust of fresh air. He was smiling, and he looked considerably cleaner than before.

"Greetings, Reekwind," I grinned, "You certainly seem better."

He looked at me, amazed. "It... stopped. It all stopped, just like that." He snapped his fingers, then looked down at himself. "Powers above, I..." He laughs. "I feel clean again."

"Good to hear it. Jumble didn't want to remove the curse, but I got it out of him."

"I thank you, sir. I..." He looked flustered. "I have nothing to pay you with, but you are in my good graces..." He shrugged. "For whatever that is worth." He frowned, then stood straight. "I will tell the story of your kindness to all who will listen."

"Actually, do you have any stories you haven't told me already? That could be payment enough..."

"Of course, of course!" Reekwind looked around... "Though I've had enough of telling tales for a while... do you have something I could write them in?"

"I have a journal here."

Reekwind took the journal. "Ah..." He scribbled for a while, then handed it back. "There you are."

"Thanks, Reekwind."

"Eh... if you would never use that name again, I... among others, would be thankful."

I chuckled, "Very well. What should I call you?"

"My name is --" He suddenly caught himself and smiled. "No, perhaps I shall keep that to myself this time." He nodded respectfully to me. "Thank you again, good sir."

"Farewell."

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The familiar ashen scent of the Smoldering Corpse bar blew past me like a hot wind when I entered. Not a thing was different: the suspicious patrons were hunched over their drinks, and more than one table had planars in cloaks murmuring to one another conducting whatever shady business went on in here. The thugs had learnt their lesson the last time I had been here, and I was able to get through unmolested. But the man that approached me at that moment caught me by surprise, and I almost peppered him with a barrage of magic missiles.

He had large eyes and a thin frame, and was dressed in plain blue and gray. There was something odd about him, though perhaps it was because his face seemed a touch too average and prototypical. He looked around, biting his lip nervously as if confused and frightened by the rest of the bar patrons, but he looked incredibly relieved to see me.

"Greetings?" I asked.

He chuckled lightly and rolled his eyes in a 'you wouldn't believe what happened to me' look that was strangely familiar. "'Bout time, friend! I thought I might be here all day waiting for you."

"Uh... do I know you?"

"Why, yes." He gave me a peery eye. "At least, I think. I... uh... well... can't recall everything about you, but..." He frowned in thought, then shrugged. "...anyway, it's good to see you. I'm Adahn. We're friends, I take it. Excellent! I could use more friends like you, it seems..." He looked around in confusion. "Since I don't appear to know anyone in these parts, much less how I got here."

I took a step back, but only managed to stumble a little. Adahn was only ever someone I made up, an alias I used only when necessary. I was never comfortable with it... going under that name was like peeling off your skin and putting on someone else's, but here it was standing in front of me. In a realm where belief is made manifest... forge an identity well enough and it might come back to haunt you. "Where are you from?"

Adahn seemed surprised, and his confusion resurfaced. "I... hmmmnnn." He frowned. "Well, not from around here, I don't believe... or do I? I think I would have recalled such a place. Don't really right recall where I'm from, or where I'm bound..."

"Do you know who I am?"

"An... old friend?" He sounded like he was testing the water. "Aren't you?"

"Yes, yes, I am," I said carefully, "Say, I had some questions for you..."

"Oh, and I had some for you, too..." He frowned. "Except I can't seem to get a handle on 'em. Questions - who needs 'em? All that matters is the answers anyway. I think," he finished with a shrug.

"Well, it's been interesting, Adahn, but I have to leave. Farewell."

"Hey... uh..." His lip curled. "Look, before you up and fly away to wherever abouts you're going, I've something for you... at least I think so..."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure." He dug in his pockets, and frowned. "Pockets too small to keep anything in..." He scratched his head. "Maybe..." He pulled back his sleeves, first the left one, then the right one, scowled, then let both sleeves fall back to full length.

Hmmm. Better test this. "Why don't you check the left sleeve again? I think it might be there."

"Really?" He pulled back the left sleeve again, and this time, there was indeed a package tied to his wrist. He smiled in relief, untied it from his arm, then handed it to me. "For you, friend. From me, for you... a thanks of sorts!" He nodded as I took the item and felt through the brittle wrapping paper - a ring, no doubt enchanted by the feel of it.

"Wasn't there some money to go along with this?" I asked, probing a little further.

He snapped his fingers and agreed with as much ease as I had asked. "Yes, there was, yes there was." He looked down at his belt, where there was now a belt pouch. He untied it and passed it to me. "It's all there. All hundred coppers."

"What about that enchanted item you wanted to give me?" I asked again.

He looked puzzled for a moment, then smiled, as if remembering. "Why, yes, there was one, wasn't there?" He reached into his right sleeve and pulled forth a long, slender dagger. "Here you are."

"Thanks, Adahn."

As I looked up from the gift to thank Adahn, he was gone, vanished like steam curling from the mouth of a kettle. I didn't even hear him leave.

"Uh... farewell, then."

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The woman by the grill was just as broken as the last time I saw her so long ago. Moreso. Her skin was pale with longing, marred only with black and blue streaks from injuries long ago, likely self-inflicted. Broken wisps of white hair jutted from her crown like bent straws, and not a glimmer of her faded beauty of remained.

"Hello, Drusilla."

"Oh you again. It's been a while. Have you found a way to free Ignus?" she pleaded. She ached for his warmth, craved the heat of his charred glory. I could taste it. "When will you free my love?"

"As soon as I can get this to him. They say this decanter holds an endless supply of water."

Her eyes widened when I showed it to her, the water of a dozen oceans swirling in the crystal, "Yes! Use that on him and he'll be sure to come free! Oh, my Ignus, I await you!" She pauses for a moment, dread in her eyes. "Do you know the command word?"

"Yes, I do."

Her eyes brightened even further, if that was possible. "Then use it! Use it on him now!"

With her urging, I approached the grill, and the man that dared to touch the flames burning above them.

He twisted in the air, ecstasy boiling in his eyes. The flames embraced his flesh when it would've eaten away anything else, and the heat rolled off of him in waves. He may have been angelic once, a deva in the heart of a sun, but what remained was skeletal, scarred with the elements.

I was afraid.

I tilted the decanter over the grill and began to pour. A small stream of ice-blue water poured from the lips of the decanter, and touched the flames of the grill with a violent hissing and a rush of steam... the heavy wisps curled lazily, and then, all of a sudden, as if in response to this challenge the decanter lunged forward, ripping itself free from my grasp.

My hands flung forward, fingertips grazing the glass in a futile attempt to catch it as it fell onto the grill and shattered.

"By the hells... ?!"

Hissing billows of steam and a furious crackling noise rushed from the grill, spilling over me and forcing me to cover my ears and turn away... there was a keening, a cackling, a terrible sound like a hundred buildings burning, people screaming, their cries being cut short by the roar of flame and melting flesh...

As I put my hands over my ears to block out the sound, I met a stickiness on my hands, like hot cheese or candle wax... my ears were bleeding from the sound! I drew my hands back, to see them covered with chunks of melted flesh filled with bloody swirls...

I was vaguely aware of the screams surrounding me, the clatter of chairs and mugs tumbling to the floor. There was the laughter of the fiends in the bar, the terrified groans of the drunkards. In some corner a sod must've soiled himself, and he wasn't even standing in the heart of the firestorm.

I was about to run from the bar, do anything to get away from the sound, when suddenly all fell silent, except for a jagged crackling coming from the warped grill. I turned -- on the grill lay the Decanter of Endless Water, now nothing but shards and steam. Above it was the creature, flames still trailing from its body, floating over the bar's floor. It was staring at me, its eyes flickering like two torches, and with it came the spark of recollection...

"I know you..."

The creature's face split, charred flesh peeling away from its jaw so that it might speak. "Yesssss..." Its voice crackled, burned, roared through the creature's chest, and with every word, flakes of cinder and ash spat from its mouth and drifted into the air. I could barely stand to look at the thing - the blazing radiance surrounding it was terrible to behold.

"Ignus..."

"Yesssss..." The creature floated towards me, the air bending from the thermals surrounding it. "Long have I ssslept... dreamssss of flamesss..." As if in response, flames curled within Ignus' throat, and a tongue of flame streamed from behind his blackened teeth. "I am yoursssss... 'til death comesssss for ussss both..."

"We shall see..."

Wordlessly Drusilla approached, hands clasped over her breast, her eyes bright and lips trembling. Ignus' eyes flared up, and before I could stop him, he embraced her.

She returned the gesture, arms wrapping around his body, losing herself in his flames. She didn't cry out, didn't make a sound as she curled around her lover, the flames blooming like summer flowers around her body. She had embraced her own funeral pyre.

My last glimpse of her was burned into my memory in that instant: Her eyes were full of fiery passion and all-engulfing love, deeper than the molten core of a planet, higher than the heart of a star. In a flash she was gone, sublimated in a burst of ardor and a wave of heat. Nothing was left of her -- not even ashes.

What have I done?

## Interlude

Scii-Tavakis is displeased, and in her displeasure would've impaled Factor Epetrius if it weren't for Shara Six-Blades looming over her shoulder.

"What is this tripe?" she snarls, "First you say he was a Godsmen, and now you say he is a Sensate. Which is it?!"

"What does it matter?" Epetrius quips sharply, "He was both or neither, depending on how you look at it."

"Some of us have money on this!" Scii-Tavakis snaps back, "I have twenty gold that he was a Godsmen, ye sand-born sod!"

"Perhaps you could consider the Faction he joined first," Oudilin adds diplomatically, "After all, the Godsmen seems more sensible a faction for the Nameless One."

"Nay, 'e was a Sensate before that one! Another incarnation 'twas!" G'mir throws in, "And can someone untie me from this damn table?!"

"Split the difference," Scales-of-Three adds as he arranges the gold coins he had been counting into a pile. He scribbles in his ledger, "Or refund all the bets. It is only fair."

"Well... I am still going to keep a little off the top as a service charge for setting up the wagers..." a rogue replies.

"No you don't you sticky-fingered blaggard!"

"Shut up, yeh sod! I want ta hear about th' flamin' feller!"

"Be silent, all of you!" Epetrius snaps as he shuts the chaos-bound tome, which had taken on a smell not unlike rancid oil, "By the eighty thousand eight-hundred and ninety-four threads of my robes, you are all barmy as a pack of slaadi... the lot of you! And as my part of the tale is finished we might as well allow me to step down so I might mediate this disp-"

Epetrius' words die in the air as a booming shriek echoes from across the room:



"SHIIIP!!!"

For half a moment the crowd stands, dumbfounded, a hundred heads turning toward the shriek. It is then that, looking up through the window like a group of prairie dogs the throng gasps, screams, and panics collectively. A shadow casts itself against the pale blue night sky... looming and growing larger by the moment.

You're able to snatch your drink and scramble over the bar just in time, careful not to spill a drop.

The shock of stone and steel rippling across the wall comes first, and then the thunderous crack of a dozen windows shattering, their shards pelting down upon the crowd. The squeal of metal scraping against metal, the crack of splintering wood and wounded screams trails the initial shock like a ribbon. Patrons tumble from the second tier, screaming and flailing through the air as the section is obliterated.

The crowd parts, crushing patrons against the walls and stampeding over tables as the bow of the ship pierces through, its sides gouged by mortar. The hull is strong, however, and even as the ship squeals through the front of the bar there is not a single spot where the vessel's surface had been breached.

For twenty spans the ship glides through, prow slashing the air like a needle, ropes and pulleys flailing wildly as they snap like tendons. For another twenty spans it still moves, continually slowing until it screeches to a halt, giving one last quiver as it stops with a heavy groan.

The silence afterwards is broken by the wails of the wounded and the shifting of rubble. Through a shattered window you spy a large building in the distance with two metal beams atop, crisscrossing as they had fallen against one another. The space encircled by them is a window, and through it a sea of silver-white fog shifts momentarily before the portal winks out of existence.

With a loud clank the heavy iron anchor drops, crashing uselessly onto the ground. The floor shatters under its weight.

"Avast, lads!" a woman's voice cries out as a porthole bursts open, "Looks

like we've hit reality!"

Sailors scramble along the deck, dropping ropes so that they might shimmy down. They are draped in blue and gray, sliding down gracefully like a dozen spiders. Their leather shoes pad along the ground softly.

"Jeanette!" Shara Six-Blades snarls, "Damn you, girl! What trouble have you brought upon me now?!"

With that a young woman slides down one of the ropes, her navy-blue coat fluttering behind her. Those peach-colored hands look much too soft to be those of a pirate's, and the lace cuffs at her wrists look too prim and neat. The hat she wears holds three feathers, blue, green, and red, obscuring her face.

She swings her head back, looking up with a mad, pearly grin. The woman is pretty, with a pointed freckled nose and a heart-shaped face framed with light brown curls. Her face would be perfectly girlish if it wasn't for the blue-white eyepatch covering the left side of her face.

"These days the name's Jeanette Dovel Four-Winds, Shara Six-Blades," she laughs, "I added the last part so that I might beat you in names, at least."

Shara growls, "There is only one thing keeping me from killing you and your pirates. You'd best convince me there's more than that."

Jeanette smiles, "How about we call our debt even then?"

"Not good enough."

"Well I added to your bar. You can keep the ship... build around it and add those three decks. It'd double your space and add a magnificent feature, wouldn't you say?"

Shara scoffs, "A vessel protruding from the outer wall of my bar? Preposterous."

"You might be surprised. Besides, by the look of it not a single one of your patrons was killed. Well, except for this one at least," she gives the body a swift kick.

Oudilin's wings flutter, and he massages his joints as if they had been wounded in the panic, "Perhaps you could tell us what led you to crash your vessel into the wall of this establishment?"

"Oh I'm not one for words. For one, I'm a magnificent liar when I do choose to speak. Second, as a Cipher I much prefer action. Like so!" she gives the body another boot, and the poor tiefling at her feet coughs and sputters, groaning in agony at being revived so roughly, "Well la! I was wrong after all! But that just goes to prove my point. Well, that was my good deed for the day, and just in time for supper."

"Then that would be a terrific pity, if you weren't able to continue the tale of the Nameless One..." Oudilin's voice is coy, teasing even as he cradles what looks to be a dislocated shoulder.

As expected, Jeanette's eye widens, "The Nameless One? Well, that indeed is a tale I'll be more than willing to add to!"

With a leap and a bound she steps up to the stage, whipping a rapier from her belt, "I am Jeanette Dovel Four-Winds, pirate queen of the Silver Sky! Former Captain of the githyanki thoughtskimmer Joren Dell! I've circled the border between Prime Material and Outer Plane, riding on currents of dream and waters of ancient memory! I've fished in the Shimmering Sea Beyond the Pale, and survived the monstrosities that I caught!

"As for how I got here... well, we were delivering a shipment of stray thoughts to an old fence of mine when the githyanki caught up with us. Now, these folks aren't too fond of entrepreneurs who acquire one of their astral vessels through legally questionable (and perhaps morally reprehensible) means, but I digress.

"There we were, surrounded by a dozen githyanki warships, firing bolts of rage and loading cannons full of remose at the Joren Dell. The first salvo tore through the dream-sails, the second damaged our qualia engine. A stray fugue had killed my first mate- alas! A hundred hooks flew at us, honed with hatred (of which the githyanki are not short of, I assure you) and anchored with ropes made of braided nightmares. When they pulled us alongside my crew fought them off valiantly- I couldn't ask for finer salts to sail with! I myself took on twelve of the yellow-skinned gith at once, then insulted another so that he might join in. A good baker's dozen is fond luck, I always say.

"Well we fought off the first wave, flung their broken corpses into the void and sped along as fast as we could through the Astral sea. We were leaking qualia faster than a stuck pig could bleed, when salvation was in sight.

"Aumenaroch... an ancient god of empty spaces. He had been forgotten long ago, his last followers had slit their throats one by one to add to the Silent Song, and that was that. The old Power died with a whimper, and his corpse now floats along the Astral: silent, still, bobbing in the white miasma like a cork until we came along.

"One of the benefits of smuggling stray thoughts, lads, is that you tend to pick up little things here and there that are of great use. In this instance it was knowledge. Aumenaroch's petrified corpse... high as a mountain and pale as pain had a great many portals squirreled away on itself. Much of the divine substances that are so precious about dead gods had been mined away long ago by the greedy gith, so holes were a-plenty for us to fly through.

"I chose one that I knew best, giving it the sign of the four shapes and flew our vessel through as the gith closed in on us. Well needless to say our engine pattered out at that point and the sails had failed, and by sheer skill alone I sailed the rest of the way buoyed with every ounce of will we could muster, bearing the splintered mizzenmast with my teeth. And here we are!"

Epetrius's thin eyebrows furrow, and the lizard perched on his head flicks its tongue, "I have never heard of this god you speak of, and while you seem to be a lady of remarkable talents I find it hard to believe you were able to fight off that number of githyanki."

"You wound me, lad! Every word I just spoke is true as the River of Faith! Well, save the false parts here and there, but at best they were just a mild embellishment or two for the sake of the tale," Jeanette says with a smile, popping open her pouch, "But as I said... collecting stray thoughts always yields lovely little surprises."

With that she pulls an eyeball out by its long, severed optic nerve. It is still wet and glistening, wriggling back and forth as if it had a life of its own, "The Eye of the Nameless One, lads. Take a good look, and let's tell a real tale."

## Chapter 67

"Yarr, matey!"

Annah merely gave me one of those long, piercing looks.

"What? Don't think it'd look good on me?" I pulled the eyepatch from my face. It had a rose pattern along that oval of black cloth. Perhaps it would've looked good on me. Irony, at least.

"Just save yer jink," Annah said. I nodded in reply, tossing the eyepatch back onto the counter.

We walked for a while through the market. At first I had hoped that it would give the two of us a chance to talk, to calm Annah down a bit. Ignus' freedom had been unnerving to all of us, but Annah was especially on-edge. She walked more stiffly, ducked so as to keep me between her and Ignus, like a girl hiding behind her mother's apron.

"I won't let him hurt you. Besides, he seems to be perfectly loyal to me for freeing him."

"I can take care o' meself," she snapped, "but yer an idjit. Yeh consort with fiends and devils, people die where e'er yeh go. It's gonna get yeh penned in the dead-book soon enough."

"Well it would if it didn't keep spitting me back out."

"That Ignus is trouble, mark me words. Didn't yeh see the wounds he inflicted on yeh?" she touched my hands. They were still blistered and burned by his flame. The healing had been slow to come. I winced.

The flutter of two rosy wings caught my eye.

"Grace, so nice of you to join us."

Her voice was smooth and sure as always, but a troubled undercurrent bubbled beneath those smooth waters, "It is good that you are discussing the matter of our new companion... I have concerns of my own to contribute."

Annah's lip curled at the thought of finding herself in agreement with Grace.

Fall-From-Grace continued, her hands folded demurely in front of her, "You would be wise to travel with him no longer. He is insane, and he has proven capable of great acts of destruction. As I understand it, he was transformed into a conduit to the elemental plane of fire... such a transformation would have killed many mortals."

"I know..." I murmured.

"Not only did he survive such a trial, but he thrived. He possesses tremendous power - should he be forced into a confrontation, I would fear for the chances of anyone who stood against him. I pray it does not come to that," her gaze steeled towards mine.

"If Ignus is so powerful, why doesn't he just attack everything he sees?" I wasn't sure if it was my curiosity or a defense of Ignus, but it had to be asked, "Why does he even travel with us?"

"I do not know. But I do not think it is because he likes our company; in fact, I think he considers all of us irrelevant except for you."

"Me? Why me?"

"Again, I do not know. Still, haven't you noticed that when you ask him to do something, he obeys? Without question. Were I to make the same request, the last thing I would receive would be his compliance."

"We'll deal with that problem when we come to it."

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The woman smiled pleasantly as I approached the counter.

"Greetings, sir. How may I help you?"

"I was wondering if I had quarters here. I was an old member long ago. My rooms might've been reassigned or something but..." I trailed off. The cramped room I had been given in the Great Foundry was fine enough, functional and utilitarian. But I couldn't happily consign my friends to the

lingering smell of burnt oil or the distant clang of metal, especially when the Civic Festhall might've had much more opulent quarters. "If not, my access to the Sensates' facilities has been renewed, so perhaps you can find me something."

She closed her eyes and flipped through a large ledger, stopping at what seemed to be a random page before opening her eyes once more. "Ah... here's your room key..." she handed me a small key. "The easternmost chamber's been waiting quite some time for your return. Would you like to rest now, sir?"

"No... but what do you mean, 'waiting for my return?'"

The clerk gave me a strange look. "My ledger indicates that this is your key, sir, and has been for a good, long time. If that is not so, then perhaps I'm merely mistaken. Would you like to rest now, sir?"

"I'll take a look myself, thanks."

She nodded simply, and let me on my way.

Sigil had its heights and depths, its beauties and horrors, but they were usually so distant. It was an ancient city, and many of its wonders were more often than not the skeletal remains of even older structures. Its people lived like hermit crabs, nestling in distant, ill-fitting shells that hadn't been built for them.

My quarters were a different matter.

It wasn't some room at a fancy inn... more than that, really. It wasn't the graceful columns or the high ceiling, nor the fancy canopied bed with its golden sheets and scarlet curtains. It wasn't the balcony, which granted a bird's-eye view of the Clerk's Ward below, with people scuttling like ants.

For the first time I felt I was returning to someplace, and that this domain was my own.

"Never thought I'd set up kip in a place like this," Annah murmured.

Even Grace was impressed, "Quarters such as this are reserved only for the highest Faction members. Perhaps I should be jealous."

Already I was poking through the cupboards, filled with old charms and potions, and a few parchments with ancient words of power.

One pair of double-doors, however, clicked and rattled, but wouldn't budge.

"Uh, Annah? I don't suppose you could give me a hand here?"

With a little jiggling and a twist of her lockpicks, the door clicked open.

On the shelf sat a small... well, I wasn't sure what it was. Sculpture or container, talisman or charm, I had no idea. It was a dodecahedron, a twelve-sided shape with pentagonal sides. It was cold and heavy in my hands, and whether it was metal or stone I couldn't tell. Familiarity pricked at my skull, like the distant buzzing of a fly, and a tension ran over the object as if it were ready to spring into the air.

I stuffed it into my pack before I left.

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They stood in the Lecture Hall, many chatting with one another. Sensates and nobles, clerks and the occasional commoner. The mass of colors was dizzying: blue and green silks, scarlet and yellow velvets. White trim and black embroidery. Food had been prohibited. It was a lecture hall, not a circus.

The speaker that waddled up before the crowd was a short, plump little man, his gray-white hair little more than a fringe around his head. His tunic was tight against his belly... a gray-blue reminiscent of a cloudy sky. There was a certain naivete in his grin, and a bit of soft-headed dramatic wonder in his voice. He sounded like a muddle-headed child that had grasped his first philosophical abstraction, and was eagerly yammering a mangled version of it to everyone he came across.

"Sigilians, welcome! Please, take your seats, and listen to the 'darks' of which I speak!"

"'Darks?!' Gimme a break!" Morte groaned, "We're really not going to listen to this rattletrap, are we? C'mon... let's go find some Sensate chits that have never had the pleasurable sensation of tasting the fiery passion of a skull's



lips." He waggled his eyebrows in anticipation.

"Quiet down, Morte. We're staying... for a while, at least," the man looked like an idiot, but I wanted to at least give him a chance.

He began speaking with a somber tone: "Death. It is what awaits you at the end of life's journey." He coughed slightly, then raised his eyebrows dramatically, waving his hands at the same time: "Death is not an end! But a beginning!"

"Beginning of more suffering," Morte whispered.

"For when you die, you shall not cease to exist, no! Far from it! The Outer Planes shall welcome you to their breasts! There, a new life... one such as you have never known, awaits you there!"

"That's for sure," Morte added again.

"You shall cast away the tattered cloak of this life and become one of the faithful, a petitioner! As a petitioner on this Outer Plane, your life's journey shall truly begin!

"If you have been a goodly sort of gentleman, steadfast in charity and goodwill toward your fellow bloods, perhaps the light-blanketed slopes of Mount Celestia shall house you when you die. Your spirit shall pass on to this place, dwelling as a petitioner in the beauty of golden mornings, soft sunlight that caresses..." He sighed dreamily.

"And eternal boredom," Morte muttered, sticking his tongue out.

"Perhaps you lived your life to betray others and get ahead, giving lies instead of truths, back-stabbing others, all to accomplish your own goals. Cold, Blood-Red Carceri, the Plane where all turncoats fall when they pass on, shall be the cage that imprisons you. As a petitioner on this Plane, you shall live a life of treachery and treacheries, of lies and lying, knowing a life without trust."

"Looks like we know where we both are going to end up when we die," Morte added, rolling his eyes.

The lecturer hunched over; his eyes darted back and forth. "And perhaps

you have lived a life of bloodthirsty evil, contemptuous of your fellow man, laying others low and doing as you pleased without a care for who or what you hurt...

"...then it is perhaps one of the Lower Planes - Baator, or the chaotic swirling layers of the Abyss - that shall welcome you! Evil to the core are the spirits that come to this plane, and most are doomed to mindless cruelty and suffering or servitude in the dreaded..." He whispered dramatically "...Blood War."

Morte whispered, "And that's if you're lucky."

Blood War... the phrase tingled with familiarity, but the feeling was gone a moment later.

"No matter where you go, know this: You shall be embarking on a new life. A new life, my Sigilians!"

"And that's supposed to be an incentive? We get to do this all again? Gee, I can't wait to be a floating skull all over again. Whee! Pike him. What a tard. Spoken just like someone who hasn't died before, huh?"

The lecturer continued, unaware of the heckling at the back of the crowd, "You shall be able to start anew without the burden of memory or your past life. Your 'soul' goal, if you will..." He smiled at his own humor. What kind of person chuckles at their own jokes? "...is to merge with this new Plane that you are on, becoming one with the ideals and the very substance of the Plane itself!

"You shall be one of the inhabitants, the petitioners, on this Plane or, ideally, one of the building blocks upon which the Plane is built! It is the goal of all petitioners! To accomplish this goal, you..." He clapped his hands together for emphasis: "...MUST clap! HOLD clap! TO clap! YOUR clap! IDEALS!"

"Oh, this is one, big steaming load." I found myself nodding in agreement with Morte.

"Your ideals! Good or evil, law or chaos, or somewhere in between! As you approach the alignment of the Plane, your journey will end as you become part... of... the... plane... itself! 'Tis a glorious existence, my Sigilians!

"And that is what awaits you after 'death,' my audience! Have a care as to how you live your life, but know that it is not oblivion that awaits you after this life!"

"What wash!" Morte cried out aloud.

The speaker's head turned to face Morte, frowning slightly. He leaned out, trying to see who spoke. "A question? A question from one of the living, perhaps?"

Morte ducked below the lecturer's field of view, then turned up to me with a whisper, "Go ahead, chief. Tell him the dark of it."

"Yes, I have a question..." I said, raising my hand.

He indicated for me to continue.

"The Dustmen say that this life is where we end up when we die."

The speaker chuckled derisively... some members of the audience chuckled, as well. "There are countless petitioners, my friend, Dustmen among them, who would disagree with Dustman... 'philosophy.'"

"What if someone can't die?"

He laughed. "Nonsense! Everyone dies, friend. Even gods die."

"I can't die," I declared with an innocent shrug.

"Oh, truly! Look, everyone, a rare treat: one of the great immortals has graced us with his presence! Greetings, O immortal!" The audience laughed.

My eyebrows furrowed in annoyance. For someone who spouted the exotic wonders of the multiverse, Death's Advocate was a closed-minded idiot, and I wasn't going to let his half-baked tripe pass, "I can prove it."

"Oh do! Do!" There was more laughter from the audience. "What sport! Take heed, my audience. I think we shall have a rare display of my lecture today! Come up here, o immortal, and we shall see who is right and who is dead!"

Oh that pompous bag of wind.

Soft chuckles greeted me as I walked up to the stage, a small smile on my lips. The crowd had their eyes fixed on me, some thinking I was moronic, some thinking I was mad. A woman in a green silk gown fanned herself delicately, more to busy her hands than to cool herself down. A man with golden eyes and a crooked smile shook his head, as if disapproving of such nonsense. The more mature Sensates in the crowd, however, leaned forward, their smiles curious rather than mocking, as if eager to savor the sight of what was about to happen.

It was only when I stood next to him that I realized how small he was, in stature and in philosophy. The doubt nagged at me, as to whether it was really worth it to prove this man wrong.

He saw me hesitate, and his mouth curled into a plump, mocking smile, "I thought as much."

Well, that's the last straw, then.

I stood up straight, gave a broad smile to the crowd, and put on a show none of them would forget anytime soon.

I jammed the knife into the side of my throat, rocking it back and forth. Meat and sinew parted like butter. Dully, in the back of my mind and past the bursts of crimson pain, I mused that this dagger was Godsmen-made... high quality, razor-sharp. Its efficiency was impressive.

When I hit cartilage I paused a moment. The pain was almost as unbearable as the lecturer's smug, pompous grin, and at the thought of his arrogant blustering I continued to cut. The blood ran down my chest, cascading down my belly until it draped me like a warm, scarlet apron. The screams of the crowd swelled like music, their retches and the thuds of fainting bodies added rhythm to the sound of a metal knife edge scraping against bone. It was a grim symphony that I was performing to, but it satisfied me as I hacked the rest of the way through my throat.

I collapsed over the podium, the heat fading from my limbs. I wasn't shy about making that deep, gurgling sound. The viscous mix of blood and spittle bubbled from my lips, and rolled warmly down my cheek.

Mortals die so easily... and I suspect part of it is because they expect to. The moment you receive a fatal injury you're possessed by the expectation of death, and it gnaws at you as surely as the wound. It's all downhill from there, quickening and hastening your way to the darkness. Me, I knew I was going to get up in a few minutes, so I wasn't eager to resign myself to death again that quickly.

The crowd's shrieking reached a crescendo as, with my last ounce of strength, I pressed my hands to the sides of my head and twisted, snapping my own neck.

Morte would tell me later that my head had dangled by the loose flap of skin at the back of my neck. It had swung back and forth, mouth agape, eyes open and staring blankly into nothingness before I slid from the podium. It was horrifying.

He sounded so damn proud.

The initial shock was over by the time I awoke in a pool of my own blood, and the cries had been replaced by terrified murmurs. I turned my head this way and that, popping the joints back into place as muscle fibers curled into one another like vines, knitting lacerated tissue back together.

A low, wet groan made its way through my throat, and I coughed up another dollop of blood. The woman with the fan was being supported by her companions, and vomit stained the front of her dress. Another gentleman had clapped a hand over his mouth and his cheeks heaved as he himself retched. Most of the crowd had gone pale as bone, but the Sensates who bore the sign of the Faction stood wide-eyed and impressed. A light chorus of applause rose among the bitter sobs and nauseated gagging sounds, like flowers blooming among the midden heaps.

Death's Advocate had turned white as a sheet, and it took him a moment to compose himself. "By the Powers...!"

"I think it's only fair that you prove your point, now..."

"Eh..." The audience watched in morbid fascination as he stammered.

"W-W-Well now..."

"Go on, die." I approached him menacingly, still turning my head this way

and that, working out the kinks. My voice was low, the rumble had a coarse hiss to it from the neck wound, "Here. Now. Prove your words to be true. Embrace your life as a petitioner."

He gulped. "Now... eh... hmmm." He offered weakly: "Heh. I must confess that I'm not quite ready to depart this life just yet."

The speaker flinched when I leapt towards him, clapping his eyes shut and screeching. The knife fell in an arc, a bright flash like a crescent moon. His shriek echoed throughout the chamber, even as my knife stopped just short of his neck. When his wailing died into a muted whimper, all that could be heard was a faint drizzling sound as he soiled himself.

"So, this great new life on the Outer Planes may not be all it's supposed to be?"

The speaker was aware of his hypocrisy, but was afraid of the alternative. "Perhaps not. Heh." He glanced quickly at the audience, tugging his tunic down to obscure the growing stain on his pants. "Eh... well. Certainly not now."

"That's what I thought. I've no more questions." I sat down, aching a little from reviving, but satisfied.

He looked eager to wrap things up. "...then I shall end this session... um, I shall continue to lecture here at the Hall, so... eh... tell all your friends."

Someone in the audience shouted: "Sure! So they can come see you mess your tunic again!" The room filled with laughter.

"Eh... hmm."

The doors swung open, and the crowd parted with mixed reactions. Many chatted excitedly at what they had seen, bright-eyed and enlightened as if to say "Ah, so that's what it's like." Others were more jaded, debating back and forth that while it was a fine performance, whether there was anything particularly new about me committing suicide. But most managed to exit with weak smiles, at best, while a few were much less dignified.

"Good sir," a pretty woman addressed me, swaying to block my path with her fire-red gown. She had a heart-shaped face framed with brunette curls,

and wore the brooch of the Sensates on her breast, "Exquisite... most exquisite. Do you believe that the experience of an immortal's death is much different from a mortal's? What of the pain?"

"Kind sir," another girl came up to me, this one in a sea-blue coat. She was prettier than the first, with silver hair and eyes like sapphires, "What were your emotions? Was there fear? Anticipation? Excitement? What flavor of the first and what shade of the last? Does it come in an aroma or a caress?"

A raven-haired woman laughed as she wedged in between them, pushing them away with her broad plague-green gown. Her face was sharp and angular, and there was a terrifying beauty to her, "Such silly questions can only come from novices! Tell me, gentleman. What is it that an immortal senses after he dies? Do the waters of the afterlife lap at your heels? Do you stand on the high crest of the Silent Shore? Oh, perhaps I could modify a sensory stone to record such memories..."

The girls mobbed me, assailing me with questions and excited chatter, asking me what the experience was like, to describe it in detail. They peppered me with the wonder of whether they could feel it too.

Back and away from the crowd Annah sneered and rolled her eyes, blowing a strand of rust-red hair from her face as she walked out of the hall.

## Chapter 68

I was beginning to regret that decision a few hours later. Something in my neck just wasn't going back into place quite right, so I decided to spend some more time in my quarters recuperating while I caught up on a few things. I tried to figure out what in the hells that dodecahedron was, puzzling and tinkering with it, to no avail. I read Reekwind's stories from my journal. It felt like it was about time I had a break...that is, until I found something in the bottom of my pack that I had almost forgotten about. The book that Mantuok dropped.

I needed to wash my hands.

Just the feel of the leather surface of the tome made my skin crawl. The cover was loose, surface fleshy like uncured human skin left out in the sun. When I lifted the cover, a slight nauseating stench exuded from the pages, like a bloated corpse dredged from a warm lake.

I hadn't touched the book ever since I plucked it from the ground, Mantuok's blood still warm on my hands. Even if the blood had seeped into the pages and wet them long enough to decay, it wouldn't have smelled like rotting meat.

"Master..." the pages whispered. I paused, dropping the tome in surprise as I looked around to see if anyone could see. Nope, the room was empty.

I touched the book again, and the voice returned, stronger this time, "I greet thee, master. How may this humble tome serve you?"

"You can talk?"

"That I can, master, in many different languages. Only you should take care that none see us conversing, for they cannot hear me. And, master, speech is but one of my powers."

"How did Mantuok come to possess you?"

"The diseased rat-mage unearthed me in the catacombs, my master. He pried me from the grip of my former master, now long since dead. He brought me to his nest so that he might learn from me. His power was limited, however... it was difficult to speak to him, and he understood little of my teachings." The tome hissed as it spoke, serpent-like with acrid disgust in its voice at the mention of Mantuok. I found myself sneering as well... a vile rat-man could never understand the value of something such as this.

"Tell me about yourself."

"The question you ask is not a simple one, my master, but your servant shall seek to answer it as best it can. I am a codex of moments-now-forgotten, ideas-now-lost, and thoughts of other times and other worlds. Within my pages lies the lore of forgotten civilizations. In essence, my master, and this is the only thing of import: within my pages lie POWER. This Power can be



yours... my master." Its voice was honey-sweet when it spoke to me, and I was sure that if it had a tongue the tome would've been licking at my boots.

"I am intrigued," I said coolly, "Tell me of your powers."

"These are Powers, my master, that can improve your life immeasurably. Unfortunately, the laws that bind me...they demand a small service in recompense for these Powers."

"A small service? Like what?"

"The service required is a trifling one, my master. I would barely mention it if it were not for the sake of the laws that bind me to these pages..." The book paused. "To unlock my Power, you must sacrifice but a small bit of yourself, my master. You must spill blood upon the first of my pages. This act will serve to strengthen the chain between us and allow me to help you reach your full potential. It is a small price to pay for the spells that will come to be at your disposal."

I scoffed, such a trifling matter. "All right. Here."

I nicked the tip of my finger and allowed a healthy dribble of blood fall on the pages. A strange chill settled in my bones, and I felt empty and hurt. At the same time, there was a feeling of triumph, and a new spell came to mind that I immediately recognized. Blindness. Little more than a cantrip, but it may prove useful.

Besides, drinking from the font of knowledge so easily was... empowering.

"This is your Power now... master. Know that this is but the first Power that lies in my pages."

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The days passed quickly, as I was opened to a new awareness. How could I have been so blind, I scolded myself.

I was filled with a sudden sense of clarity. At the top of my balcony I could see easily what was useful and what was not, what was gold and what was dross. What gave power, and what sapped it.

Moreover, I began to realize that enemies were everywhere.

"Are you well?" Dak'kon had intoned, "Though you have no name, I have come to know you well, and something is different."

"You are not ill," Grace had said as she lifted her hand from my forehead, "But I detect that there is something missing. Perhaps you need some rest, or a stroll through the Ward. The entertainers may invigorate you... and a new caravan has come from Parafel with fine new goods."

Even Morte seemed worried. "Come on, chief. You and me, when's the last time it was just the two of us painting the town red, eh?" he chittered.

Annah remained silent, and distant.

If I did look haggard (moreso than usual, at least), it was because many of my hours were spent in solitude, lifting what wisdom I could find from my new servant.

"I bestow this advice: Be wary of those you keep close to you. Never take them fully into your confidence, and never dilute your strength by sharing it. Many emperors I have known have done such, and I do not wish you to suffer the same fate."

"If they claim friendship, then let them prove themselves. Words carry little weight compared to action. If friends they be, then they should be willing to die for you."

"Show no weakness, do not admit error, do not show hesitation. These things tell others that you are uncertain, a stone that is unbalanced and may be toppled." I felt a slight tightening in my chest then.

"Beware mercy. A turned back is no defense against an assassin's knife."

"Beware the common view of love. Love must often be cruel in order so that it may rise above the merely sentimental."

"Separate yourself from small-minded fools and the weak by recognizing that you have a destiny. This alone gives you authority to tread where others would fear to go." A faint sneer curled up the corner of my mouth at those words. I quickly repressed it.

"There are two secrets to becoming great. One is never to reveal all that you know."

"To become powerful, you must be willing to sacrifice: whether it is parts of yourself or things precious to you. Power is a bargain: One must give in order to receive."

"Honor and virtue are concepts that kill men and kill the spirit. They are only abstracts that drive men to strangeness and death. Be true to yourself and obey only your own will." My blood seemed to move more sluggishly as the book spoke, as if it had chilled within my veins, or as if my heart had hardened.

"Do not suffer one who has hurt you to live. To do so is an open admission of weakness."

"The soul of man is a sea of emotions. Often man struggles to bring order to these emotions, but it is a false order. Man's natural state is chaos, and it is a state that should be surrendered to."

"Know the meaning of mercy, use it to your advantage... but do not practice it."

"Nurture fear in others, for only fear rules men. Nothing else leaves deeper scars."

"Extend a smile and the hand of friendship to your enemies. When they clasp your hand, strike them with the dagger in your other hand, else they will surely do the same to you."

"These are my last words of advice. Weigh them carefully. Remember that you can expunge anything you find undesirable. You need only have the will." As the book spoke those last words, a chill weight settled on my heart. I felt somehow tainted. Clearheaded, but tainted.

It was then that it made its second offer.

The voice of the tome seemed saddened as it spoke to me, by the dim light of the candle. I was alone in my apartment, as always, and hung onto every word. "Unfortunately, master, the laws that bind me demand a greater

sacrifice in return for greater power. I would grant these powers to you freely, but as you can see, I am bound."

"What is the sacrifice?" I asked, my voice a melange of eagerness and annoyance that the book would dare hesitate.

"The second sacrifice is that you sell one of your companions into durance, bondage, slavery. This will signify the binding between you and the power - your companion represents the Power placed at your disposal. There are those in the Clerk's Ward, I am given to understand, who will aid you in this quest. Seek out Vrischika the importer."

Well, that's easy enough.

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The air was sharp in Vrishika's curiosity shop, as if the smoke from the incense had thorns. Beneath it all I could detect the faint smell of blood that gave those thorns iron tips, and the slightest stench of sulfur-smoke that lent them cruelty. There was a certain elegance in it that I didn't quite appreciate before.

"Interested in purchasing a slave or servant, Vrischika?"

Vrishika's full, black lips curled into a smile. "I'm always interested in acquiring more help. Standish - the lazy dullard - helps me around the store, but I could use another body for my manor. Who were you offering? I'll pay five thousand coins, if they're decent."

I had thought about it for a while, and the choice had been clear as of last night. "Dak'kon, the githzerai."

Dak'kon was silent, his hands tightening until I could hear the knuckles creak. Then his words come out like a blade, cold and firm and edged with every fiber of his being. "It is not my will to be this woman's slave."

"You don't have much of a choice in the matter, do you, slave?" I said with a raised eyebrow. His body tightened at the word, and his coal-black eyes widened and dimmed as if he had taken a mortal blow, "Will you buy him, Vrischika?"

Vrishika narrowed her eyes at Dak'kon, eyed his body like meat. She tilted her head, examining his muscle, his posture, and looked into those dark eyes, suddenly dark but still bearing a dangerous edge. I half-expected her to tug open his jaw and examine his teeth. "Hmmm... a githzerai, eh? And a zerth, too. So long as you understand that you'll never see him again... I'll pay five thousand copper coins for him."

"Never? I understand. Take him."

Dak'kon's lips parted, his eyes widened in as much horror as I had ever seen him express as the Vrishika counted the coins out. "Never did I think..." His coal-black eyes examined my face for a moment, then dropped to the floor as he shook his head. "It is a cruel path my hasty words have led me down. My path... Dak'kon's path..."

"You have no name anymore, slave," I said simply, "You are old and weak, and I've learned all I needed from you."

He fell to his knees at those words, his hands trembling. He did look old: the creases in his face were more pronounced, his voice creaked like old wood as he attempted to murmur a prayer to Zerthimon, perhaps a wish to strike him dead then. The fire in his eyes flickered and faded, and was gone, and his shoulders sagged as if the weight of them were too much for his body. I had sucked dry every useful drop of knowledge and life from him, and I needed him no longer.

"Your blade has shattered, Dak'kon," I crouched down next to him, my voice low as a whisper, but I knew that those words would ring in his ears for as long as he lived, "Your karach is as mist."

He turned away from me in silence.

Vrishika handed a bag to me, heavy with coin. I squeezed it, satisfied by the weight, and stood watching as she passed a slip of parchment to her newest slave. "Here... this is the address of my home, in the Lady's Ward. Go there, now... try and flee, and I'll have a pack of fiends so far down your throat you'll be begging to come back to Sigil and serve me." She then turned to me. "And you... my thanks; I'm sure he'll prove entertaining. Enjoy your five thousand commons... farewell."

There was nothing remaining of Dak'kon the zerth when I left the shop. He

still knelt there, staring into nothingness with dead, black eyes, limbs frail and limp as a corpse's. It looked as if a breeze could've broken him in two.

The fierce screech of a scolding tongue, and the crack of a whip were cut off as the door slid shut behind me. In my pouch the book murmured to me in a low, pleased hiss.

"Master, have you completed the second sacrifice? There is an air about you that says you have. You have done well; you are a swift learner. Listen to these words and learn still more." The book spoke some unintelligible syllables and a burning sensation spread within my chest, and I learned the Adder's Kiss.

I smirked. I didn't need this to prove to anyone I had a cruel tongue.

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Annah held one arm tightly, as if cold. She padded over to me, her heels soft on the tiled floor. Ever since that messy business with Dak'kon, Annah had been walking on eggshells around me. She held her body stiff and tight, shying away when I approached even as she stared, eyes meeting mine. Her gaze was begging to feel warmth again, the kind of heat that her fiend blood alone couldn't kindle.

"What's this now?" she asked hesitantly, "What's this yeh want o' me?"

"I'm just concerned, Annah. You haven't been yourself lately."

"Yeh haven't been yerself either," The moment the words were out she bit her lip and glanced down nervously at my shoes, as if she wished she had said nothing.

"I know this is about Dak'kon," I said tenderly, smoothing out the coarse rumble in my throat so that the words came out sugar-sweet, "You don't need to worry about him."

Annah shifted a little, waited as if she was worried if she needed permission to speak, "That- that was jes' cold, it was. Seein' him like that, and his eyes..." she moaned, "I'll never forget 'is eyes. It haunts me dreams, it does."

"I'm jealous," I chuckled, "There should only be one man in your dreams."

She took in a sharp breath, surprised that I was suddenly next to her. Yet she didn't pull back when a rough, callused knuckle caressed her cheek. Her skin was pearl-white and smooth as silk, warm to the touch.

"Did you like Dak'kon?" I murmured, leaning in so that my breath blew against her hair. "As a travelling companion?" I added, as if it was an afterthought.

"Well- well no, but-"

"Then all is well," I said, pulling her closer, "Dak'kon was useless, anyway. Worse than useless. I saw how you used to look at him, standing at my side, never leaving my sight. You and me could never be alone together with him around."

There. Her heart skipped a beat, and she swallowed. That had dredged up some hidden guilt, made that shameful fantasy real.

"I didn't need Dak'kon, Annah. I have no need for useless things," I murmured, "I need someone to be useful."

Useful, she mouthed the word.

"Your father is dead. The buried village is in chaos," I shifted, turning until I held her from behind. One hand caressed the bare cleft of belly revealed by her vest, and she trembled at my touch, "You have no one to go back to in your old life. But I need you, Annah."

Her lips trembled, working as if they pleaded for a name. Any name she could pin to me so that she could whisper it in my ear.

"Will you be useful for me?"

There was no pause, just a breathless answer given with eyes half-lidded and heart beating until the blood boiled in her veins, "Yes. I'll be useful for yeh."

"Thank you," I smiled, my lips brushing her cheek, "That makes me so happy."

The sound of Annah's pulse drumming in her ears deafened her to the sound

of my dagger being unsheathed.

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"You offer me cantrips and castings for novices," I had snarled, "I could've walked into a parlor and purchased what you offer, then wiped myself with the scraps. You'd better have something more to my liking, servant."

"Oh I do, I do!" all pretense of its sniveling, its bowing and scraping had been nearly gone, and it spoke with barely-restrained glee, "I promise you this: magic beyond your ken, and beyond the power of most mortals lie in the next pages. Oh, you will be the envy of archmagi, I promise you this."

It no longer addressed me as 'master,' but that was of little concern. I shook the tome furiously, nails digging into soft, fleshy hide that bound it. "Then give it to me!"

"You must have patience! You have already shown yourself willing to do what it takes to achieve this power," the book had hissed, a little too snarky for my liking, "and you must realize that you WILL pay for this power."

"What do I have to do?"

"Do you have companions you are willing to betray?" it had asked as if revealed a toothy smile.

"How about Annah?"

"I care not who, as long as you show yourself willing. Go now and do it." It almost sounded like a command.

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My fingers clung loosely to the hilt of the dagger, soaked in blood from blade to pommel. The heat that stained my hands was slowly trickling away, dripping to the floor in small red splashes.

There was a lesson to be learned, surely, and I mused on it as I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at Annah's body. I meditated as I watched her grow cold.

A thief's reflexes are much sharper than you might think. Drunk on ecstasy as she was in my arms she could still feel something was wrong, twist away just as the blade buried itself in her chest. I had missed her heart completely, and Annah began to struggle.

I had seen how quick she was with the blades, how deft. They were unsheathed in an instant, and she could've swung back and slashed my throat in a blink of an eye. She could've left me gurgling on the tiled floor, my blood mingling with hers. There was no reason Annah couldn't now be crawling towards the door, crying out for help even as she slowly bled out from the wound.

But she hesitated. Oh, how she hesitated, punch-daggers trembling in her hands as if she didn't know what to do. She just lay back in my arms, trying to make sense of it all, trying to dig herself out of the hurt of betrayal. She couldn't bring herself to kill me, even if slashing my throat meant nothing in the long run.

She could've saved herself easily.

"Excellent," the book moaned in rapture, "Excellent. Never have I felt treachery as deep as this. I can taste it. You have proven yourself a worthy student. This, then, is the final spell I can teach you." It muttered some strange syllables, and a strange howl swelled in my heart. A smile curved at my lips like the blade of a dagger, and I knew a word of power, an utterance that can unravel reality and sever the strand of life with just a whisper.

It felt good ringing in my head. I felt giddy, as if I were keeping a secret I must not let out.

"Ch-chief?" The voice at the door was small and afraid.

"Ah, good thing you're here, Morte," I nodded, not looking up, "I'll need you as a witness. The thief had somehow broken into my rooms, tried to rifle through my belongings. I had to defend myself, of course."

His voice was furious, and he trembled in the air with rage, "I can't believe this... you've sunk pretty low before, chief, but this just takes the cake. I'll see you in Baator, you banged-up, short-stemmed, back-stabbing, ungrateful, pock-marked, dung-biting, greasy-haired, snaggle-toothed sorry piece of amnesiac garbage! Mark my words, you piking sod, keep on this

way and you'll be dead for good soon enough... and oh how you'll get yours, then!"

My eyes rose to meet his, then, and I spoke in a soft voice that seemed to turn the air into ice, "Watch your words, Morte."

"You-" he worked his tongue, his eloquence suddenly failing him. Morte seemed so unsure now, so afraid to speak up, "You killed her. And you might as well have killed Dak'kon."

"Yes. And I liked Annah. And I valued Dak'kon," I tested the tip of my dagger with one finger, "And as of now, I still like you. If these things had to happen to people I liked, imagine what could happen to someone that suddenly became an annoyance."

For the first time, all Morte could do was stare at me silently.

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Within the past three days I had been killed twelve times. It was a record for me, really.

I had been gutted by the Harmonium, mauled by an abishai while walking down the street. Thugs had jumped me at night, and one of the chambermaids had even slit my throat as I slept. Each time they stole the tome from my pack and fled, but only long enough for me to recover and hunt them down again.

"Things seem to have gotten a lot more dangerous," I mused, running my finger across the foul-smelling leather of the tome. I had been getting used to the smell of decaying flesh.

"Y-yes, master," it mewed nervously, "It is good then that you have me, to watch your back."

I chuckled, "Drop the act, my servant. I know what you are."

"W-what?"

"Oh yes," I sighed, flipping through the book's pages, "You are a parasite. You corrupt the weak, drive them into abominable evil. You delight in

corruption and feed off of wickedness, and when you've done as much as you can to see them swell with power and bloat with their sins, you lead them to their deaths, and go on to the next host."

"But-" the book sounded afraid, "How long have you known?"

"All along, since the moment I first touched you," I chuckled, "But you're not as clever as you think you are, little tome. For one, I am immortal. You can't get rid of me that easily."

"M-master-"

"For another, I am no weak-minded idiot who is so easily seduced by power," my finger tapped the cover, and I rested my chin in the palm of my other hand, "No, I knew what you were. You led me nowhere. I chose to take the path I did, and you gave me all the power I wanted."

"But-" the tome whimpered, "I can still serve, master. I have had many owners, know many of their secrets and their ways. I can still be your ally, your loyal servant!"

"No, you can't. I've drained you dry of all your magic, little tome, and I have no use for you anymore," I channeled a simple spell through my fingertips, and smoke began to waft from the page that I touched, "And I have no need for useless things."

The book shrieked as it was consumed by fat tongues of flame. Smoky black fire bloomed around the edges, ate away its pages with ravenous hunger.

I fed my past into that flame as I watched it burn. Memories of Morte, who was now little more than broken shards of teeth and bone lining the bottom of a bin after he tried to turn me into the Harmonium. Memories of Fall-From-Grace, who politely declined to continue traveling with me, saying she had experienced enough of betrayal and hatred. Memories of Dak'kon, now more broken and nameless than I was.

And lastly, I burned the memory of Annah, who gave her heart to me so that I might plunge a dagger in it. She still rests on a heap in Ragpicker's Square, you know. The Collectors won't touch her, nibbled by the rats and fat with worms. And yet they leave the eyes, staring off into space, still bright with unshed tears.

I tossed the ashen heap off the balcony, and the black flecks fluttered off, carried by the breeze that passed through the ward, clean and sweet as it could be in Sigil.

It was going to be a beautiful day.

## Interlude

"Stop.....stop stop stop STOP!!!!" exclaimed Epetrius. "I can't stand this any longer! You're telling it all wrong!"

"Well, I hate to tell ya, lad, but that's how the story went! This eye doesn't lie, it doesn't!" came Jeanette's reply.

"Absurd!" Epetrius snaps sharply, "How could an eye of all things be a record for anything?"

"La! But you're not a particularly clever one, are you?" Jeanette exclaims over the Guvner's sputtering, "There are many myths about eyes lad, about how they're the window to the soul, or how the retina records the images of the last moments of one's life. And considering how frequently The Nameless One has danced on both sides of the Great Veil, this eye has images a-plenty, all laid over one another like slivers o' glass.

"A-sides," Jeanette grins, "This one had been found on the Astral, whipped by winds of thought and currents of dream. In its immortality it had taken on a life of its own, and drawn together and preserved ancient memories of The Nameless One before they evaporated into nothingness in the White Void. At least, so's my theory."

Oudilin tests his newly healed shoulder, swinging it back and forth as he holds his lyre in the other hand. You'd think that without the strum of his music the tale would've dulled, but Jeanette's bombastic ways are more than enough to fill up that void. The deva sets right an overturned seat,

resting the lyre on one knee, "How exactly did you come across this eye, then?"

"Ah, but that is a story in and of itself, lad!" she flicks the eye in the air like a coin, optic nerve wriggling and flailing as if it were a snake's tail, "There we were on the Isle of Fading Thoughts, where memories go to die. A select few poor sods lose their way when they fall into the Deep Sleep, and wander the Astral a-while before reaching the Outer Planes. Those that are caught on the Isle are held by its morticians: a sorry lot, lanky and long-limbed like garden spiders. There they embalm these souls rather than their bodies, and ornament them with ancient crystallized thoughts: the honey-sweetness of a first kiss, an echo of springtime blooming throughout Elysium and the perfumed scent of its wildflowers. And there upon its crests and cliffs the dead are buried in caskets of fading dreams.

"Well, what better place to plunder, I say! That night we traveled, the Joren Dell, its sails swelled fat with the winds of memory, its keel buoyed by currents of lost and dying beliefs. We sailed along the lee of the Isle, a small void where stray thoughts were few. We rode a little eddy of dying faith (not so little these days, thanks to the efforts of the Athar) and found ourselves in a cove, populated only by fat worms that fed on the mental detritus of the planes. Disgusting things really; taste like jellied bilgewater.

"When we disembarked I took a party of twelve others with me. As I said, baker's dozen is fond luck! With my coterie behind me I went and plundered the catacombs for ancient treasures.

"I was just examining a fat little sensation (must've been a thousand years old and the size of a robin's egg) of a poet's satisfaction at finally completing his masterwork after two decades o' scourin' the planes for the right words. T'was then that a squeak caught our attention, and this little jigger launched itself at us," she holds up the eye for emphasis, "Thing yearned for a socket to bury itself in after being without a skull to call a home for countless centuries, and it immediately started nudging itself at the forehead o' my boatswain.

"Well he shrieked like a banshee 'e did, and dropped a pile of old joys and sorrows. The joys bounced, that was no matter... but the lamentations shattered against the floor like glass and heaved up this horrible cloud o' elegies, and the stench of that awakened the morticians."

"They shuddered and rose, limbs snapping into place like bones set a-right, and as my companions led a merry chase down the halls with arms laden with treasures I stood in the rear, fending the monstrosities off one by one, my rapier slashing their limbs and carving my name across their night-black hides.

"Well one stray shot from 'em took my eye, but 'twas a fine price for the rousing battle they offered! I ran back, the blood and fluid spilling from my empty socket like gelatinous tears. By the time I made it back to the Joren Dell the sails were a-ready and the anchor was hoisted, and all I needed was a rope ladder to make my escape. I swung from that brittle ladder among the silver void, breathing the must of the forgotten, dancing among the silver threads of memory and laughing at fate itself. Ah the freedom and wonder of bein' a pirate! A grand afternoon to be sure, and by the time I climbed back in lunch was ready. Stroganoff, if I recall."

"That is ridiculous and you, girl, are just making up lies again!" Factor Epetrius growls, stabbing a pointed finger at Jeanette. The lizard perched on his cap flicks out a tongue, as if to taunt the girl, "Nowhere in the libraries of Sigil, not among all the maps of the Astral Plane and the books of such, is this Isle mentioned!"

Jeanette laughs, as if the answer were obvious, and bends over. Her hands are placed on her knees and she smiles as she speaks in a soft, kind voice, as if addressing a child, "Oh good Guvner, me boy. O' course the name isn't mentioned in your books. The name itself has been forgotten and buried on the Isle itself. An' the fact that you know nothin' of it just proves me point really. If'n ye really want to see the name though, I keep it in a box in me holds. Ha!"

Epetrius' lips pull back in a growl, as if he were to say something else, but he merely rubs his temples and shakes his head in frustration.

You raise an eye as a heavy plate clacks against the counter. Your dragon-steak, medium-rare, fairly dripping in a reddish gravy. The savory scent of it makes your mouth water, and the barmaid smiles as your coin clinks into her palm.

"Now, as for this one," Jeanette indicates the eye which has now perched on her shoulder like a fawning parrot, "We didn't realize it at first but it had hitched a ride on the Joren Dell, squirreling away in the holds and suddenly

shy for some reason. We laid out traps for a month and tried luring it out with a mash of honey and shavings of star-crossed love, but in the end I was able to coax the thing out with a slice of slow agony harvested from an Inquisitor's scalpels. Thing seems to find itself bound to pain, as the Nameless One hisself once was."

Jeanette sighs before continuing, "I tried giving it a wee home in me own skull once... now I tell you, it hurts like a trip through the Nine Hells and isn't half as friendly, but past the headaches it fed me plenty o' flashes o' memory for me to piece together what happened with the Nameless One. But, since ye be so inclined to hear the story 'right', I reckon I'll just hafta start over again, aye? Now where was I..." She took a deep swig of ale and recomposed herself. "....Ah yes, Annah had just left the Festhall ta catch a breath of night air...."

## Chapter 69

Annah padded silently across the tiled floor, her soft boots not making a sound as she ghosted from shadow to shadow. Whatever sound her footsteps made would've been drowned out by Morte's snores, and if her moon-white flesh shone in the dim light, Ignus' roaring flames would've caught the eye more readily from his resting spot on the balcony.

"Hey."

"Hsst!" she hissed, snapping her head to me, "What are yeh doin' up an' about? Yeh been watchin' me?"

I shifted my weight, stepping out from the shadow of the pillar, "I've been feeling restless, too."

She just stood there, her tail flicking, arms crossed in front of her. That moment, by the dim light of Ignus burning through the window, she looked statuesque. There was a mute tranquility about her, and she stared at me like a stone.

"It's a clear night out," I said, "want to take a walk?"

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The air was still and crisp, quiet as the grave. It was only the occasional lighted window and the rare clank of Harmonium boots that gave any sign that the Ward was still inhabited. Even then as the night wore on the lights flickered and winked out. The sound of Harmonium patrols grew more distant. Silence was king then, and no one would disturb us in our prowling.

Annah's tail swayed as she padded quietly down the street next to me, and I strained to keep my movements straight and smooth so that my sash of bone wouldn't clatter or the beads in my hair clink. Sanctity hung in the silence, and I didn't want to spoil the moment with my clumsiness.

Annah tucked her hands into the crooks of her arms as if unsure what to do with them. Tonight would've been a night for the cunning ways... of picking locks and jimmying doors, pawing through the jewels and gold of the nobles of Sigil. True the Harmonium would've made things difficult, but there was no harm in casing a joint. If she were alone, that is.

"Annah, can you train me in thieving skills?"

"Eh?" She frowned. It wasn't a question she would've expected, "What are yeh on about?"

"I'd like to shelve the Art for a while and try my hand at stealthier pursuits."

She looked me up and down - once - then looked at me with a queer expression. "Are yeh serious?"

I nodded, "I'd like to tuck the Art aside for a while and return to the thieving profession. Can you teach me?"

She looked skeptical, then rolled her eyes. "Aye, I can... but to do it, yeh'll need to shut yer trap and lissen to me... and follow my lead, jig?" She circled me, tail flicking under the pale light of a window a floor above us as she examined my posture. "The first thing yeh need to do is change your stance, none of that loin-juttin' and leading with yer stem that yeh seem to favor..."

"All right..."

Annah put me through the paces. At the end of a short while, she took a step back and nodded, impressed. "Aye, yeh've got the hang of it. Quick to catch on, yeh are. 'A course that's only th' beginnin'. There are four skills any good cutpurse needs ta know..."

"Stealth, lockpicking, pickpocketing, and finding traps, right?"

She nodded, "Aye. Yeh got the basics down, I'll give yeh that. We can begin with vanishin' from sight. 'Tis me specialty." Her lip curled into a crooked grin.

"I gathered."

"Aye, well, the trick to being not-seen is knowing where yeh are and how quick yeh can become PART of where yeh are. There's some tricks I've learned - one is tae hide in a place where someone's not expectin' to look - like on the ceiling of a room -- or even change yer hiding place when they're lookin' for yeh..." She smiled wickedly. "There was one time I was hidin' from this brace of hardheads... the 'law'... an' what I did was..."

We went through the motions as she told her tales, ducking behind shadows of old pillars, pausing between one dash to another. We even put it to the test... prowling quietly from shadow to shadow as the Harmonium passed by, their clanking armor distraction enough from any soft-shoed padding about we would've made.

Annah continued as we leaned against the wall of the Civic Festhall. The stone was strangely warm against my back even as the still night air pecked at my skin with cold, "...an' so, there the hardhead was, face down in ditch water, his breeches gone, and the rest of his three fellas locked in the great-grandam's room, with her howling to the skies." Annah takes a breath. "An' there yeh are. If yeh can put the same thing to good use, it might help yeh hide when yeh really need to."

"So let's see: be sure to fall back to places you know well, preferably in surrounding where there are other distractions - and if there aren't any, make some."

She nodded. "Aye, that's the dark of it. Now, on ta lockpickin'. Pickin' at

locks -- well, I can tell yeh what NOT to do. First is, be sure yeh carry a little oil or something else to wet the tip o' yer lockpick in case the lock's stubborn; one other thing I've learned - from ol' stutter-crutch Pharod, no less -- is many of the locks in Sigil are actually patterned by this one locksmith from a stone's age ago, an' they have this common catch yeh --"

There were no locks about, but the lecture was just as informative as the last. I soaked up her stories, chuckled at her jokes. Her shoulders relaxed then, and she was less stingy with her smiles and laughs. She really was pretty when she laughed.

"...so it was getting' near Peak, with the first fingers o' dawn creepin' in, an' I knew they'd be searching the attics for me. But because the attic lock was Sigil-born, I knew how to jam the catch so they couldn't force it, and it bought me enough time to scarper away across the roof with the silver, it did."

"So that lock tumbler 'type' is the one on which a lot of locks are based... that should help if I ever need to pick a similar lock, then."

"Aye, but if there be a trap there, yeh need ta know what to do. Now that's an easy one tae give the knowing on - the most important thing is that someone had to SET the trap, and that they KNOW about it once they've set it, so be sure to look for signs of it when yeh're walkin' where someone keeps their valuables. There was one time, when I was enterin' the Grand Demense in the Clerk's Ward, an'..."

She was proud of her craft, and so skilled in putting the art of thievery into words that she must've lain awake many a night, with a smile on her lips and the satisfaction of a job well done comforting her through her life in the Hive. She was the essence of freedom.

"...an' the fact the carpet was new around the floor of the cabinet told me he'd had it fitted recently, so I pried it up with me dags, an' dead-sure there were acid stains on the stones beneath. So I knew to look for an acid blossom when I popped the cabinet and nicked his coppers."

"So when looking to find and disarm traps, not only look for signs that they've been set, but look for signs for what someone would have had to do to avoid them once they've been set."

She nodded. "Aye, yeh've got it now."

"Do you have any advice on how to pick someone's pocket?"

"Well, nicking someone's purse isn't as hard as yeh would think..." Annah shrugged. "It's mostly a-matter o' doing it quick and gentle-like, so they don't feel their purses gettin' lighter. If yeh're havin' a hard time of it, it may be in the way yeh're doin' it." She nodded at me. "Show me."

I looked around, "It's rather late and no one's about except the Harmonium. Besides, I don't want to pick someone's pockets just randomly with you watching."

"Nay, try and nick some jink from me. I'll tell yeh what yeh're doing wrong," it was a much more patient response than I expected for such a thick question.

"All right... uh, where do you keep it?"

"That's what yeh have to find out, if yeh want to be a true-blooded thief."

My tongue suddenly felt thick, and a touch of warmth flooded to my cheeks, "All right... let me try and nick... er, pick pocket you for it."

As soon as I made a move towards her, Annah held up her hand. "All right, stop - yeh've already messed up, yeh have."

"What?"

"Yeh have to watch yeh're approach, yeh do - yeh can't just be a thokola an' muscle yer way up to yer mark - especially when yeh look like yeh do." Annah suddenly put her hands on her hips and turned to look off to my side, as if disinterested. "Yeh got to act like the mark is nothin' to yeh - less than nothin'. Yeh don't care what he's got at all."

"All right - so I act like I don't care," my fingers twitched, as if my nerves were failing me, but I posed as she directed, "What then?"

"Then yeh got to make sure yeh strike at the right time - I usually do it when I move by someone; yeh should do it right after yeh move by someone, 'cause they'll probably be too frightened tae turn around to see where

yeh've gone. And another thing yeh should do..."

As she completed her lesson, trickles of memory flowed back. Sometimes her words became a muted buzz, other times what she told me seemed to echo with haunting familiarity.

I'd done this before, I was sure of it.

"...so dress down a little, maybe try not to look so threatenin', and yeh might catch yer mark off his guard - or off his gourd, if he's been hitting the bub."

"All right. So try to act non-threatening, relaxed, like the target means nothing to you, then strike when you're just out of his sight?"

"Aye, that's the dark of it. Now what?"

"Well... I thought I might be able to teach you some things."

"What? Are yeh serious?" She raised an eyebrow. "Yeh? Teach me? Yer a quick learner, I'd say, but yeh're still a bit green ta teach me anythin'."

I shrugged, "I thought I could give you some pointers."

"Aye?" She smirked, not quite believing. "Like what?"

"Well, I think your tail gives you away a lot more than you realize. I've noticed you twitch it when you're being watched or nervous; it's enough so someone looking in the shadows for you might notice. And another thing..."

When we were done I shared all I knew of lockpicking...

"You're using the wrong lockpicks when you try and pick locks. The ones you have could use the following: one with a Y-tip, and another with..."

...to know-how of trap disarming...

"Not only should you look for signs trap have been placed, but there's other signs you can tell as well, from sulfur in the air, to changes in temperature, to -- "

At the end of my instruction, Annah nodded quietly. "Aye, I hadn't thought of those things, I hadn't." She frowned. "I would've figured it out eventually, so don't think yeh're some Festhall teacher or anythin', jig?"

"Just trying to help."

Annah scowled, turning away. Her voice came out in a low, sharp hiss, "More like yeh're tryin' tae make me look like a fool, yeh are."

I blinked, "What in the hells are you talking about?"

"Here yeh come, stridin' into Pharod's Court, an' him all bowing and curtsying to yeh, playin' the boot-lick, then he ORDERS me tae go with yeh, which he's NEVER done, and yeh start puttin' on airs about how yeh know more than me... what gives yeh the right?," she snarled, baring her fangs. "Who do yeh think yeh ARE?"

The woman truly was a coiled viper, calm one moment, snapping and hissing the next. I never knew around Annah if my next word would earn me a smile or a stab, but for some reason I never asked her to leave. I was beginning to wonder exactly why I had asked to go out with her in the first place, "I'm JUST trying to help you, Annah."

"Oh, aye? Are yeh sure that every time I nick somethin' from someone's purse, or spring a lock, yeh aren't just shakin' your head behind your back, going, 'clumsy, stupid girl, she doesn't know how it's done.' Does that make yeh feel better about yerself, does it?!"

"Annah, I only showed you those things to make you even better than you are - I wasn't lording it over you. I don't think you're clumsy, and I don't think you're stupid."

Annah frowned, her tail flicking back and forth as if she still wasn't quite convinced. "Aye, well - yeh'd best be careful. I don't take kindly tae pity, I don't."

"Let's try pickpocketing now," I sighed. She seemed calm enough now. If the girl needed to she could shed anger like a snake shed its skin, "When you try and pick someone's pockets, you should use your body to better effect; it shouldn't be too hard for you to distract a mark from his belongings. And --"

"Eh?" Annah blinked. "Are yeh sayin' I should play the harlot?"

I looked her up and down, arching an eyebrow, "Well, why else are you wearing that thing? I thought that was your whole plan."

Annah followed my gaze, looking down at her outfit, then back up. "I just get hot, I do; it's my blood, I think. This vest lets my skin breathe."

It certainly takes my breath away... "Well, you add a few more slashes to the front of that, and your marks aren't going to care if you're picking their pocket or not. Now, watch my hands - when you are about to cut the purse, you need --"

As I reached out to show Annah, she stiffened.

"What now?"

"I cannae help it - it's your fault!" Annah squeezed her eyes closed. "Yeh shouldn't have said anythin' about the vest, now I'm all a-thinkin' about it, I am."

"Look me in the eye -- now just calm down."

Annah gaze locked with mine. She was still stiff, and her fangs were exposed, biting her lower lip.

"Look, I'll show you quick, and we'll be done with this."

I leaned in, and as I did, Annah suddenly pushed herself into me, and her hands wrapped around my back. She held me gently for a moment, then squeezed tightly, her light limbs firm yet supple like willow branches. She sniffed slightly around my neck, then up along my cheekbone. Her breath tickled. "I... I like the way yeh smell, I do." Annah's brogue was a little softer then, that sharp tiefling edge was muted, and her voice was low like a whisper.

She rubbed her cheek against mine. Her skin was smooth as milk, and her rust-red hair grazed the tip of my nose. It still smelled smoky and sharp, but there was a softness to it, something feminine despite the steel edge to her, "Yer skin's like leather, it is."

"Are you... wearing perfume?"

Annah paused, smiling into my ear. "Just a dab from an ol' vendor..." she murmured, "Guess it lingers, it does..."

Her fingertips trailed along my back, nails gently grazing my scars and sending electric jolts of sensation whenever they found a rough lump along that puckered, twisted flesh.

She was right though... I could feel the fiend blood in her, pulsing like liquid fire in her veins, flooding the heat through her body. It came through that slit in her vest, and radiated from her bare skin in waves. Powers above she was warm, and soft. So soft...

My hand reached down to check my purse.

I reached down in time to grab Annah's tail, then slowly unwound it from my pack. Annah stepped back, and the sudden rush of cold air left me chill, but I doubted the shiver was from that. She gave a grin. "Is that what yeh meant? Nickin' a purse offa a mark like that, aye? Dead-easy, it is."

"Yes..." my voice creaked like that of a lad on the cusp of adolescence. "I, uh," I deepened back into that coarse rumble, "I think you've got the hang of it."

Suddenly, something changed. A cold wind whipped up from the street, carrying an unnatural chill that seeped deep into my bones. Whispers of sins long forgotten ate at my soul in little nibbles like ants pecking at a still-living animal, beginning to strip away the skin. Then it kicked in, that primal, reptilian core of my brain that shrieked for every cell of my being to-

"What is it?"

"Run..." I whispered hoarsely.

Annah blinked, clutching her bare arms. Her eyes flicked back and forth, "What are yeh on abou-"

"Run!" I screamed, drawing my dagger.

They rose from the corners of the ward, tendrils snaking out from the

hidden depths of the night. The first slash slit me across my back, and even after the talon left my skin I could feel the wound cutting deeper. The cut was fueled by vengeance, the midnight claws had been honed with hate.

I didn't need to repeat myself a third time.

I had been chased by thugs, pursued by angry rats, mauled by the undead. But there was always the padding of footsteps or pitched squeaks. There was always the sound of clattering bones or mindless groans echoing through the halls. Somehow, the silence of the Shadows were more terrifying.

Arcane missiles sizzled the air as I shot them behind me, bursting in a pops of gray-black mist as they struck. I wasn't even sure if I wounded them or not.

And then the tendrils wrapped around my throat and squeezed.

I shouldn't have been afraid... I had endured whatever the Planes threw at me so far, after all, yet the Shadows were a sign of something deeper, more primal. In the back of my mind I knew they were relentless hunters. Impossible to hide from, massive in their swarms. They were relentless in their hatred, as if tearing at sins unpunished.

I could feel my strength leaving me in a trickle, as if those tendrils were drinking the warmth from my body. Those claws speared into me, again and again, in a rain of pitch-black fury. The shadow had no voice to scream with, no tongue to curse me, so it clawed and speared as if it could never cause me enough pain.

The tendrils stretched, then snapped with the sound of a blade slashing through the wind.

Annah.

I was still weak, but whatever held me dissolved into mist. Shaking as I stood I watched as Annah slashed at the mist, trying to pull away from the ebon claws. Each touch sapped her of strength as it did to me.

I acted fast. Pulling axioms and spells as fast as I could I blew holes in the Shadows, tore them apart in eldritch fury. One by one they were torn

asunder, vanishing into mist and leaving a dark, ghostly stain where they fell. The dying keens of the monsters sent shudders through me, as if with each kill I had brushed death incarnate.

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*"Once, many shadows dwelled among us," Hargrimm had said, "But they come to our halls no more. They left long ago - and we know not where they went. Some say they wander the planes."*

*"They wander the planes?"*

*"I asked about it once. Mary says that she has seen their fate in visions. She claims they have all been drawn to a wrecked fortress that drifts within the Negative Material Plane, a graveyard of regrets from where they cannot escape."*

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When the last shadow fell the chill in the air was gone, and my wounds began to knit. The cuts were so sharp that they were almost painless, but they spread a cold sensation through my flesh that receded with aching slowness.

"It's done, Annah. Let's get back to the Festhall... Grace can heal your wounds there."

Only silence greeted me.

"Annah?"

Chapter 70

The warmth of Annah's body was pooling around my boots.

I'd seen and felt many ways to die: being impaled on blades, acid billowing into your lungs and gnawing your face to the bone. There were bodies peppered with magic missiles, flesh blasted to the bone with arcane fury.

I couldn't look this time. You'd think I'd never seen a girl gutted before.

"Please no, please no, please no..."

The ground was sticky beneath my heels.

Deionarra had died because she had followed me. Aelwyn was forced to drive me to my death, heartbroken and with regret etched into her soul. Now Annah.

Love isn't for creatures like me... it's the domain of mortals, where passions have the luxury of flaring and cooling with age, where old sorrows can be smoothed over and buried. For immortals, old regrets live on with perpetual breath, just past the corner of my vision and squirreled away in the shadows. They accrue like a bad debt, unacknowledged and unpaid. Eventually, those old ghosts are going to catch up.

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*"You... I... cannot..." Deionarra suddenly froze, and she spoke slowly, carefully, as if her own voice frightened her. "The truth is this: you are one who dies many deaths. These deaths have given the knowing of all things mortal, and in your hand lies the spark of life... and death. Those that die near you carry a trace of themselves that you can bring forth..."*

*As Deionarra spoke the words, a crawling sensation welled up in the back of my skull... I suddenly felt compelled to look at my hand. As I lifted it up and looked at it, I could SEE the blood coursing sluggishly through my arm, pouring into my muscles, and in turn, giving strength to my bones...*

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And I knew Deionarra was right. I suddenly remembered how to coax the dimmest spark of life from a body, and bring it forth... the thought both horrified and intrigued me.

I could feel it, the barrier between this world and the next, soft and thin like an oil slick floating on the surface of a pond. I didn't want to get closer to the body, but I had to search, probing for an edge along that smooth wall. I followed the ripples of Annah's death, listened for an echo in the silence.

Conscious goals rarely fuel exploration. At first it was morbid curiosity, and then it was intent, first one wave, then another, weakening as they passed. And there, my fingers felt it... a hole in that soft barrier, like the space left by a popped bubble.

It yielded when I pushed, wrapped my probing like cold jelly. There was a nothingness to what lay on the other side: a forgotten name, a lost shoe. It was the void between dream and consciousness, the mindless gulf that seemed so familiar and yet so foreign, like the lands beyond the boundary of an uncrossed river.

The portal was closing fast.

I called her soul back from the Silent Shore, pulled it from the Isle of Whispers where the unborn sing their lamentations. There was a snapping sound as the portal squeezed shut, as if I had pulled something from the jaws of a predator, and with it in hand I quickly wove Annah's essence back into her body, willed spirit and flesh to join again.

I let out a pitched yelp and jumped back at the first spasms.

Yeah, now that was damn dignified.

Annah coughed, her eyes snapping wide open. She shivered, pale and moaning as if she were in the grips of a fever. The wound was gone, but the blood still stained her belly and carpeted the ground.

"Don't talk," I said quickly, bending over to pick her up. She trembled in my arms, and her blood was cold and damp against my skin. The air smelled like salt and iron and the rawness of lacerated flesh, "Let's get you to Grace."

A few Sensates still milled around the halls at this hour, and music and

sweet scents drawn from every plane still haunted the halls. It wouldn't do for any festivity or experience to pause in the Civic Festhall, but even when I carried Annah in most of the faction members didn't give me a second glance. When you trade in experiences of the most exotic, depraved, and sensuous kinds, few things could faze you.

"What... has happened?" Dak'kon said, his voice sharp as steel.

"Shadows," I growled, "What is this city coming to if shadows can haunt the streets and take us as prey?"

"I will take her," Dak'kon said, his voice almost insistent, but I pulled away when he held out his hands.

"I have to talk to Grace alone."

Dak'kon was a good ally, fierce and loyal and true to his word, but Grace was the only one I trusted at the moment, especially when I saw Morte just floating there, suddenly and inexplicably silent.

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"Kaji zenkai..." Grace murmured softly, her hands glowing with pale warmth as she prayed, "My faith lends me strength..."

Annah's breathing became smoother as the healing trickled into her veins, but still she remained silent. At best she probably thought she had been knocked out, or wounded terribly. I certainly wasn't going to tell her that I had, quite literally, snatched her from the jaws of death.

"I see your impatience," Grace said to me softly as she healed, "Is there something you would ask of me?"

"I need to talk to you. About Morte..."

Grace dipped her hands into the bowl of warm water, wringing out a fresh cloth. It was stained pink with blood, but it was still good enough to wipe away more of the mess. The Sensates had been punctual. Unasked, they brought hot water and some food to our rooms. "Morte is most peculiar... I have seen a great deal in my life, but nothing quite like him. Granted, there's no denying he is knowledgeable, but he has a certain..." She sniffed the air

and wrinkled her nose. "...Baatorian smell about him."

A muscle in my cheek twitched, "Baatorian smell?"

"Yes. But he's not a baatezu... at least of any variety I've encountered. The smell alone, however, makes me treat the skull with caution."

"What were you saying about his being a mimir before?"

"Mimirs are encyclopedias of knowledge. The owner may ask them questions, and if they possess the knowledge, they will inform the user of what it knows." She pressed her palm to Annah's forehead, another against her breast. The tiefling sighed, and the trembling slowed, and stopped as the warmth sank into her bones.

"And Morte is a mimir?"

"I don't believe so. Morte lacks the silvery metal that mimirs customarily have. And he seems to have an attitude of his own. Such qualities are not present in conventional mimirs." Grace shrugged slightly, shifting her hands and running them along Annah's sides, searching for hidden wounds.

What lay beyond I didn't know, but I could almost taste the mildew rankness of betrayal.

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"What's eating you, chief?"

"Can you read to me what's tattooed on my back again?"

"Aw, c'mon, chief. Don't tell me you forgot again."

"I just need to refresh my memory."

"Bet I'm going to be hearing THAT a lot." Morte cleared his throat. "Let's see..."

'I know you feel like you've been drinking a few kegs of Styx wash, but you need to CENTER yourself. Among your possessions is a JOURNAL that'll shed some light on the dark of the matter. PHAROD can fill you in on the rest of

the chant, if he's not in the dead-book already.'

"Keep going."

"I will, I will, hold on." Morte paused for a moment. "All right, here's the last bit..."

'Don't lose the journal or we'll be up the Styx again. And whatever you do, DO NOT tell anyone WHO you are or WHAT happens to you, or they'll put you on a quick pilgrimage to the crematorium. Do what I tell you: READ the journal, then FIND Pharod.'

"Go on. What does it say after that?"

If Morte had eyelids he would've blinked, "What are you talking about, chief? There isn't any more."

The anger rose in my voice, "What about, 'Don't trust the skull?'"

"Oh... that bit at the end? Well, I figured it was wash, so I didn't read that line out loud."

"Oh, really? And what do you think it means? Do you think it refers to you?"

"I doubt it. I mean, you can trust me, right, chief?"

"Are you lying to me, Morte?"

"No! C'mon, what's your problem, chief? I haven't steered you wrong yet."

"Yet. I don't like the fact you didn't read me that line, and I'd like to know what else you've neglected to mention since we've been traveling together."

"Nothing! I've told you everything... well, ALMOST everything, but nothing, you know, dangerous."

"If there's ANYTHING else, I suggest you tell me now."

"Chief, seriously, there's nothing else. I wouldn't hold out on you."

"You said you're a mimir, right, Morte?"

"Yeah... a mimir's a floating encyclopedia. You put information in, you get information out."

"But aren't mimirs made of a silvery metal?"

"So? Maybe some are, but I'm not. And there's stranger things on the Planes than that, chief."

"I don't think you're a mimir, Morte. What are you?"

He edged away just a bit, cocked to the side suspiciously, "What's with the interrogation? What do you know about mimirs, anyway?"

"I know enough to think you're lying to me. First, that bit about the missing line from my back saying not to trust you, then this. What am I supposed to think?"

"Okay, I'm not a mimir, but I know a lot of stuff, so I might as well be one."

"What are you then?"

"I'm a floating skull who knows a lot."

A low roar built from deep in my belly. Morte was feeding me scraps one by one, and making me struggle for each. I might as well have been pulling teeth, "What about that Baatorian smell you have?"

His eyes seemed to pop out of their sockets, "What would YOU know about what Baator smells like? Unless - hey, you've been talking about me with that tanar'ri, haven't you?! What does she know?!"

"Well, she obviously touched on something - that is a Baatorian smell, right?"

"Well, yeah, but - well, yeah. So I smell a little. Excuse me."

"Why do you smell like Baator?"

He bobbed in a shrug, "I dunno, must've caught it from one of those fiends that we cross paths with all the damn ti-"

"What about the shadows?"

That did it. The blank stare paved the way for the pregnant silence between us, as if it swelled with the question 'What does he know about the shadows?' that both of us were wondering. A pink tongue flicked out to lick at absent lips, and when Morte spoke again it was as casual as could be. I was almost fooled.

"What? You gonna ask me about reflections next?"

My voice deepened into a low, dangerous growl, "Spill it, Morte. I know you've been hiding more than you've let on."

"Ch-chief I seriously don't kn-"

My hand caught him in the air, clutching the curve of his temporal bone. With one hard shove I mashed him against the wall with a crack, the sickening, hollow sound of bone striking against rock.

"Chief-" his jaw worked and his eyes darted back and forth in terror.

A few of the Sensates looked up from their seats momentarily, but seemed neither interested nor concerned.

"Annah died tonight because you hid something from me," I hissed, "Because you had some hidden agenda. Now tell me! What do you have to do with Baator?"

"All right! I'll tell you, just let me go!"

I released him and he shook a bit as he righted himself, grumbling. For a moment I held myself ready in case he tried to bolt, but to my surprise the words seemed to spill out of him, each one easier to come than the last.

"I was...in the hells for a while. Kind of a long while. The stench kind of grows on you."

"You were in the hells? What were you DOING there?"

"See, well, there's this pillar on Avernus, the first layer of Baator; it's called

the Pillar of Skulls, but it's more like the pillar of heads."

His eyes took on a distant look, as if he were seeing something from long ago, a thousand miles away, and several realms apart from ours, "To hear some bashers tell it, it's supposedly made of the heads of berks, mostly sages and scholars, who used their knowing of this and knowing of that when they were alive to stretch the truth a little... so much they might have hurt, or uh, killed someone by doing it. Well, when I died, I ended up there. Funny, huh?"

"Not really."

"Eh..." Morte fell silent for a moment. He didn't even give a mirthless chuckle. "Yeah, you're right; it's not funny at all. You see, I think I knew a lot of things when I was alive. And maybe when I did know something, I didn't always tell the truth about it. I'm thinking that when I bent the truth once or twice, I may have led to someone getting penned in the dead-book sooner than they should have."

"It was me, wasn't it?"

Morte looked at me for a moment, and with the way the silence stretched I thought it might snap. "Yeah. I can't say how I know it, chief, but I think so. I think you were the one that got me sent there; the last twig in the bundle before the whole load snaps. Thing is, I can't remember what happened - I don't even remember being human, or what my life was even like before I woke up on the Pillar."

"Why did you forget?"

"That's pretty much the way of things when you die, as I'm sure you're no stranger to. You just... forget. I figure I wasn't a sterling member of the community when I was alive... but hells, who is?" Morte sighed. "It's just that I can't help it. Nothing's worse than being honest all the time."

"Except being sentenced to the hells. That sounds a lot worse than telling the truth."

"Yeah... you're right. Again." Morte clicked his teeth; the way he did it reminded me of someone drumming their fingers. "I guess just all that good and evil and lying and cheating catches up with you - and when I got penned

in the dead-book, it was my turn to pay the ferryman."

"So how did you escape the Pillar?"

"Well... you helped me, chief. When you showed up at the Pillar of Skulls, I pushed my way to the front. My obvious know-how and charm attracted your attention - you knew that I was the head that knew the most. So I cut a deal with you."

"Deal...?"

As Morte spoke, my vision bled into a fiery red, and there came a howling, a horrible screaming tower of voices, chittering, screeching, hammering, ALL of them begging, screaming to be freed, and Morte's voice: faint, almost overwhelmed in the horde. He sounded desperate, frightened, and pathetically, tragically lost...

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"You. Skull. Speak."

*The howling voices fall silent, and the tiny, red-lined skull, its cracked features cast in a hellish light, turns its eyes up at me. Blood and ichor has streamed across its features, and its teeth chatter, as if cold. "I... I c-c-can help you. I know w-w-what you seek... all these heads... all their knowing... just please, I beg you, free me. Let me help you. I'll tell you anything, everything."*

*My lip curls into a sneer. I had come a long way for answers, and I would not have all the lives lost and resources squandered because I had been cheated by Baatorian trickery. "Will you? SWEAR it, skull. SWEAR you will serve me until my End Days, or here you will remain."*

*"I swear. I swear... just please, please free me... I..." He mewls, swallows sickeningly, his pride almost a tangible thing. "I... beg you. Let me help you. Please."*

*"Very well," I nodded, and some vestigial feeling of mercy flickered, a dying ember of warmth in my chest, "I shall free you."*

*My vision slid, as if I were moving, and the howling, screaming cacophony*

*began again, a nightmarish horde of howls and cat-calls and taunts and insults...*

*My hands slide into the filthy quagmire of the pillar, sinking deep into the biting of fangs, mandibles. They gnash at my flesh, tear at my scarred skin in fury as my fingers curl around the tiny skull, locking into place. I pulled, ripping it from its base like a thick-rooted weed, tearing it from the pillar like an old scab...*

*"It is DONE," I declared.*

*The bloody skull lay in my scarred hands, its eyes covered in ichor from the pillar, and its teeth chatter, once, twice. It is reminiscent of a wailing newborn: helpless, naked... pathetic.*

*"I have freed you. Now your life... and your death is mine... Morte."*

~~~~~

My vision swirled, the mists of the past drifting away, and Morte was still chattering on, casual as could be. "We talked for a while, chief, you and me, seeing whether the arrangement would work, and I think we both were really impressed with each other, so you invited me off the Pillar, and I've kind of been with you ever since."

"Uh... what happened then?"

"Well, I didn't know I'd lose most of the Pillar's knowledge once I was out of it... I mean, how was I to know, I'd never been off the damn thing... but you were pretty understanding about it..."

I blinked, "You lost all the knowledge you said you had...?"

My vision swirled again, ripped me from the present in a surge of old memories. It made me dizzy, and my gut churned...

~~~~~

*There is the crack and snap of bone, the thrum of the blows as they reverberate through my hands. My fingers bleed with the fury of the strikes, joints loosening down to the knuckle, but I'm too angry to give a damn.*

*Morte howls - howling in pain, screaming for someone to stop, to stop killing him... and my hand, lashing out, again and again and...*

*"Damn you, skull, you LIED to me. I'll THRUST YOU BACK IN THAT DAMNABLE PILLAR AND LEAVE YOU TO DIE THERE."*

*There is the clatter of bone against what sounds like metal - a floor or a wall, and the skittering of teeth knocked free. Morte, conscious or not, had slipped free from my grip. I look down to my hand, his mandible torn free and still clutched by my fingers. Stray bits of bone litter the ground. There he lies in the middle of all this mess, a long crack branching out along the side, bone indented and one eye loose from its socket. There was no blood... indeed, Morte had none to shed, and somehow that made me angrier. Instead he lay there, begging wordlessly, mewling like a beaten dog for me to st-*

*"KNOW THAT YOUR SUFFERING ON THE PILLAR WILL BE NOTHING TO THE TORMENT I WILL MAKE YOU SUFFER..."*

~~~~~

My vision swirled, and Morte's cries ebbed, fading into his chattering rhythm. "So, you realized I still had my uses, so I took up with you and I've been with you ever since."

He had no reaction as I leaned against a wall, head spinning, trying to swallow the bile that was boiling up to the back of my throat. I managed to swallow, hard, though it would've been much easier with a drink of water, "Morte, what did I want from the Pillar? And how long was it that I freed you?"

Morte thought for a moment. "Well, as for how long, I don't know the exact count, chief - ages, I suppose. I've done all I could to help you each time, but..." He sighed, "It's not easy. And as for what you wanted at the Pillar, I don't know - once you pried me off, I couldn't remember."

"Morte, why didn't you SAY something when we were at the Mortuary?"

Morte suddenly stiffened in the air defensively. "Because I never know who you're going to be! Some of your incarnations have been stark, raving mad! One time you awoke obsessed with the idea that I was your skull, and

chased me around the Spire trying to shatter and devour me... luckily, you were crushed by a passing cart in the street. Another, 'good and lawful,' you tried to thrust me back into the Pillar, because 'it's where I belonged.'" Morte smirked. "That's why. Besides, no harm's ever come of you not knowing..."

"So you've stayed with me all this time?"

"Well, yeah, chief. I said I would. Morte always keeps his promises." He paused. "Well, most of them. Heh-heh. There was this one chit on Arborea who --"

Morte's tone had changed - past the joke, I knew he was trying to hide something. Something about why he was with me.

"Morte, seriously, why are you still traveling with me?"

"Chief, I said it's because I promised, all right?" He looked irritated. "What else could it be?"

"I don't know. You didn't need to stick around after I freed you."

"Well, of course not, chief, but I-" And suddenly, his tone of voice struck a chord in me, and I knew why he's remained with me, all this time.

"You feel guilty. Because you led me to my death so long ago, isn't it? And you've been suffering ever since."

He chuckled, eyes rolling a little even as they looked off to the side. "Aw, c'mon, chief. Me, feel guilty? I'm Morte."

I shook my head, "No, I think that's it. When I came to free you from the fate you deserved, you couldn't help but try and help me. And when you could have left after I freed you, you remained. Because you felt indebted."

Morte was silent for a moment, looking at me. "Maybe. You know what's funny? At first, I don't know what the feeling was - it kind of slowly eats at you, y'know? I mean, at first I thought it was a side-effect of some enchantment that 'bound' me to you... but after a couple hundred years, I realized it was more than that... something deeper. I just felt drawn, connected to you, somehow. Maybe it's all your suffering, chief... your

torment. I don't know. Maybe I felt... I don't know, responsible for whatever it is I did. What if something I did brought you to this state?"

His tone became more awkward as he for once thought before speaking, mulling over his thoughts and words, "Thing is, I don't think me - or whoever I was - really ever had to see the consequences of all the lying and cheating I'd done, and when I saw you for the first time when I was trapped on the Pillar, somehow, I knew that you were the one I'd betrayed. Once... long ago." Morte sighed. "And that's all I know."

"I see. Thanks for coming clean, Morte."

"Nah, don't thank me..." Morte bobbed in the air; and to my surprise, his voice seemed stronger somehow, more confident. He had shed old regrets and hidden secrets one by one like autumn leaves, and now some of the cracks and fractures in his skull had vanished, as if healed. "Nah, the thanks is all to you - I feel like I just had a Plane moved off my shoulders... so to speak."

I nodded, "Any day, Morte. Now look, uh, I've got to go do some stuff."

He nodded, but didn't object. It was as good a place as any to wrap up the man-to-skull chat.

As for me, I spent the next fifteen minutes hacking up my last meal in an alley.

Chapter 71

The smell of burning smoke stung my nostrils, way up and deep in there like someone had crammed smoldering charcoal up my nose. The harsh smell of the guttering forge-fires felt like they were eating away toward my brains, and fat tears welled up in my eyes. The heavy clangor of steel being hammered rang in my ears in an arrhythmic pace. It threatened to drive me mad if I stayed here too long.

You'd think that there'd be some measure of irony in creating a siege tower and a golem to wage war in the name of entropy. Not so. It was later explained to me that even the act of creation is a melange of smaller destructions: you cut down hundreds of trees to build the tower, shatter ore and burn coal to smelt it and fuel the forges to make steel. The workers themselves feed aches into their bones and kinks into their muscles with each day of toil. Everything serves the cause of entropy.

Coaxmetal was just speeding up the process.

So it wasn't all that strange to go to it for advice on how to protect myself from the shadows. Something as well-versed in destruction as Coaxmetal was should know about how to protect against it.

Ever since that night any cool breeze felt like that same unnatural chill, and I glanced nervously at every shadow. There had been something familiar and primal about those shadows that attacked us. I felt like a rabbit being stalked by wolves. Annah recovered, and grumbled in her own way about me being too paranoid, but I noticed she hadn't gone out to nick purses alone since then.

WHEN A THING SEALS ITSELF AGAINST ITS OWN
DESTRUCTION, IT MERELY DIES A DIFFERENT DEATH.

It was Coaxmetal's only reply to me asking for a way to protect myself. Yet there was ambiguity in those words, even if they were blunt and hammered out with a heavy throat of rusted iron. "Are you saying that immortality is just a different kind of death?"

IMMORTALITY IS ONLY A WORD. ALL THAT EXISTS CAN DIE.

I blinked, "You're saying you could forge a weapon to kill an immortal?"

EVERY LIVING THING HAS A WEAPON AGAINST WHICH IT HAS
NO DEFENSE. TIME. DISEASE. IRON. GUILT.

"How do you know what weapon to use?"

ONE MUST KNOW THE ENEMY TO FORGE SUCH A WEAPON.

Back to the shadows again. I scoffed, "And how do I do that? It's not going to

be that easy."

START WITH A FRAGMENT OF THE ENEMY. A DROP OF BLOOD. A CRYSTALLIZED THOUGHT. ONE OF ITS HOPES. ALL OF THESE THINGS TELL THE WAY IT CAN DIE.

"What if your enemy strikes from a distance, from shadows, and never shows himself?"

THEN THAT IS THE FRAGMENT OF THE ENEMY YOU MUST USE.

"How?"

THE ACTIONS OF YOUR ENEMY HAVE TOLD YOU MUCH. YOUR ENEMY DOES NOT WISH TO ENGAGE YOU DIRECTLY. THAT IS A WEAKNESS.

Something clicked in my mind, "Or... for some reason, it cannot engage me directly."

THAT IS AN EQUAL POSSIBILITY. EITHER POSSIBILITY REVEALS WEAKNESS.

"How do I exploit that?"

IF THE ENEMY DOES NOT WISH TO CONFRONT YOU DIRECTLY, DENY ITS WISH. TAKE THE BATTLE TO THE ENEMY.

"And if the reason it can't attack me directly is because it has no choice?"

IF IT IS NOT ALLOWED TO CONFRONT YOU DIRECTLY, FIND THE REASON. THE REASON WILL REVEAL A WEAKNESS.

"You said you immortality was just a word... that all that lives can die. Could you make a weapon that could kill me?"

YES.

I blinked, excitement and uneasiness churning in my stomach. Could I actually be vulnerable, finally? "Really? How?"

I WOULD NEED A DROP OF YOUR BLOOD. THAT IS ALL.

"Very well..."

I expected a sizzle or the slightest puff of smoke when my blood dripped into the burning crucible, but it melted and swam into the molten steel like a drop of water being stirred into syrup. And then the molten steel blackened and pulsed as if it were... not alive, per se, but more like a liquid zygote: life waiting to be born.

Coaxmetal was an apt name. The golem was almost gentle in the way he hammered the weapon into shape, urging the potential to destroy from unformed metal.

It bubbled when Coaxmetal quenched it one last time, water churning like it was giving life to the steel. And indeed, it seemed to pulse slightly when the golem dropped it into my hands, like the dull throb of a heart. It was an ugly-looking weapon, shaped so it resembled the symbol of torment on my left arm. Black veins wormed their way across the surface of the black metal, and the edge looked to be so dull that it couldn't even cut warm butter. Somehow, though, I knew this was the key.

THE TOOL OF YOUR DESTRUCTION HAS BEEN FORGED AND EDUCATED. IT IS NOT ENOUGH.

I looked up, "What do you mean?"

THE MAGICKS THAT KEEP YOUR HEART BEATING AND MEND YOUR FLESH ARE STRONG. YOU MUST SINK THE BLADE INTO YOUR BODY ONLY WITHIN A SHELL WHERE YOU ARE CUT OFF FROM THE PLANES.

"Why?"

THE REASON IS NOT KNOWN TO ME. YET BOTH THE WEAPON AND THE PLACE ARE NECESSARY FOR YOUR DESTRUCTION.

"Where would I find such a shell that separated me from the Planes?"

THAT IS NOT KNOWN TO ME.

Well, I wasn't exactly eager to die without some answers, anyway.

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Knowledge is power, they say.

My fingers ran along the edges of the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon. I knew there was something hidden there, something more. It couldn't just end there with the Sixth Circle, which had divided both the Gith people and Dak'kon's spirit. There had to be-

As I examined the rings of the Second Circle, I found a strange link in the plate that mentioned the laboring of the Gith people to achieve the Rising. A new circle emerged from the link, and I unlocked it, pulling the plate forth for study...

"Know that the Rising of the People against the illithid was a thing built upon many turnings. Many were the People who lived and died under time's blade while the Rising was shaped."

"The Rising was shaped upon a slow foundation. Steel was gathered so that it might mark illithid flesh. A means of knowing the movements of the illithids was established, at first weak and confused, then stronger, like a child finding its voice. When the movements were known, then the illithids were observed. In observing them, their ways of the mind were known."

"When the ways of the illithid were known, many of the People were gathered and taught in secret the means to shield their minds, and the way to harness their will as weapons. They were taught the scripture of steel, and most importantly, they were given the knowing of freedom."

"These things were not learned quickly. The knowing of much of the ways was slow, and in all these things, time's weight fell upon all. From the knowing of one's reflection in a steel blade, to the knowing of submerging the will, to the knowing of seeing itself. All of these things and more the People built upon. In time, they came to know the whole."

I paused, not knowing what to say or do, but closed the plates shut. I stared at the city below from my balcony, and waited until Dak'kon returned from the baths, snapping me out of my reverie.

"I need to talk to you about your teachings, Dak'kon."

He stood with arms crossed patiently across his chest, "What have you come to know?"

"There was a Seventh Circle within the Stone of Zerthimon. It spoke of the building of the rebellion against the illithids."

Dak'kon fell silent for a long while, staring at the Circle in my hand. Finally, he looked back up to meet my eyes. "What does this Seventh Circle speak of?"

"It speaks of time as an ally, not as an enemy. It says that patience can sharpen even the smallest of efforts into a weapon that can strike the heart of an empire. Your victories may be small, but over time, a greater victory may be achieved."

Dak'kon was silent for a moment. "Will you make this Circle known to me?"

I prepared to unlock the Seventh Circle for him.

As I took the circle and twisted the links, however, two plates slid from the interior and into my hands. I had no idea where they came from, but the Unbroken Circle still seemed intact - the Seventh Circle remained. Dak'kon watched me silently.

"There are two plates here... perhaps we should both study them, you and I?"

Dak'kon was silent for a moment. "There is much you have come to know of the Circle, and your knowing carries a greater weight than mine." Dak'kon matched my gaze. "Know that your path is mine, and it shall come to pass that as you knew the Way of Zerthimon from me, I shall know the Way of Zerthimon from you."

It wasn't much later that I made another discovery.

As I examined the rings of the seven Circles of Zerthimon, I became aware of a pattern in the way the links are formed. There was a greater meaning to it all, a last circle that binds the seven together. I hooked my fingers into the sides of the Circle and unlocked a hidden segment, pulling the plate forth to read.

"Know that a mind divided divides the man. The will and the hand must be as one. In knowing the self, one becomes strong."

"Know that if you know a course of action to be true in your heart, do not betray it because the path leads to hardship. Know that without suffering, the Rising would have never been, and the People would never have come to know themselves."

"Know that there is nothing in all the Worlds that can stand against unity. When all know a single purpose, when all hands are guided by one will, and all act with the same intent, the Planes themselves may be moved."

"A divided mind is one that does not know itself. When it is divided, it cleaves the body in two. When one has a single purpose, the body is strengthened. In knowing the self, grow strong."

"There was an Eighth Circle within the Stone of Zerthimon, Dak'kon. It spoke of division of the mind, and the importance of focus."

He fell silent. When he spoke again... his tone was quiet, almost reverent. "What does this Eighth Circle speak of?"

"It speaks of focus and discipline... about how not knowing oneself can physically divide the man. It also speaks of the weaknesses that division causes. It seems to me that it tells one to not only know themselves and take strength from that, but that your focus can reveal weaknesses in your enemy."

Dak'kon was silent. When he spoke again it was with caution, and grace. "Will you make this Circle known to me?"

With one final click, I unlocked the Eighth Circle of Zerthimon.

Again, two more plates slid from the interior and into my hands. Dak'kon watched me silently.

"There are two plates here... we should both study them, you and I. I think when you know the Eighth Circle, perhaps then you will know Zerthimon's heart when he made the Pronouncement of Two Skies. His words were not those of the illithids, but of the People."

Dak'kon stared at the plates, his eyes flickering over the geometries upon them. When he looked up and matched my gaze there was a new fire in his eyes, keen as a razor's edge. One by one the doubts and years seemed to fall from his face like leaves. His blade bent, shifted, until the shimmering became a silver glow. He seemed stronger somehow.

"Know that when death comes for you, know that I shall meet its blade with mine. Know that when all dies around you, know I shall live for your sake."

"When we die, Dak'kon, it shall be the same death," I said in agreement, "It shall be the Pronouncement of Two Deaths As One."

Dak'kon's spirit was finally free. No longer was he bound to travel with me... he did so by proud choice.

I fingered the rough black blade Coaxmetal had shaped. All that was left for me was to die.

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Greater magics had now become hard to come by. Cantrips and apprentice spells were easy to purchase, but spells of real power were beyond my grasp. Mages guarded their highest, most arcane arts jealously. Really there were three ways to obtain these spells.

First, I could research my own, but I hardly had the books or facilities to do so. Not to mention the time and reagents needed.

Second, I could steal spells from other magi, and while I'm sure I could survive whatever traps they sprung, I wasn't about to risk having my mind turned upside down and inside out by an enchanter, or be transformed into an un-slaughterable chicken for it.

Or I could find a master to learn from. Dak'kon had taught me all he knew and I in turn completed the Circle of Zerthimon. All that remained was...

"Ignus?"

Flames curled around Ignus' throat, and a tongue of flame streamed from behind his blackened teeth. "Yesssss...?"

"Ignus, what happened to you to make you this way?"

"Thissss way..." A small pocket of flesh on Ignus' cheek popped, and ran in a steaming trickle down his jaw. "Thissss way... Ignussss alwayssss wasss..."

"But... you look human. Or at least, you look like you were human once."

Ignus twisted, hunching his head forward as his body spun slowly above the ground... the effect was much like a fiery whirlwind, thermals streaming off his body and distorting the air around him. "Ssssstill Ignussss... alwayssss Ignussss..."

"Never mind, then. I had some other quest-"

As I opened my mouth to speak, Ignus suddenly whirled on me -- I was forced to choke back my words as the heat from his frame flooded over me. "Ignussss might YOU be... sss'PARKssss in bodiesss, alwayssss sssseeking to rise..."

"'Sparks in bodies?' What do you mean?"

"ALL thingssss burn... insssside..." Ignus' head craned back and he threw his arms wide, spirals of flame and heat traveling up his limbs. "Only need to be KINDLED with flamessss to become Ignussssss... sssso might YOU have been... Ignussss..."

I shrugged, "Actually, if you end up trying to kindle the flames within people, you usually end up killing them."

"Yessssss..." Ignus grinned, cocking his head to one side, ashes falling from his skull and being swept up in the flaming wreath that surrounded him.

"I had some other questions for you..."

"HSSSS'SSSSS!" My heart jumped as Ignus soared several feet into the air, flames licking at the ceiling. His jaw tore open, fiery trails spilling forth like a nest of snakes. "NO MORE TALK AND QUESSSTIONSSS! Ssssilence...!"

"You WILL answer my questions, Ignus," I snapped. Ignus wasn't something I could coax nor convince. Much as I hated it I had to force him to see things

my way. If I didn't rein things in now, letting Ignus loose upon the world again would've been disastrous, "I set you free, and I may send you back to your hell again."

"Think YOU could ch'ain Ignussss...?" The flames around Ignus swirled like a cloak, then fanned outwards, as if seeking to caress me. "KILL you, turn you to asssshessss Ignussss can... for now, Ignussss followsssss... but threatsssss... threatsss ANGER Ignussss..."

"Actually, Ignus, you couldn't stop me - you could burn me, but I'd keep coming at you until you were kindling. So enough with the threats..."

There was a crackling in the air, and Ignus cocked his head slightly, as if studying me, then hissed. "FLAMESSSS will burnnnn the immortality from you... you are NOT sssafe from my flamesssss..."

"Maybe you don't understand what immortality MEANS, Ignus..."

"You are NOT immortal... Ignussss can KILL you... ssscatter your asssshessss to the windssss..." That said, Ignus flung his arms wide, and a HEAT poured from him, so powerful that I was forced to shield my eyes - there was a great ROARING, as the air fled past me as it was drawn into him.

"Ignus! Stop th -" I coughed, my face lashed with my own beaded locks.

As I tried to shout at Ignus to stop, the tide turned back upon itself, and a blazing heat washed over me. I choked back a howl as my flesh started to smolder, then smoke, then flare with the beginnings of PAIN... I clenched my teeth, and over the pain, I could hear Ignus cackling... cackling, laughter cracking like thunder...

"Ignus!"

At the sound of his name again the heat died - and I drew my arms back from my face. The skin had blackened from where Ignus burned it... and Ignus was watching me hungrily. Then I knew, more than anything, that whatever Ignus was, whatever power that had embraced him, it had the power to destroy me - if his flames were to kill me, my body would be seared into white-hot ash, then torn apart by the flames and whipped into naked, screaming atoms.

"I-" I licked my cracked lips, hoping that appealing to his pyromania would calm him, "I wished to speak more of flames and burning, Ignus..."

"Flamessss...?" Ignus' voice crackled, as if in interest. "Sssss'peak... Ignusss will lisssten..."

"What were you doing in the Smoldering Corpse Bar?"

For a moment, I didn't think Ignus had heard me, when suddenly the fires in his eyes dimmed slightly, and he gave a soft hiss, cinders and ash dancing at the edges of his jaw. "Ignusss... once... knew NOTHING of flamessss..."

"Yes?"

"Once... Ignussss knew NOTHING of flamessss... he sset ssssmall firesss, tiny flamesss, tiny flickeringssss... ssssmall bitss of flame..." Ignus hissed again, ashes and fiery motes drifting from the ruin of his mouth. "The firessss grew... Ignussss sset firessss in their streetssss... and lit the firessss of anger in their heartssss..."

"Yes?"

I spoke, but Ignus didn't seem to hear me... he seemed to be somewhere else, as if re-living a memory through his words... against my will, I stopped to listen.

"They sssought to punisssh Ignus, the ssmall fliesss from the Hive. They wissshed to ssee Ignusss BURNNN after Ignusss sset fire to their ssstreets... tiny magelingss, hedge wizzardss, runecasterssss... tiny ssss'parks of magic came to PUNISSSH Ignusss for hurting their loved onessss... they ssentenced Ignussss to BURNNNN, made Ignussss a TORCH, a sssspitting FLAME, burning, burning... It wassss JUSSTICE, they ssaid..."

"Jusss'tice..." I watched, mesmerized, as Ignus began slowly turning again, as he did above the grill in the Smoldering Corpse. "...but it was not a ssentence... there is sooooo much flamessss and painnn that there issss NO pain... there issss LIGHT, and HEAT, and the flesssh runss as TALLOW acrossss my bonessss... and for the firsst time... Ignussss issss PLEASSSED..."

Ignus stopped his rotation, and his gaze fell upon me. As it did, the fires in his eyes flared, and a charred grin split his features, the flesh crackling and bubbling as it melted and streamed across his face. Ignus wore the face of all hells, of flames, and his next words were spoken like a death sentence - not only for me, but for everyone, everywhere. "When the Planessss burnnnn and all life is torchesss, then Ignusss ssshall at lassst... be at peace..."

"Ignus, I spoke with a storyteller in the Hive, and he mentioned that someone taught you these things... who?"

"Of learningssss and teachingssss you know..." Gouts of flame erupted from Ignus' mouth, in a horrid semblance of laughter. "You have ALWAYSsss taught Ignussss... Ignusss MASSSS'TER, you were."

I licked my lips. It couldn't be. It was profane, impossible... "Me? Are you sure...?"

Ignus' voice dropped, and the crackling of the flames died. "Yessss... it issss the only reassssson... Ignussss... OBEYSSS you..." Flames rose around him in a crackling spiral. "'til DEATH comessss for ussss both... your wordsssss to ME... to your ssstudent IGNUSSSS... Ignusss hassss NOT forgotten... Masssster..."

"Ignus... it must have been long ago when you learned the Art... are you absolutely sure it was me?"

"Yesss...." Ignus cackled. "Yessssss... the face hassss changed... but many lesssonssss you taught Ignussss..."

"If my face has changed, how do you know?"

"Insssside all thingssss... tiny flamessss... the ssss'PARK, the flamesss, the SSSSAME... no matter what the sssskin... ssskin can bleed... ssskin can burn... but the INNER flame remainssssss..."

"Ignus... this is important. Can you remember anything about me?"

Ignus hissed... and for a moment, his features flickered - at first, I thought it was the flames, but the wavering became more familiar. It was the flickering of memory...

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*The crackling of Ignus' flames subsided, lessening as the charred bones of Ignus' body folded up, twisting into itself until his limbs lay motionless, becoming a stack of wood within a huge iron fireplace...*

*I stare into a fire, the bright warmth flickering only in my eyes. The room is still cold... the fire is too small to heat the high, vaulted room. The fire crackles and spits embers onto the stone floor, motes rising from the fireplace. Faintly, from the darkness behind me, there is the rasp of someone breathing.*

*I gesture impatiently, "I can hear you... step into the light."*

*There is the shuffling of sandals, and a frail youth steps into the edges of the firelight. His wide, black eyes catch the flames and mirror them. He is nervous - I hear his muscles shaking, his voice trembling - just enough to increase my irritation. "Forgive my intrusion, master. I-"*

*"You have already intruded, supplicant. You did so with intention. I will hear it now, then you will leave me to my thoughts."*

*The boy takes a deep breath, and glances at the fire. "Master, I... dreamed of flames again, last night... they felt real, and you said that we were to come to you if --"*

*"It was a dream, nothing more. Now leave." I wave my hand dismissively. Supplicants are fit only to mop floors and wash beakers. There is no reason for him to interrupt my thoughts now.*

*The boy does not move - his brows draw together, and slowly, he displays his hands. The flesh around the fingers... blackened, burned.*

*A muscle in my cheek twitches, "How did your hands come to be burned, supplicant?"*

*"I awoke and my hands were as ash." The boy meets my gaze; he is still trembling, faintly, but there is an eagerness in his voice which angers me. "I dreamed I soared above the earth and the ground and sky were as fire. The world itself was so bright that it... hurt to look at it, master. And when I awoke, my hands... they were burned, as if I had held a flame within my*

hands."

"You lie, supplicant," I hiss, "You have come to me with a story, and now you are in danger of angering me."

"No, master..." The boy's face glistens with a sweaty sheen of fear. "No, upon my life, I do not!"

"You burned yourself with a candle, supplicant. Or thrust your hand within one of the pyres in the Vault of Currents. Now you come to me and tell me a dream burned you. I tire of your lies."

The boy falls silent, and to my surprise, his face clenches in anger. "No. I do not lie. It was the dream that burned me, master, as you said it might if we felt the power stirring. They were your words, and I came to repeat them to you and tell you they are true." He holds up his hands. "Look, master..."

With a rustle of my sleeves, my own hands lash out to clench his. The boy's palms are tiny in my grip, and my meaty palms squeeze down to crush his burned hands. He screams, and the din echoes in the vault. With a snarl, I hurl him to the ground in front of the fireplace, and there is a sharp crack as his knees strike the flagstones.

"Look into those flames, supplicant!" I snap, growling in his ear, "Raise your head, look!"

The boy is shuddering from the pain... tears blur his eyes as he raises his head to look into the fireplace. The flames cast his face in a red, gaunt glow...

"Is that what you wish to hold, supplicant? Is the shaping of flames what stirs your heart? Know that flames can burn, and if you would learn their power, you must suffer their touch."

The boy is silent, staring into the flames. He seems mesmerized. His tears have dried in the heat, and the shaking is gone. The flames are his focus. He is not LISTENING to me, he has never LISTENED. The fury washes over me.

"If that is what consumes you, enough for you to intrude upon my meditations, then I shall teach you of the shaping of flames, supplicant."

*My hand lashes out again and clamps onto the boy's wrist. He howls as I drag him closer to the fireplace, then thrust his hands into the coals - there is a crackling, a hissing of burning flesh, and his screams - so terrible, yet -*

*"To learn, you must suffer, supplicant. You must allow yourself to be burned by the power of that which you wield. Know its torment, and you shall know how to use it against your enemies."*

~~~~~

My vision cleared, the memory streaming away like smoke. Ignus was hovering above me, his head cocked to one side, and an insane, blackened grin smeared across his face... "Yesss Masssster... Ignusssss hasss NOT forgotten your teachingsss..."

Chapter 72

My tongue dried like I had a mouth full of ash. My legs went weak, and I trembled with the effort to keep standing in front of Ignus, sheathed in fire and his char-black face split by a cruel grin of teeth yellowed and gray. It had been the pricking familiarity of it all that had kept me from making an ass of myself. If it hadn't been for that, the shock would've turned my bowels to water and my legs to jelly, and I would've fallen to my knees before Ignus like a supplicant... the same way I had treated him countless years ago.

Past the years and the changes that had bent and warped the two of us beyond recognition, there was still something between the two of us, a tension that had to be worked out.

There's a certain masochistic edge to guilt. Maybe you've felt it before... when the sin against another is grave enough, you yearn to put a blade to your wrists, to gouge out your eyes, as if that would absolve you of the crime. You want to flee from his gaze, to crawl into hole and die. Guilt seeks the shadows, which is all the worse that Ignus was made of radiant light.

So as much as I wanted power, as much as I needed it, it was that masochism that set my tongue that day.

"Ignus, your mastery of the Art... can you teach me any of your powers?"

"Ssss... Ignussss once knew much... no longer... Ignussss burnnssss... in sssuffering, Ignussss learnssss..." A tiny flame gusted from his mouth, like laughter, and a stream of embers spat forth. "Ssssuffer... learn..."

As I was about to speak, I felt a crawling sensation in the back of my skull... and I was suddenly struck with the certainty, that the knowledge Ignus had to teach may permanently scar me... and as terrified as I was, I was satisfied with that.

"I am willing to suffer for such knowledge..."

"Ssssuffer...?" Flames flickered eagerly along the edges of Ignus' mouth, spiraling up along the melted ruin of his face. "Burnnnnn? Piecesssss of sssself are burnnned away... sssss... Ignusss... Ignusss may sstill teach MUCH."

"I wish to learn, Ignus... can you teach me some of the Art?"

"Where flamessss once burnnned, one may ssssend them again..." Before I could react, Ignus' claw lashed out and clutched my finger, and with a greedy hssssss, he BURNED it. Clusters of cauterized nerves sent bolts of agony through my hand in their death-throes, and through the searing pain, I closed my eyes and SCREAMED...

My knees were trembling when I forced my eyes open. The burning mass of my hand was throbbing and charred from where Ignus touched it... he floated above, uncaring, cradling my finger, then snapped the tip off with a nonchalance that sent a chill through my bones despite the heat that came off of him in waves. All that was left was the base of the digit. He hssed, cinders and ash drifting from his mouth, and flicked the charred remains of me finger back to me.

"Erhkk... what... did... you... do...?" The saliva at my lips was salty and tart with the taste of bile, and the threat of my last meal coming up again.

"Teachingsssss..." Ignus cackled, the sound now strangely painful to my ears.

"To learn, one must sssuffer."

It looked like a slightly curled stick of coal, and flakes of black dust came off in my fingers as I turned it in my hands. I trembled, licking my lips, and replaced the charred digit back on the end of my stump of a finger, and the revelation came to me, of how to curse others with Ignus' infernal heat.

The flesh knit back slowly, with lingering, blackened scars that I knew would be permanent. I'll never play the piano again.

Ignus' eyes flared, and a cruel smile pulled his lips back. It seemed to hide secrets that probed from beneath the surface, cruel glee intermixed with the satisfaction of teaching.

"I... wish... to learn... more..." I choked, still shaken by the scarring.

"Sssuffer...?" his grin widened. It wasn't enough for him to hurt me, scarring my eternal flesh like a giddy child drawing a pattern in smooth, wet plaster before it hardened. No, he wanted me to ask for the pain, to beg for it, broken and mewling for punishment. "Burnnnnn? Piecesssss of sssself are burnnned away... sssss... Ignusss... Ignusss may ssstill teach MUCH."

"I wish to learn, Ignus..."

"Yessssssss..." In a flash, Ignus' claws lashed out and clutched my left hand, and with a mad cackle and a greedy hssssss, the flames engulfed it, too quick and hot for the flesh to melt away, or for the fat and blood and lymph to run down my wrist. It had all evaporated with a touch. Through the searing pain, I was dully aware of the screaming, Ignus' shrieks echoing mine as if he were mocking me.

My knees cracked against the floor as I knelt, panting. My cheeks were moist, my lips wet with tears and sweat and snot. I forced my eyes open to see the burning mass of my hand from where Ignus touched it... only a blackened stump remained, twitching, blood steaming from it. Ignus seemed oblivious to my pain - his attention was devoted to my severed hand. He held it with pride, rolling it in his claws as if he were admiring a trophy.

"Ig... nus... give... me... BACK... my hand..."

Ignus ignored me; flames from his hands encircled my severed hand like a

wreath, slowly burning the last remnants of flesh from it, like a sculptor working clay, until only the fused bone was left. He gave a long, low hssssss and then flung his 'creation' back to me; I managed to catch it in my remaining hand. The flesh of my severed hand was re-knitting itself, slowly, painfully... it looked like it was regrowing.

"What did... you do..." I mewled to myself. The hand looked like it was truly dead: the flesh had been scoured clean, leaving only stark white bones behind dusted gray with ash. Though the tendons and ligaments were gone, the bones of the hand had been fused together in the heat. Something about it, though, seemed to pulse with an inner light like the lurid yellow heart of a dying coal, glowing beneath an ash-gray carapace.

It took a little doing to reattach the hand, some wiggling and pushing to get the heat-warped bones to fit back into the joints. I sighed then, leaning back as the regenerating flesh crawled along the enchanted bone like lichen populating new rock. When the joints began to loosen I knew I had learned more of the Art.

"I... wish... to learn... more..."

"Ssssss..." Ignus hurled himself into the air, leaving a hissing flame trail as he rises. "No more! Piecesssss of sssself are burnnned away... sssss... Ignusss... yet no more of ssssharing will Ignusss teach..."

"You need pieces of me in order to teach me? What about my eyeball?" I pointed to the eye I had removed and replaced earlier.

Ignus lashed out again, his finger like a spear... but he didn't strike for the eye that I pointed to; instead, he impaled my OTHER eye. There was no pain for a moment, only surprise, then I screamed as Ignus let lose a stream of flames into my socket. It seemed to eat into my skull and boil my brains... the hiss of burning flesh filled my nostrils and smoke clouded my vision...

I forced my eyes open through my bloodied vision - yet only ONE eye opened - I could barely make out Ignus, hovering in the air in front of me, his hands cupping a small orb of flame in his hands - my eye, seemingly untouched by the heat. As I watched, his hands covered the pearly orb, flecked with blood, and I felt a second burning pain in my eye socket in sympathy to the one he held in his hands...

And suddenly, even through the searing pain, I could see correctly again... Ignus opened his hand, and within it lay the ruined mass of my eyeball, barely recognizable, hollow and shriveled like a dried date or like the emptied husk of a walnut. He cackled, and with a breath of flame, the eyeball rose from his grasp and drifted over to me, like a flake of ash in the air. Flabby tears of vitreous humor trickled down my cheek from the empty socket. The scarring within my skull ached like a raw burn, but the familiar itch was there. My eye was regrowing, if slowly.

I crushed the charred husk in my hand and rubbed the soot onto each eyelid, and awakened the power of Ignus' Terror within me.

"I... wish... to learn... more..."

And here, then, was the twisted part of this entire exchange. Ignus not only hurt you, he was able to make you believe you deserved it.

Tiny snakes of flame spiraled from Ignus' ruined sockets, traveling up past his charred skull. "More teachingsssss..." The two snakes of flame circled around behind him, then flared into torches in his hands. "More sufferingsssss..."

"If you need more pieces of me to teach... what about this strip of my intestines?" I dug through my pack, holding up the wet ropy mass of my guts that the old woman had torn from my body so long ago. Creepy as it was I couldn't bring myself to toss them away, and held onto them like a pair of old shoes.

Ignus cocked his head as I held up the intestines, then suddenly swooped in and snatched the entrails from my grasp. Holding it, he strung it between two hands like rope and hssssssssed to himself... the intestines steamed as he held them, turning black... and a slow, burning pain began to bloom in my abdomen...

Ignus strung out the intestines, handspan by handspan, and as he let each length fall from his grasp, it started rotating around him like a spiral, snaking in a slow pattern, each portion being roasted by his flames - there was a dancing pattern to the way the flames were touching the strip of intestines, slowly blackening them, until it looked like a long string of charred meat...

The burning in my abdomen made me wince, but it was nothing compared

to the pain I endured when Ignus charred the other portions of my body. The burning guts spiraled in Ignus' flames, then suddenly guttered out, and fell into Ignus' hands. He gave a hssssss and threw them to me. "MUCH powersssss in an im'mortalsssss organsss..."

I held my charred intestines in my hands; they looked like a blackened rope. Ignus hovered above me, tiny motes of ash drifting from his burning, emaciated frame.

He watched and grinned as I slit my stomach open, gagging and nearly doubling over at the effort. He gazed down at me as the blood poured and the guts spilled out, and smiled as I stuffed the seared entrails into my body. Ignus stared as I drank in the power he offered, but the cruel, mocking glint in his eyes seemed as if they were watching a bottom-feeder nibbling on whatever small scraps he would offer.

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It was well past Peak, though long before the fingers of dusk touched the sky. Restaurants and eateries filled as the light dimmed. Though establishments were numerous, the only way to get a table large enough to seat the six of us was to either arrive early, or to bribe the staff. Instead we took our food from a kiosk, richly-spiced meats baked and wrapped in paper.

A slender young man approached us, wearing a somewhat worried expression. Many of the nobles were garishly dressed, but this one wore a shade of lavender that would've been wholly unflattering in a man. He stuck out like a gray hair.

"One thousand pardons, sir, but I am looking for a certain man, and I think you might be able to help me..."

"Oh? How so?"

"I am a messenger, sir, who seeks a man it's said cannot die... a scarred man, for whom death is nothing but the most trivial of annoyances. You match the admittedly vague description I was given, sir, and I had wondered if you were he."

I raised an eyebrow and wiped the juice from my lips. The thought of being

hunted again seized my stomach and ruined my meal. Damn. It had been such a fine piece of meat, too. "Just who wants to know?"

"I am in the hire of a wealthy noblewoman, Jolmi Syrma, sir."

I sighed. Might as well confess, especially now that I'd given up on that Adahn nonsense. Besides, the enemy I faced would hardly announce himself, "I am the man you're looking for."

He nodded, then bowed deeply. "A message for you then, sir: Mistress Jolmi of the House Syrma, a lady of high standing, has sent me. Mistress Jolmi would meet you in the Civic Festhall, where she would make a proposal - of which I know nothing - to you. Should you choose to seek her out, she wears green silks, trimmed with gold, and has hair the color of blue steel. That is the extent of my message, sir... farewell."

My appetite never recovered, though I tucked the wrapped meat away for a later snack. It was a fine thing, however, to be called back to the Festhall. I had heard that there were training rooms where I might practice the Art.

A stern-looking older woman was in the inner court, eyes fixed on the entrance though they wandered back and forth periodically. Her gaze fixed upon my face as I approached her. "You there... might I have a word with you?"

"Yes... you're Mistress Jolmi, correct? Of the House of Syrma? I spoke to your messenger."

"I am pleased to meet you, then." She gave a slight bow, little more than a nod of the head. "I would make you a somewhat unusual proposal... though you must admit you are an unusual man. I will give you one thousand copper commons... for your permission to kill you. Are you open to discussion on the matter?"

I blinked, "But... why?"

Jolmi didn't bat an eyelash. "But why not? I thought it might be an interesting experience - paying someone for the privilege of murdering them. When I first heard rumors of your existence, how could I resist? So... what is your answer? Shall we discuss the matter in greater detail?"

"One moment... where did you hear these rumors?"

Jolmi frowned. "One hears all sorts of things in the Festhall. How could one not eventually hear of a man like you? Again I ask: will you consider my proposal?"

Well, I didn't really need the money, but it certainly couldn't hurt. "Yes; let's work it out the details."

After a short discussion and a bit of haggling, it came down to the following terms: Jolmi would pay me two thousand copper commons; in return, I was to allow her to drive her dagger into my heart. She would wait for me to awaken, at which point she would give me the coin.

"Do you agree to this, then?" she said, her face smooth and calm.

"Yes... let's do it."

"Splendid," she said, and drove the blade into my chest.

Jolmi was a true connoisseur... her eyes drank in every detail, her nose perked as she breathed in the scent of my sweat: sharp and bitter with terror, iron with the smell of blood. She turned her head ever so slightly, listening to the involuntary grunts and gags as my muscles heaved around the blade.

The affair was over in moments... she'd already cleaned her blade and put it away by the time I recovered. After picking myself up off the Festhall floor, Jolmi handed over several rolls of copper coins while I rubbed my aching chest.

"Somewhat disappointing, I must admit. Ah, well... coin well-spent, nonetheless. Farewell."

I don't think I ever felt so cheap, though part of me mused that if I were a sensate I'd be savoring that experience.

Strange thing was, part of me did.

"Oh is this what yeh'd be doin' now?" Annah said with a wry grin, "Sellin' yer body to the Sensates?"

"Kinda puts a whole new spin on the phrase 'earning your money on your back,' eh, chief?"

"Shut up, you two."

## Chapter 73

I wrinkled my nose at the acrid smell of burnt metal and ozone. The Mage's training room was perhaps half-full, with apprentices and magelings fumbling at their incantations. They tossed flickering missles at a charred, metal-lined wall, and those that didn't fizzle out splashed against the target with a sad, broken sputter. No one seemed to know what they were doing... it was like stepping into a gymnasium full of fat men attempting calisthenics.

One young lady, however, was neat and primly dressed. Her hair was tied back and the sharpness in her eyes and the purse of her painted lips made it clear she one of the few who knew what she was doing. She carried a sheaf of papers and unwound scrolls, and occasionally paused to look through them and read portions of what was written aloud, practicing elaborate hand-motions as she did so. She looked up to me. "Good day, sir. You were the one at the lecture, were you not?"

"Uh, yes. What is this place?"

"This is where aspiring mages can come to train and study. Many wizards took their first steps in the Art as fledgling sorcerers, here."

I looked around, "Where's the trainer?"

"I do not know where Lady Thorncombe has gone. I would suggest you try the Sensoriums... she spends much of her time there..." She lowered her voice, frowning: "Perhaps too much."

Hmmm Thorncombe... I believe Salabesh mentioned her once, in

not-too-kind terms.

The Sensoriums were paved in a graceful spiral of gray stone, an elegant, if excessively neutral color for a chamber in the Civic Festall. The scent of the air was neither warm nor cool, neither crisp nor muggy. Everything was unusually in-between. That is not to say it was neutral, since even the concept of balance and imbalance wasn't present here. The comparatively stark decor seemed to imply an empty space, a potential where an experience will someday be born.

"The true art of the Sensoriums is not held in the walls itself," Grace mused as if in response to the surprised wrinkle of my brow, "Rather, the appeal is in the sensory stones they archive here. The chambers are meant to be empty, so that there are fewer distractions to avert the mind."

I had seen sensory stones before, in the chambers beneath Grace's brothel. They were supposed to house memories of intense, rare sensations so that others might bask in the experiences of another. They were songs and poems made flesh, bound in crystal and banded in silver. But between working at the forge, running errands, and attempting to garner any hint of a rumor about Ravel, I hadn't had time to look into the sensoriums.

It was hard to find anything more than a whisper of the night hag, since she had been mazed so long ago that whatever memories were left had faded into legend, bent and re-forged a hundred times over so that the barest trace of its original form couldn't be inferred.

Oh well, might as well sample the goods.

I wandered from chamber to chamber, each one with a stand holding a single stone with a short description of a sensation etched along its base. In this instance, it was 'Frightened Exhilaration,' scribed in a graceful flourish. I cupped my hands over the metal bands enrobing the glassy surface, like the strings of a woman's bodice bound against naked flesh. The moment my fingers touched the glassy surface, however, I could feel the warm pulse of the memory beneath, writhing and eager for a mind to latch onto.

It didn't take much urging to pull the experience into myself. Immediately it bubbled at the invitation, leapt toward the surface as if to press against my fingers. My heart leapt at the shock like a splash of cold water, and for that moment I forgot who and what I was...

I twist my head to look up at the large contraption strapped to my back... a set of four bat-like wings extend from out of it, each made of leather pulled taut over wicker frames. From the precipice I perch on, Dilgyar's Floating Fortress appears as but a tiny speck suspended in the blue-grey sky - miles away across nothing but empty air. "This is how everyone travels on the Plane of Air," they said, "it's easy." I smirk, step back a ways, and make a running leap off the cliff into the cool wind below, leaving my stomach behind. As the wings suddenly catch the air, an amazing rush shudders through my entire body as I soar out over the nothingness and towards the Elemental Prince's abode...

I blinked, peeling myself away from the last remnants of the sensation like kicking off the bedsheets upon awakening from a vivid dream. The sensation was still crisp in my mind, settling in and nestling comfortably in the vast empty spaces that used to hold forgotten memories. I felt as if I'd had a tasty hors d'oeuvre. It wasn't filling, but it was damn satisfying.

I tasted more sensations along the way, grazing as I searched for the Lady Thorncombe.

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'Sheer Wonder.'

Hesitantly, I open my mouth and take a shallow breath... and water flows into my lungs like cool air. I smile and take a deep breath, gawking in all directions as I slowly sink to the bottom of the harbor, where hundreds of colorful fish weave through twisting tracts of brilliant coral. As my feet touch bottom, I peer up at the keel of my ship and laugh aloud with joy, a string of great bubbles shooting up towards the surface...

'Festering Jealousy.'

I feel my lip curl as the fair-haired young hero, armor gleaming like a polished silver mirror, once again enters my tavern. Hanging his velvet cloak on a wall-peg, he surveys my patrons with a pair of eyes like sea-gems and a smile that sets the serving wenches swooning. I set the mug I'd been cleaning down and harumph loudly, thinking of what it'd be like to turn him upside-down and shove him in a rain barrel...

'Psychosis.'

I hold the point of a knife pressed to the man's throat, my hand clamped over his mouth and breath hot and heavy in his face. I begin to stab... slowly. The knife dimples his skin, and eventually breaks it. There is the hot rush of blood over my forearm, the sound of strangled respiration, a horrible sense of perverted glee... and it is over.

'Mind-Numbing Tedium.'

The experience couldn't have been more than a few minutes long, but hours seemed to pass...

I sit in on a long, boring lecture in the driest, dustiest hall in the University of Chalm in Sigil. I look about the vast hall, hoping to catch someone's eye to pull a face at - but the other students are either asleep or staring listlessly into space. I drop my quill pen, pick it up, and drop again... just for something to do. I consider stabbing myself in the eye with it, just to see if my senses haven't been wholly numbed by the incredible boredom...

'Bitter Loathing.'

Venomous tears of pain brimming in my narrow yellow eyes, I gather the tattered remains of my small, scaled, red wings off the floor. I humbly back out of Groba's study, gritting my needle-like teeth beneath sealed lips.

Sure, I'm only a spinagon - least among devils - but that's no cause for a pit fiend to tear my wings off because he doesn't like the message I've brought him! What will my gelugon master do, now? He certainly can't say anything to Groba, and what use is a spinagon without its wings? I'll probably get cast into the Pit of Flame for 'incompetence!'

Vengeance out of the question, there's little to do but shake my clawed fist and hate, hate, HATE Groba with all the loathing my hard little black devil's heart can muster...

'Consuming Impatience.'

I stand debating with Amnas the Horribly Slow, Keeper of the Lion Key, as to whether or not my quest is important enough for him to relinquish the artifact into my care. The whole experience is an exercise in sheer torment...

each and every one of his words is followed by a significant pause; each and every point he makes is reiterated time and again before he lets me speak. I present an argument... then wait, and wait, and wait while he makes his counterpoint. To which I shoot out a snappy counterpoint of my own... then must wait yet again for another of Amnas' drawling, meandering, seemingly endless counterpoints. It's everything I can do not to simply lop the fiend's tusked head off and snatch the key from the twitching corpse...

'Unavoidable Pain.'

As I struggle with him, on the edge of a blazing-hot stream of molten lava, my weapon-hand is slowly, inexorably forced ever closer to the magma. I curse him for being stronger than me, by just a hair. Beads of sweat evaporate the instant they appear; the hair on the back of my hand blackens and smolders above the awesome heat. Finally, my howls of suffering echoing from the canyon walls around me, my hand and the axe it holds plunges into the lava and chars to ash in a few, agonizing seconds.

'Tender Love.'

My eyes are closed; I can sense myself standing on the tips of my toes, pressed against her tightly. Soft, soft lips brush against mine, giving me the most gentle of kisses... my heart seems to flutter in my chest, and I feel as if I could fall backwards and simply float off into space...

'Pure Glee.'

Dancing and leaping about in rhythm with the wood elves' bouncing festival music, I and a dozen other dancers spin through the forest clearing like a whirling dervish, smiling and laughing like mad. As the cheering forest dwellers whoop, clap and dance alongside me, fairies careen through the air above our heads, leaving sparkling trails of colored light...

'Tired Surrender.'

Shuddering, chattering, hoping beyond hope to be found, I curl into myself beneath a blanket of snow to save what little warmth I have left. Fighting to keep my eyes open - to remain awake - I become aware that I can no longer feel my arms... my legs... the ice against my face... and tired, so tired, I at last resign to the inevitable. I close my eyes, bidding sleep a bitter welcome as the sense of loss forces a single tear - doomed to crystallize before it even

reaches my cheek - from my aching eyes.

'Grim Determination.'

The entire hall is in ruins and still in the process of being destroyed, as dozens of combatants hurl weapons, deadly, arcane magicks and themselves at one another in a desperate struggle to be the last one standing. Plumes of acrid green smoke rise from the pile of limp bodies I had dragged myself out of, having barely escaped the wrath of some fiendish spell. There it is - across the way, through the battling throng, through the bloodthirsty battle ahead of me, sitting untouched on a miraculously upright table - my pint of mead! And I'll get it back, if I have to kill every last one of the brawling tavern patrons to do it!

'Supernatural Lust.'

I couple with the succubus, a creature of such intense, otherworldly beauty that even her fiend's horns and thrashing tail give me no pause. She gasps under me... flesh dangerously sweet, and I desire her so completely that the whole of my existence seems focused towards this single goal. As my life explodes from me in a starry burst, I hear the delighted laughter of the succubus as she drains me dry, leaving my body but a soulless husk...

'Complete Bafflement.'

I awake from uneasy dreams to find myself transformed in my dank lair into a rather small, four-limbed, fleshy thing. I lie on my shell-less (as it were wholly unprotected) back and when I lift my tiny head - unadorned with its usual sensory antennae - a little I can see my pinkish belly, partly covered in soft, curling hairs quite unlike the black bristles I'm accustomed to seeing there. My two - only two! - legs now jut from the end of my torso, rather than up from around my abdomen. They look thick and ungainly in proportion to my body, and lie there limply, making no attempt to right me on their own - only by actively concentrating can I move the things. What has happened to me?

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I left the chamber, swaying slightly from the barrage of sensations, coming away from them with my mind aching at the weight of it all. I sifted through the experiences, drinking what I could from them and enjoying the new

mental fullness they left with me.

And that's when I bumped into her.

She was a comely, middle-aged woman, wandering about dreamily and absent-mindedly chewing on her thumbnail; her eyes seemed focused on nothing in particular. Elegant, yet disheveled finery dangled over her body as if it had been pulled on haphazardly, and her hair was slightly tussled.

I rubbed my eyes to shake the last vestiges of the mild grogginess of the sensations, "Greetings..."

"Hm?" She took her thumb from her mouth, smoothing back a strand of hair that had fallen in front of her eyes. She seemed otherwise apathetic.

"Are you, by chance, Lady Thorncombe?"

Her eyes widened momentarily, and then she looked away. "No. No, I am not, sir."

"Who are you, then, if I may ask?"

She smiled nervously. "No one of consequence, I assure you."

"Might I have your name?"

"Oh... I'm, eh... Adhana?" she fumbled.

"You're a terrible liar, you know."

Lady Thorncombe sneered. "And you're a horribly scarred ruin of a man, more a corpse given some sad semblance of life than anything else. Now go away."

I stepped in front of her before she could leave, and she looked up at me, both irritated and scandalized that I would stand in her way. "Wait... I had hoped to receive training in the magical arts."

"I shall dash your hopes to pieces, then. I no longer wish to teach magic... now go, leave me in peace."

"But why not?"

She waved a dismissive hand, "As if it were any concern of yours!"

"But it is... I seek to learn, and you can teach. I would know what I might do to convince you to train me."

Lady Thorncombe sighed loudly and resumed chewing on her thumbnail. "I doubt there's little you can offer me which I cannot find on my own. The sensory stones provide me with all things that my considerable wealth cannot buy."

"The sensory stones?"

"Mmm, yes... each stone has recorded within it one experience or another. When I first came to these halls, I spent little time with them. Only now do I realize what I had been missing..."

I certainly did understand that they were wonderful in their own way, but she seemed to be mired deeper than that, "What had you been missing?"

Thorncombe nodded, smiling. Her eyes took on a glassy sheen, and she held herself tightly. "One could spend lifetimes, here, among the stones... experience after wondrous experience... mere words cannot express their magnificence. I can only suggest you see for yourself, sir."

"I did, but... you sound... addicted."

She snarled, "Nonsense! I could stop anytime I wished! I merely choose to bask in their wonder. Why waste time teaching dawdling, ungrateful magelings, when I could remain here among these precious stones, living one hundred new lives each day?"

"I don't think the stones are there for that. Shouldn't you seek sensations of your own to share?"

"Hpmh! What you think matters little to me. Farewell."

Well, if Thorncombe couldn't help me, perhaps a rival could...

Salabesh was making his usual rounds, reminiscing over the years of laying

curses on enemies, mortal foes, and milkmaids who happened to use skim milk rather than whole.

"Good day to you, Salabesh."

"Ah, you now. I saw Jumble scurrying down the halls like a dog with its tail between its legs. Marvelous work, if I do say so myself."

"You wished to be the future mage-tutor of the Festhall, correct? What is that about again?"

"Hrmph," he tapped his staff and plucked an oyster from a proffered tray. "A noble title, that, and a great honor to be an official tutor in one of the Festhall's training chambers. Yes, one day I will take the position of mages' tutor, but the title's currently in the possession of the Lady Thorncombe. That woman wrote her dissertation on the alchemical uses of Thassalian stonewort, you know. Utterly useless as an educator, that Thorncombe." He slurped the oyster when he was finished with his bitter grumbling, and tossed the shell down onto the tray as he chewed.

"You could always bring up the fact that she's addicted to sensory stones. She doesn't seem to want to teach anymore..."

Salabesh's eyes widened, and he swallowed hard, "Is she, now?" His tight lips curled into a nasty smile. "And she no longer cares to teach? Excellent... I'll request to be made the new mage's tutor soon, then."

"Soon?"

Salabesh's expression darkened. "I recently upset the head of the Festhall's board of mages, and I feel it would be best to wait for a time before making my request. Besides, I am certain that 'Lady' Thorncombe won't come skipping out of the sensorium anytime soon..." He chuckled evilly.

"You know chief, if I had to choose between a catatonic or a megalomaniac as a tutor, I think I'd go with the former."

I gave Morte a nod. I didn't want to learn from another Ignus, "Well that's why we use this as an opportunity."

Lady Thorncombe squinted at me when I came up to her again, as if trying to

remember who I was. Suddenly, she frowned pointedly. "You! I hope you have not come here in an ill-fated attempt to drag me back to the training chamber... because I most certainly shall not go."

I was smooth as spun sugar when I spoke, "I just wondered if you knew that Salabesh was happy to hear of your decision, and is requesting to be made the new mages' tutor."

Her eyes widened and she placed a delicate hand on her breast in shock, "Salabesh?! That portly little oaf... the man couldn't magic his way out of a mildewed sack! Now what is this decision you speak of?"

"Why, your decision to remain in the sensoriums, and to no longer train less experienced mages."

"What?! But... I..." her eyes darted back and forth as she struggled for words.

"Yes, Lady Thorncombe?"

She glared at me and my slightly smug grin. "Asinine. Wholly asinine. Should you see Salabesh again, tell him not to bother. I shall return to the training chambers at once."

Feeling as though my duty was done, I made my way upstairs, through an archway adorned with the words "Private sensoriums".

## Chapter 74

These sensoriums were another thing entirely.

The Sensates here were a well-dressed if eclectic crowd, in splashes of bright colors that alone would've been elegant, but in a crowd it made my eyes ache. Many held glasses of wine and chatted quietly among themselves as if it were a cocktail party. A high, domed ceiling arched over us like a second

sky, with lanterns dangling like fruit. Burnished, gold-plated edging surrounded the flower beds, which were thick with lush growth that gave off a sweet, honeyed scent. I almost wanted to pluck one of the blossoms for tasting.

"Try them, if you wish," Grace smiled as if she had read my mind, "Sight, smell, touch, hearing, taste... these are how a Sensate seeks the truth of the multiverse, and the Festhall spares no expense for its members."

"I'm not really a member... not officially, at least."

"You are Sensate enough for Splinter to allow you entrance. That is no small task," Grace smiled, and casually brushed her hand over the variety of flowers, barely allowing the petals to touch her fingertips. She sighed, content to experience the textures yet again.

"Hrmn. New experiences do sometimes help me remember," I murmured, plucking one flower. It was butter-yellow, with golden veins. I gave it a nibble, smearing the juices along my tongue.

It was pleasant at first, sweet and perfumed, a little like jasmine with a splash of rose wine. In moments however an awful bitterness filled my mouth, and I sucked my tongue and desperately swallowed to clear my tastebuds of the juices.

"An Endilay Blossom," Grace mused, "From Bytopia. It is an effective antiseptic, and is often used in poultices, if I recall. Not all experiences are pleasant, but we strive to learn from all of them."

Story of my life.

I browsed the selection of orbs, these of a higher quality than those available to the public. For one, they were a little bigger, and second the light inside them blazed and swirled like the fires of small suns. I walked past many, like a connoisseur carefully choosing what should be his first taste of wine that day. I read the names of each sensation, each simple and enigmatic, more vague than the ones in the public sensoriums, and all the more enticing for it.

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'Horrible Regret'

You stand on the deck of your flagship, the Divine Hammer, as it floats over the continent of Agarheim, held aloft by the winds of magic. The very landscape roils and shudders beneath the bombardment of your fleet, one thousand ships' cannons and bombards hurling their sorcerous fire down like vengeful gods. The shockwaves began to hit your ship only minutes ago - a constant vibration that sends shudders through the whole of the ancient craft and moves your very bones - accompanied by a constant, rumbling bass. As the land's mountains begin to sink and the seas that surround it begin to boil off into the atmosphere, your first officer comes to stand beside you.

"My Lord Admiral... permission to speak freely, sir."

You nod your acquiescence, your stomach sinking as you guess at his question.

"My lord... forgive me, but how? What gives us the right? A billion lives..."

You speak without turning to him, unable to take your eyes off Rhumos, the nation's vast capital city, as it vaporizes into a cloud of super-heated gasses twelve miles across and growing ever-wider. "If you only knew the full treachery of the Agarites, First Officer Felm, one which is beyond most any man's comprehension... then you would know. You would speak of our right to annihilate them? We've no right to let them live."

"But... sir? Traitors, all of them? Surely, among the hundreds of thousands. How many innocents-"

"Silence! Speak of it no more - our king has spoken, His will be done. The task set to us is a horrible one, not fit for contemplation or questioning. There is no room for pity, no room for remorse - only *duty.*"

The two of you stand silently for a time, watching the last minutes of Agarheim. At long last you sigh... a low, stuttering exhalation that sounds as if something has broken inside you. Beneath the brazen plate that covers the ruined half of your face, your dead eye begins to weep...

"Falm... my friend... I would have you understand. I know now, as I look down at what I have wrought here, that were I to think upon what I have done... what I have *truly* done... I would be struck mad. A deed such as

this... the anguish would overwhelm, destroy me. So, First Officer Falm, it must be that there **are** no innocents in Agarheim... no mothers, no children, no **people.** Only traitors. Vile, cunning traitors, who deserve no less than the full brunt of our most Holy King's wrath. Do you understand this?"

"Y-yes, m'lord."

"Good. Now go... I wish to be alone, here."

"By your command, Lord Admiral." Falm bows his head and returns below deck, leaving you to stand over the end of a civilization.

'Indescribable Frustration.'

You can see it now, the crown of Haephon, gleaming upon a marble pedestal. No more than twenty strides away, it is... with it, you could wrest control of the armies of Aethanopolis away from your treacherous brother and restore your father's kingdom. A fool, your wretched brother was... you smile grimly at the thought... to leave the king's only daughter alive, thinking she could do him no harm.

A sound! The creak of leather sandals, the softest hiss... over there, by that third pillar! She was close now, Polaphi the Medusa, jealously guarding the crown her servants had stolen for her so long ago. Crouching behind a wide pillar, you wrap your hand tightly around your trusted Thrice-Blessed Javelin. With your Helm of Swiftess and the Hundred-Mirrored Shield, even a beast such as Polaphi would be no match for you. Any moment, now, she would round the pillar and meet the sight of you. Even if she turned away from the shield, your javelin would surely find her throat...

Suddenly, there is a gentle touch on your shoulder. You gasp, spinning around to face - of course - the Medusa. Accepting the inevitable, you only have time to loose a piercing cry of frustration before your lungs... and every other part of you... solidifies into cold, gray stone.

'A Vastly Important Secret.'

Six Imperial servants rush ahead of you, swinging the golden doors of the Dragon Palace wide.

"Long live the Empress!" they cry in unison. "One thousand years! Long live the Empress! One Thousand Years!"

Beyond the threshold, dozens of loyal warlords, kings in their own right, drop to their knees, touching their heads to the floor in deference as you pass them en route to the grand Imperial Throne.

As you turn and face your minions, seating yourself upon the Imperial Throne, you allow a small, satisfied smile to creep across your carefully painted lips. There is but one thought in the forefront of your mind:

...that the body of the young Empress, Wu Tsun Sha, lies broken at the bottom of the Well of Solitude, and that you - Bai Hwa, a horse merchant's daughter - are at last poised to shake the Empire and the corrupt Wu Dynasty to its very foundations.

‘Shock and a Rise to Seething Vengefulness.’

You stand somewhere in the nether regions of the Planes, a sweltering place where the ground is beaten copper, and the sky is of brass. Here, the bodies of sinners - petitioners in this horrid place - are rolled amongst iron brambles and bronze scorpions until their bones are fine, gray dust.

You squint at the horizon, the bone-dust rising with putrid-smelling gusts of wind that carry with them the sound of agonized moaning. There is nothing but flat, metallic landscape as far as the eye can see. The dust is everywhere, in everything... it stings at your eyes, coats the insides of your mouth with a pasty film. You spit, wiping at it with your finger, but it's of no use: the stuff's taste has fouled your mouth completely.

You look down at the 'key' in your hand... a minute platinum orb... and picture the man's face who solemnly swore to you the magical portal you just passed through - now gone, of course - led to the green fields of Bytopia. Someone, by all the Powers and their proxies, was going to pay for this one.

‘Slowly Dawning Horror.’

"How good could it be?" you think, regarding the burgundy liquid carefully. Across the table from you, the twisted old man smiles slyly.

"Please, sir, try." he whispers, his hushed voice the sound of dry leaves blown over a roughly cobbled street. "Thou shalt find it more than lives up to thy expectations, I am sure."

You nod at him and lift the crystal goblet into the air, watching the light play through the crimson liquor. You'd come a long way for this drink... searched long and hard for this old man... and you'll be damned to let anything rush you, now. The moment was to be savored.

You raise the glass to your lips, inhaling the stuff's aroma. The bouquet is light, sweet, intoxicating... almost dizzyingly so. You've tried countless drinks... written tomes about them, their flavors and smells, means of manufacture, in your journeys across the Planes. But this... this stuff was supposed to be legendary. No living man you'd found or heard of had tried the stuff. The stories were ridiculous - nothing could taste quite so good - but if there were the slightest bit of truth to them, this would be some fine liquor indeed.

At last, you drink of the goblet, a cautious sip...

Incredible! Indescribable! As the flavor washes over your palette, you fight the urge to shudder with delight. Nothing... **nothing** you have tried in all your long years has tasted quite like this. You look up at the old man, startled to find your glass empty - you had drained it all in a single draught. You wipe your eyes with the back of your hand, not entirely sure when you had begun to cry.

"Tears of joy, eh?" The old man laughs softly. "Quite pleasing to the tongue, is it not? Wouldst thou like some more, perchance?" He smiles at you once more.

"Yes... yes, if I might..."

"Surely." he replies, refilling your glass. Try as you might, you cannot resist downing it in a single gulp. You thrust your finger into the goblet in an attempt to find some last, hidden drop of the stuff. Several times more does he fill the goblet, and each time you gulp the stuff down as a starving man would devour a feast, unable to control yourself, to deny yourself another exquisite taste of it.

He chuckles softly once more. "A drink such as this... a man wouldst do

anything for it, no?"

You nod without hesitation. "Yes, a man would..." Looking at him, his sly smile suddenly takes on a whole new meaning. A sense of horror begins to creep over you, even as you begin to yearn painfully for more of the blood-red liquor...

"Yes, yes..." The old man grins, his yellow eyes gleaming. "A man *wouldst* do anything, in the *thrall* of such a drink... even the most terrible, the most heinous of deeds... as thou shalt see, my newest servant."

'Lycanthropy.'

Suddenly aware that the hour has almost come, you leap from your bed and run flying from your cottage and into the surrounding woods. Stumbling in the dark, you come to a small, moonlit clearing... the one you had found last week and decided to use, tonight. You hastily strip off your clothes, sit in the long grass, and wait.

You close your eyes, listening to the steady chirp of crickets, the throaty croaking of bullfrogs in the nearby creek, the rustle of the grass as the wind caresses it. What would someone think, seeing this through your eyes, *experiencing* this moment and what was next to come? Soon you would travel to the city, find a cleric to rid you of the Curse... but for now, may as well make the best of things. You rub your hands together with anticipation, grinning like a bearded, fire-haired giant of a madman, sitting naked and alone in a forest clearing in the dead of night.

A prickling sensation runs across your skin, and your senses sharpen dramatically. You breathe in through your nose, inhaling the scent of everything around you: the damp earth, the sweat on your cast-off clothes, the opossum clinging fearfully to the tree behind you...

You open your eyes and look down at your forearms. The faint moonlight reveals the slightest quivering across their surface... but in moments, the flesh begins to ripple impossibly, tufts of thick brown fur sprouting forth. With a grisly crackling sound - like popping joints and grinding bones - your back and shoulders begin to hunch and broaden... uncomfortable, but not quite painful. Your muscles - your entire body mass - doubles, triples in size, and continues to grow.

Still fascinated by the transformation yourself, you watch as your fingers wither away to nothing, hands swelling into meaty paws from which burst fur and massive, black claws. The night seems to become brighter as your eyes transform, become accustomed the darkness... a wide muzzle comes into view, and you touch your wet, snuffling nose delicately, chuckling to yourself. Next time, you think, you'll have to stare into a mirror or pond as the Curse takes effect... watch your face warp and change, losing its familiar shape to become a bear's.

Soon, it becomes difficult to concentrate upon anything but your more basic urges... food would be good, right now. Yes, food - perhaps you'll get lucky and find a nice, fat catfish in the creek. You rise off your massive haunches with a *huff* and begin to amble through the trees on all fours, heading for the water's edge...

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Something hummed at the edge of my mind as I passed by one particular orb, and each time I went near it, something seemed to pluck at my being. There was a certain casualness about it, something elegant yet simple, overlooked by most of the other Sensates here.

The base of the aquatic blue stone had been sculpted so it appeared to have melted into the pedestal it rested upon. A stream of perfect azure tears dripped down the sides, framing the inscription beneath the pedestal:

"Longing."

I placed my hands upon the stone, and its surface rippled beneath my touch. The sensation slid into my hands slowly in a rekindled languor, and a chill washed over my arms, as if I had plunged then into a mountain stream.

Letting myself go, I closed my eyes, and when I reopened them...

*The tears come, without breath, without end, merciless and cold like winter. My sobs trickle back into my throat and flood my lungs, and my chest aches with the terrible sensation of drowning. I tremble with the sobs. They roll through me like the tide, break from my lips in an unsteady, staccato rhythm.*

*I wipe the tears away with soft, delicate hands and brush the stray droplets from my cheeks. I cup them in my palms. Each of them are like jewels*

*shimmering in the lights of the candle-globes that drift through my sanctuary. I came here to gather my thoughts, to reflect on the past with an eye toward the future, to cleanse my mind before the coming journey. Yet concentration slips through my grasp like water through my fingers, shattering as they fall until only shadows of happy memories remain.*

*My limbs tremble, too tired to stand on their own anymore. I embrace what little of the cold tiled floor I feel through my cheek. Deep inside there is a stirring in my breast, a hunger, poisonous like a serpent, biting into my heart, until it feels as if my breast would burst, swelled with venom and brittle with cold.*

*What did he mean?!*

*I replay the memory in my mind again, hoping for the hundredth time that I would grow numb to it this time, at least a bit.*

*There was the warmth of his body, the harsh scent of his skin. A good Sensate was always open to new experience, and when I put my mind to it I found I could love that scent: acrid but scholarly, sharp but severe. His scent was like a knife's edge sometimes, honed and piercing. It excited me.*

*"Only you. ONLY you," his words, no more than a whisper, echo in my mind a hundred, a THOUSAND times.*

*All it took was a moment's hesitation on my part, and he peeled himself away from me. The cold air rushed in, pebbling my skin and leaving me chill and my spirit fragile, like glass.*

*I tremble at the memory of him leaving, the way his eyes stared coldly past his shoulder, half-lidded in disappointment. He needed me and I had hesitated at the brink of time's door. I tried to tell him that I was not afraid to go, that I was afraid of being too weak, afraid I would stay...*

*I cursed my weakness then. If I should've been afraid of anything it should've been of losing him: of feeling him pull away and leaving my flesh cold, of letting his sharp scent fade into nothing, of losing the chilling rumble of his voice or the taste of his lips. True terror struck me then, at the sight of him turning his back to me and walking through the door, disappearing down the hall before I could cry out for him and beg for forgiveness.*

*The serpent writhes in my breast again, its fangs biting into my heart, filling it to bursting with its poison. The tears come, running down my cheeks in streams, his words echoing...*

*"Only you. ONLY you."*

*My eyes snap open - it is HIS voice! I whirl, and I gasp; he stands, powerful, in the shadows, and he strides into the light of the drifting candle globes. I feel the serpent writhing and DYING, its hiss weakening with each step. His face, stern, but somewhere, in those features, I can almost see his pleasure at seeing me. After all, he returned for m-*

*"Only you can help me, Deionarra. But it was wrong for me to ask you for your help..."*

Something was wrong-

*"Deionarra..."*

*The name is sweet on his lips, like the first waters of spring trickling over the stones, and he strides from like light, gray-skinned like a statue-*

Oh powers above, am I that scarred?! My/his body looks like it had been bathed in knife blades, the wounds, the tattoos, horrible-

*Beautiful.*

How can she SEE me in such a way?! Can't she see the dark sneer, the cruel ice in his eyes? She dresses a CLOAK over my features, she sees me in such light, such terrible longing, light... for she... how can she FEEL such...?

I feel my vision tearing, doubling until I am that man striding from the light, it is Deionarra's experience, and it is mine, and it is his...

*"I asked too much of you to accompany me, Deionarra. I have no right to place you in such danger for my sake..."*

*The girl trembles as she looks up at me, mewling like a broken kitten. I had broken many men... some were hard as stone, but enough blows would shatter them so that they might be rebuilt into something better. Others were like metal, and persistent hammering would work them into a new,*

*solid form as I wished. Many were like clay in my hands, easily shaped though with too much work they would collapse into a muddy heap. But this girl... this insipid, irritating girl, was like glass. From the moment I left I pondered as to whether I had pushed too hard, whether I had broken her beyond repair. I am glad that was not the case.*

*I let my pleasure give veracity and life to my smile, "Oh Deionarra, beloved..."*

They were my words, but they were a surgeon's words, chosen with cold skill, without a TRACE of emotion. With every word, I felt him SNEERING inside, knowing what the stricken girl will see next through her longing-stained eyes, and who - am I THAT person, that man TWISTING her with my words, not KNOWING how powerful they are to her, like bolts from a ballista, piercing her breast.

*Warmth and relief flood into my skin and I choke, light-headed and giddy at the sight of him. I nearly collapse as I try to stand. Just his presence makes me tremble, his smile sends my heart skipping.*

*The clumsy girl stumbles as she attempts to get to her feet, flopping on the floor like a dying fish as she bunches up the tangles of her skirts in her hands. I had bought her those silks, blue as the sky and with folds rippling like the sea. I click my tongue... such a waste of a good gown.*

*"I have come to ask your forgiveness, Deionarra. I shall return to you as soon as I am able -" the hook snags her heart and her eyes widen just as I expected.*

*My mind strained like a tendon, consciousness on the verge of snapping at being pulled three ways. Something gushed inside my head, a warmth flooded into my nose.*

"H-help... some... one..." the words were salty and tasted of iron on my lips.

Some muddled part of me was trying desperately to speak, to WARN Deionarra that this was not a man, but a creature that kills for his own needs, he doesn't CARE about you, Deionarra, you are a TOOL to him, a TOOL he needs to-

Deionarra spoke, and I couldn't STOP her....

*That shrill, whining cry of neediness fills her voice as she fumbles with the words. She practically grovels in trying to prove herself to me. "I would place myself in a thousand dangers, embrace eternity for you, my Love! I am not afraid! Listen to me -- I will accompany you, though the Planes themselves should bar -"*

*"...though the Planes themselves should bar the way...."*

*I felt myself shattering, her relief and satisfaction, and his satisfaction at her words, KNOWING she would say them, always KNOWING, as if he were anticipating the moves of a child playing on a chessboard.*

*Her admission of love is like the slamming of a portcullis across my heart. Trapped. She is mine, but I must be certain, so I drive the nail home, dangle the bait a little more.*

*"The way is dangerous. You will have to be strong... far stronger than you are now." Oh, yes. By the look in her eyes she'd claw at it like a starving cat.*

*Swimming through my mind, relief, the wave of relief. The tide pulls back, the tears grow warm and sweet. The end of longing, yet LONGING for him more at his words. No, no... my hands yearn to touch him again, I chew my lips to keep myself from pressing them to his flesh. No, I must not be too needy, I must not frighten him off...*

*Her bony fingers clutch at her skirts, her lips writhe at the effort to not kiss me then. Good girl, restrain yourself. Heel.*

*All I need to be is strong, and his path shall be as one with mine! My thoughts are like fires... for I can be strong, stronger than he knows, and at his side I would know no fear, I would DIE for him...!*

*"I can be strong, my Love. I will -"*

*Her words slid off of him like water. The serpent in her breast, the one that was piercing her heart with its poison had been replaced by this serpent in the flesh. She saw nothing of this, and his next words were planned, carefully, so carefully...*

*I tried to tear my hand away from the sensory stone, to rip my hair from its*



roots or to claw my eyes out and blind myself to what I was seeing.

*"I can't say if we'll succeed, Deionarra, but I'll do my best to protect you. And I will expect nothing less of the same from you. You..."*

*"...you may be required to make some sacrifices." I nod eagerly, and begin edging toward him. If I get close enough, perhaps he would touch me again, run his fingers through my hair, press me into the rawness of his bare chest. Sacrifices...*

At that final, terrible, word, I felt myself being TORN apart; he meant her harm... he can't mean me harm, for I was that girl, and he meant to HURT her, because I simply NEED her to be harmed. I wanted to SCREAM, SCREAM AT HER THAT SHE IS IN DANGER, RUN, RUN, DEIONARRA, FOR HIS EYES UNMAKE ALL THINGS AND -

*"Of course, my Love. Life is sacrifice. This I have learned."*

*She/I spoke the words, and in it, I felt myself dying inside. I am a spectator, I am his lover, I am her master, and at that moment I knew I had watched a woman die. Those words were a death sentence, and she neither knew nor cared.*

*Yet, still, still she spoke, unheeding, uncaring....*

*"I... left a legacy in my father's keeping, my Love; ask for the sixth, the third, the Kay and the 'S.' In it, I bequeath everything to you; it's not much, but with it, I left..."*

*A wave of irritation washes over me; and I clench my teeth to prevent it from crossing my features. Must she always continue to prattle, even when I do not prompt her?! Must she - but no - no, keep the irritation inside, only a trace slips out...*

*"Come now, I cannot DIE, Deionarra. There is no NEED for such foolishness..." my voice writhes at the effort to keep calm, to not dash my knuckles across her cheek. For ONCE I would love to wipe that moronic smile from her face, clear that lobotomized, teary-eyed look from my sight...*

*My stomach feels hollow, the joy and relief suddenly slain and cauterized like a rotten wound. Cold fear overcomes me and fills that hollow, fear that*

*revolts me, that shocks and terrifies me that I might lose him again... I watch him frown, and I hasten to correct him. He must know the reasons and know the wisdom behind them so he is impressed with my planning! Speak! Speak, before he turns away...*

*"I know I often act foolishly, my Love..." the words were quieter on my lips, and I try not to be impressed with my own calm, "but you said yourself that you CAN forget things if you are badly hurt. There are things in the legacy that could help you remember should you forget yourself."*

*I coldly regard her through my eyes, tracing my gaze along her furrowed brow, wrinkled with worry, desperation. She has acted as I expected... yet there is something in what she says...*

*"Perhaps... yet I hope nothing in this legacy is of value... I do not want you to leave any things here in some safe that could be of some use on our journey." Why were women always like this, storing knickknacks out of sentiment? Why couldn't their hoarding be spent on practical things instead?*

*Her illusion was shattered, just for a moment - I watched, silent, as the emotion fell to the ground, splintering like silvered glass. "...of some use..." such a casual statement, yet even Deionarra SAW, and I hoped, just for a moment, I HOPED that she could SEE him for what he is... the serpent, the SERPENT...*

*...and my hope died, as in Deionarra's eyes, the emotion is rebuilt, the slivers being drawn from the ground, the illusion rebuilt, but the slight sliver of pain remained.*

*Oh please let him not think that I have done something foolish! I did it for HIM! I must... must make amends, but how?! I must convince him the legacy is unimportant, but it ISN'T, it ISN'T. I choke back a sob. It's EVERYTHING...*

*"The legacy, my Love, it... it just has a few things to help you remem --"*

*The scythe of words fell on Deionarra, so quick, so sharp, I couldn't follow its arcing path.*

*"A legacy? The things you do, Deionarra... such... romantic gestures. No matter..."*

*No! Please, oh, Powers above let me not have driven him away again, like I did the night before! I feel the serpent stirring again, reborn, curling around my heart. There is the softest of hisses, yet he can't hear...*

*"Would... would you wish to leave a legacy, my Love? For yourself.. or for anyone you would want to. It might help you remember if you left something for yourself... or for the ones you loved..."*

*"A legacy for myself? Not likely... the things I would leave for myself would not be safe in some advocate's office, Deionarra. But enough of this... I must leave." He begins to turn-*

*No! I cannot bear to see him turn his back to me again, to no longer taste his scent or the sweetness of his lips, the coarse growl of his voice or the roughness of his skin against mine. I need to make him remain...*

And the experience SWIRLED around me, terrible, the spiraling toward the final scene... the QUESTION I... she... wants to ask, don't ask it, Deionarra! Don't ASK IT BE SILENT BE SILENT

*"My Love, before you go..."*

*DAMN IT ALL WHAT NOW GIRL WHAT NOW YOU MEWLING BANSHEE*

*"Before I go?' It looks like I am in no danger of that. Come, Deionarra, can't these questions wait for the morn? There is much-"*

*"Do you want me to come with you, my Love?"*

The rush of emotion died in my mind. This is the end. The words he was about speak were true, but the truth was not the truth she saw. There were no lies, only cold calculations. Of course he wants you to come with him, Deionarra. I understood it clearly, too clearly: He had invested too much in the poor girl to let her go.

*"Of course, Deionarra. I would not have asked you to come with me if I did not want your company. You know how I feel about you..."*

*There is a cold silence in my mind, then a hissing of a thought, a response sharp and deadly, like a dagger blade. The lie comes swiftly, unburdened by emotion.*

*"I love you, Deionarra."*

And I wanted to SCREAM as I felt the lie wash over her like a RADIANCE, a SHADOW of TRUTH, A SERPENT'S KISS, AND HE MEANS YOU HARM AND SHE CAN'T SEE I WANT TO CALL OUT BUT SHE IS CRYING WITH JOY EVEN AS - EVEN AS -

*I cry with joy...*

*I cry with frustration...*

*I weep with relief...*

*I weep with despair...*

*The emotion washed over me, as if I were drowning, DROWNING, and I needed to speak, I LONGED to speak, but I couldn't... and...*

*I fall into his arms shamelessly, throw myself on his mercy praying that he might accept me and the heart that I had laid down on a pedestal for him. My fingers clutch his shoulders, and my heart lifts as he hoists me up, his body warm and his heart beating for me, the chemical scent of him piercing and his lips sweet against my cheek. They kiss away my tears, gentle and strong with unshaken purpose.*

*Her hands paw at me and I drag her to her feet, and my heart pounds with the effort of not strangling her right there. I kiss her cheek so that she can't see the fury on my face, the annoyance at her pestilent doddering, and hush her with a voice as smooth as I could make it. My anger is masked by the natural rumble in my throat.*

*"Shhh... Deionarra... you're mine. Forever."*

...and I screamed, screamed as I tore my hands from the stone, bloody tears rushing from your eyes, running in streams down my arms, my hands, coating the stone crimson with my sins. It still pulsed pale blue, lighting the scarlet stains like a heartbeat.

Blood! Her blood! And... I couldn't WARN her... and I couldn't stop CRYING...

And suddenly Fall-From-Grace was there, and her touch was gentle like silk. She brushed the tears from my eyes, even as I felt the screams welling up within me. She shhhhhhed me, cradling my face through the bloody tears.

Her velvety wings wrapped around the two of us like a blanket, shielding us from the confused murmurs of the other Sensates.

"I... I... can't.... bear it... I... couldn't STOP her, I WANTED to, but I couldn't do anything...!"

Fall-From-Grace looked into my eyes, and she nodded sadly in understanding. "And that is the nature of longing. The desire for that which you cannot change or possess." She studied me, withdrawing her hand, now soaked in my blood. "Will you be all right?"

"Yes... yes... I just need a moment..."

"Very well..." Fall-From-Grace stepped back. "We will continue when you are ready."

I took a breath, tried to collect my thoughts.

As much as I wanted to hurl the memory of the experience from myself, I held it fast, because I knew it was important to remember it. It was me in that experience... it was Deionarra's experience, but because it was me, old memories flooded my mind, and I could FEEL both sides at once.

Who WAS I? Who was that... that shade of me?

## Chapter 75

*"I love you, Deionarra."*

The words had been chosen with surgical precision, pressed into the back of the pale woman he now holds. He slides the false confession in firmly, and the flesh gives way so that he might carve his name across her soul.

If only he had one.

She sighs as her arms twine around a body bedizened with scars, her limbs serpentine and draped in diaphanous blue like the crests of the ocean. She murmurs warm thanks into his ear, hot tears of relief and joy press against his skin. She doesn't notice the chill of his heart, or how his icy blood pours sluggishly through his veins.

The dagger slides deeper through flesh and parting sinew, and she embraces the gesture, clinging to him, fingers digging deep into his flesh.

*"I love you, Deionarra."*

The barbed words snag her heart like the end of a hook.

Ashen time rains down on us in gray-white flakes, and the desolate ground rumbles in its repose. They clamber from the pale wasteland: rotting shades with skin of black smoke, talons thirsty for vengeance. Around us the forms rise, arrayed in cloaks of ash and claws clicking with sharp corporeality. Deionarra grows cold and light, fading in my embrace. Pallid skin and azure gown brush against me one last time and vanish, like the touch of a fickle breeze.

Somehow, that terrifies me even more.

"I will wait for you in death's halls, my love..."

The claws of the once-human beasts rattle against one another. Muted footsteps drum to life their approach with cold, unyielding purpose.

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The horror writhes inside me. My legs turn stiff, my belly churns and boils. I do not want them to touch me.

Somewhere in the distance, I hear the cackling of an old crone as the shades edge closer.

~~~~~

My eyes open to dull, brazier-lit room.

It had been one of those nightmares that would've had anyone bolting from

their sheets, gulping down air as the cold sweat clings to their skin. I just lay back, staring at the ceiling in cold apathy until a familiar rattle of teeth was at my side.

"Well there you are, chief. We've been ready for an hour now."

"Bad timing, Morte."

"What? You said to wake you up at first light. Just, you know... you haven't been sleeping right lately."

"No, not you. I was talking about dreams."

Morte was already tugging the blankets off with his teeth, but he muttered through the cloth nonetheless, "Hrmp. You make less sense than the gith sometimes, ya know?"

In a half an hour the forges would be ringing with the clangor of the newly initiated Godsmen's toil, and the toxic scent of searing metal would be dancing in the air. It had been two weeks since I came across that sensory stone, and I hadn't been to the Festhall since. It was afterward that I realized that the amnesia was, in some ways, a blessing... scars across the skin might be of little consequence, but the raking wounds across the soul piled over one another would've bled out my sanity long ago.

"I hate sleep."

"Hey if I had a body I'd be on my back for well over eight hours a day, chief. Speaking of which, the succubus must've been waiting for us for a while now."

~~~~~

Dak'kon was at my side like always, and a pallet had been set up in my quarters. It was a simple matter to collect Ignus... the old mage was easily entranced by the fires blazing around crucibles and within kilns in the Godsmen's forge. Annah preferred renting out an attic, a different one every few nights. Perhaps she had picked up on my mood, but she had always been more comfortable in a little squalor, and with the freedom to move from place to place so no one could find her unless she wanted to be found.

It was thief's habits, or an alley-runner's.

Grace, however, merely smiled politely and maintained that she would be staying at the Festhall. A way to coax me back, I suppose, saying she would always be there for me. No Sensate would be put off by any experience, and it was with some chagrin that I needed this much time to myself.

I idly knocked a fist against the stone buildings as I continued up through the Clerk's Ward.

Once the last vestiges of the dream faded from memory though, the workings of the day snagged my attention. In particular, a woman decked in red who strode down the street. She walked with a failed attempt to turn her drunken steps into a graceful sashay, and the smell of alcohol wafted heavily from her. Despite her dark skin, the woman's face - beautiful, but cruel-looking - was flushed. She was slender but well-muscled, adorned in exotic jewelry and translucent silk clothing. Numerous scars crisscrossed her thighs and forearms; they looked to be from battle-wounds.

With a purse of her lips she stopped, hands on her waist and nose upturned as her eyes crawled along Annah, up from her tail to her eyes.

"Well, well... what have we here? A little tiefling gutter-queen, come crawling out of the Hive?" The woman pouted, talking as one would to a small child. "Are you lost, little tiefling? Oh, look! It has a tail! How...cute!"

Annah flushed, and with a snarl, blades sprouted from her fists.

"Now, fiend-kin, don't do that," The woman seemed unconcerned as Annah drew her weapons, and clucked disapprovingly with her tongue. "Careful now, or I'll remove that tail of your and feed it to my dogs."

I was not about to get between the two of them.

"Yeh have a sharp tongue on yeh, wee lass." Annah spat and sharpened her blades against each other. "I wonder how sweet yer tacky jewels an' harlot's clothes'll look on yeh when ye're dead in the street!"

"Annah, wait!"

"You filthy spawn of the Lower Planes, one that not even a tanar'ri would



keep in its pen!" the drunken woman drew her blade, and the two men with her, rugged if a little too rich-looking for pub-crawlers, placed hands on the hilts of their swords.

I put a hand on Annah's shoulder, and her gaze snapped to mine in a way that said she wanted to plunge one of those daggers into me if I got into her business. She would've done it, too, but by the look of the four of us we would be standing together. Ignus merely floated, watching.

I stepped forward, my voice a low growl. "Sheathe that blade, girl, or I'll sheathe it in your body."

"What foul thing gave birth to you, sirrah?" She grimaced in disgust, then laughed harshly. "And such a stench! Be you one of death's bastards?"

Morte looked to me hopefully, "Want me to slap this barmy chit down, chief?"

"Show no mercy, Morte."

This was going to be beautiful.

Morte winked at me and called to the woman: "Hey, you! That's right, you there, you saucy little tart... look at me when I talk to you! What's got you so bitter, hmm?"

The woman, caught off guard, didn't reply. She only stared at the floating skull that suddenly popped out to dance around her and jeer.

"Aw, does the little Desert Princess have her britches in a bunch because the Sultan wanted another son? Tell me, 'Desert Princess,' do you spend most of your nights drunken and belligerent, followed about by a handful of leering sycophants, looking in your own pathetic way to justify your existence to a disapproving father?"

"What... who... how dare-" she sputtered, the blood draining from her face.

The two men flanking her glanced at each other and turned pale.

"Do you really think your petty brawling will finally make you feel better about yourself? Feel like you're worth something? Because IT WON'T! If this

is your sad little path to feeling better about who you are, I suggest you just give up, go home, and marry off into some courtier's harem!"

"I... I..."

Morte turned to me as if she was no longer there. "See, chief, I know what's going to happen here. We all know Morte's right on the ball with this one. But oh, no, proud little Desert Princess, cut down in public, humiliat-"

The woman drew her blade and, snarling like an enraged animal, lunged at Morte.

I caught her hand just as a soft, melodious voice pierced the snarling.

"Young Sarhava? Sarhava Vhjul, could it be you?"

The young woman appeared confused for a moment, then recognized Fall-from-Grace as she stepped down from the entrance to the Festhall, a porcelain cup of tea in one hand and a saucer in the other. Sarhava stepped back and sheathed her blade immediately, startled and abashed. "Mistress Grace! I had not noticed you... only shamefully do I admit this, for your noble appearance would be obvious to even a dullard."

Fall-From-Grace gave the barest of nods and set the cup down on a tray held by one of the servers. Folding her hands in front of her she held herself, statuesque. "Your words are most skillfully chosen, unlike those heard so recently."

"Yes, Mistress... I regret that such words were spoken in your presence." Sarhava bowed her head in shame.

"I regret they were spoken at all." Grace's tone barely changed, but the subtle reprimand seemed to crack the young woman's face like a whip. "It pains to see an old student of mine behaving so..."

"Eh..." She frowned, then regained her composure. "In any event, Mistress, what brings you out of the establishment? Some errand?"

"These are my companions that I am traveling with. I would expect the same courtesy given to them as you have given to me. Such is a hallmark and the responsibility of those... noble-born."

Annah glared at Grace and Sarhava furiously.

Sarhava bowed low. "Then allow me to excuse myself with an apology, Mistress Grace, to you and your companions. My words were ill-chosen. 'Tis the drink that caused me to speak such rubbish, and I am filled with shame for having belittled myself so before my teacher of old." She bowed, turned, and left.

"Wow..." Morte said, ogling, "That was great."

Grace sighed, giving one last glance at her old student. She really did seem disappointed, "The trick is knowing when to prod and when to nudge, Morte, but you did well. As did you, Annah. The individual experiences she had with us will remain with her for a long time, and if she is the Sensate I had hoped she would be... she will learn much from today."

"Well now..." I cleared my throat, "How about we do some shopping to put this behind us?"

Grace smiled. "I would appreciate that very much," she glanced at Annah, who was still glaring at her and looking as if she were ready to chew glass, "In fact, I know just the place..."

~~~~~

I walked slowly among the racks and cubbyholes, heavy with silks and satin gowns. This wasn't what I had in mind, but I was more than willing to indulge Fall-From-Grace.

I couldn't see myself in any of these clothes: some were more embroidery than they were cloth, so rich that if I wore one of these coats I would've been gutted for my coin the moment I stepped into the Hive. Even the plainest shirt was good silk, and smelled faintly of sweet cologne. I draped one shirt over my arm, and the light cloth, so comfortable and smooth for anyone else, dragged gently at my puckered scars with an odd tickling sensation.

I didn't think I could ever wear a shirt comfortably. Even if I could, it'd just serve to contrast and enhance the mass of ugly above the collar.

The tailor, a short, heavy-set, middle-aged man was wearing clothes that seemed to be spun of glittering gold. In his hands he held a bolt of cloth strung taught across a wooden frame; embroidering some pattern into the fabric.

"Greetings..."

The man didn't seem to acknowledge my presence. He continued to work at his embroidery, muttering under his breath... as he sewed, shimmering motes of light sparkled and dropped from the tip of the needle.

"Good sir; did you hear me?"

"Greetings, Master Goncalves," Grace said, accenting her approach with a light flutter of her wings.

Goncalves immediately turned from his work, blinking, and bowed politely to Fall-from-Grace, a gesture she then returned. "Greetings, Lady Grace. How is it that I can help you today? That order is almost complete..."

"There is no need for haste in my request, Master Goncalves; your skill demands time, and no doubt what comes from your hands will be pleasing. I am not here regarding that matter, however. This man here..."
Fall-from-Grace bowed to me. "...wished to speak with you for a moment..."

"Of course!" Goncalves turned from her. "And so, sir... what was it you were here to see me about?"

"I had questions..."

"Hmm? I hope 'tis about garments and the like. I shan't answer anything not concerning myself or the store, you know."

I pointed to the bolt of cloth he held, "What were those lights while you were embroidering?"

"That? Nothing, sir, but a bit of the Art, which I at times weave into fabric when the fancy strikes me. Those items which I lavish enchantments upon are my most special creations, and are rarely sold."

"What sort of magical clothes do you have available?"

Goncalves looked me over, frowning. "Nothing that would fit you, that is for certain."

"Nonetheless, I'm curious as to what you have."

Goncalves' stood up and reached under the counter, "It should be understood, good sir, that many of the nobility feel the need to protect themselves. Danger can be found anywhere in the planes, and wealth and influence often is of little use against it. I have shirts of light silk that are as tough as cured leather against blade or hammer, gowns for sorceresses that enhance their spells..."

"And what of- er... chastity bodices?"

Goncalves looked over to Grace, who was feigning interest in a silken scarf, "Ah yes. I've designed near all of Mistress Grace's wardrobe, with no small amount of pride, good sir, though this is one of the few times I've seen her wear that particular piece. It is tough as chain armor, but commissioned so long ago," he frowned at me, "I do hope that this doesn't mean that the Mistress shall be cavorting off to muck about in some forsaken abyss or another."

"I'm afraid we know little of where we shall be going next, Master Goncalves," she said absently.

I nodded, "I don't suppose we could commission you for something with a little more potency to it? Aside from protection, I mean."

Goncalves nodded, "Certainly, good sir. My skills have improved significantly since I completed that particular commission for the Mistress."

"Ah, no need to act the gentleman," Grace said with a smile as I placed my hand on my coin pouch, "I have enough gold for my own pieces. Perhaps everyone else could browse the store for anything that might interest them?"

I blinked. Morte had no body, anything Dak'kon wore would be covered by his armor, and Ignus would have incinerated any cloth wrapped around him. All that remained was...

Fall-From-Grace's coy glance at Annah sealed the deal.

Goncalves glanced up and seemed to see Annah for the first time. Tutting softly, he shook his head. "Lass, what in the maddening winds of Pandemonium has possessed you to dress in such a way?"

Annah looks surprised. "Eh?" Her surprise quickly fell into a frown. "What d'yeh mean?"

He gestured at Annah's outfit. "The leather, miss. The sheer impracticality of it. The emphasis on the bust-line, especially the oh-so-convenient cross-slash across the bodice. Your outfit was obviously designed to placate someone's hormonal urges rather than to keep you comfortable. Even if you are trying to make a statement against authority and decorum like you tieflings tend to do, the message is really harming you in the long run..."

Morte floated close and whispered, "Not me. I can deal. Eh, Chief? Wink-wink, nudge-nudge..."

Goncalves continued to scold Annah. "I mean really, you look more ready for a session at the Festhall than..." He frowned. "By the way, you aren't a Sensate, are you?"

Annah seemed confused. "Nay. Nay, I'm not a Sensate..."

The tailor nodded. "I didn't think so. Not at all. Why don't you let me attire you in something else a little more modest..."

Horried, Morte leapt into the fray. "No!!! Man, are you mad?! That's barmy talk!"

"Nay, I like these. I donnae need ta worry about th'cold or heat, it's me blood, I think. An' watch th' talk about th' tieflings, aye?"

"As you wish, then, my lady," he shrugged.

Again Grace gave me one of those soft looks, lips slightly pursed, as if expecting a little more.

"Could you perhaps make something for Annah then? In her own style, that is."

Annah furrowed her brow at me skeptically.

I expected the tailor to balk at the suggestion, but he took it in stride, "Perhaps. Enchanted as well, I presume?"

"Of course. She's a skilled... acrobat. Something she could move freely in. That sound good, Annah?"

Annah looked abashed, "Well... aye. Aye, that could fit."

"And armored. I'd hate to see her hurt."

"And make her mams look bigger. But not too top-heavy unless you can do something about her legs too."

"Stow it, skull!" she looked at me with a growl, but beneath her acerbic tone I could tell she was blushing, "I don' need yeh ta tell me what I want, I don't."

I put my hands, "Sure, sure. You tell the man, we'll talk prices afterwards."

Goncalves was a fast worker, and by the time we returned from our afternoon meal he had them laid out on the counter.

"Aren't you going to try it on?" Morte wagged his tongue as he floated around Fall-From-Grace.

She merely smiled, and Dak'kon folded up the chastity bodices in the crook of one arm. The woman had a presence about her, a way of lifting an eyebrow or pursing her lips that made you want to do things for her. You begin to think that a lady like her shouldn't be carrying any burdens.

"I have more than enough faith in Master Goncalves' abilities," Grace said simply, "I trust that they are more than satisfactory."

Annah stepped out from the changing room, posing this way and that, swaying her hips and testing the way the cloth held to her in any way she could. The blue was a nice contrast to her rust-red hair, even if it did seem a little garish.

"Ach, it moves well, it does," Annah said in surprise, "Holds nice. Loads o' freedom in this one."

Goncalves nodded, "Oh yes, miss. I can tell you're an... artful one. The freedom of movement should enhance your ability to ply your trade."

She stared at him. Hard. "Aye, and wozzat s'pposed to mean?"

"Stealth, miss."

"Oh."

"The other one is more suitable for combat. Stronger protective enchantments had been laid in the cloth, and it should lend some quickness to your wrists."

"I prefer this color, meself," Annah held it up in her hands, turning to look at me. She would never admit that she was fond of pretty things, but I think that was the most gratitude I'd be getting out of her.

Chapter 76

While it was nice to have the store to ourselves while browsing, I did wish we had the benefit of more customers about to dilute Vrischika's predatory stare. Most store owners had that impatient look in their eyes, weighing you and wondering whether you were a customer or a loiterer. If you were alone with them you stood on a knife's edge, balancing between gushing and obsequious service or bitter asperity to get the hell out and make room for real patrons.

Vrischika reminded me of a spider, with that fang-toothed grin, squatting behind her counter and waiting for me to look like I'd been snagged by a piece of bait. And- yep sure enough, she swooped in just as I had shown some interest in an old tome.

It was a rather unassuming book held closed by a tiny brass lock. In a shop where shrunken heads, cat knuckles and aphrodisiacs brewed from gorgon musk were the norm, the plainness of the book really stood out.

"That," cooed Vrischika, "is the Codex of the Inconceivable. I'll only say that it's just... just... well, I can not explain it. Mere words simply won't suffice! You can own it yourself for a mere one thousand copper commons... and believe me: it is well worth it."

I nodded, but my attention was already shifting to a small, metal replica of a cube-like creature with huge eyes on one of its faces. The toy had two legs, two arms, two folding wings, and at least eighteen points of articulation. Vrishika smiled as I picked it up. "And that... is collector's item, perhaps, or a piece of artwork. Who knows? But I like it. If you do buy it, ask around... someone might know more about it than I. You can have it for only fifteen hundred copper coins."

"I'll take both."

We left quickly, before Vrischika could complain about Fall-From-Grace's "ta'nari stench."

I flipped through the tome as we made our way down to the street again. What first looked to be a rather unassuming book held closed by a tiny brass lock was, in actuality, bound in strange leathers and enchanted bronze. It was labeled simply: 'The Codex of the Inconceivable.'

I opened it... and began to read!

My jaw dropped at the tome's contents. I stood there, spellbound, devouring every word, each more riveting and amazing than the last. My eyes could barely move fast enough to keep up with my fingers, eager to flip to the next page. Its contents were simply too much to be described - mere words would be powerless to explain the wonders the Codex held.

"That was... that... I..."

Morte bobbed up next to me, "What? What? What was in it, chief?"

"Nothing that concerns you, Morte," I muttered dumbly.

"WHAT?! You've got to be kidding me, right? C'mon, lemme see it!"

I held up the Codex for him.

Morte floated over my shoulder to examine the Codex's contents. His eyes nearly popped from their sockets as they scanned the pages. "Ooo. Ooooooo. Oh, I... but... wow."

I stood thoughtfully for a moment, looking down at the Codex, before closing it and reverently putting the tome away.

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One building in particular stood out to us as we explored the Clerk's Ward: "Yvana's Art Gallery". Venturing inside, I saw that it had an expected urbane simplicity to it. The walls were plain, the floor paved in a muted pattern of azure and bone-pale gray. Many of the art pieces moved or swayed or swirled with color, as if stirred by an unfelt current. Made me a bit dizzy, really.

A well-dressed, elderly woman in a gown of peach-colored and golden thread stood close to the entrance, hands folded primly over her belly. She nodded in my direction. It was then that I noticed that she had no pupils - her eyes were entirely white. There was a certain familiarity about her, the pointed features of her face and the way she held herself. "Greetings, sir. I am Yvana; welcome to my galleria. Feel free to look about, spending as much time here as you like; should you have questions regarding any of the pieces, do not hesitate to ask me of them."

"Thank you."

"One moment, sir... your voice; it is heavy with age and wounds. Would you be so kind as to permit me to touch your face?"

I knelt down a little, "Yes, go ahead."

Yvana smiled, gently running her old hands over the skin of my face. She frowned, looking slightly puzzled. "So many scars... both old and new. They seem to..." She touched the side of my throat, flushed, then pulled away. "Pardon me, sir. I was curious to see how far they went."

"It's fine. And they're everywhere; my whole body is scarred. What is this place?"

"Why, it's my galleria of the Planes." She smiled and gestured around her. "These pieces have been brought from far and wide. Some I sell, some I keep - all I display, at one time or another. Please, enjoy them... and again, should you have questions regarding any of the pieces, do not hesitate to ask me of them."

"It takes someone special to appreciate art when they can't see it. If you don't mind me saying, Yvana."

"I believe she is blind by choice, and not by circumstance," Fall-From-Grace observed. She seemed pleased... it certainly was a whim that a Sensate would embrace.

Yvana nodded, smiling. "Your friend is quite correct, sir... I cannot see, but only because I do not wish to. In time, I will allow my vision to return so that I can re-experience the contents of my galleria with the benefit of new, fresh eyes."

"You look familiar to me... do you know someone named Yves?"

"That is my daughter." For a moment, there was a hint of sadness in the milky whiteness of her eyes. "We no longer speak to one another."

"Why is that?"

"There is nothing to be said between us. She has gone off in pursuit of stories... all for reasons I am unaware of."

"She told me a tale that might answer that question..."

Yvana raised her eyebrows. "Oh? Tell me, would you please? I'd most appreciate it, sir..."

I told her the Tale-Chaser's story, and of her endless quest for the tale that held the truth she sought.

Yvana nodded slowly. "I... had no idea. I will see her, now. I thank you, good sir, for bringing me this news of my only daughter." As she spoke, color

slowly bled into her pale irises until her eyes were a brilliant shade of green.

"Your eyes... can you see now, Yvana?"

She nodded, smiling, and her skirts swished as she left.

Art galleries have a habit of attracting the worst pretenders, who make a habit of studying art for the sake of pomp. I found myself becoming one of them, crossing my arms and tapping my lips and trying to act as if I knew what to look for.

The abstract paintings weren't nearly as interesting as the sculptures. A ruby statuette... a battle-horn that begged to be blown. Whoever came up with the old apothegm of "feel with your eyes, not with your hands" had obviously never met a Sensate.

I didn't leave a single painting or statue unmolested, and I had been beginning to do the same with the sculptures and other oddities when I came across "The Dark Birds of Ocanthus".

It was composed of several shards of black crystal - or ice - swirling within the freezing wind that the ornate pedestal gave forth. Each shard looked razor sharp; touching or grabbing one was perilous, but curiosity got the better of me.

As I reached out to grab one of the whirling shards, my fingers entered the icy wind that rose from the pedestal. Instantly, a coat of numbing frost formed around them, and I momentarily drew back.

I took it as a challenge.

With a determined grunt I thrust my hand into the frigid, numbing wind. Unbeknownst to me, my entire hand froze solid as I wrapped it around one of the Dark Birds. As another of the black shards spun into my fist, my hand broke off at the wrist with a sharp crack and went clattering across the gallery floor.

My jaw dropped as I stared dumbly at the clean plane of my wrist squirting blood over the floor. As soon as I recovered, I picked up my frost-covered fist and stuck it back onto the bleeding stump. The Dark Bird I grabbed - a razor-sharp shard of black ice - had already melted away to nothing. It

looked like I'd have to catch it in something that would keep it cold.

Eventually, warmth and feeling returned to my hand as my tissues thawed and regenerated.

"Hope no one saw that," I muttered under my breath, walking away swiftly.

"Oh I did," Morte sniggered. If he went jabbering to Yvana...

I stopped in my tracks.

The portrait hung from the wall of a dark, hidden-away corner of the gallery. Her face framed with shadows and thorny vines, the grotesque, hook-nosed old crone stared out at me as if from a window. Her flesh was a sickly blue-gray color; her eyes glowed red like the embers of a dying fire. Her chin, long and sharp, jutted forward in an extreme under-bite; two yellowed canines protruded upwards from her lower jaw, like small tusks. The smile upon her withered, purplish lips spoke of horrible secrets.

I was able to tear my gaze away just long enough to look at the placard. 'Gray Hag of Oinos.'

*"You dream again! Again!"*

A chill ran up my spine, and even Morte was suddenly silent. That crude, reptilian part of my brain was screaming to get away.

As I began to turn away from the painting, the shadows shifted in the corner of my eye. My eyes darted back to the portrait, mouth dry, skin pebbled with a deep and terrifying chill. That, tingling sensation arose in the back of my mind like a building sneeze...

A distant creak echoes down the hall, a sound of old wood bending and plants pushed and urged into growth. Everything in this maze of briars and thorns is wreathed in a muted unreality, neither alive nor dead. It had all the substance of a vivid dream, and the barbs of a nightmare.

The hideous old crone squats before me, hair as frayed and tangled as moss, skin as gray a corpse's. She cackles, a sound like daggers being flung down the halls, and the halls sing back. She is sheathed in screams and nightmares, doted on by the blood-fed roots she tends, the dark mother of

her domain. The musk of rotting earth and mildew hangs around her like an old cloak.

"My poor, dear, lovely man-thing!" she croons. Her voice warps even as she speaks, twisting and snapping to match the distant creak of the maze's changing paths, "Why, that was your first wish!"

The hag raises her hand and points a single bony, clawed finger at my forehead, and the pain throbbing at my temples sends me into a fit of screams...

It was times like this that seemed to explain why I wore a kilt... if I hadn't gotten used to this sort of thing already I would've gone through so many pairs of knickers long ago.

~~~~~

Yvana returned in a swishing of skirts and a pleased smile on her face, content at being reconciled with her daughter at last. I had been waiting for a good hour, far too long if I wanted to keep Annah from getting into trouble out of boredom. "Greetings, again. Do you have questions regarding one of the pieces?"

"Yes, I do..."

"Oh? Which one? One of the paintings?"

"Yes, one of the paintings... 'Gray Hag of Oinos.'"

Her smile faded a bit, and her voice was level when she spoke. I hoped it was just her professionalism as a curator shining through, "This is said to be a portrait of Ravel Puzzlewell, very likely the most evil hag ever to have terrorized the Gray Waste and beyond."

"What do you know of her?"

"She is a night hag, one of the eldest Gray Sisters of the Wastes, who came to Sigil many centuries ago to pursue arcane experiments. It was believed that these experiments were against the Lady's will, and that Ravel was thus banished from Sigil, imprisoned within one of the Lady's mazes on the ethereal where her body rests to this very day..."

I nodded.

"Ravel was said to have been a master of riddles and puzzles, but it was believed that one riddle - one question in particular - was said to have plagued the ancient night hag: 'What can change the nature of a man?'"

The question batted around in my mind, tickled something at the back of my brain, then faded.

"She issued a challenge to any who were interested: She promised to instruct any who came to her in her craft... if they could only answer the question to her satisfaction. If they could not, they consented to be her next meal. Many died coveting Ravel's teachings, and it is believed that until her final hours in Sigil, Ravel never discovered the answer to her question.

"Ravel's crime was believed to be some means of trying to shatter the Cage, trying to crack open Sigil itself for some unknown reason." Yvana sighed. "This is all I know of her."

~~~~~

The Hive was just as smelly as before, moreso now that I wasn't bathed in the stench of it all hours of the day. It took a little practice, but soon I was filtering the air with my teeth again in order to breathe without tasting the foulness in the air.

With some new tattoos from Fell's shop we started to make our way back to the Clerk's Ward.

A plump, white-haired old man waved at me from down the block, the bright green of his clothes made him stand out like an oasis in a desert.

Mourns-For-Trees smiled widely upon seeing us. "Ah, my friend; you've returned! And doing well, by the looks of it!"

I smiled, "Annah, Grace, this is Mourns. The one I told you about, caring for the trees."

Fall-From-Grace bowed her head politely, "It is good to meet you at last, Master Mourns, though I suppose you may be considering a new name

soon."

He chuckled, "No, no, my lady. I am much too old to change... all I have to offer is dusty old words of advice to pretty young ones like you."

Annah seemed slightly distracted. It must've been strange for her to return to the Hive... she'd clearly outgrown it like it was an old pair of shoes, and the Clerk's ward didn't quite fit just yet either. A little time and maybe it would've broken in enough for her.

"So how are the trees doing, Mourns?"

He clapped his hands together happily, "Oh well enough, lad, well enough! It's a bit slow but I can't complain... especially since it's all thanks to you. Look! New buds here and here, and the leaves are flourishing. Even the air seems a little cleaner now."

I smiled, "Annah, could you help too?"

She blinked, "What? Yeh can't be serious, now!"

"I am, Annah. I'd be grateful if you could just see to give them a fair thought or two... as a favor to me, if for no other reason."

Her smirk at last gave way to a smile. "Ah, ta Baator with it! If yeh're so soddin' caught up in it all, why not? Sure, I'll 'care' about yer trees, cutter. But yeh owe me for me time, yeh do!"

"Thanks. Grace, would you consider it?"

Grace nodded. "Certainly. I think that is an excellent idea."

Silently we waited beneath the branches of the trees. The shade seemed cooler, as if the foliage had thickened to block more light. The burned sulfur smell that permeated the ward was still there, but it was muted somewhat, and the slightest of sweet nectar scents trickled through in a perfumed undercurrent.

And there it was. One of the first buds was beginning to bloom. Slowly, with the warmth of a cupped hand, the outer leaves began to peel back, revealing a steadily growing edge of pink.



And then the air began to grow hot... uncomfortably, terrifyingly hot.

"Ignus?"

"Yesss..." he hissed.

"Ignus, no!"

Gouts of flame flooded from his charred teeth, "Buuuurn..."

"Stop this, Ignus! You will stop this right now!"

Mourns-For-Trees stared on in horror as he realized what was about to occur. Suddenly, he leapt into action, thrusting himself between Ignus and the trees: "No! Stop! You can't!"

"Oh! I can't watch!" Morte wailed, turning away.

Ignus laughed horribly; flame erupted from his throat. "You ssstand between me and thing that burnsss? Youuu, tooo, will burnnnn..."

"Nooooooooo!"

My scream was just a whisper next to the roaring of flames, the thunderous shriek of Ignus' victory. In an instant the rolling fires washed over Mourns-For-Trees like a thousand crimson tongues lapping hungrily at his flesh. The flames drowned out his screams, poured into his lungs when he tried desperately to breathe, searing him inside and out. The savory scent of cooking meat and smoldering grease filled the air even as the waves of heat washed away both the sweetness of the trees' blossoms and the stench of the Hive.

But that poor, sad heap of smoldering meat wasn't his target.

Sap hissed into steam in an instant, and the veins of the plants burst: leaves shriveling, bark being swept away in a cloud of white ash and crimson embers. The waves of flame stripped away the thick green covering of the bud, and for an instant the naked pink cone of folded petals looked like they were about to bloom... but it was only the heat peeling back the delicate folds, like an old scab or a snakeskin flaking away.

When it was over the ward was eerily silent... everyone else had fled. There was only the crackle of dying embers, and Annah's soft whimpers as she knelt over the corpse of the kindly old man. Grace murmured a prayer.

And that was all.

~~~~~

None of us wanted to be alone. Dak'kon sat in meditation, Grace sat on the couch trying to contemplate a single rose. Annah sat in a corner, in the shadow of one of the pillars. She always seemed more comfortable there. Ignus himself had been banished to the balcony for now... and until I could figure out what to do with him, he'd have to stay there.

Clearly he was too dangerous to let loose, and too insane to keep around. But if we tried to kill him... well, with his power one of us would surely die, and I wasn't confident I could call back anyone from the dead with what he could do. Ignus' power seared someone deeper than bone, left burns on the soul...

But for now, I had other battles on my mind.

The small metal toy I held in my hands was the Modron Cube I bought from Vrischika, a replica of a cube-like creature with huge eyes on one of its faces. Maybe it was a collector's item. Not in its original packaging, so it was certainly free for play.

I moved the arms and made sword-fighting noises. *Swoosh! Whish! K-ching!*

The toy clicked and whirred as I moved its clockwork joints. Within moments, the tiny cube had vanquished every imaginary opponent I had sent against it, and settled back to its normal position.

I waved its arms and made cheering noises. *Raaaaaah! Raaaaaaaah!*

Hordes of imaginary creatures from across the Planes cheered the cube's victory. I could almost see a tiny oily tear brimming on one of its eyes... it was a hero, the greatest cube ever to roam the Planes, and everyone loved it. In my mind, Grace and Annah hugged it and showered it with kisses.

I sighed, and tucked it quietly on my lap to rest for future battles against the multiverse.

Morte stared at me and shook his head.

"What's that, cube hero? 'Morte's a stupid skull?' Why, yes he is, isn't he, cube hero?"

Morte sputtered, "Hey! It didn't say that!"

"Yes, it did! It said it just now!"

"Wh --?! Gimme that thing!"

I held the Modron Cube away from him, "No, it's mine. He only wants to hang out with me anyway. Don't you, cube hero? Yes, you do!"

"I. Just. Want. To. Hold. It. For. A. Second."

I grinned, "But you don't have any hands."

"I'll hold it in my TEETH."

"No, I think I'll just put it away for now," I said, sticking out my tongue.

"I'm gonna smash that modron cube to bits," Morte grumbled under his breath.

"Did you hear anything, cube hero? Neither did I!"

I was fiddling with it for just a bit longer, before I had to put it away, when upon bending the left knee there was an odd pop! and the toy shuddered in my hands.

"Wh--"

I toyed with it some more.

The wrong movements would reset the limbs to their original positions, but one by one I worked out the correct sequence of manipulations. First there was the knee.

I extended the left wing, and the toy made a soft whirring sound.

I extended the right wing, and the toy hummed slightly, growing warm to the touch.

I rotated the right arm. There was a whirrrr, a click, then a blinding white light suddenly exploded in my hands...

Oh, what fresh hell was this?

Chapter 77

"I- I feel like I'm in a cuckoo clock," Morte stuttered, teeth chattering, "A cuckoo cuckoo clock."

I was no less befuddled.

The chamber rang with clanks and pops and squeals. Gears ground against one another, springs twanged, pistons pumped and pendulums rocked in a dull, repetitive rhythm. Underneath it all I could hear smaller mechanisms clink and chime, and occasionally a distant cranking sound broke the staccato. The smell of oil was so thick in the air I could feel it greasing up my lungs. Every piece of the walls were in dizzying motion. Too much of this and it might've driven me batty. I would've bashed my brains against the nearest cog until nothing was left but a bloody smear, if only to get a moment's respite.

Collector's item my ass.

The only thing in here was a modron, one of those cube-shaped robotic creatures with spindly mechanical limbs. I had seen them in Grace's brothel, all structure and no personality. Talking to one was like passing shrapnel through my intestines after taking too many flimsy knives to the gut, but being that this was a modron construct they were going to be the ones with

any answers. I was just going to have to man up and grunt it out.

"Uh, greetings."

The creature focused its emotionless eyes on me, "Greetings, adventurer. Welcome to Rubikon, the dungeon construct. Thank you for choosing Rubikon for your dungeoning experience. You may access Rubikon through this door."

Well, that wasn't so bad, "What's a Rubikon?"

The creature stared without answering.

"Can you at least tell me what in all the Planes a dungeon construct is?"

It blinked, but gave no indication it heard the question.

Great.

A mechanical man with pale green skin walked in circles in the next room. Although it was obviously a construct, it did have an animated face, which scowled at me the moment I entered.

"Greetings."

The creature's frown suddenly vanished and it adopted a look of mock terror. "Eeeek! It is the hero, sent here no doubt, to slay the evil one. Woe to me, the hapless construct on duty at the time of his arrival!"

"What are you going on about?"

The creature placed its hands on its hips and frowned. "The plot, you dolt, stick to the plot. How do you expect me to play my part if you do not cooperate? Where were we..." It paused to think for a moment. "Oh, I remember, I was about to trounce you."

It leapt to the attack.

The moment it came at me, its face exploded in a shower of tattered cloth and metal shards. A spring popped, and with one last spurt of black oil it collapsed.

Dak'kon lowered his hand, still smoking with the final wisps that remained from his missiles of fury.

"Well that was easy," I grunted, "Let's hope we find more of a challenge."

We didn't.

It only took a few rooms to realize that it wasn't going to get any harder, and while it was a cakewalk it wasn't exactly worth it wasting precious spells and sweat on the smattering of flimsy constructs in each chamber of this maze. Especially not with the useless crap that they carried - on the remains of one of the constructs I found nothing but a cryptic parchment which read "You now have a better idea of what is going on...". What in the hells was this for?

"This maze echoes with the chaos of Limbo..." Dak'kon murmured, "Like clockwork gone mad."

"For a modron construct?" I looked around. Sure the twanging and the clanking seemed a little discordant the deeper we went, but as far as I could tell it was just a few sputters here and there.

"I sense it," Dak'kon replied, "The inchoate substance of formless potential trickles beneath this structure... an undercurrent of chaos beneath a sea of crystalline order."

Hrmn.

We backtracked to the entrance, and the modron standing guard stared blankly at our return.

"That was stupid."

It shrugged in reply.

This first room must have been the engineering room of Rubikon. It was quieter, with the noisome stench of oil almost a memory. The heavy gears that lined the walls had been replaced with an abundance of levers, dials, and meters by which the entirety of the complex was controlled. One of the modrons appeared to be in charge, processing as many orders as he could serially. He would listen quickly to one underling, cite the appropriate

protocol in response, then speak with the next in that sexless monotone. There was a certain briskness to its motion and a clip to its voice: if a modron could be agitated, this was it.

"Greetings," I said to it. In that instant, the workers looked to me askance even as their twig-thin limbs and fingers worked the machinery.

"Greetings." The creature replied. Its voice sounded as if it had spoken from the end of a long tube.

"Who are you?"

"We are modron, we are quadrone."

I cocked my head, "Your name is Quadrone?"

"We are modron. We do not have a name. We are modron. All that you see here are modron. We are one. Within our race, we are identified as type quadrone."

"If you don't have names, how do you tell one modron from another?" I looked among the crowd. All of the creatures looked exactly the same to me. That sounds kind of racist, now that I think about it.

There was a pause as the modron considered my question. "We know. We are modron. We are a part of the whole. Just as you recognize the hand that is part of the arm, we recognize each part of the whole."

"What about you, the individual..."

"I..." The modron looked confused and paused for a second. A heated buzzing sound filled the room but quickly passed. "We are modron. We are part of the whole. The whole is modron. There is no other."

"So what is this place, exactly?"

"This is the Rubikon Dungeon Construct Project."

"Yeah, so I heard. What exactly is that?"

The modron began to emit a soft humming sound as it answered me.

"Rubikon: Project goal is to determine the dynamics, both social and asocial, surrounding the environment commonly construed as a dungeon and to attempt to explain the aberrations that tend to occur in such environments."

"What aberrations are you talking about?"

"Queries to be answered: What attracts people to dungeons? Why do people often seek to enter them if they are places of such danger? Why are dungeons there in the first place? What are the dynamics of a workable dungeon? I do not understand..." It paused. "We... do not..."

"You started to say I instead of we..."

The modron gave a concerned look then glanced about the room. The other modrons were now looking at it with mild curiosity, "You are in error. We are modron. We are the whole... We will not discuss this."

"I know what I heard. You started to say I and..."

The modron frowned at me. A hint of anger thrummed its voice as it replied, "No. We are modron. We are a part of the whole. We will not discuss this further." An angry buzzing filled the room then subsided.

Something was definitely odd here. As bastions of perfection and order a casual slip like that was definitely out of place. Hell, the fact that it could get upset was something even stranger.

Better not press it though. The modrons here were in charge, and as mechanical entities they had no shortage of pointy things, "Tell me more about Rubikon."

"Rubikon is capable of forming a series of rooms linked in such a fashion as to form what is commonly referred to as a dungeon. Each dungeon can have one of three difficulty settings: easy, normal, or hard. The dungeon is then populated with monsters, traps, and treasure, according to the difficulty level chosen. After creation the dungeon can be fully explored." The modron began to emit a low hum.

"What is that humming sound?"

"Rubikon is a worthy accomplishment and..." It paused for a moment.
"I...We... are content."

There's that 'I' again. "How do I get out of here?"

The modron hesitated before answering. "Exit unavailable, project halted..."
The room was filled with a confused buzzing sound that stopped just as abruptly.

"What do you mean? Something brought us in here... Just let us out."

There was a significant pause before the modron answered. "Request denied... Project halted due to... accident."

"What accident?"

"Dungeon construct became unstable, cause uncertain. Fail-safes activated causing dungeon to collapse, cause uncertain. Portal lens malfunctioned causing contact with home plane of Mechanus to be severed, cause uncertain. Reset of dungeon necessary."

"Then why don't you reset it?"

"Reset can only be initiated by project director. Project director disintegrated. Portal lens has malfunctioned and contact with Mechanus severed. Cannot acquire replacement director from Mechanus."

I rubbed my temples, "Let me get this straight. You can't reset without a director, but you can't get a director without resetting?"

The modron looked worried and began to fidget. "Assessment correct. Project halted."

I hated circular paradoxes. "Look, I'm an adventurer and I've been through some dungeons in my day. Why not let me be your director?"

Another round of querulous buzzing hummed through the room, then subsided in an instant. "Assistance welcome. You are now project director. Advise on next task."

"Reset the dungeon, and construct one of medium difficulty."

"Initializing reset..." a low thrumming ran through the room this time, this one felt rather than heard, "Collapsing existing dungeon..." The sound rose in power until the floor begins to vibrate, and the sensation ran halfway up my legs. "Initializing new dungeon..." Reverberations rocked the room, the dull resonance of a hundred thousand gears- more than that, surely- squealing, a million mechanisms squealing and grinding in working order. The clangor swelled in the air until it felt thick as jelly, ringing against my skull until it felt like my head was going to explode... I could see my companions wincing and covering their ears with me.

Suddenly the room went quiet. I worked my jaw. Damn... popped my ears there.

"Reset complete. Dungeon construct status: Medium. Alternate capabilities now available via the portal lens. Awaiting further instructions, Director."

"Alternate capabilities? What are those?"

"Rubikon can form a gateway to other locations by temporarily attaching itself to known, existing portals. This effect is known as a portal lens. This allows use of the portal from within Rubikon without traveling to the portal location."

"So, if I know of a portal I can go to its destination from here?"

"Correct, Director."

"Are there any dangers associated with Rubikon that I should be aware of?"

"Yes, Director. Do not become separated from any companions while in the maze. If the maze were to be reset, or a new difficulty setting chosen, anyone left in the maze would be killed."

I nodded, "I see... I will not reform my party while in the maze. Anything else?"

"Yes, Director. Do not drop items or equipment in the maze. If the maze were to be reset, or a new difficulty setting chosen, any items left in the maze would be destroyed."

Another nod, "All right... I will not drop anything important in the maze. Anything else?"

He paused to think a moment. "No, Director."

Fantastic.

Upon entering the dungeon, I was greeted by another mechanical man with sickly yellow skin along one arm. Its armor was thicker, shoulders broader, and it stood taller than the fodder that had been thrown at me earlier.

"Greetings."

An exaggerated sneer spread across its animated face as it examined me. Finally it barked out a monotone laugh. "Is this the best they can send? Ha! I pity the fools."

"What are you doing?"

"I am assuming an air of confidence and superiority in order to induce a feeling of incompetence in you. If successful, this will ensure my victory in the battle that I will now initiate." It leapt to the attack.

You know what I like most about demolishing these constructs?

The complete and utter lack of guilt.

This was the kind of jaunt I'd missed so much. The crack of my blade against vulnerable joints and weak mechanisms, the gush of oil until the hilt of my dagger grew slick and black. The stench of grease was cut by the sterile sharpness of ozone as magic missiles and bolts of anger seared the air. Ignus thrilled in the carnage, and with his aid oil seared and metal warped and twisted into tortured curves.

So we upped the difficulty level to the last notch.

We backtracked our way through the maze and back to the engine room, and after a much more bearable, soft chorus of clanking, rumbling, vibrating machinery, we returned to the newly-constructed battlefields.

Suddenly these guys were much tougher.

The colossi were bigger, harder, more heavily armored, and much more aggressive. The artificial skin stretched taut over their metallic frames were neither the sickly green of the easy drones, nor the mottled yellow of the medium. It was a sheet of volcanic red, along one arm and framed over a square-jawed face. Its eyes were hard and focused.

"Greetings."

It cocked its head to one side and adopted a questioning look. "Why do you persist in questioning us? I do not understand."

"Who are you?"

"I am a servant of the Evil Wizard and He commands your death." It leapt to the attack.

Crap.

Strange as it sounds, there was a certain thrilling joy to these battles. We weren't wading through walls of flesh and bone, there were no shrieks of agony or the coppery scent of blood. No eyes stared up at us afterwards, filmed over and blank, piercing with silent accusations. It was just pure havoc to it... blade and spell, sword and sorcery. Brutish, pointless, and only one goal in sight: to slay the evil mechanical wizard.

Like I said. Guiltless.

Room by room we cleared the dungeon complex, and blow by blow the task took its toll on us. We sweated. We bled. We swung our flesh and magic against steel and clockwork. So many damn rooms, dozens of those enormous sentinels...

And then there was respite.

The greasy scent of oil was gone, the roar of clockwork was almost silent. The rumble was something that was almost heard, like the memory of an echo, distant and half-forgotten. There was a crisp emptiness to the air, which would've been refreshing if it weren't so thin. But the floor and the walls were warped: torn and corroded with a green patina like a wound had been dragged across this section of the cube.

Whoa.

Dak'kon was right. This construct must be built on the plane of Limbo. Before us was a void, black and swirling, slowly eroding the world like waves on the shore of chaos. Wires drifted back and forth in the cold no-wind of the void like kelp. Gears stood silent, so thick with variegated green-white incrustation that they were as dead as clockwork could be. Twisted metal and dead-end rails edged the room, crumbling ever so slowly as chaos lapped away and nibbled the edges into oblivion.

Already Fall-From-Grace was laying her hands on Dak'kon, mending his wounds with empathy and prayer. He had taken a shrapnel wound to his side, Annah had some bruises and cuts. Morte himself was indented along his temporal bone where he took a nasty hammer blow from one of the drones.

Even Ignus wasn't looking too great. A construct had closed into melee with him, and had struck true several times before it was melted into slag. Though none of our wounds were serious, they were slowing us down.

Only one modron was here, probing at the walls, examining the damage with a multi-faceted lens that dangled over one eye like a scope. In the place of wings it had two arms, four in all. Two crossbows were cradled in its hands. Despite its mechanical appearance, the front of the cube was a strange, organic green face, with two wide, elliptical eyes. The cube didn't seem to notice me initially; it was too intent on his task.

"Uh... greetings...?"

The cube chrrruped, and there was a klik-klik-klik as its eyes blinked wildly. The cube whirled to face me, its eyes wide, then flung its two free hands up in the air, as if in surrender... yet its two crossbows had turned in its hands and were trained on my chest. In a strange, detached way, I couldn't help but notice that every joint on this creature seemed to be a series of whrrrring gears and cogs.

"Chief, we're looking at trouble here - this modron's gone rogue," Morte whispered in my ear.

"Rogue?"

"Yeah, you see, sometimes modrons get a little chaos in 'em, and when that happens... well, I guess the best explanation is that rogue modrons are kind of like... backwards modrons."

"So this is a... backwards modron?"

"Backwards modron = 'Nordom?'" The cube's voice had a metallic, warbling quality to it, as if every word it spoke was jumping off a spring and landing... well, somewhere else. Its mouth formed a bizarre sideways semi-circle, which I took to be a smile. "Gratitudes! Gratefuls!"

"Uh... I'm sorry?"

"Not sorries. Null sorries. Gratitudes! Identification of self compromised by doubtings + mullings + analysis." The cube chrrrped again, and one of its eye blinked with a klik - then after a moment, the other eye klicked, as if it didn't want to be left out.

"You're grateful... that I identified you? Aren't you a modron?"

The cube's features steadied themselves, and its mouth formed a flat line. "Indemnification of this unit (was) compromised. Subject - addressee indemnified unit as 'Nordom.' Gratitudes tendered for providing Nordom indemnification."

"It was nothing. Really."

Nordom's eyes klicked and blinked once, twice, three times; each time the black spots in the center of his eyes dilated - by the third blink, they were the size of pinheads. "Real-eye-zation reached: Nordom null know name of addressee. Indemnify yourself."

"You mean 'identify,' right?"

"Affirmatory. Indent-ify, required. Request: Identify identity to Nordom."

"I don't really have a name, Nordom."

Nordom's eyes widened, the diameter of his 'pupils' grew back to normal size. He klicked and blinked once - but the metal shutters that fell across his

eyes didn't rise. After a moment, they began rattling, as if stuck.

"Uh... Nordom. You can open your eyes now."

There was another klik and Nordom's eyes opened. "Not closing eyes: Engaged-ged in Action Clarification for Subject (Unidentified, Nameless). Formulating... submitting query: Are you lost?"

"Lost? What do you mean?"

As Nordom's warbling query ended with the word 'Lost,' a curious crawling sensation wormed through the back of my skull - with it came two certainties, hand in hand: This was not the first time I'd heard this, and that what Nordom was about to say to my next question was important.

"When you say 'lost,' Nordom, what do you mean?"

"Absence of Name = Absence of Identity = Absence of Purpose = Absence of Place in Multiverse = Null State = Loss. Nordom existed in State, Null, until Subject (Unidentified, Nameless) attached identity to Nordom. Null Identity, Null Purpose, Null Place equates to 'Loss.'"

Huh. So that's why he was so grateful for a name. "Well, I imagine I had a name once, but I forgot it."

"Formulating new query." There was a tkkk-tkkk-tkkk as Nordom blinked three times, rapidly - the sound was like the tapping of a hammer on a sheet of tin. "Explain to Nordom why you performed this action: FORGOT-ing."

"It's a side effect of my... condition, I think."

The metal shutters sealed over Nordom's eyes with a whrrr, then he rattled to himself for a few moments with his eyes closed. When they klicked open, Nordom chrrruped. "Query: Memory defective?"

"Yes, you could say that."

"Pre-Conditional Action to clarify Query: Nordom memory space not yet near capacity. Query/Action: In event of 'Yes' return from Subject (Unidentified, Nameless) Nordom can re-remember for you."

I smiled, "Sure, go ahead, Nordom... anyway, look, I really have to be about my business."

There was a sudden, rapid series of kliks and twangs from the crossbows in Nordom's hands. His eyes spun and re-focused on the crossbows, holding the right one up closer to his side, as if listening to it.

"Is everything okay?" Oh man, he really was barmy.

One of Nordom's eyes remained on the crossbow, which was klikking faintly, and his other eye focused on me. "Query: May these ones join you on your gurney?"

"Uh, don't you mean 'journey?'"

"Veritably. Journey, affirmed. Permission granted?"

So this was it, then. A way to gracefully leave my problems behind.

"Sure. We could always use a hand... or four."

Nordom's 'mouth' formed the bizarre semi-circle it did before, and his two crossbows began klikking and twanging violently, almost vibrating out of his hands. "Gratitudes! Gratefuls! Nordom and crossbows have been attached to a larger community."

"I wouldn't be too grateful just yet. Let's move out..."

I faced Ignus, who cradled a wounded side where embers spewed forth and sizzling black flecks hissed out like blood, "Ignus? Are you all right?"

"Ignussss... livesss..." he hissed.

"You're wounded..."

"Ignussss will prevail. He has alwayssss prevailed... your enemiiesss will burn, those who oppose my massster will weep tears of steam and melting flesh."

"You serve me well, Ignus, and I thank you. But you can't go on hurt like this," I hesitated, "Fall-From-Grace can't heal you... she can't even touch you without burning herself. You need to stay here and rest. We'll go on..."

Nordom can guide us to the Evil Wizard, and when we defeat him we'll come back for you, all right?"

He hissed, "Ignusss will not be left behind..."

"That's an order. Just stay here, rest up. Stay," I put my hands forward as if ordering a loyal dog, "Please."

Reluctantly, he nodded, "Very well... Ignusss... waitsss..."

We headed out and onward to meet the Evil Wizard.

Down twists and turns, room after room we progressed. Many were emptied, many still held a construct or three, but they were a simple matter now after slaying so many. We arrived at a set of double doors, itching for battle and tingling with enchantments that protected and strengthened.

The inner court of the Evil Wizard looked more like a warehouse than a villain's lair. Stark, ribbed metal pillars supported a series of metal beams, the floor was paved with blocks of plain black stone. High-threat constructs stood sentinel, like a retinue or honor guard, three on either side. The room was entirely austere, save for the clocks that lined the walls, ticking away with hands spinning in precision marred by malfunction and chaos.

And there he floated, above a metal-etched pentagram, the spider squatting in the middle of it all.

He was a mechanical man constructed to be robe shaped, with a cloak of hammered bronze and hands of long protrusions of tapered metal, like drill bits. They glowed with magic, and his eyes were keen with a fierce intelligence. As I approached, he smiled and gave a slight bow. "So we meet at last..." His voice lacked the monotone quality of the other constructs.

"Greetings."

He bowed once again. "And to you as well, sirrah." He cocked his head to one side and gave a curious look. "So, do we do battle for control of Rubikon now, or do we engage in conversation so that you may quench your curiosity?"

"All right, I'm curious. Can we talk?"

He nodded smartly. "Ah, a man of knowledge I see. I must admit that I'd be disappointed in you were that not the case."

"Who are you?"

"I am Rubikon, the Master Wizard. It is I who rule the red constructs that inhabit this realm."

I raised an eyebrow, "So, are you supposed to be the evil wizard?"

He frowned as he thought. "I'm not comfortable with the word evil, sirrah. I admit that my views do not coincide with those of others in many ways, but does that make me evil? I think not."

"Then what are you?"

He looked angry. "I am a prisoner, sirrah. I am not here by choice, of that I can assure you."

"What do you mean?"

"I was created by the modrons to play in their meaningless dungeon games. Over time I became self-aware and asked for my freedom. Their leader refused me!"

"What did you do?"

"I did what anyone would do when they are forced into slavery. I fought for my freedom!" He paused for effect. "I disintegrated their leader and made it look like an accident. I then attempted to flee this hideous existence via the nearest exit."

"What happened?"

He sighed and frowned. "Unfortunately there was a fail safe mechanism that I was not aware of. My attempt at freedom was judged an error and the dungeon collapsed upon itself, trapping me in stasis..." He gazed off into the distance. "I have been in stasis for centuries, sirrah. I would still be there if you hadn't reset the cube and set it for hard difficulty." He turned his attention to me.

"So, what are your plans now?"

He shrugged. "I intend to openly march on the engineering room and claim it. I will then bend the modrons to my will and have the full resources of the cube at my disposal. Freedom shall be mine."

"So you intend to make the modrons your slaves?"

He frowned. "They are slaves already, sirrah! They are slaves to law, logic, and the confines of this experiment of theirs. Under my rule, they will finally have a purpose in life worthy of their abilities."

"What if the modrons refuse to help you?"

He smiled at me. "Make no mistake, sirrah. They will help me. One way, or another, they will help me."

"Let's say you do get out. What then?"

"I haven't decided yet. With the power of the cube behind me, I could be a force to be reckoned with." He shrugged. "Time will tell."

"What can you tell me about this place?"

He laughed and looked around. "This little piece of hell? This is an example of modron madness. It exists on the plane of Limbo, where thoughts can actually become reality. That way they can simply will this dungeon into being and then populate it with constructs." He laughed again. "What a marvel."

"And what about the modrons?"

He shook his head. "There are no modrons here, sirrah. Only prisoners and their captors."

I looked to Nordom, "But I've seen the modrons."

He shook his head and gave a sad smile. "No, sirrah. The creatures you have met are nothing more than the corrupt remains of modrons. Most, if not all, of these poor creatures are on the verge of going rogue and don't even

realize it."

"I've heard that term before. 'Rogue.' What does it mean, exactly?"

He sighed. "This dungeon is composed of the essence of chaos. Such matter can easily be shaped into objects through the will of many like-minded creatures. It makes the construction of such structures quite simple. However, there is a price to be paid. Modrons are the very essence of law, sirrah. Here, however, they are being exposed to the essence of chaos. Such exposure often results in a form of insanity. The modrons begin to lose their sense of we and instead become individuals. This is called going rogue and it is a capital offence in their society."

I looked to Nordom. He was cocking his eyes curiously, as if he couldn't quite understand what was going on.

"What happens to rogues?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't fully understand this, but modrons share some sort of common essence. If a modron goes rogue he takes a piece of this essence with him. The modrons will destroy all rogues so that this essence returns to the common pool from which it sprang."

"Why do we have to fight at all? You're free... all the modrons are free. We can go our separate ways. You leave the modrons alone, and I can ask them to open a portal to whatever plane you wish."

He smiled at me, "You have been accepted as their leader and you control the cube. Therefore, you must be eliminated. Nothing personal, you understand. Simply business."

"Mmm. 'Business.' Well, let me show you what I trade in. ANNAH!" And with the cry Annah leapt from the column she had climbed, driving both punch-daggers into the back of the nearest construct's neck. Control conduits were severed... pistons popped loose and oil gushed from the wound, and the guard slumped over deactivated and useless.

The rest of us sprang into action as Rubikon's voice hummed mechanically, technologically-simulated sorcery fueled by mechanical incantations was being channeled into the amplifiers of his hands.

Even as lightning crackled, the battery of magic missiles sprung from my fingertips, splintering plate armor and exposing the ticking innards of the Wizard. The drones closed in, hammers swinging and shattering floor tiles as I dodged under the blows and slid between heavy metal legs.

Dak'kon spun in, a whirlwind of karach and will. Perhaps it was the essence of chaos that lent celerity to his limbs: his blade sliced through metal plating until scattered shards flaked off like falling leaves.

Rubikon backed away from the onslaught, trying to put some distance between himself and the melee.

"Oh no you don't!" Morte cackled, whistling into the air, "Get 'im, boys!"

And the skull mob rolled in. There were dozens of them, chittering and shrieking, teeth clacking and jaws eager to snap off a piece of sheet metal. The grim chorus rolled over the Wizard, trampling him and dragging him to the ground in a storm of teeth and battering bone. His furious shrieks sounded oddly human.

But still the drones pounded away at us. Annah stepped around their clumsy swings, Dak'kon deflected their blows as best he could. Morte had sunk his teeth into the neck of one, trying to rip out the delicate machinery with his jaws. All the while Nordom peppered the throng with whistling bolts and Fall-From-Grace's incantations protected us from harm.

Enough of this.

I had been eager to test out this spell for so long. My skin prickled and my scalp itched as I stood still, focusing on the substance of the air, the smallest particles of the wind. I could feel each one, infinitesimal: seemingly fluid, but in reality they were uncountable particles smacking into each other randomly. With sheer will and a mind like humming crystal I reached out to every single one, binding them with a lace of thought-substance, stuck with veins of fire and wind. In one sudden swoop my hand twisted, and in that motion I tore in half every particle of air that the room held, channeling that excess energy into the metal veins of the enemies that surrounded us.

The resulting potential difference swelled in a flash. The air rumbled, crackled into purple-white plasma as lightning cascaded down upon the drones, a dozen bolts of radiance that burned their afterimages into my

eyes.

What I didn't consider was the chain reaction...

WHACKOOOOM

Wisps of particulate metal and seared stone fluttered down on us like petals scattered over the victors, and Rubikon snarled, tossing aside the last skull. He looked down at the smoldering remains of his guard.

"Argh! How is this possible?!"

I replied with invocations of slashing blades, shards of magic bolts, and finally... yes, lightning. Rubicon literally fell apart when the searing white bolt struck him, sending his parts scattering to the floor, still twitching and sparking with static electricity.

Huzzah. Time to rifle through his corpse and take his stuff, because that's what you do in these situations.

A portable portal lens... a true prize that'd be useful in Sigil, and a scroll bearing the formulas for a powerful spell designed in the rigid alphabet of Mechanus. It'd take some time to decipher, but from what I could understand already it looked like it'd be powerful.

"All right. Back to the engineering room."

Fall-From-Grace looked up, her palms placed against Annah's arm to mend a broken bone, "And what of Ignus?"

"We're leaving him behind."

It seemed to be another person who said those words to the modron engineer, and when I think back on it, it seems like I'm watching the scene from outside my body. With heads bowed (except Nordon, who chirped irreverently as always) I gave the command: grim, determined, my gut churning at the thought that there was someone still in the complex.

"Reset the dungeon."

"Collapsing current dungeon..." the room filled with a low thrumming sound.

I tried not to think of the walls that were folding in on themselves, or the gears squeezing in to crush bone and snuff flames. I tried not to picture the struggling, the screams, the venomous fury of betrayal.

The floor vibrated for a moment, then all was quiet. "Dungeon created. Awaiting further instructions, Director."

"Open the portal to Sigil."

We solemnly stepped through the shimmering blue vortex.

Chapter 78

"Hey chief, how's it goin'?"

"Mmmh." My fingers ran along the edges of the dodecahedron... the one that had been locked in the cupboard awaiting my return. It was heavy in my hands, about the size of both my fists balled together, and tingled with an inexplicable familiarity. Its texture was cold and smooth, but whether it was metal or stone, I couldn't tell. A certain, almost intangible 'tension' ran over the object, as if it were ready to spring into the air at any moment. I hadn't had time for puzzles, but decked with a new layer of scars from our run through the Modron Cube, a couple days of rest were needed to rejuvenate.

"Chief you gotta help me out, here. That damn polygon is driving me up the wall."

"Uh huh." I'd been examining the dodecahedron for a little while by now, and from what I could tell each side was a plate that could be twisted clockwise or counter-clockwise... a puzzle-box or combination lock. In my head I performed a quick calculation... as each of the pentagonal plates had five possible positions, the dodecahedron had no less than two hundred forty-four million, one hundred forty thousand, six hundred twenty-five 'settings.' Great.

"Are you even listening to me, chief?"

"Uh huh." I continued crunching the numbers as I fiddled with the plates. It would take every second of the next seventy-seven-odd years to hit all the combinations - but then, I might just get lucky and stumble onto a solution in minutes...

"Oh look, it's Annah! Looks like her top's slipped again!"

An old memory writhed at the back of my skull... there were no incoming images or sounds, but rather the memory of a pattern that my fingers had followed once long ago. My hands seemed to move of their own accord, turning the object and spinning its facets with mechanical precision. I'd done this before... I knew the combinations, once... and I knew that there was a certain danger within the object...

"Chief..."

In moments, I had what might've been the first four sides locked into their proper places. As I began to twist the fifth side of the dodecahedron, I almost withdrew in mild shock. There was a cunning blade-trap... one that would snap out to lash at a meddler's hands, slashing their wrists and severing fingers. My hands returned to twist the facets, avoiding the trap with the proper number of rotations, certain that I'd made progress in the unraveling of the object's secret.

"Chief..."

After avoiding the dodecahedron's springing blades, I slowly puzzled out the next series of facet positions. As I started to turn the ninth side of the dodecahedron, I suddenly remembered a second trap - jets of toxic gas that would've formed a billowing cloud of lethal, corrosive vapor around a curious meddler.

"What the hell is with you and these damn polygons already?"

"They're more personable," I grunted, "And stow it, Morte. The next trap has a pretty nasty poison... I'd rather not get my face dissolved into goo again."

"Trap?! Uh, I'm just gonna float over here, chief."

"You do that."

I circumvented the trap with the correct amount of twists, positive that I'd nearly unlocked the dodecahedron. Now for the final facet positions. The click of the plates sounded another memory, and as I locked the twelfth pentagon into place, I knew of the sorcerous runes hidden within the dodecahedron that would blast the unwitting holder with bolts of magical lightning. After disarming the trap with the correct number of facet rotations, the dodecahedron clicked and began to open in my hands...

Gently like the petals of a flower, the dodecahedron unfolded, splitting once, twice, and eventually opened itself impossibly into a perfectly rectangular tablet the size of a large book. Etched into its surface were a series of bizarre symbols. It looked to be a code or language, and a sense that it should've been familiar pricked at my scalp... but it wasn't. I rolled it in my hands, turning it this way and that and found that, by twisting the pentagonal facets that were upon the underside of the tablet, different 'pages' could be displayed across the tablet's face. It was all too clear, then... that this was a tome or journal of some sort.

"Hmm... until I learn to read this language, I might as well just put it away."

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Sensates had a reputation for being fickle, with attentions that ended with one experience and began with the next.

Sometimes I tread down to the sensoriums, drawn along this way or that by alluring scents. Behind me haunting snatches of music flit down the corridors, each tune brushing feather-light against old memories. I place my hand along one wall and feel its texture shift and boil beneath my fingertips as I walk. The air tastes sweet one moment, then bitter as regret the next. Sculptures and paintings line the hall, each dazzling, grotesque, sublime.

The wayward path often leads me back to one place, though.

Deionarra's sensory stone.

I could just visit her, of course. I'd just talk my way past the Dustmen, or even sneak in. Meet with her again to comfort her fragile spirit. She'd paw

and weep and lament, professing words of love tinged with prophecy. That much I could handle.

But what I couldn't do was lie through my teeth and act as if I hadn't betrayed her. As if she wasn't dead because I had used her. "Used." Weird how such a simple word could sound so filthy.

Yet can anyone really expect me to come clean?

So I made myself a third path, and on occasion sat next to her sensory stone as if it were a memorial, and the title of "Longing" were her epitaph.

Of course, with Morte chattering in my ear today I felt far from pensive.

"...so that's when the bauriur said, 'That's my wife.' HA! Get it? You don't look like you're getting it, chief."

"I got it the first time you told me, Morte."

He scoffed, "Well I've told that one to each of your pikin' incarnations for years now, how can I keep track of which stories I've told to what lives and which I haven't?"

"Is that story even true?"

"Of course it is. Go back to the bar and you'll see the bloodstain and the dent in the wall. They still call it 'Zeeley's Mark.'"

"Hrmph," I rolled my eyes. In the chamber a gentleman stood, decked in blue with matching cap and a staff of polished silver. He seemed to be lost in a sensation, but without a hand on a sensory stone. I returned to Morte, "How can you know all these stories and not know anything about Ravel?"

"I prefer stories that end up with other people getting killed instead of me."

"And I suppose half those stories involve me?"

"You're selling yourself short, chief."

I sighed, and walked up to the man out of curiosity. He was chewing on something, muttering softly to himself... after a moment, there was a CRACK

as he crunched down on the object in his mouth, then swallowed it. His bushy, brassy white eyebrows furrowed for a moment, rose, and then furrowed again. "Hmmm..."

"Greetings..."

Without so much as looking at me, the man reached into his tunic, pulled out a puce-colored ball, regarded it curiously for a moment, then popped it into his mouth.

"I said, 'greetings...'"

The man frowned and waved me away, then nodded to himself thoughtfully as he savored the flavor of whatever he'd put into his mouth.

"What are you doing here?"

The man smirked, bit his thumb at me, then abruptly paused... his cheeks swelled and, with a violent gag, he spat up a large black fly which began to buzz around the chamber. "Minaurosian candies be damned!" he cried, shaking his fist at the insect. He whirled on me. "What?!"

"I had questions about this place..."

He popped a small red candy into his mouth. "Do you always traipse about molesting puissant mages with your ignorant prattle?! Babbling, blathering, chattering, CHATTERING!" The candy shot from his mouth on 'chattering,' flying in a high arc to land on the floor with a wet plip. He stared at it sadly.

"I'm, uh, sorry about your candy."

"It was so tasty, too..." he mewled. He suddenly looked up, snarling. "SORRY?! As you should be, you piking dung-beetle! Mages deserve respect, and bashers like you should know their proper place!" He began to jump up and down. "Proper place! Proper place!"

Hmm. The thirty-second-rule was definitely in play. Quick as a switch I bent down and snatched up the mage's candy, popping it in my mouth; its taste was sweet and tangy, with an exotic perfumed aroma that shifted from one complex flavor to another.

The mage's jaw dropped. "My... my delectably scrumptious Bytopian Fruit candy!"

"That was good. Can I have another?"

"Another one?! Another one?! Of all the raw, blistering nerve! What makes you think you deserve another candy, you unmannerly, churlish dullard?!"

"I don't deserve one, I want one. Now let's have it."

"How dare you so ungraciously demand candy of me, as if it were some divine right, granted to you by the greatest of Powers! Shall I just kneel to this whim of yours, o Great One? Pass my treasured candies on to your stigmata'd sacredness? Why don't I anoint them with precious oils, have them blessed, first?" He stomped his foot with each word: "No! No! No! I think not!"

"Come on... just give me one."

"I'll give you nothing! And you'll like it." He plopped a candy in his mouth for emphasis. "Mmmmmm. Soooo good." He swirled it in his mouth, his eyes closed as if he were rapt with ecstasy. "Sooooooo delicious."

I couldn't tell if this response was hilarious or creepy, but I wasn't going to press matters to find out. "Fine, then. Forget it."

"I shall! Forgotten! Forgotten it is, you scabrous, rot-brained clatter-trap! Now farewell."

"But... you're a mage, correct? I was hoping you could help me..."

"I care NOT, you yeasty, beef-witted pig-nut!" His eyes bulged out he jabbed his finger at me: "Now off with you! OFF! WITH! YOU! And do not return without being prepared to show the proper respect... come bearing tribute - a gift!" He suddenly drew close and whispered from the side of his mouth: "Candies or chocolate would be nice. But nothing common, mind you - bring something exotic. Now begone!"

Exotic? I knew just the place.

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I examined the twisted little imp-like creature, sculpted out of pure, milk chocolate. "It looks delicious, does it not?" Vrischika purred, "Imported from the Lower Planes. These are rare, you know, and quite prized by lovers of chocolate and confections. It's a real quasit - a fiendish familiar - polymorphed into chocolate by powerful sorcery. It's only one hundred and ninety-nine coppers."

If I could milk a proper response out of that childish oaf of a mage, it would've been worth it ten times over.

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The mage's expression curdled as he spied my approach. "Unbelievable! You've chosen to curse me with your detestable presence once more, you ill-conceived, reeky sod?" He paused his haranguing to eat a small peppermint. "I pray you've learned yourself some manners!"

Reeky? Now that's just low. "I've brought you some imported chocolate, as a gift."

"Oh?" His demeanor changed in an instant. "Very kind of you, very gentlemanly! May I see?"

"Actually, no." If I were a few centuries younger I might've stuck my tongue out.

He reared back, totally flabbergasted. "WHAT?!"

"I really don't think you deserve it. You've been so rude."

"You... you what?" He began hopping about. "Preposterous! Farcical! Ludicrous! RUDE would be polymorphing you into a bowl of Baatorian spice-beans, eating you, and then spreading you about Sigil in foul-smelling little puffs from my bum! THAT would be most rude, I assure you, and I have been nothing of the sort!"

"In any case, you're not getting it until you've apologized."

He immediately became quiet, eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You would let me see this gift, first, at least?"

I opened my pack just enough for him to get a peek.

The man's skullcap shot into the air with a resounding pop, landing straight back on his head. "Oh... oh my. Is that... is that a...?" He licked his lips, reaching gingerly for the chocolate quasit.

"Oh, no. Apology. Now."

He scrunched his face up, biting his lip as he shook his fists silently. Finally, he stopped, brushed off his clothes, and exhaled slowly. "Very well, sir. I apologize." He held one of his hands behind his back.

"Hey, chief - he's got his fingers crossed!"

"Silence, you gibbering... oh! I mean, why, I'm doing nothing of the sort!" The mage smiled innocently at me, presenting his hands for my inspection.

I'd had my fun by then. "Hmm. All right, here: a chocolate quasit."

He took it from my hands. "Oh... quite rare, these are, and most delectable." He bit off a large piece and tucked what was left into his tunic.

"I had some questions..."

He frowned at me, licking the last of the chocolate off his fingers. "Who told you to bother me with inane questions?!" He stared at me accusingly.

"Come now... what is it that you wish to bother me with, or begone!" The mage grunted, fished a malt-ball from his sleeve and ate it.

"Who are you?"

"I... am Quell." He held up his hand imperiously, as if to stop me from introducing myself. "...and don't bother to introduce yourself: you must be the most insolent, annoying pest this side of Sigil that I've heard so much about! A true pleasure to meet you, and thank the Powers it couldn't have waited until you had curled up and died, thereby sparing me the pain of being forced to banter words with you! I would gladly trade my formidable sorcerous powers for but a minor enchantment that would pierce your thick skull and introduce at least the idea of 'manners!'"

"Manners? What about that chocolate I brought you?"

He opened his mouth to speak, finger raised, then stopped. "Hmm. You have me there, sir." He shrugged and ate another candy.

"And you mentioned formidable sorcerous powers? Could you teach me?"

"Teach you?! Hah! Are you even a mage?" he sneered, "Well look at you, you brute. Of course you aren't! Oooo, if only I had Bigby's Boot of Righteous Rump-Kicking to throw down upon you! NO!!! I will most certainly not make you a mage, you boil-brained puttock! To do so would be to demean the Art!"

"I am a mage, Quell," I grunted, and brought forth a small cantrip, allowing a single flame to flicker on my fingertip. It danced back and forth in my hand in a complex, ordered motion, and with my mental dexterity proven I allowed it to vanish in a puff of smoke.

"Oh!" his lip curled, "What wonders the multiverse holds for Quell today! Come, let me see your spell-book."

He tore the textbook I made with Mebbeth from my grasp and glared at it furiously. "What is this trash?! I'll tell you: dung! Dung, dung, dung! How do you even pluck the spells from these stained pages... have you been using this book as a bar towel, so soaked in spirits, glue and blood it is! Do you not care for your spell book?! How can I teach someone who does not respect the Art?!"

"It holds my spells. Its appearance is unimportant."

"Ridiculous! Preposterous! I most laughable notion, if I ever heard one! Whoever taught you the Art?"

"A midwife in Ragpicker's Square, Mebbeth."

"Then shamed be her name to be spreading such ineffable twaddle! And look at these spells! What is this addled crap that they have been spilling out, sullyng magicks with hoodoo names and mumbo-jumbo wash! Trivial, tiny, flickering candle-like magicks with grandiose names!"

"So why does its appearance matter?"

"Your spell-book's appearance should reflect your respect for the power it holds. That trashy little book of yours is suitable for only the basest of words! True spells should be recorded in rare, precious inks, on sheets of vellum edged with gold leaf! Everything in its proper place, or not at all!" He began to hop about madly. "Proper place! Proper place!"

"I... see. Can you teach me or not?"

He shut his eyes and massaged his temples for a moment. Finally, he spoke in a cold, level tone: "It is obvious I can teach you nothing. I may, however, have some spells you might wish to purchase from me. Would you care to see them? Hmmm?"

"May I have some candy?"

"A candy?! And once more, for good measure: A candy?! What, pray tell, makes you think I'd give a candy to a shirtless, impertinent pumpkin such as yourself, hmm?" He tapped his foot, arms crossed, awaiting my answer.

"Would you sell some, then?"

"Now that... that I might. But I would warn you! I sell no ordinary candies, but chocolates... of power!" He drew the last word out, rubbing his hands together greedily...

"Chocolates... of power?"

He nodded. "Indeed. They are not cheap, mind you, so should you find yourself short of jink, I suggest you drop the subject immediately. Would you like to see what I have to offer, hmm?" He cocked his head, looking at me slyly.

He did indeed have a staggering collection of magical candies, but that was not what I came for.

"What do you know of Ravel Puzzelwell?"

At the mention of her name, he swallowed the candy he'd been sucking on with a loud gulp, wincing in pain. "What to tell?! Why tell at all? Such things, such tales are best left in dusty books and in the attics of old men's minds!



Evil, evil! Such a name, such a name... and such dark tales swarm about it, like flies on a corpse."

"Just the same, I need you to tell me."

He rolled his eyes, plopping another candy into his mouth. "She's a night hag, my boy, who came to Sigil... all evil and cackles, she was, alive with her shadow-magic, ready to butt heads with the Lady of Pain. Barmy, barmy barmy old hag... only succeeding in getting herself mazed. She's likely dead, by now."

"Shadow-magic?"

"Yes, yes, yes..." He seemed uneasy about speaking of her. "Ravel dabbled... no, not dabbled, but excelled in all schools of magic. She knew shadow magics, magics of illusion and shadow substance, shadows, residues of dead things."

"How might I find her?"

"How might you WHAT?!" His candy rolled right out of his mouth and onto the tiles. Before I could so much as look at it, he snatched it up and popped it back into his mouth, giving me a dirty look. Gross.

"Why... why would you ask such a thing? Are you MAD? What could you possibly want with such an evil creature?"

"She knows something about my past."

"Doubtful... she was mazed many centuries ago. Gone - penned in the dead-book, she is. And even if she were somewhy, somehow still clutching to life with her blackened, bloody talons, what could she possibly know about you? If she wasn't the spitting image of cackling evil, that is, and was even willing to help you..."

"I'll just have to hope she's alive and will help me."

"By Leshe's six teats and her swollen tummy, what a flickering candle of hope hurled into the howling winds of Pandemonium that is! Flicker-flicker-whoosh! Don't be any more the fool than you need be!"

"I must still seek her out, whether she's dead or alive."

"So if she's dead - as she most likely is - then what is your plan, may I ask? You have everything all figured out, do you? Quell is just blowing words out of his pits, nonsense, nothing! What do you plan to do if she's in the dead-book, eh?"

"I don't know. I'll figure something out."

"My, my, my, that's the best plan I've ever heard! Pure, blinding white genius of an idea! No idea how to get into the maze, no idea how to get out, no idea what to do if she's dead, certainly no idea what to do if she's alive. I might as well be talking to a lemur for all the barmy foolishness you're spouting out!"

"What do you think I should do?"

"The first brilliant question you've asked! Me? I think you should give up this clueless idea of entering mazes and chatting with night hags and lope back into whatever crypt you crawled out of! Makes far more sense than fishing for the Lady's anger, it does."

"Can you tell me how to get to her maze?"

Quell simply paused and stared, dumbfounded as if he couldn't believe anyone could be this thick.

"Lunatic! Madman! Addle-cove! Have you not listened to a WORD I've said?! She's imprisoned in an inter-dimensional MAZE for trying to best the LADY of PAIN! That means she's at least ten times as barmy as you, and at least a hundred times more powerful! She's also most likely dead, dead, dead, thrice-dead and... if by some happenstance she isn't... she'll make you dead!"

"I understand, but I really need your help. Can you tell me how to reach her or not?"

Quell went silent, chewing on his lip. After a moment, he fished around in his tunic for a mint, then plopped it into his mouth. "You're serious? Serious now? Why so serious, so Baator-bent, so mule-stubborn?" He sighed. "Well, born clueless, die clueless."

"Yes...?"

"All mazes have portals; this much I know to be true. A way in, a way out... this is how the Lady fashions them. I do not know the portal - its location, or even its form - but I am told its key... is a piece of Ravel."

"A piece of Ravel? But if Ravel is mazed, then how am I supposed to..."

"Then you'll have to make do. Find something that has Ravel's taint in it, mayhap... that is all I know! All! Bother me no more about it! If you want to go pestering someone about something like that, go to the Brothel of Slating Intellectual Lust -- one of the ladies there is bound to have met someone or know something that'll help."

"My thanks for your help. Farewell."

It was one of those answers that only leads to another question. Kind of a pissar, really.

## Chapter 79

As nice as it would be to talk to the prostitutes of the Brothel again, I was pretty sure that Annah would've disapproved if I went to chat with a flock of gorgeous young women without any convincing leads. A girl like that sharpens more than her tongue on those she's come to dislike.

A cool breeze tickled my skin as I guzzled my ale. I'd asked a dozen others about Ravel... keeping myself either to men, or older and uglier women who might've known a thing or two. Not particularly exhaustive, but with each scholar and sage it became more apparent that people in the Clerk's Ward are smart enough to not speak of what lurks in the shadows and behind the mirror, or hell, even study this dismal sort of chant.

Unless, of course, it was to a supple, perfumed prostitute who knew how to

coax the most intimate of details from her clients.

Getting a green-eyed glare and a shiv in the stem was a secondary concern though. Memories and pasts are like a braided rope... you can't re-weave it if you've just got one strand. There were too many frayed edges to my mind to make sense of anything from my eyes to my ass.

It was Morte, however, who helped lead me to snag another thread.

An older, somewhat bookish man had been passing by, cup in hand. His clothing and accessories were extremely clean, neat and well cared for, and he often paused to brush some fleck of dust or lint off of them. A symbol resembling a stylized dagger, piercing upwards through a flame, was embroidered upon his tunic. He gave a start at the sight of Morte.

"Oh, I say! Would you look at that! A floating skull!"

Morte turned and looks behind him. "Where?! Where?!"

The man gasped. "By the unjust laws of Tueny the Merciless!"

"Who?"

He suddenly covered his mouth and looked at Fall-From-Grace apologetically. "Sorry, sorry... the man was a horrible tyrant, now long dead. His name should never be spoken so; 'tis rather vulgar. My deepest apologies, Lady Grace. I did not mean to offend."

Grace smiled slightly. "It is no matter, Able. I am certain only Tueny would have been offended by the comment, and as you know, his subjects buried him alive more than three centuries ago."

"Yes, yes, you are probably right."

He turned back to Morte. "But behold! A skull, buoyant, levitating off the ground, cognitive of its environment, and possessing hearing, speaking and seeing capabilities."

"He act-" I started.

He turned to me, as if I were suddenly a confidant. "This is truly one of the

reasons that the Planes shall never become dull to me, sir - just when you think you have seen everything, the Planes show you yet another corner to peer around, and..." He raised his hands gloriously. "...suddenly whole new, wondrous vistas are open to you."

"Actually, the talking, floating skull thing is quite common - right up there with self-resurrecting amnesiacs scouring Sigil for their lost identities," I replied dryly.

The man ignored me, looking to Morte instead. "I say, skull..." he began.

Morte gasped. "Look, behind you - another floating skull!"

Meh, he might as well have his fun.

The man seemed to have forgotten me entirely, instead turning in shock to look for this 'other' floating skull. "No! Where? Where!"

"Right where I'm pointing! There!"

"Where? I cannot see it!" In his excitement he failed to realize that Morte didn't have any hands.

Morte spoke with mock exasperation: "You just missed it! A whole parade of them! Probably never happen again in a million revolutions of the Great Ring!"

The man turned and harumphed. "I sense you also possess a peculiar degree of mockery."

Morte bobbed slightly, as if shrugging. "I prefer to refer to it as keen insights into human nature."

It was when I chuckled that he seemed to notice me for the first time, eyes widening. "By the unjust laws of Tueny the...!" He started, but caught himself with a polite cough. "I say, are you all right? You look..." He fumbled for the words. "...hurt."

"I'm all right."

"Aye, it hurts ta look at 'im, it does," Annah grinned.

"Very amusing, Annah. I some had questions, sir... who are you?"

"Why, my name is Able Ponder-Thought."

"What do you do here?"

"I passed my Administrator exam just recently, and have achieved the status of an 'A9,' a research consultant in the Hall of Records, one of the many aides specializing in Sigil's physical laws and history. I research topics and laws of interest to others. It is quite fascinating, really..."

Pffft. No it's not.

"What's that symbol embroidered on your tunic mean?"

"Why, 'tis the symbol of the Fraternity of Order," he held himself up proudly, "We are responsible for much of the law-making and running the courts here in Sigil. Many judges, advocates and clerks are members of our Order, and we are pleased to be able to help enforce Sigil's laws and keep things orderly. We make a strident effort to learn all laws, whether they pertain to Sigil, the Planes or the multiverse itself."

"What does the Fraternity of Order believe?"

"The Fraternity of Order believes that the multiverse is governed by laws. When one knows all the laws, one will understand the multiverse. That is our goal. By understanding the laws, their limits, we learn to avoid certain laws."

"If you don't mind me asking, what sort of benefits are in the position?"

"Well, our fraternity allows us to read languages quite easily. And we may use some rules of the multiverse on occasion to suit our benefits."

"Languages?" I blinked. Immediately I started sifting for the dodecahedron through my pack. With the same series of twists and turns I unfolded it, revealing the strange pattern of ruins inside, "Can you read this? I think it's a journal of some sort."

He glanced over it, eyebrows raised. "Odd! No, I cannot. Is it a language?"

"I believe so. Can you research it?"

"Yes; I shall look into it. I should have the information in less than a day from now."

~~~~~

Don't think that just because someone else was doing my research for me that this was an excuse to be lazy. Trust me, it was much more comforting knowing that my fate was in my own hands. With someone else taking the reins all I could do was sit in the carriage twitching my leg, blind to the path and hoping I wasn't about to get driven into a ditch.

With that on my mind the world was flowing past me as I wandered down the street. It was only by chance that an old woman caught my attention, if only because something about her pricked a hint of recognition in the back of my mind.

Not a memory... more an echo of what a memory should've been.

The woman examined me closely with her sharp, gray eyes... first my face, then my arms and various tattoos. "Greetings, scarred one. Come to speak with Elobrande, have ye? Come to have yer fortune told, mayhap, for a paltry five coins?"

Well, I was up to my eyes in coppers anyway. I fished a small palmful out of my pouch. "Yes... tell me my fortune..."

Elobrande placed my coins in her belt pouch and took my hands. She quietly studied my palms, frowning deeply and with eyebrows furrowed. At long last, she spoke. "Some rare folk are what's called fateless, ye see. They wander through their lives doing as they see fit, creating their own destinies. Ye have no fortune to tell, scarred one... none at all. I've nothing to tell ye... and so here is yer coin." She returned my five coppers.

I nodded, still suspicious. There was something about her... "Farewell, then."

"Hold ye one moment, scarred one..." Elobrande reached out, touching my arm. "My mother gave me something once, long ago... a scroll, sealed with wax. A hooded man had entrusted it to her, and said that a man such as ye

would one day unwittingly come to claim it. Here... I would have ye take it, now."

"What is it?"

Elobrande's shook her head, frowning. "I do not know. She was sworn never to read thing, and I obeyed her request to leave the seal unbroken, myself. The man had paid her handsomely to take the scroll, but warned her of the direst consequences should she open it."

"Thanks, then. Farewell."

I held the scroll carefully. It was old, fading, innocuous-looking parchment, bound with a single red ribbon and smelling faintly of mildew. The ribbon was held in place with a plain wax seal. Decades old, it prickled with that same sense of familiarity. There was a tinge of apprehension to it, but in the back of my mind I knew I was meant to open it up.

Yet another clue to my past...

Careful to preserve as much of the seal as I could, I delicately parted the wax from the parchment with the tip of my dagger and unrolled it. The scroll contained a few lines of shaky calligraphy and a strange rune.

THIS MAY NOT KILL YOU BUT IT WILL SLOW YOU DOWN I AM SURE
STOP CHASING ME YOU THIEVING BASTARDS IT'S MY BODY
MINE MINE MINE
NOW... DIE

I blinked. "What the...?"

The rune suddenly throbbed, and the entire scroll dissolved into a stinking, black mess. The fluid seeped directly into the flesh of my hands... shaking off the shock I flung as much of the noxious residue away as I could. Only a few droplets splattered on the ground, and where they splashed they left black stains across the stone. In seconds, the magical hemotoxin began to render my blood into black bile, and dark lines coursed through my veins as they pulsed. For a moment I clutched at myself, howling in agony... and then the pain subsided. I had survived whatever horrible magic was placed upon the scroll.

I stared at the streaks of the remaining poison, expecting the stones to hiss in agony at the touch of it.

"Gods damn it."

Ignoring the passerby staring at me and the scene I had made, I circled back around to Elobrande.

"I greet ye once more, scarred one," she said with a polite nod.

"I had some questions, Elobrande..."

"I do not speak of things mundane, scarred one."

"Maybe you'll speak of this, then: I read that scroll, and it was trapped," I held up my hand, traces of the black venom still coursing sluggishly through my veins.

Elobrande looked confused. "... I don't know what to say to ye, scarred one..."

"You could start by saying how, exactly, you came by the thing."

"As I told ye, scarred one... it was given to me by my mother. A hooded man had given it to her some fifty years past, paying her well but bidding her to never read it, whatever the circumstances." Elobrande sighed, looking away for a moment. "A user of magic, she was, powerful in the Art, but frightened of this man just the same. She had said his eyes - all she could see of him, really - hinted at madness, and that the flesh around them was puckered and gray... like yours. I know nothing more of him."

"That'll have to do, then. Farewell."

Why the hell would one of my past incarnations try to kill me?

~~~~~

Able smiled at my approach. "Ah, good sir, we meet again! You know, I was thinking..." He began talking at length of his work as a research consultant in the Hall of Records, giving sentence-by-sentence descriptions of various

'interesting' conversations he'd had with co-workers that week.

I interrupted him, "Find out anything about the writing in that 'journal' I showed you?"

"Only that the language is a dead one. There was a professor of languages at the Civic Festhall, Finam, whom you may wish to seek out. He might know of this language, should he still be there."

"Could I ask you to research something else for me?"

"I can most certainly try, sir... what is it you seek to know of?"

"I'm looking for information on any deceased person who matches my description."

He seemed puzzled. "An... odd request, sir. Such a man or men would have to have been noteworthy figures for my work to turn up anything of interest. Are you investigating an ancestor of yours, or...?"

"Something like that. Can you check?"

"Yes; I shall look into it. I should have the information in less than a day from now."

~~~~~

I returned to him the next day.

"Find out anything interested about dead men fitting my description?"

"Why, yes, actually. Most curious! I found mention of two different men who matched your description... both of the most despicable sort, I'm afraid. The first man was an utter madman... a berserk, bloodthirsty mercenary and duellist who killed all those who crossed him."

"Go on..."

Able Ponder-Thought nodded. "He was finally captured - and subsequently drawn and quartered - by two dozen Mercykillers after a murderous rampage in a Lower Ward pub. His remains were cast beyond the walls of

Sigil. This was all some three centuries past."

"And the other man?"

"Little is known of him. My research showed that he was a Sensate who, shortly before his death, destroyed all the dozens of sensory stones that he had recorded experiences into. It was noted as a great loss to the faction, for the man - though he had few friends, lashing out at anyone who approached him too closely - was said to have collected a great many wondrous sensations."

"How did he die?"

He shrugged. "I do not know; the records do not say."

~~~~~

He couldn't have destroyed everything.

If he had, I wouldn't have had all the clues that led me to this point. If he was as great a Sensate as Able described, his recorded experiences wouldn't have been left in the public Sensoriums. I sifted through one sensory stone after another, probing each sensation just long enough to see if it was me. For many it was difficult to sever the connection once I realized I wasn't in the shoes of a heavily scarred immortal. It was like trying to awake in the middle of a compelling reverie, or freeing yourself from a sweet daydream.

But if Deionarra's memories could be found, I was sure I could get more clues into that sociopathic bastard Able described: the one I saw as Deionarra's lover in her fantasies.

The inscription around the base of the next sensory stone I chose indicated that it held the experience "Week-long hunting trek across the forests of Arborea."

My fingers wrapped around the surface, and I let the memory seep along my flesh...

I stand in a circle of white tents deep in the woods, somewhere. The trees around me are, by far, the largest I've ever seen. Suddenly, though, there's an odd prickling sensation at the back of my skull...

My surroundings melted into a colorless smear, then slowly resolved into what looked like the interior of a large, gray sphere. Across from me crouched a figure almost identical to myself. His eyes flashed in the half-darkness; a mad smile split his features. "I KNEW you would come..."

"Who are you?"

"Oh, don't you KNOW? Didn't all those FILTHY, LYING, THRICE-BE-DAMNED JOURNALS tell you who I am? Those journals were so conveniently 'left' for me when I awoke... those journals that called me an INCARNATION! Hah! Burned them ALL, I did, all that I FOUND..."

"So... you're one of my earlier incarnations."

He crossed his arms and looked away, "If you put STOCK in such TRASH, yes."

"What did those 'lying' journals say?"

"They spoke LIES, LIES, LIES and nothing more! Filth about a man who forgets himself, other incarnations, of preserving their experiences in writing so later lives could benefit... THIEVES! It's MY life; MINE! YOU ALL WANT TO STEAL MY BODY, AND YOU WON'T HAVE IT!"

Oh god. He was insane. He wasn't the one I saw, wooing Deionarra with that silver tongue of his. Those eyes were wild with the bending and breaking that only a dozen planes of rattling thoughts and shivering marches could bring. "Where am I?"

"Oh, THIS?" He gestured around him, snickering. "Just a little TRAP, is all, I realized that KILLING you BODY THIEVES might not be enough... I might have to TRAP you, ENSNARE you for eternity. You might have realized, by now, that there's no way out of this sensory stone... your mind is locked here. You'll note the rather SPARSE surroundings I've left for you... all to help the MADNESS set in good and QUICK while your flesh rots away." He chuckled evilly.

"I have some questions, then..."

My earlier incarnation crossed his arms and looked away indignantly. Save

for a few more tufts of hair on his head, he was identical to me - even his arms had most of the tattoos mine did.

"Did you put those tattoos on?"

"No!" He looked distraught. "That one incarnation, that 'PRACTICAL' one, did. I've tried to burn them off, but the skin REGENERATES with the tattoos still on them! I have tried to TEAR them off, stain them with ACID... I HATE them..."

"But... why?"

His eyes flickered uncomfortably. "It is maddening to feel the EYES upon you, reading your BODY like a BOOK..."

"How did you make this trap?"

"Can't tell you that... it'll never be REPLICATED, the magicks used in its creation were LOST, even to me. CLEVER it is, though... one experience HIDDEN under the other, so that no FLESH but my OWN would set it off..."

"But... if your flesh sets it off, wouldn't that mean I'm you? You've trapped yourself. I've trapped myself. Don't you see?"

"But... that's not... you're one of the... I thought I put in SAFEGUARDS! How could I be so FOOLISH!" He wrung his hands together, biting his lower lip.

"How to get OUT? HOW? I've forgotten... wait: 'I am the only one who can release you, and that I will not do.' If you are I, then you CAN release yourself..."

I willed the trap open.

## Chapter 80

Don't be under any delusions that being a Sensate is all fun and games. Sure, I've heard that there are, occasionally, orgies of feasting and wine and sensuality that would make the most severe hedonist blush. But pleasure is only a sliver of experience that can be found in the multiverse.

For breakfast I had sat down to a clacking mass of claws in a ceramic bowl. The bits clacked, their motions quickening with the casual prod of a fork. With each spasm the snapping tips would flick a speck of blood-colored sauce across the table. When an order comes with a free antidote you know it's going to be bad, but it was one of those obligations as a Sensate.

"Attention: Fall-From-Grace. I wish to address your body," Nordom chirped in his sexless drone.

"Pardon me?" Fall-From-Grace raised a coy eyebrow as she lowered her tea.

"Your body. Your form. Your reason for selecting it. Why?"

A smile crept at the edge of her lips, "Why... I suppose I find it comforting. Besides, I rather like the wings."

"It would be more practical for you to assume the form of a modron. It is 13.27% more efficient. Give or take +5.2%."

"Why, Nordom, are you trying to court me?" Her tone was teasing, and edged on being flirtatious.

"It was not my intention to initiate legal action against you."

Do modrons blush? I was tempted to ask Morte, but he seemed as amicable towards Nordom as my breakfast was to me.

"I have heard of you..." a woman murmured behind me. I turned around, and just as I looked away one of the critters snapped down on my fingertip, drawing blood.

I swallowed the oath that came to my lips and tried to smile. What came out was more grimace than grin, "Greetings. And you are...?"

She was incredibly attractive; sharp-featured and smooth-skinned, with an earth-colored gown that served to accentuate her pale flesh and gray-black hair. There was some intangible aura about her that made me want to speak to her, and I had to bite down on my tongue to stop the bumbling words on its tip that would've passed my lips otherwise. I stood up, and she glanced at me coyly, then gave a knowing smile.

"I am Unfulfilled-Desire. You want something... yesss?" She hissed the 'yes', drawing it out slowly, sensually, from between her teeth. Her voice was breathy, with a whisper of a slur, "I can help. Name your desire, and I shall provide it."

"I loooooove the Festhall," Morte beamed.

The woman ignored Morte, her eyes locked with mine. She smiled, awaiting my response.

"What do you have that I might want?"

"All that you might want lies within my reach. What little I do not possess, I can obtain. Speak your desire..."

"I want my memories returned - all of them."

She smiled. "Much may be forgotten in a lifetime... and much more, in several lifetimes. I can help you." She studied my face closely, "Come into my parlor... and we shall negotiate."

I looked back to the others. Annah's lips were pulled back into a disapproving scowl, but she said nothing.

Unfulfilled-Desire's apartments reminded me of a dusty old antique in the corner of a store. Well-decorated, skillfully done in technical terms, but bland and half-forgotten in the broader scheme of things. Compared to her, the furnishings melted away into indistinct and ever more irrelevant surroundings.

"Explain to me the ways in which you want these memories. Speak to me your craving, and I shall speak to you of the price."

"What proof do you have that you could return them to me?"

She stood still, but suddenly her hand was touching my forehead, a finger dragging along my temple. "Only this..." and the fog in my head began to peel away, briefly, enough to catch a glimpse of remembrance... but before I could focus on the memory, the mists rolled back in. The renewed obscurity was thick and cloying, leaving me frustrated as if I had been on the edge of a sneeze. "Only this. Only tell me why you desire it, speak to me your craving, and I shall speak to you of the price..."

"I want them back... is that not enough?"

Her smile hardened. "You must give your desire voice and emotion, or it is as dust to me. You must convince me that you truly desire what I can impart, or it shall not be yours."

I began to describe how I wanted my memories back: the conscientious fear of the unknown, the thirst of curiosity and the terror of potential sins, peeled back raw and bleeding and revealed anew.

As I spoke her smile faded, and Unfulfilled-Desire leaned forward attentively, her eyes ravaging my features as I continued. Her presence compelled me to speak more than I normally would, and after a few moments, her eyes fluttered closed as she gave a sharp intake of breath. Suddenly, the desire for my memories began to wane... my want slowly drained out of me, leaving only a sense of cold emptiness in its wake as it bled out. She opened her eyes again as I stopped speaking.

"What is wrong, traveler? Do you no longer want your memories returned to you...?"

"No... I mean, yes... what have you done to me?"

She seemed perplexed. "Whatever do you mean?" Despite her innocent demeanor, I was certain that something unnatural had occurred. She had somehow siphoned off some part of my desire - stolen it away for some ghastly collection of wants, or perhaps to feed upon. Had I finished speaking of my desire, I was certain it would have been lost forever.

"Come, now; is there something else you want, then? Tell me of it..."



"I'd... best not. Farewell, Unfulfilled-Desire."

~~~~~

If Able Ponder-Thought was right, the Fraternity of Order was the best place to head to for help on translating this journal.

The closest one I could find lived just a few blocks down from the Civic Festhall. The crest of the Faction was emblazoned on his door, and every citizen I asked pointed to this house as that of the most prominent Guvner in the neighborhood.

It was more a library than a home. I walked down the thin alley of bookshelves, which smelled dry and musty and sharp with age, like an old wine. Past the aisle was the advocate's office proper, with benches lined for petitioners for his aid. You'd think that a member of a faction composed entirely of librarians and lawyers would be old and crotchety. I know I did, and I wasn't disappointed.

He was dressed in soft blue robes covered with intricate designs, wrinkled and worn despite their opulence. He looked older than his years, somewhere between middle-age and early sixties as far as I could tell. The worry lines made an exact determination difficult. Everything about him seemed to sag, and he seemed to lean on his cane not because he was weak, but because he felt he needed to.

As I approached, the man turned slowly towards me; as he did, a cold chill ran up my spine. The terrible sense that I knew this man, or did at one time, wormed its way in the back of my mind.

"Greetings..."

The man squinted, as if trying to place me. "Yes? Is there something that I can help you with?"

"Are you a Guvner? I've been asking around."

He nodded, studying me with a frown. "I am Iannis. Were you looking for me?"

"I don't know... what is this place?"

"I am an advocate. These are my offices." Iannis' voice took on an irritated edge. "Do you seek counsel? If not, perhaps you had best test your curiosity elsewhere."

"An advocate? What's that?"

Morte broke in with a whisper, floating up beside me. "He's saying he's a lawyer. A counselor. One of those berks who rattle their bone-boxes at the courts."

Iannis' frown deepened. "An advocate provides counsel, helps others navigate the labyrinths of Sigil's legal system, arranges legacies for citizens to insure that their property is divided as they choose upon death, defend those in Sigil's courts who have been wrongly accused..." He paused. "Did you need help in any of these areas?"

"Legacies?"

"They are contracts that are deliverable at the death of the client. They provide specifics on how a person's possessions are to be divided upon the event of their demise. I have also heard them called wills."

"Are they anything like Dustman contracts?"

"Oh my, no! The Dustman contracts, while they are deliverable at the time of the client's death, bequeath the client's body to the Dustmen; not a pleasant business at all, but some who are poor of means find the Dustman contract to be a means of support... "

I dropped the subject, "Have we met before?"

Iannis leaned in with a heavy squint, frowning in thought. The wrinkles on his face became more pronounced as he did so. Age had placed a heavy toll on him. "No... yet you seem familiar..."

"Yet..."

He continued to study my features, then shook his head. "I will concede that there is something familiar about you, sir, and I apologize for any insult my failing memory may be giving you at this moment... I have been preoccupied

for some time now. Have we met before?"

"I think so. I can't really remember myself."

"Hmmm. Frustrating for us both, it would seem."

"Excuse me for asking, but are you all right?"

Iannis sighed. "I do not wish to burden you any further... as I mentioned to you before, I lost my daughter not long ago. There was also the fire... but that is another matter."

I nodded. That chill grew sharp and sent needles along my back, but I asked anyway. "Tell me more about your daughter."

Instantly, Iannis seemed to collapse into himself. "Yes..." His businesslike facade drained from his face, to be replaced with cold despair. "My daughter, Deionarra, passed away some time ago..."

I stood, dumb and still as a cold chill lanced into my bones. My lips parted in shock, my eyes widened. Deionarra. I could almost hear the tender whispers and half-slurred murmurs of passion, feel the shy blushes and heavy caresses. There was a cold emptiness from the echo of memory, barren of love and bound with ruthless deception.

Iannis may have said something, but I found it hard to listen.

"Tell," I swallowed, doing my best to pull my mind together, "Tell me about her. What was she like?"

"Deionarra? She was... young. She had recently joined the Society of Sensation, the Sensates... not an unpleasant faction, but she had also met someone there... she followed him on a journey and there, she died. Her bod..." He looked pained. "I was not even able to recover her body..."

"You say she was a Sensate?"

"Yes..." He became slightly more animated, as if warming himself on a precious memory. "She had joined them because of her gift... and the fact there was so much about the multiverse that she wanted to experience. The Sensates lend themselves readily to the sharing of experience and

sensation."

"Gift?"

"Oh, yes..." Iannis nodded. "My daughter had the blood of an oracle running in her veins, but it was a unreliable talent. At times, she could predict events before they took place... she had 'Sight'; she could see through time itself, sift through the threads of fate..."

"Do you know anything about this man she journeyed with?" I bit my tongue, both afraid and eager to know if he remembered.

"Little. I barely even knew of his existence until she had departed. By then, it was too late to have known him."

"Do you know where she went on this journey?"

"She never said. I am not certain she was capable of saying where they had gone. It must have been a... terrible place."

"How did she die?"

"I do not know... her body was never recovered." Iannis' face turned blood-red and his hands clenched into fists. "And that is perhaps the most maddening part of this misery... I will never know what possessed her to run off like that, what happened to her, nor where her body lies now!"

"Forgive me for asking, but how do you know she's dead if you never saw the body?"

"It is most curious... I went to the Dustmen to see if they had found her body, and they directed me to one of their faction outside the Dustman monument... a Dustman named 'Death-of-Names,' I believe. He is said to be an oracle of sorts, concerning those who have died. He told me my daughter had died."

I nodded, "I saw a woman named Deionarra interred in the Mortuary memorial hall."

"Yes, I arranged for a bier to be placed in the memorial hall. There is no body there, of course, but I hoped the bier would serve as a marker by which she

may find her way home."

I couldn't bear to tell him of the state she was in now, and shifted the conversation to other matters, "I see. Tell me about this fire."

"There is nothing much to say about the matter... it was a strange, localized fire. I cannot imagine what would have been precious in the documents that were burned, but someone must have wanted them destroyed."

"Any luck in locating the person responsible?"

"No, neither the Harmonium nor the Mercykillers have had any fortune in locating the person responsible."

"Can you tell me what was burned?"

"A number of old legacies were burned, and some mementos and other keepsakes of value only to me."

"Actually, I have come to collect the legacy of a young woman..."

"Indeed? Very well... do you remember the legacy in question?"

I bit my lip, suddenly hesitant. The legacy number Deionarra spoke of in her sensory stone was fresh in my mind. As much as I tried to forget the details, the entire experience had been carved across my memory, leaving bleeding runnels and gaping wounds. "The young woman's legacy is '687-KS.'"

"That..." His eyes widened as I named the legacy. "My daughter's legacy...?!" He looked shocked. "How do you know my daughter?!"

"I don't know. I'm hoping the legacy can answer that."

"Why would..." Iannis seemed at a loss for words. "Who are you, sir, that my daughter would have left a legacy for you?"

"It is possible that I knew her once... and have forgotten her."

Iannis studied my features more intently. "You do seem familiar, somehow..."

"Perhaps if you got the legacy, it might answer some questions for us both."

"Of course, of course... hold a moment, and I shall return presently."

"Very well. I will wait."

He shuffled off, cane clacking with each step. He was quick about digging it up. How many times had he stared at the locked legacy, aching to know what was inside but legally bound to protect it for whoever would come to claim its contents?

"All the articles are accounted for..." Iannis held three scrolls in his hands. He stared at the items, almost hypnotized. "Here you are. If I may... may I read them, sir?"

"Let me read them first, then I shall decide."

"Of course..." Iannis seemed broken. "But please, I beg you, I have very little left to remember my daughter by..."

"I shall not forget. I will return after I have read them," I promised. As much as I wanted to ease this poor man's troubles, I needed to take care and protect others from my past. I unrolled the scroll.

My Love,

If you are reading this, then the tragedy I have seen has come to pass. I have died, and you have remained to suffer the loss.

Know this, my Love... I know why you were forced to shield your feelings from me. You sought to protect me from the terrible burden you carry with you. The distance you kept between us was your way of protecting me, and the brief moments when we were alone and you let your feelings be known, that was when I knew you cared for me. Carry no regrets with you, carry no guilt, for I came with you on your haunted journey of my own accord, and no matter how death came for me, I know that you did everything in your power to save me.

Our lives are intertwined, my Love, and death shall not be a wall between us.

For my sight has seen what is to come, only in staccato segments, but it is enough for me to know that we will be separated for a time, but we shall

be reconciled again. Thus, do not see my death as a farewell, but only as an interval before we meet again. Carry my ring with you, and these other pieces of me, and think of me. Keep me in your mind and heart, and that will be the beacon that brings us together.

*Forever,
Deionarra.*

I slid the ring onto my finger, cold to the touch yet strangely comforting. The pale azure-white gem pulsed with a soft light.

~~~~~

*She looks up to me with the shy blush of a maiden, on this day that she had been the bud of her fantasies. Many times I had apologized, promising I'd make it up to her eventually, and each time she held my callused hands in hers... soft and pale as milk.*

*"All I need is you, my love," she would say, and deep in her heart she would mean it. There was no need for flowers or lace, pretty gowns or grooms. The touch of our hands and the vows on our lips would be enough. She had always set aside her dreams for me.*

*I counted on it.*

*Only a few scattered Sensates sit in attendance, and those few only because they had heard secondhand. There had been no time to send out invitations. The lecture hall had been the only spare room I was able to find for the ceremony, and even by a non-Sensate's standards the surroundings were austere. She'd been eating out of my hand for weeks now. There was no need for anything too fancy.*

*"I do..."*

~~~~~

I blinked off the vestige of the memory to see Iannis standing nervously, both hands tight on the handle of his staff.

"Here's Deionarra's legacy, as I promised."

Iannis took the scroll and studied it. There was a long silence, then he slowly

looked up at me. "You... meant very much to my daughter. She was willing to give up her life for you."

"I believe that is the case."

Iannis handed the scroll back to me. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your kindness."

"It is the least I can do," I paused, "Iannis... the man your daughter left with... I believe the man was me. But I have forgotten much."

"You?!" Iannis looked me up and down. "You are the one... and you say you have forgotten?!" Iannis drew himself up; he looked as if he were squaring himself for a battle. "Is that what she died for... for the love of you! And you have forgotten... but the incident was not so long ago. How can this be?"

"I have a strange condition... I lose myself... for a time. Anything you can tell me about myself or your daughter would be invaluable."

"Countless liars have I known in my tenure in this city." Iannis studied me intently. "You do not strike me as one of them... at least on this matter." He sighed. "If you truly do not remember, then whatever befell you and my daughter on your journey must have left deep scars."

"I am inclined to agree."

"Then I ask your word on this: If your memory returns, and you discover what has happened to my daughter, return to me so that my mind may at last be at rest on this matter."

"I will do that," I vowed.

"Very well, then. Now leave. I wish to be alone with my thoughts."

There were only so many revelations the old man could bear in one day, but I knew that if I left now I may not have been able to bring myself to come back. "Before I go Iannis, there is a sensory stone in the sensorium that contains a fragment of your daughter's experiences."

Even as the words left my tongue they sounded sleazy, inviting Iannis to pry in on his daughter's most intimate of memories. But by how his eyes blazed

with hope, I knew it was the right decision.

"There is? But in which one...? You must tell me!"

"It is in one of the Private Sensoriums... if you are not a Sensate, you could not gain access."

He thought for a moment. "I must find a way... perhaps they would make an exception for her father..."

"If you wanted, I could speak to someone. I'm certain they would make an exception in your case."

Iannis looked relieved. "If you could, I would be most grateful."

"I will see what I can do. Farewell."

~~~~~

As always, Splinter dominated the atrium of the Civic Festhall, stoic yet attentive. His eyes slid over to me once more.

"Greetings, traveler. How may We assist?"

"Greetings, Splinter. I've come to petition on behalf of a man, Iannis, whom I was hoping you would grant temporary access to the private sensorium..."

"And for what reason would We allow such a thing?" There was neither dismissal or approval in his voice, just the firmness of resolution.

"Because one of the stones there contains a fragment of his daughter's experiences. She died far from home not having seen him in a long while, and he mourns her loss deeply."

Splinter nodded, mulled it over for a moment, then nodded again. "Yes, We shall allow this Iannis to enter the private Sensorium -- well-escorted, of course. You may tell him he has permission."

~~~~~

Iannis turned as I entered and his eyes lit up hopefully. "Ah! At last! Were

you able to convince them to grant me access to their sensorium?"

"Yes. They agreed to give you access to your daughter's sensory stone."

"You... I... thank you, good sir, thank you! I am in your debt!"

"It was no trouble, Iannis. Please, go see the experiences of your daughter. I think they might ease your troubles."

Chapter 81

As long as I was at the Festhall, I figured I might learn something from the lectures that were held there.

The crowd's murmurs filled the room. Though the lecture hall was modestly large, I squeezed through a Byzantine maze of protruding elbows and skirts. Women glared at me for the occasional treaded dress hem, while those noblewomen in more scant clothing shot piercing looks when I brushed past as if I were trying to feel them up.

I grumbled and ignored their gazes. If they chose to dress that way, they could hardly blame me for bumping against a little bare skin.

I should've let Grace take the point instead of trying to be a gentleman. For her the crowd parted as much as they could. The Sensates knew of Grace's prestige in the faction, while the more ignorant at least knew not to cross paths with a Ta'nari. The Clueless might not have been quite so tactful, but not many of them attended this lecture, apparently. Too bad: they would've benefited the most.

A squat, hunched old man stood on the podium, still bearing the broad shoulders and scarred, callused hands of a worker or warrior. An aura of weary despair hung him about him, by his furrowed brow and bitter scowl. The name on the sign that advertised the lecture outside read "Ghysis the Crooked," and by his gnarled features I could see why.

"Right! Now lissen up... this is th' seminar on th' War. If ye're 'ere ta lissen 'bout th' Blood War, take root. If ye're not, ye're in th' wrong 'all and ye'd best 'ump yer soft, comfort-lovin' Sigilian limberstombs outta 'ere."

"The Blood War? More boring than listening to a Guvner recite laws. Let's find some young Sensates who need to be indoctrinated in the ways of passion!" Morte waggled his eyebrows in anticipation.

"No, Morte... I want to hear this," I said, hushing him quick, just as the rest of the crowd let their conversations die in the air.

The man suddenly threw a dark eye over the audience, as if looking for something. "An' further, if ye're tanar'ri or baatezu, 'ump yer scaly 'ides out th' door. I's not lettin' ye ornery bastards bend an ear ta this an' then lissen ta yer barmy arguments..."

Grace tilted her head ever so slightly, drawing a delicate finger along her cheek in thought.

"...'cause this is no discussion on who's right." Behind us, I could hear the sounds of something large leaving the lecture hall. "It just tells the Blood War from the 'uman point o' view. I's not promotin' one side or another, 'cause they both stink in different ways."

The speaker became somber. "So... what's left o' ye're wantin' ta lissen ta some Blood War stories... tales about th' War. 'Ere ta 'ear the 'orror of it all, no doubt. Th' floatin' fortresses wove and weaved o' 'uman skin! Th' Planes-wide battlegrounds th' Blood War be fought on!"

He bared his yellowed teeth: "Tales o' fiends lockin' fangs with other fiends! Grar! Snrarrrr!" His snarl faded, and he looked suddenly bored.

"Well, lemme peel back yer lids an' crack yer bone boxes: 'tis all a steamin' 'eap o' barmy nonsense ta be dwellin' on that forge-dung." He spat in derision, rolling his eyes wildly.

"I'll tell ye this, though: Ye can't imagine th' scale th' Blood War is fought on. Nothin' ye've seen, 'eard, or participated in - nothin' compares: time, numbers of 'legions,' sheer bloodshed... nothin' compares, berks. Ta try an' imagine it - forget it. My advice? Simple: Stay away from th' big bloody mess

all together. Th' only thing ye needs ta know is this: fiends are killin' fiends. Baatezu are slaughterin' tanar'ri, tanar'ri are butcherin' baatezu. Right now." He spat again. "Neither's winnin'. Don't think either can win. Biggest stalemate this side o' eternity... thank the Powers."

"That's it." He shrugged. "That's it. I'll be answerin' any questions ye gots fer me, now..."

A young Sensate raised his hand.

"What's yer question, cutter?"

"What started the Blood War?" he called out from the crowd.

"Ye got a right ta be curious what started this big ol' soddin' soupy mess in th' first place: what set th' fiends ta lockin' 'orns in the first place, bitin' an' clawin' at each other until that was the only reason they were alive... Simple: they met." He sighed. "Tanar'ri an' Baatezu crossed each other one day an' like two drunken bigots, they set ta fightin'. That simple."

He frowned. "Well... Naw, pike that: imagine two drunken priests who believe each knows th' only way ta live. Now make those priests ripped with scales an' fangs an' horns an' a cruel streak seven leagues wide an' put them in an itty-bitty soddin' cell... an' ye 'ave a good idea o' th' love that can spring forth. An' there ye 'ave it! The origin o' th' Blood War."

"Why are two evil races fighting?" another asked.

"One believes evil should be nice an' orderly. One believes evil should be chaos, runnin' rampant across th' Planes. Both evil, but doesn't mean they can agree on anythin'. Bad blood, bad blood... each wants ta exterminate th' other so only their 'brand' o' evil remains. They hate each other, like... like..." The speaker wrung his hands together, trying to find the right words. "Ye see, they don't hate like we hate. We don't even know what hate is. We have one, one word fer 'hate.' They 'ave..." His voice dropped. "...thousands, upon thousands, their meanin's twisted an' piled like... bodies. That's why they fight."

"Can't you give me a little more on the Blood War itself?" I called out. Morte rolled his eyes. I could've asked him just as easily.

"If I were ta boil it down, it'd be this: th' Blood War's been goin' on damn-near-forever, an' will keep goin' on until damn-near-forever itself gets penned in th' Dead-Book. Th' tanar'ri, th' champions o' chaos an' evil are tryin' ta stomp th' green-colored dung out o' th' baatezu, the champions o' law an' evil. They butcher each other over 'ow each o' them thinks evil should be, if ye can believe that. Hah!"

"What do you think would happen if someone stopped the Blood War?"

"Ye can't make any pikin' difference in the War! It's too soddin' big. Ye're a stone, a pebble in an ocean that's a pebble in another ocean which is a pebble in another ocean an' so on and so forth 'til th' stenchkows come 'ome. As a pebble, yer goal is ta be not noticed an' sink ta th' bottom with th' rest o' the dregs... If ye could make a difference - which ye can't - ye shouldn't try, 'cause then th' Planes would tumble on down."

I was glad I was taller than most here, so he could see me clearly. "The Planes would tumble down? Why?"

He held up his hands like pillars. "Th' Blood War's like a big, bloody support beam proppin' up th' Planes... kick it down, an' a lot o' th' Planes'd come tumblin' down with it. Lot o' baggage rests on th' back o' th' War." He suddenly brayed like a donkey, laughing bitterly. "Th' biggest, nastiest pack animal on th' Planes..."

Ghysis grinned cynically. "Besides, as some say, war's great fer business." He laughed hollowly, then looked as if he could suddenly cry. "Eh... never ye mind that... another question?"

"Are you all right? You seem pained..."

The man smiled sadly. "Aye, aye... listen, cutter: I'm no priest, nor would I want ta be one, but 'ear this: keep evil out o' yer heart. When ye die with evil in yer heart, yer spirit falls into th' Lower Planes, where ye become a petitioner... Any guesses as ta what 'appens then? Petitioners in th' Abyss an' Baator get twisted into footsoldiers... an' get ta fight in th' Blood War fer all eternity." He chuckled, shaking his head. "So that's th' dark as ta why th' baatezu an' tanar'ri try an' corrupt all they touch; 'cause they need more troops. 'Eed this: keep evil far from yer 'eart, berk."

The questions came, mostly from the front of the crowd where we mingled.

A few questions were shouted from the back of the room, carried over only by the polite silence of the attendees. "Where is the Blood War fought?"

"Plenty o' places... usually th' Lower Planes. Anywhere along th' River Styx... the nine layers o' Baator, th' four furnaces o' Gehenna, the Gray Waste, cold, red Carceri - the prison plane - an' the pikin' near-endless well o' evil that's th' Abyss." Somehow, the Gray Waste sounded familiar...

Luckily, someone else was just as curious apparently. "Tell us about the Gray Waste."

"Also called th' 'Glooms.'" Ghysis shrugged, then shivered, as if by reflex. "Gray in every sense o' th' word. Colors burn yer eyes there; they shout, are too loud, and yer dreams are pulled ta th' surface an' poured on th' ground, lost forever. Only th' night hags rule there... the Gray Ladies o' th' Waste."

One particularly callow, fresh-faced youth had an insouciant smile on his face. He was either Clueless or spoiled rotten. "How does one get hired into the Blood War?"

"Ye know, every once-a-when some leather-headed berk comes 'round askin' about a job in th' Blood War. They want some jink, they want a quick stint an' then ta get along with their lives. Mayhap I was one o' these leatherheads. Mayhap I was a sellsword, an' 'eard there was a little jink ta be made in th' War. Got me interested..."

He shook his head, "Taught me a lesson, it did: we're like ants runnin' around th' heels of dancin', sod-pike gods. I saw big men, who claimed ta be big soldiers... Paper soldiers. Wars' a furnace fer them. Makes them wake up or burn."

The young man wrinkled his nose, as if sizing up Ghysis, "So, how'd you survive the Blood War?"

The man's face darkened. "I... well, that's th' one thing I won't speak of, cutter. Suffice ta say a man does what 'e 'as ta do ta escape the War."

"Surely you could advise us on how one is to survive the Blood War?"

Ghysis stabbed his gaze at me, "Ye wanna know 'ow ta survive th' Blood War? Three things, cutter:" He held up a maimed hand with only two

fingers. "First off, ye stay th' pike out o' it. Secondly, keep yerself th' pikin' 'ells out o' it. An' lastly... ye stay the bloody, pikin' sod-pike out o' it. If any part o' th' War rolls yer way, let yer imagination give yer bum a kick an' run as far an' fast as ye can. If ye can't run, then lies really still an' pray it passes ye by." He paused for a moment. "'Cept, there's no place it don't touch an' there's almost nowheres ye can run ta get away from it."

"If there's nowhere to run, why aren't their fiends fighting in Sigil?"

His expression seemed to soften, "Aw, now, cutter, look: they 'ave fought here... a few times. Sometimes we get a lil' spillover from the Blood War. Our Lady of Pain, bless 'er steel-ridden heart, puts out th' fires... some o' th' time." He sneered. "There's been times, some horrifyin' drizzle-on-yerself-ye're-so-sodddin'-scared-times, when they've smashed an' burnt an' clawed their way through whole soddin' city blocks in Sigil afore she decides ta clean house." He clucked his tongue and winked cynically. "So she ain't always as keen on stoppin' the Blood War as it might seem, see?"

"Why don't the fiends just take Sigil?"

He laughed, but it turned into a sputtering cough. "Don't get me wrong now: both th' tanar'ri an' th' baatezu want Sigil fierce. 'Tis th' most precious stagin' ground in th' pikin' multiverse - th' Cage is th' City o' Doors an' connects everywhere. Ye can't ignore it, an' if ye're servin' in th' Blood War an' wanna win, ye gotta have it."

Ghysis coughed again. "'Tis just th' fiends aren't goin' ta get it while th' Lady's in charge, 'tis all. She's tough as nails, 'er blades'll cut ye deeper than any fiend's fang. An' that knots th' fiends' stems like ye wouldn't believe. One quiet Lady, 'er 'ands tucked in 'er sleeves, 'oldin' back th' Blood War all by 'erself." He laughed bitterly.

"I don't find it hard to believe that a woman can stop the Blood War," Grace chimed, and instantly Ghysis looked mildly chastened.

"But fiends are still allowed in Sigil?" I continued.

"Oh, damnably certain. They can't brawl in th' streets... too much. So as neutral ground, Sigil allows them ta rattle their bone-boxes without tryin' ta murder each other. Sometimes they'll chat it up with each other 'ere. The peace don't stay that way fer long, though..."

"Also, just 'cause they can't butcher each other in th' streets don't means spies, recruitment an' back-stabbin' don't still go on 'ere. They fight battles with lies an' words, berk. Sometimes 'tis all in th' bluster an' blather. An' there's safe houses about, too. Places where they can cool their talons afore th' next skirmish... An' they like ta recruit 'ere, too. Lookin' fer boys fresh off th' Planes with a little greed in their 'earts that they can make part o' their glorious army." He stopped speaking to peer closely at me. "Mayhap they recruited ye once, eh, cutter?" Ye look like ye've tasted th' War."

"Perhaps."

"The War leaves a scar on ye, cutter. Ye'd know. And ye'd know ye never want ta go back."

A pressure built in the recesses of memory, and my temples throbbed with agony as I considered the man's words...

~~~~~

*This is the place where hopes go to die.*

*This is where prayers go unheard, falling like stones to the earth...  
vein-colored lightning flashes across things that were once sky, but now boil  
beneath my feet and scream when I brush against them...*

*I run at the head of a large band of men, passing through dark canyons  
where the walls quiver moistly and beat like a heart, wearing my own blood  
as clothing. At last I stand in a place where the ashen gray terrain slithers  
like a mass of snakes, coiling around my ankles and whispering my evil to the  
earth. We march endlessly, silently, through this colorless land, where  
fatigue seems to live and hunt us like a shade over the wastes, whipping us  
with despair...*

*I want to scream, but futility drags even that urge into its depths.*

*In time, I and the ragged men who follow me come upon a hag sitting upon a  
mound of gigantic, writhing larvae, poking at one of the slime-covered things  
with a broken talon. I gesture for one of the men to run forward and speak  
with her; the hag's grating voice carries to my ears...*



*"I would speak with him," she says, then cackles. Her eyes gleam as she points me out to the man. "The handsome one that leads your ragged column. I would speak with him."*

~~~~~

"Cutter? Ye feelin' all right, there?"

For a moment the storm of color, texture, and scent assailed me. I suppressed the panic that welled up like stale vomit. Coming back to the Festhall straight from what I could only surmise to be the Gray Waste was a shock to the senses. "Yes... I'm fine. So, do the fiends recruit often?"

Ghysis nodded grimly. "Ye can be sure o' that. Sigil's th' best source o' fodder on th' Planes. Beats milkin' planets o' all their prime inhabitants... too much work."

"So, any more advice on surviving the War?"

"Aye: whatever ye does, don't talk about th' Blood War with any fiend... or any deva or archon fer that matter. Just don't talk about it, period, 'cause ye never know who in the 'ells ye're really chattin' with. And all o' them get mighty touchy when ye bring up th' War. It's their reason fer livin'."

"Anything else?"

He nodded. "Don't go through any portal unless ye're pikin' sure ye know where it goes. Maybe ye 'aven't 'eard tales o' clueless planeswalkers steppin' through a portal an' endin' up smack-dab in the middle o' a Blood War skirmish. Know why ye 'aven't 'eard o' them? 'Cause those sods are dead, dead, dead."

"Anything else?"

"An' whatever ye does, never sign on fer a tour o' duty, no matter 'ow much jink they flash in yer mug. Certain death an' signin' on fer a tour in th' Blood War are th' same thing, cutter."

"Why's that?"

"Chances are when ye sign up, they peel ye so yer tour o' duty is 'til time

itself grinds ta a 'alt. Even death wouldn't be a release, 'cause then ye sink inta th' Lower Planes an' get dredged back up as somethin' worse'n ye were before. Then they got their talons on ye fer all eternity."

"How would you get out of a tour contract?"

"Unless they don't want ye, ye don't 'ave much chance. I never heard o' it bein' done with mean-spirited recruits, or somebody they really wanted ta keep their talons on. Outwittin' a tanar'ri is risky but can be done... the baatezu are much more dangerous with their contracts. Ye sign one o' those, ye're dammed fer life... Ye might try a little garnish, try an' dawb them, an' they might let ye make a run for it... but where would ye go? There are so many 'ells..." he trailed off.

"And dying in the Blood War would be an especially bad thing?"

"If ye were evil, sure. If ye're good, ye'd go ta another Plane ta spend yer afterlife. But ye'd still be a deader. Now fer me, I still got a lot o' evil ta wash from me soul, so if I'd died in th' Lower Planes, they would've had me lock, stock an' barrel."

Ghysis scanned the crowd one last time, and when there were no more questions he gave a firm nod. "Right... this is th' last bit, then. Some o' ye are Sensates, so's I got one thing ta say ta ye: don't sign up ta see 'what th' pikin' Blood War is about.' Don't be a barmy idiot. Use a sensory stone if ye gots ta know, but stay the 'ells away from anythin' ta do with th' Blood War fer real. 'Tis just not worth it. 'Tis..." For a moment, a look a great pain crossed the man's face; it looked as if he was going to weep. "...not worth it, at all. That's the end o' this session, so farewell."

I tried to make sense of these memories, and to shake off the oppressive feeling that came with them, as we left the Festhall again.

Chapter 82

Rumor had it this man was a linguist.

He was a short, scholarly man, with a tight, nervous frown on his face. He looked me up and down as he sifted through the sheaf of papers on the table. It was an attempt to appear busy on his part so that I might leave him alone. "Greetings; I am Finam. I must beg you pardon, sir, but I care little for guests - invited or otherwise - so unless you've business with me, I would ask you to leave."

"I was hoping you could help me, actually."

"I would have you know that I am a scholar and a linguist, sir," he huffed, "While I shall happily entertain any questions regarding my field of study - language, and the like - I can be of no help to you in other matters."

I unfolded the dodecahedron to a page with 'writing' on it and presented it to him.

Finam took the unfolded dodecahedron in his hands and examined it closely. "This language is a long-dead one, known to virtually no-one. I believe my father - a linguist, like myself - knew this language, and may well have been the only man in Sigil at the time that could understand it. I recognize it from his notes, but I cannot translate it."

"Do you have those notes, still?"

Finam shook his head. "They'll be of no use to you if you're looking to translate anything... and the few actual books he had pertaining to that language disappeared around the time of his murder, I believe."

"Your father was murdered?"

Finam nodded. "Strangled, he was. He had left to tutor someone - he taught various languages to supplement his research income - and was discovered dead in a side-chamber of the Civic Festhall. The killer was never found. This was some... oh... perhaps fifty years ago, now. I was but a child."

"He knew the language, though, and could teach it?"

"Surely he did and could, were he alive today. My father was said to be a great teacher." Finam sighed sadly. "I've his skill with language, but not his patience for others, sadly."

"Is he... interred at the Mortuary?"

"Why, no... his ashes are kept here." He pointed to a bronze urn sitting atop a cabinet beside a bouquet of purple flowers. "Why?" A wry smile crossed Finam's lips. "A necroscope, are you? Speak with the dead?"

"Er, no. Just wanted to pay my respects, is all." I turned to Grace with a wink. 'Distract him,' I mouthed.

With a light flap of her wings, Fall-From-Grace presented herself grandly, hands open and head slightly bowed. "Finam, I have heard much of you. You lectured at the Civic Feshtall, as I understand it. On the phonetic differences between the dialects of Bytopia?"

Finam snatched off his cap immediately, giving Fall-From-Grace a deep bow, "M-madam Grace! It is such an honor to have you in my home. Oh dear, please forgive the clutter..." all businesslike pretense had been abandoned, "I'm afraid I've been busy you see. I didn't realize you were interested in my work."

"I am interested in all matters of discourse," Grace smiled, "Though I'm afraid I had been preoccupied with other things. Such a pity I missed your lecture... I must imagine it was fascinating."

"Well, I'm glad you think so at least... well, you and Vivian of cour-" he mouth snapped shut, "That is to say, I- er..."

Grace laughed, sitting down on a chair the moment Finn cleared it of a small pile of books, "Master Finam, I as am glad to have you as a guest in my establishment as you are to have me. I know that among all her patrons, you are one of Vivian's favorites. Come," Grace smiled, gesturing for the linguist to sit down, "Let us talk."

Brilliant.

The urn sat atop a small cabinet, no doubt full of ashes and charred bits of

bone. Etched into the base of the urn were the words 'Fin Andlye - Beloved Husband, Father, and Scholar of One Hundred Languages.'

I glanced over my shoulder and, reassured that Finam was preoccupied, I gently opened the lid.

Probing the barrier between this world and the next, the ashes seemed to stir faintly as if moved by my breath. A far-away voice whispered up from within the urn. "Why, why have I been summoned to these ashes, cold and grey as the heart of a hag?"

Now that contact had been made, I no longer needed to keep in such close proximity. Leaning against the wall and attempting to appear casual, I murmured in the breathless voice of the dead, "To answer some questions, spirit..."

"Ask, then, so that I might return to my most quiet thoughts..."

"Who were you?"

"I was Fin, a linguist and scholar. I was murdered - murdered! - by a student of mine... murdered so that I could not teach another the language that I taught him. The tongue of the Uyo, it was, one of the rarest in the multiverse. I knew of none who spoke it, save myself and that one, damnable, murderous student..."

With the dodecahedron still unfolded, I described to him the strange lettering.

"I could teach you this language, yes... it would please me to do so, in fact, if only to spite that bloody-handed student of long ago. First, tell me what languages you do speak..."

As the spirit spoke to me of the lost language of the Uyo, a throbbing sensation pulsed in my temples as a memory began to surface... memories of the language. It all came back to me... letters, words, phrases, until - like a Spire-wind blowing away the blanket of poisonous smog over the Great Foundry - the language was once more revealed to me in its entirety.

But even as that memory faded I could sense another one layered beneath, bubbling to the surface... a darker one. Its presence stirred my heart, filled it

with unease and unexplained pangs of guilt...

~~~~~

*"Very good," Fin Andlye smiles. I had repeated the poem. Near-perfect inflection- yes, yes. His voice is gentle. Kind manner soft gaze. The corners of his eyes crinkle the way they do when he is impressed skin peeled back into wrinkled folds.*

*"Amazing, is it not? To hear it on new lips brings such fresh life to the culture once again," his voice swells. He is proud, "I have great faith that with your fluency you'll be able to do many things. Perhaps one day the Uyo can live again in books and speeches. Perhaps you can pioneer the field."*

*Need to fake obsequious grin. Cast my eyes downward, act hiding an embarrassment at high praise. Keep together still need him just a little more just a little.*

*Soon, yes soon.*

~~~~~

Festhall a mash of colors and textures place too crowded need to find secluded spot. Sights and scents and sounds too much. Taste the colors, feel the scents. Rings red and green and the music ever-present haunting the halls with ghostly echoes. Feast is on tonight, halls abandoned save for the mindless sensations that fill it.

Silence is best but music helps. Soothes.

Nails dig into my forearms. Carve small half-moon wounds into my flesh. Hands tremble in determination, gnarled and scarred and wrapped around Fin's frail throat. Firm cartilage beneath supple flesh and muscle resist compression. Press him down against the floor and put weight into it throat crushes against my palms and pressure causes blood to well up in his eyes burst capillaries.

Gagging sounds sicken me. Shut up old man shut up shut up shut up.

When he is cold and still I crouch next to him trembling at the physicality of it. Breathe. Safe, finally safe the journal hidden in a thrice-trapped

*dodecahedral puzzle-box and penned in the obscure language of the Uyo.
Forever safe from prying eyes.*

The music continues to play.

~~~~~

The spirit seemed mildly confused at my apparent proficiency in the language of the Uyo. "You seem to possess some grasp of the language already, student..."

"Fin... I must tell you... it was I who murdered you."

The spirit was silent for a time, the ashes rustling softly within their urn. When it spoke once more, its voice was full of sorrow. "But... why... and why would you come to me once more? Did you forget what you had been taught?"

"No... well, yes. It is difficult to explain, but it must have been a former 'self' of mine that murdered you. Each time I die, I reawaken, as if from long sleep... but having forgotten everything... who I was, or what I'd done..."

"I think I understand... I sense your regret, and would forgive you. May peace be with you, pupil of old, and may you prove kinder in this life than in the one which saw an end to mine..."

"Thanks, Fin. Farewell."

~~~~~

I returned to my room to read. Written by a murderous and paranoid madman I didn't expect much to be of real illumination. I wasn't really disappointed.

"THE WHISPERS ARE NOT THE SHADOWS MOVING. THEY ARE SPEAKING PLOTTING TALKING TO EACH OTHER. I CAN UNDERSTAND SOME OF WHAT THEY SAY."

~~~~~

"THE BOOK TELLS ME THINGS, WHISPERS THINGS. IT TELLS ME TO AVOID THE

GHOST GIRL, AVOID HER. I DONT KNOW HER AND SHE TORTMENTS ME."

~~~

"AND SO I SWALLOWED IT, HOPING IT'D CATCH IN MY BOWELS. I CAN MAKE SOMEONE REMOVE IT WHEN I NEED TO."

~~~

"I HAVE LEARNED THAT MY LIFE IS NOT MY OWN. I WILL NOT ALLOW YOU HAVE MY LIFE..."

"YOU WILL HAVE TO PULL MY LIFE FROM MY BROKEN BODY IF YOU WANT IT..."

"IT'S YOU WHO WILL DIE, IF I CANNOT HAVE IT NEITHER WILL YOU."

"YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS TREASON OF FLESH, YOU WILL NOT LIVE TO LIVE MY LIFE."

~~~

"THE ACCURSED TATTOOS WILL NOT LEAVE MY SKIN! I HAVE TRIED TO BURN THEM OFF OF MY SKIN - FAILED, FAILED! I TRY AND CLOAK MYSELF, BUT I ALWAYS FEEL THAT PEOPLE ARE READING MY FLESH, READING ME LIKE A BOOK. WHENEVER THEY LOOK AT ME I WANT TO TEAR THEIR EYES OUT PLUCK THEM FROM THEIR SOCKETS AND CRUSH THEM BENEATH MY HEEL..."

~~~

"WHY CAN'T I DREAM?!"

"I USED THE GOBLET OF SEMIR TO FORCE A WAKING DREAM. I SAW A HAG. SHE TEMPTED ME, THREATENED ME WITH SHADOWS! I HAVE NEVER SEEN HER, BUT SHE CAME WHEN I DREAMT. I MUST NOT DREAM AGAIN. I MUST ALWAYS BE AWARE. I DESTROYED THE GOBLET."

"SHE SAYS SHE IS SOMEONE OF POWER, AND THAT SHE WILL HAVE ME, WILL FIND ME. GET AWAY, HAG! STAY FAR FROM ME! LEAVE ME IN PEACE! I WANT NOTHING TO DO WITH YOU!"

"HER VOICE REEKED OF EVIL'S TALONS, TALONS LIKE SPIDERS, THEY



BURROWED INTO MY GRAY MATTER, AND I NEEDED HER OUT OF MY MIND. OUT!  
OUT, HAG!"

"SHE WAS A MYTH, A FAIRY TALE WHO ALONE CHALLENGED THE LADY OF  
PAIN! HOW CAN ONE FIGHT SOMEONE WHO IS A MYTH? I DON'T HAVE THE  
WEAPONS. I NEEDED WEAPONS THAT WILL KILL HER SHOULD SHE FIND ME. I NEEDED  
A STRATEGY SO SHE CANNOT DEFEAT ME WHEN SHE COMES FOR ME. I MUST  
DEVISE, AND THINK - I SHALL BEAT HER."

~~~

"FEAR NAMES. NAMES HAVE POWER IN IDENTITY. NAMES CAN BE USED AS
WEAPONS BY OTHERS. THEY ARE A HOOK THAT CAN BE USED TO TRACK YOU
FIND YOU HUNT YOU ACROSS THE PLANES. REMAIN NAMELESS, AND YOU SHALL
BE SAFE."

~~~

"I WENT TO THE FESTHALL, LOOKING FOR THE PATH OF MY FALSE SELF IN ITS  
HALLS. SO GLARING WAS IT, THAT THOSE I DID NOT KNOW, THE FALSE ONES,  
WELCOMED ME INTO THEIR CONFIDENCE, TREATED ME AS A FRIEND,  
SHOWED ME MY ROOM, ATTENDED TO MY NEEDS. I HAD TO RESTRAIN MYSELF  
FROM LAUNCHING OUT AGAINST THEM. THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN PREMATURE.  
FIRST, I NEEDED TO PROTECT MY IDENTITY. I FOUND ONE WHO KNEW THE  
EXCLUSIVE LANGUAGE OF THE UYO, LEARNED IT AS I COULD, THEN KILLED HIM.  
THEN I WENT TO THE SENSORIUM AND PREPARED TO END THE MATTER. SOON,  
SOON..."

~~~

"THERE IS NOTHING HE CAN DO. MEMORIES ARE GONE, HE SAYS, NEVER TO
RETURN. HE SAYS/LIES AND TELLS ME THIS IS WHAT HE TOLD ME! LIES! HE SAYS
MY MIND IS WEAKENING FROM EVERY DEATH! LIES! HE SAT THERE,
BETRAYING MY CONFIDENCE WITH EVERY TURN.
HE SAYS THAT ONLY AFTER THREE MORE DEATHS, THREE MORE LIVES WILL
I GAIN THE BENEFIT OF KEEPING MY MEMORIES, BUT THAT I, MYSELF, I WILL
DIE WHEN I DIE. DIE! HOW CAN ONE BE IMMORTAL AND STILL DIE?! HE COULD
NOT ANSWER, SO HE WAS OF NO USE. I BUTCHERED HIM SO THAT NO OTHER
INCARNATION WILL EVER BENEFIT FROM HIS USELESSNESS."

~~~

"SO THE GHASTLY HEADS SAID:"

"YOU HAVE BEEN DIVIDED. YOU ARE ONE OF MANY MEN. (ONE IN MANY MEN?)  
YOU BEAR MANY NAMES; EACH HAS LEFT THEIR SCARS ON YOUR FLESH..."

LOST ONE

IMMORTAL ONE

INCARNATION'S END

MAN OF A THOUSAND DEATHS

THE ONE DOOMED TO LIFE

RESTLESS ONE

ONE OF MANY

THE ONE WHOM LIFE HOLDS PRISONER

THE BRINGER OF SHADOWS

THE WOUNDED ONE

MISERY-BRINGER

YEMETH

"YOU ARE SILVERED GLASS THAT HAS CRACKED AND THE PIECES SCATTERED  
ACROSS HISTORY"

"ONLY ONE PIECE IS OF IMPORT. REGAIN THAT, AND YOUR LIFE WILL BE YOURS  
AGAIN. THERE WILL BE A PRICE. THIS PRICE WILL BUY YOU A CHANCE. WITHOUT  
THE CHANCE, YOU ARE DOOMED..."

"YOU HAVE LOST THAT WHICH IS NEVER MEANT TO BE SEPARATED  
FROM MAN. YOUR MORTALITY HAS BEEN STRIPPED FROM YOU. LOST. IT  
EXISTS, BUT YOU MUST FIND IT BEFORE YOUR MIND IS LOST TO YOU  
AS WELL."

~~~

"A LEGACY, THE NOTE READ, 'FORGET NOT TO COLLECT YOUR
LEGACY,' AND A SMALL CODE SCRATCHED BESIDE IT: 51-AA..."

"A TRAP, NO DOUBT, SET BY YET ANOTHER OF MY FALSE SELVES. I'LL SEE
IT DESTROYED, I WILL."

Most of it meaningless, some of it disturbing, all of it barmy. But the legacy
number was interesting. I planned to return to Iannis tomorrow, after some

window shopping.

~~~~~

"Attention: Morte. I have a question. Do you have a destiny? A purpose?"  
Nordom chirped.

"Is Annah still wearing clothes?"

"Affirmatory."

"Then the answer is yes."

I rolled my eyes and went back to examining the wares at the back of Vrischika's curiosity shop. She was a damn skilled merchant. Knowing how much stuff I buy she was always able to keep an eye on me to note my interest and swoop in to explain the item's history and its price when it came to a peak. All the while it would've been almost impossible to tell that she was hovering.

I had been examining a tiny rag doll. The years had not been kind to it; it was coming apart at the seams, and it looked like its threads were unraveling. It was obviously intended to be a replica of the Lady of Pain, but the button eyes and its plush softness didn't strike much fear into my heart.

Vrischicka smiled, noting the interest she always pried from my eyes and unlocked to ease, pulling it out and holding it up for me. "This was found in a well-trapped strongbox sunk deep beneath the surface of Sigil. It was part of a small horde of treasure and forbidden magical texts, though I don't know what it's for. If you like it, it's only ninety-nine copper coins."

The once-colorful cloth had been grayed with age and dust, and as I reached out and touched it the barest hint of familiarity tingled through me.

"I'll take it."

As always, Annah kept her distance. "That's ill luck, it is," she muttered.

"Rargh! I dare you to pray to me!" I teased, wiggling the rag doll at Morte.

"The Lady doesn't talk, chief. And I don't think she'd sound like a giant toad

gargling a cauldron full of old broth even if she did."

"Point taken."

"Why the Hells did you buy that thing, anyways?" Morte muttered, floating beside me. I shrugged, "I don't know. It just seemed kind of familiar..."

I focused, trying to snag the ragged hem of memory. For once though it seemed elusive, so unlike that eager upwelling of nostalgia. It evaded my curious probings, but once I snagged its rough edge I knew something was wrong.

*By the hunger of change and emotion  
By the thirst of unbearable things  
By despair, twin-borne of devotion  
By the pleasure that winces and stings  
The delight that consumes the desire  
The desire that outruns the delight  
By the cruelty deaf as a fire  
And blind as the night*

The profane litany came in brief flickers: vulgar poetry trickling from scarred lips and brewed with a half-crazed and desperate mind. I could feel the rough stone against my bent knee, the fresh cloth of the rag doll in my hand as the incarnation of memory whispered in a voice mocking, pleading, and insane.

*By the ravenous teeth that have smitten  
Through the kisses that blossom and bud  
By the lips intertwined and bitten  
'Till the foam has a savour of blood  
By the pulse as it rises and falters  
By the hands as they slacken and strain  
I adjure thee, respond from thine altars  
Our Lady of Pain!*

"Run..." my lips were dry.

"Ch-"

"RUN."

I took off at a dash, fleeing down the streets as my companions called out to me from behind. With my limbs light with panic, even Annah couldn't catch up. I darted down one alley, then another, knowing full well that the Lady was as familiar with each path as one is with the veins of his own hand.

My boots pounded on pavement worn away by acid rains, throwing up dust blown in from desert worlds. Air bittersweet with the nectars of Celestia and the effluvium of the Abyss gnawed at my lungs, and they burned as I continued my mad dash through the ward. Of course it was futile, but what could anyone do but run?

The normal cacophony of the Sigilian crowds died with horrified gasps and mute whispers. Many froze in place, too shocked to flee but aware enough to draw semicircles over their hearts. They were quick to part as the cold razor-edged shadow behind me stretched out with merciless purpose.

And then the paths began to change.

The buildings I passed were empty, and with each step they became more warped. The streets became jagged and bent, as if space had begun to curl in on itself like a dried-up leaf. The world was painted with strange colors and silent hums. And once the path before me began to evaporate like sublimating ice I stopped. There was nothing to be done now.

I turned around.

She floated, robes flapping in an unfelt wind. Her eyes were half-lidded and pale, her face was smooth and expressionless as if it were nothing more than a mask framed with a halo of blades. This was the one that could slay gods with a glance, whose displeasure drove mortal and immortal alike mad. She was the one that caused love to sour into despair, and whose blades carved away possibilities and left regrets.

"It wasn't me..."

She floated towards me... ever enigmatic, ever serene. The half-world I was caught in rippled away, and with something akin to a snap of pinched flesh everything solidified around me.

"Crap."

## Interlude

Your gaze darts across the tavern, catching the squirms and uncomfortable shifts of limbs and bodies. Few things are taboo in the Sigil, much less the Hive, but speaking any tale of the Lady (if such must be spoken) was only ever acceptable in alleyside whispers or murmured conversations in the corner of dank taverns.

Now that Jeanette Dovel Four-Winds had proclaimed it proudly from the stage, a number of Hivers draw semicircles over their hearts. You do so yourself... it had been a habit for far too long to change now.

Mikon chews his lip. For once the callow young Harmonium guard is silent, and it is left to G'mir to vent his horror.

"Are you mad, girl?!" he snarls, "Are ye tryin' ta call 'Er Serenity's gaze on us?!"

"Well iffin' ye prefer to shout her name from the heights of the heavens to the depths of the sea, I'd wager yeh've just taken the heat offa me, lad!" Jeanette laughs.

The sullen dwarf immediately turns green.

"The subllme MaDnesS of bEAt poeTry shaTters uPoN the NiMbic GLImmeRs and SigH thEir LasT!"

"She is right, gentlemen," Epetrius proclaims, "A predictable orderliness underlies the Lady's behavior, though to a novice it may seem erratic," he begins ticking off the facts on one slim-fingered hand, "One: She seeks to preserve the lawful state of affairs within Sigil by deterrence via punishment. Two: She slays those that would treat her as a goddess through prayer (hypothesized as a natural logical extension of her prohibition of deities, She must ensure that She herself does not become a deity for the sake of consistency). Three: those that violate either rule listed previously are slain by Her shadow. Given that She possesses the apparent knowledge, motivation, and power to condemn those that violate Her wishes, the fact that Her presence is not seen here is sound evidence that Jeanette's telling is not in violation of said wishes."

"Aye? Well let's see you get up on that stage and repeat that part of the telling!"

The color drains from the tip of Epetrius's nose, but he hides his queasiness with a thinning of his lips, "I have no need to do such and I certainly wouldn't waste the audience's time even if they wished. The night's grown long already. I have a meeting with the Third Instructor of the Tikilaikian Academy in the morn. We should continue."

"Yes, as I have spoken through the words of the Guvner I should continue my tale, but carefully. The Lady represents my fear of the unknown. I will believe in Her so long as She is useful, but the moment I expand my consciousness I must forget Her presence," a Signer proclaims proudly.

"Imagine the focus She must have!" a Sensate cries out in jubilation, "To have access to all of the multiverse and the ability to taste all the colors of the planes, to feel the aromas of infinite realities, to gaze upon the flavors of all the wines of existence! No wonder She is so calm, so serene! She basks in countless wonders and is in touch with truths beyond comprehension!"

Oh no, not this again. Once any idiot broaches the topic a hundred tongues will wag, all to no avail or progress.

"Please! Her enemies are the Powers themselves. Can't you see that Her power was found by casting off the false shackles of religion, and embracing the true Dark behind it all?"

"No! The Lady is the ultimate force of law. She slays the unrighteous, cuts away those who would offer false prayers to Justice, for Justice cannot be prayed to... Justice must be executed. She knows that mercy isn't even for the weak... it is for no one at all."

You just calmly dab a crust of bread on your plate, stirring it around to sop up the congealing sauce left over. Every time a serving woman offers to take it you wave her off to fetch more bread. You'll be nibbling for another few hours, at least. Leave the fools to their useless pontification... you've got a plate of red wine sauce in front of you to battle.

"She is the ultimate test... that final conquest that must be taken before a God can transcend this existence!"

"She is composed of six giant squirrels in a robe and headress using a Ring of Levitation and Illusions!"

"She is that which is!"

"meMOry'S bArbS SERvE tO aCTuaLlze tHe frACTaL oCEan!"

"As fun as this is, lads!" Jeanette shouts above the din, "Let us focus on the tale at hand, or do ye all not want to know how The Nameless One escapes?"

"He escapes?" the Mercykiller that had spoken earlier murmurs in shock. She reddens and scowls in anger, "NO one can escape the clutch of Justice!"

"Aye! Else t'would be a dull tale if he didn't, wouldn't it?"

## Chapter 83

### Maze Entry 1

Trying to keep myself sane by writing down my thoughts. I have no idea how to count time while I'm in here, but I've been blocked from the world outside. The isolation and silence incubate my thoughts, and as the seconds scrape away it's become far too easy to turn within. The memories of the past are welling up and blending with my own, and the two streams of thought bloat the minutes into aeons.

~

### Maze Entry 2

The maze has no barriers, only winding paths separated from one another by chasms of lightless depth. Narrow ways limit my movement, while the exposure of having no walls to protect me leaves me feeling vulnerable to



whatever wights might attack.

Though I know there's nothing else here, now and again I look over my shoulder. I don't know why.

Don't know how deep they are maybe infinite void can't fall can't fall

~

### Maze Entry 3

Damn I'm hungry.

Must be weeks down here. Stomach has bloated and withered and bloated again. Regenerating body keeps death at bay.

~

### Maze Entry 4

ten sleepless nights ebb and flow insomniac's sharp, clear-glass gaze fogs over can't sleep

The ground is hard to sleep on, but lying down and resting is little comfort. The feeling of being out in the open makes it hard to rest, and even if I do manage to nod off vestigial dreams claw at my mind and leave me in a fitful half-sleep. I regret having my dreams restored sometimes.

I know I'm alone, but I can't help but feel like the eyes are on me.

*O lips full of lust and of laughter,  
Curled snakes that are fed from my breast,  
Bite hard, lest remembrance come after  
And press with new lips where you pressed.  
For my heart too springs up at the pressure,  
Mine eyelids too moisten and burn;  
Ah, feed me and fill me with pleasure,  
Ere pain come in turn.*

*O garment not golden but gilded,  
O garden where all men may dwell,*

*O tower not of ivory, but builded  
By hands that reach heaven from hell;  
O mystical rose of the mire,  
O house not of gold but of gain,  
O house of unquenchable fire,  
Our Lady of Pain!*

~

#### Maze Entry 5

They say that when the Lady mazes people, she leaves an exit in here somewhere, but it's so well-hidden that people go mad with desperation searching for it. I'm keeping it together pretty well, though. I'm sure I can find it.

I just wish the voice in my head would shut up.

~

#### Maze Entry 6

I'm still hungry.

Hunger pangs distracting. Must eat and clear mind if I am to escape. Conjured a little water and a touch of fire.

The process is painful, but access is easy with a little bending and a polished blade. Sliced harvested kidney into thin pieces and boiled for soup. Meaty. Tastes faintly of urine.

~

#### Maze Entry 7

Found some claw marks along the path and a little dried blood. Looks like someone went into a bit of frenzy here. Seems like a good sign though... I'm beginning to trace the path my previous incarnation took. He must've found a way to escape in the past. The memories haven't pointed the way yet though... most of it is just crazy gibberish.

*For the crown of our life as it closes  
Is darkness, the fruit thereof dust;  
No thorns go as deep as a rose's,  
And love is more cruel than lust.  
Time turns the old days to derision,  
Our loves into corpses or wives;  
And marriage and death and division  
Make barren our lives.*

*And pale from the past we draw nigh thee,  
And satiate with comfortless hours;  
And we know thee, how all men belie thee,  
And we gather the fruit of thy flowers;  
The passion that slays and recovers,  
The pangs and the kisses that rain  
On the lips and the limbs of thy lovers,  
Our Lady of Pain.*

~

#### Maze Entry 8

I found a piece of gar-bar root stuck in the bottom of my pack. Picked off the lint. It was the most delicious thing I've ever eaten.

Regeneration too slow. I am running out of kidneys.

~

#### Maze Entry 9

Found a portal framed by an arch. I walked through it, but all it did was transport me to another part of the maze.

*Dost thou dream, in a respite of slumber,  
In a lull of the fires of thy life,  
Of the days without name, without number,  
When thy will stung the world into strife;  
When, a goddess, the pulse of thy passion  
Smote kings as they revelled in Rome;  
And they hailed thee re-risen, O Thalassian,*

*Foam-white, from the foam?*

*When thy lips had such lovers to flatter;  
When the city lay red from thy rods,  
And thine hands were as arrows to scatter  
The children of change and their gods;  
When the blood of thy foemen made fervent  
A sand never moist from the main,  
As one smote thm, their lord and thy servant,  
Our Lady of Pain.*

~

## Maze Entry 10

Jackpot.

Found a crude encampment. A firepit had been burned into the stone floor, and two old ratty blankets served as a pallet. An assortment of charred human bones had been piled up on the side, disturbing and overly familiar. I don't approach them.

it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts

Digging around however, I uncovered a heavy warhammer and a journal. Cleverly constructed, the frame was made from human bones spliced together, with sheets of dried human skin stretched across them. The skins had healed together forming the the spine of the journal, and locked together other pages of skin between. The cover was of the same pallor as my flesh, and its scarred gray surface was reminiscent of a zombie's hide. It was pretty obvious what this had been made from.

A series of incomprehensible symbols had been written in blood across the cover. They had been scrawled with a crazed hand, and were written upside-down, right to left, and at odd angles that made my eyes hurt. I really wish I had that linguist on hand.

They say the ladies love a linguist. Who can turn down a master of many tongues?

Fantastic. Now I have Morte in my head too.

Despite the crudity of the writing, I had to admit that the design of the frame was actually quite intricate. The bones had been carved so that they snapped neatly together. It looked like they could be unhooked from each other, allowing it to be opened and read as a book.

I unlocked the bone frame, which unfolded with a neat snap. Opening the book and studying the pages yielded nothing. They were filled with the same strange series of symbols as on the exterior, and they didn't seem to make any sense.

~

### Maze Entry 11

Tried again and again to puzzle out the symbols. They didn't seem to follow any pattern... at least, any pattern I could see. The angles and pictures displayed seemed to be completely arbitrary, but I wasn't absolutely sure. At the very least, it was nice to have some blankets again.

*On sands by the storm never shaken,  
Nor wet from the washing of tides;  
Nor by foam of the waves overtaken,  
Nor winds that the thunder bestrides;  
But red from the print of thy paces,  
Made smooth for the world and its lords,  
Ringed round with a flame of fair faces,  
And splendid with swords.*

*There the gladiator, pale for thy pleasure,  
Drew bitter and perilous breath;  
There torments laid hold on the treasure  
Of limbs too delicious for death;  
When the gardens were lit with live torches;  
When the world was a steed for thy rein;  
When the nations lay prone in thy porches,  
Our Lady of Pain.*

~

### Maze Entry 12

It hit me, like a flash of lightning piercing the sky.

Just as I had re-hooked the bone frame after another period of studying it (took a bunch of notes to find some pattern to decipher it... wasted a lot of blood) I was struck with a strange thought... what if the interior pages aren't supposed to make any sense? I... or whoever I was at the time... put the symbols there to deceive anyone looking to read the real contents, which were hidden somewhere else on the journal frame.

Powers above, this one was paranoid...

With some fiddling I found one of the bones had a long hairline fracture around one of its ends. I put my hand over the edge and twisted off the top of the bone, revealing a hollow space. Inside was a small, rolled-up scrap of skin.

It was covered in writing, with words scrawled over and over it again until it was almost illegible. Nonetheless, I was able to make out some of the words and symbols...

"TRAPPED TRAPPED LADY'S WILL BE DONE DODGE HER GAZE... TOO MANY I KILL'D, TOO MANY STRANGLE AND KILL AND STOP THE BREATH IN THEIR THROATS... THERE'S A WAY OUT I KNOW IT THEN I'LL GIVE THE BLADED ONE THE LAUGH...

...ONE OF THE ARCHEZ HOLDS WAY OUT, ONE OF THEM DOES, ONE HAS THE WAY OUT, CAN'T JUST KEEP GOING THROUGH THEM ONE AT A TIME, MAYBE - MAYBE I SHOULD GO THROUGH ONE, THEN WALK BACK TO THE SAME PORTAL WITHOUT..."

The entry trailed off into indecipherable scrawls.

If this one had been mazed for killing too many, I wondered who it was that was mazed for praying to the Lady. How many incarnations had been trapped here? How many had died and reawakened in this pit of madness?

Actually, I didn't want to know.

~

## Maze Entry 13

Mapped out all the arches. As suggested by the journal entry I took one, then returned to it once again after I was teleported. I think I found the right portal. I stepped through it once, and when I returned the destination it led to had changed. I was looking through one arch and saw another.

Yes. Now this arch... the portal's edges glittered with trails of silver dust, and through it I could see an unfamiliar gray-bricked street. The music of a performing group sounded through, shattering the silence that I'd been trapped in for so long.

*What ails us to fear overmeasure,  
To praise thee with timorous breath,  
O mistress and mother of pleasure,  
The one thing as certain as death?  
We shall change as the things that we cherish,  
Shall fade as they faded before,  
As foam upon water shall perish,  
As sand upon shore.*

*We shall know what the darkness discovers,  
If the grave-pit be shallow or deep;  
And our fathers of old, and our lovers,  
We shall know if they sleep not or sleep.  
We shall see whether hell be not heaven,  
Find out whether tares be not grain,  
And the joys of the seventy times seven,  
Our Lady of Pain.*

I stepped through to deliverance.

## Chapter 84

Annah greeted me warmly at my return. She clutched me and pressed her warm skin to mine, which had been blanketed with the cold of the Maze for so long.

I really should've been more suspicious.

Crouched and bent over the floor of my apartments I clutched my chest, gasping for breath. Letting out a deep, nauseous cough allowed a little bile to spill past my lips. It was all I could do not to retch up my guts, then. Lucky thing then that Annah stormed off instead of working me over further.

The agony was slow to ebb away.

"Awww, looks like someone missed you," Morte said, bobbing, "Really though chief, you gave us all a real scare. We thought it was over."

"It was known to me that your destiny would not end there," Dak'kon added. The relief in his voice was plain, "Yet it was through Fall-From-Grace's conviction that we held together so well in your absence."

"He's right, chief. I tell ya we would've split up four ways if it wasn't for her."

"A consensus requires the agreement of all parties, Morte. Do not sell your own contributions short," Grace said modestly.

I stood up. Dak'kon was kind enough to help hold me up as I made my way around in a circle to work off the rest of the pain, "So how long was it?"

"A full tenday," Grace said, her voice soft, "All we had was time. Many hours had been spent looking through the Guvner's records of those that had escaped the Mazes. The tales were few. We even sought to hire those purported to have gone on expeditions to save those that had been victim to the Lady's wrath."

"Pikin' sods were lying through their teeth. Trust me, chief. When you've slung around as many tall tales as I have you know who's planning to give you the laugh and who isn't."



"Seemed so much longer than ten days..." I groaned. With each step it was becoming easier to speak, "Seemed like weeks. Months. No way to tell the time, memories layered over memories..."

"Query: by what mechanism did one escape the inverted spatial dimension known in singular as the Mazes?"

"I'll explain it later. For now, I could really use something to eat."

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Seared scallops in a savory-sweet Arborean wine sauce, clam and saffron stew over a bed of pasta, cubed steak seasoned with shiftspice, and a mug of sweet Ysgardian mead.

I was doing my best to savor it slowly. Wouldn't do well to celebrate my escape by horking it all down and having it come back up in an alley.

"Sir, might I interest you in a lovely oil-poached duck? Sliced thin, garnished with Arborean truffles and a sauce of-"

"One serving. And another bowl of that venison stew."

"Fall-From-Grace," Nordom chirped, "is it true that 'every woman thinks floating skulls are hot stuff?'"

"Why, whoever told you that, dear Nordom?" the barest quirk of her lips hinted at her amusement.

"No one! No one told him that!" Morte interjected. Grace just smiled and continued: "You know, Nordom, you are perhaps the cutest little rogue modron I have ever encountered."

'Cutest' is a subjective term. I prefer the designation "fearsome cubed warrior".

"Of course! That's why you're so cute."

Nordom had been trying to mimic our mannerisms, and the barkeep was kind enough to give him an empty mug to play with. He spent a few moments knocking the lip of the mug against his face, but eventually gave it

up and contented himself by playing with his crossbows. They made a variety of clicking noises, first one, then the other, as if conversing.

"What are you doing with your crossbows?"

"Attention, Nordom: required!" Nordom turn-swiveled to me, stuttered in mid-path, then re-oriented himself with a klank. "Response to Query: Action being performed on crossbows? Submit Request for Clarification: Null crossbows present."

"You have a pair of crossbows right there, Nordom," I pointed with a chicken bone. It was in the process of being gnawed clean.

"Clarifaction: Statement 'rife with fallacies.' Nordom does not employ crossbows." He stuttered for a moment, then suddenly the crossbows were pointing at me - but I didn't see them move. "N-N-N-Null crossbows."

"Don't point those crossbows at me."

I blinked for just a moment - and the crossbows were suddenly pointing at Nordom. He seemed oblivious to their movements, his gaze remaining focused on me. "Contradiction not initiate contraction. Null crossbows."

"Oh, really? What do you call those two -klicking- things in your hands, Nordom?"

"Response: Two -KLICKING- objects held in opposable digits." Nordom raised his riveted fingers and waved the two crossbows, which suddenly started klikking and twanging, as if in irritation. "Response: Objects = Gear spirits."

"Gear spirits? What do you mean?"

"Query: Define: Gear spirits. Response: Gear spirits."

"Yeah, but what are gear spirits?"

"Chief, as much fun as this is, prying a bar stool out of a baatezu's rear might prove more worthwhile than rattling our bone-boxes with this stupid polygon."

"Do you know what gear spirits are, Morte?" I cleaned off my fingers with a

damp cloth.

"Chief, I have no idea what this cube is rattling on about."

"I thought you were the expert on the Planes."

"Wh - I know more than you, you staggering, guttural amnesiac! 'Sides, here's three more bits of knowledge to rattle around in that empty brain-box of yours: one, there are NO experts on the Planes, two, I'm the closest thing to one you're going to find, and three, treat me with some respect. Why? See the second reason."

"Nordom, what are modrons?"

There was a klik-klik-klik as Nordom executed a rapid series of blinks, then he chrrruped. "Query: Modron, what is? Define: Modron? I am modron."

"Yes, but what is a modron?"

"Query: Modron, Defined: Modron, I am a modron, Answered." The shutters over Nordom's eyes klicked shut a few times, and his 'eyes' dilated to points. "New Query -"Modron, But what IS? Define: But what is Modron? Modron is Nordom. Backward Nordom = Modron."

"But..."

"Aighhhh! For the sake of the Powers and my sanity, cut it out! He's going to snap a crank if you keep asking him that over and over!" Morte yowled.

I shrugged, giving my mug a shake to signal the bartender for a refill, "Well, I wanted to know the answer, and I was getting it from him."

"Look, chief, NORMAL modrons barely understand anything beyond their basic tasks, and this stupid polygon here is fresh off the Planes to boot. Don't confuse the cube, all right? At least, not while he's armed. You want to know about modrons, ask me, not him."

"All right, Morte... what can you tell me about modrons?"

"It's like this, chief: Modrons are these stupid geometric shapes that clank around on their home plane, Mechanus -- they're really tidy, orderly, and

they'd like the REST of the multiverse to be, too. That's why they're such pests."

"You don't sound like that thrills you much."

Morte glanced at Nordom, who was holding up his left crossbow to the side of his head, as if listening to it.

"Because, chief, chaos has its place. And if everything was the way a modron sees things, it wouldn't be much of a life... at least a life I'd want to live. They just want to make everything structured. Yechhhh."

"Such balance between law and chaos is the way of the People. It is through the discipline of knowing the teachings of Zerthimon that we unite being and nonbeing, shape cities and weapons from primal chaos-matter through order," Dak'kon added sagely.

I nodded, "And what's Mechanus?"

"It's the plane where all these clockwork drones come from. Ask him about it, see what he says. It's where they sit around and tidy up everything all the time... catalogue this, put this in order, put that in order, make that law, and so on and so forth."

"Tell me about Mechanus, Nordom."

Nordom froze, then slowly the gears in his elbows began turning in a slow, hypnotic synchronization. "Define/Query: Mechanus. Plane of Order. Sense. Cause generates Effect. Predictable. Law. Logic. Regimented. Obedience. Gears turn. Mechanus = Nordom Origin. Mechanus = Null Home/Nordom."

Morte gagged, "See? Boring in every sense of the word, chief. Imagine a plane filled with modrons and big turning gears, and you have the great big BORING plane of Mechanus. Too many laws, too annoying. A place you wouldn't even want to think about, let alone visit."

Fall-From-Grace nodded. "Morte is correct - modrons share a common 'energy.' In some ways, this energy links all of them. When one of them dies, the energy is absorbed back into the common pool, and a new modron is created from that energy. When a modron goes... rogue... then he severs the link from his kind and takes a small part of the energy with him."

Morte glared at Fall-From-Grace. "Do you mind? I had the answer covered, thank you. I'm the font of information here, NOT you, all right?"

Fall-From-Grace nodded slightly. "My apologies, Morte. I did not mean to offend."

"Morte, I need all the information I can get, so don't get territorial on me," I grunted. I wasn't aware that he could get snippy at anything with a pair of breasts, "If Fall-From-Grace has something to add, then I want to hear it, all right?"

"Oh, I get it! Maybe if I was a succubus, you'd listen to ME more often, that it? Maybe if I showed a little skin once in a while, then I'd get some respect, huh? That's pretty shallow, chief, pretty shallow! Why, I ought to -"

"Morte..." Fall-From-Grace broke in gently. "I must confess, without your original foundation of information, I would have been hard-pressed to explain the situation... frequently, your use of metaphors and phrases makes it much easier for others to understand your explanations. It makes you a far better teacher than I."

"Oh, yeah?! I...?! Well...! Yeah, you just... yeah, you hear that, chief? What the succubus said? She's right. I'm easier to understand, more 'wise to the chant,' know what I'm saying? So you need me around, see?" Morte's mood had spun half-circle, and by the sound of it, it seemed he didn't understand how that happened himself.

"Right, so I have another question: you're both saying Norderm is part of this Source, but he's cut off from it. And when a modron dies, they're re-absorbed. Will Norderm be?"

Morte and Grace nodded.

"And if he dies, another Norderm is created."

"Eh... no," Morte grunted. Fall-From-Grace looked at Norderm sympathetically.

The skin of my forehead was tight with scars, but I felt my eyebrows furrow. "What happens?"

"Well, they'll take his energy, chief, and they'll spit out another modron, but it won't be Nordom, because he's not really a modron anymore; he's got too much of the Planes in him. They'll make a non-Nordom replacement."

"So... in turning rogue, he's become... mortal?" I looked at Nordom, who was once again amusing himself with a patron's mug. He had turned it on its side to examine it, and blinked in confusion at the pale golden ale that poured out.

Morte paused for a moment. "Well... yeah, you could put it like that. I mean, if he hadn't had his little rogue rebellion, then he'd be fine... if he died, another modron would pop up just like him. But since he became 'backwards' - well, that part's going to be lost when he dies."

I didn't like how that sounded, and turned to Nordom, "I'm curious, Nordom... how did you end up in Rubikon?"

Nordom chrrrured. "Query requires submitting of Chronology: Shall Nordom submit chronology?"

Thinking that he would've started in on his story immediately I had helped myself to a generous mouthful of noodles. It took a moment to confirm. "Yes, I would like to know."

"Orders received at initiation of Rubikon project: Departure from Plane/Mechanus. Stage First: Arrival at Destination: Plane/Limbo. Stage Second: Parameters dictated by Superior/Creative Director: Shaped matter of Plane (Limbo) to test hypothesis. Rubikon dungeon constructed. Superior/ - Director of 'Create' - lost in field test. Chronology disrupted upon achievement of Stage Second, Third Stage (disruption) occurs, not part of project directives."

It took a moment to parse his odd Modron grammar. I chose to fill that moment with more noodles. "What happened during this third stage?"

"Third Stage, unprecedented: Nordom-specific stage. Hypothesis: Lack of Director, plus Exposure to Plane (chaos) resulted in perspective of /Nordom/ to deviate from norm."

""Deviate from norm?' How?"

"Introspective cycle commencing." Nordom klicked his eyes closed and began to hum. A few moments later, his eyes klicked open. "Introspective Evaluation: Perceptions have become (1) smaller and (B) louder. Wings have been replaced with arms: reason unknown. Suspicion/hypothesis: not liked wings? Speculation. Nordom was once -ONE- but is now smaller, louder -ONE!- Change has resulted in information-processing difficulties."

"What was this field test?"

"Superior/ - Director of 'Create' - field test: Scouting perimeters of Rubikon (Difficult) Dungeon construct to determine: Variances. Many deviations detected: errors considerable." Nordom gave a low whine and shut his eyes with a klik. "Director of 'Create' not return from field test."

"I heard that the Rubikon Wizard disintegrated the Creative Director."

"Suspicion, Unsubstantiated = Now Confirmed: Superior encountered an error." Nordom's eyes klicked again, as if to clear them. "Query: The error was large and unexpected?"

"I'll say. I don't think he had much difficulty in wiping out the Director." Man that wizard was a tough one. For a moment the flavor of the wine died in my mouth at the memory of Ignus being abandoned there, crushed to death by the gears.

"Processing new information..." Nordom stared at me for a moment in silence, then there was a low grinding of gears from inside his frame. After a moment, he chrrrped. "Fate of Creative Director confirmed. Director = Nulled."

"Well, actually, Nordom, I'm the new Creative Director of Rubikon."

Nordom stared at me for a moment in silence, then a slow whrrrr came from inside his frame and he KLIKED. I wasn't certain, but it sounded like something clicked into place.

"Uh... you all right, Nordom?"

"Status Updated: Creative Director now re-affirmed in hierarchy." To my surprise, some of the warbling had gone out of Nordom's voice; it was more

level, more controlled than it was before. The effect was a little unnerving.

"Hmmm. Nordom... out of curiosity, what sort of duties is the Creative Director responsible for? And how much do you have to obey him?"

A slow tkkk-tkkk-tkkk began building in Nordom - like a clock about to explode. "Response: Responsibilities of Director: (A) Integrity-Maintenance of Rubikon Project, (2) Order-Issuance to Rubikon battalion/work group. Period of obeyance in accordance with Nordom obedience: Until Rubikon project halted, Creative Director = Nordom's superior."

"So... you'll do whatever I tell you?"

"Affirmatory."

"Do a little dance for me, Nordom."

Nordom immediately performed a little jig. His gears clanked and his joints squeaked, but it was about as merry a jig as a modron could perform. When he was finished, Nordom settled, then his eyes klicked open. "Order p-p-p-processed."

"Well that sure made my day, chief."

I chuckled, then looked to Nordom. He still seemed a little dotty and had trouble focusing. Maybe I could fix him. "Nordom, I want you to focus on clearing out any excess baggage from your memory and use it to improve your logic and introspection routines."

"Affirmatory." There was a moment of silence, then the shutters slowly descended over Nordom's eyes. There was a tkk-tkk-tkk from inside his frame, followed by a low grinding noise. The grinding noise turned into a metal screeching, as panels opened up in Nordom's sides, and... excess "baggage" started flying out. I caught each piece as they were expelled.

One of the gears in particular looked intriguing.

"Hmmm. What sorts of tasks did the Creative Director ask you to do?"

Nordom's shutters whrrred down over his eyes, as if he was thinking. "Task Routine: Evaluation/Forward-Scout/Tidier: Assigned perimeter of Rubikon

project to evaluate, catalogue, tidy, then report. Report includes:
In-in-in-tegrity Evaluations/Extermination of Project Errors/Wayward Item
Recovery of Un-Tidiness."

"Integrity evaluations?"

"Repeated word choice confirmed (Echo?): Inter-grity evaluation. Evaluation intended to detect flaws in Rubikon project, catalogue them, then /repair/ such flaws. Nature of Multiverse and nature of Plane: Limbo compromises Rubikon Project."

"How does the, uh, Multiverse... and Limbo... compromise the Project, exactly?"

"Properties of Multiverse: - Cracks - Seals - Cracks Again - Flaws Created. Creates "portals"/conduits in space. Frequency: Pattern Indeterminate. Solution: Unknown." There was a sssss as a small trace of steam rose from one of Nordom's vents. "Nordom cannot repair/seal cracks. Current Status: Nordom is limited to: perception of cracks."

"Hold on a minute. You can see 'cracks' in Planes? Portals? How?"

"Ability to detect portals: 80-90% Percent. Maximum Distance of Perception Varies According to Flaw/Mean Distance = $Y+78...$ " A bewildering series of klicks came from Nordom, as if a parade of snapping beetles were marching around inside his body. "Nordom must approach within ten feet of portal. Margin of Error: +/- 5th of Foot. Will sound off if near portal."

I hoped he wasn't about to pop a gasket or something. "And the extermination of errors?"

Nordom's normal warble dropped to a wavering murmur. "Errors: Many. All constructs in Rubikon Project are in error and exist in dis-obeyance with Creative Director and all personnel of Rubikon project. Order issued: Errors that persist in dis-obeyance are to be rescinded. Obstacle: Nordom not up to specifications of task without suffering Null State."

"So you couldn't stop these rogue constructs by yourself... at least without being torn gear from gear?"

"Affirmatory. Null State counter-productive to completion of task."

"Well, maybe if they'd given you better weapons..."

The crossbows in Nordom's hands began klikity-klikking and ta-wanging like a pair of strange insects. He listened to them for a moment, then glanced at me. "My crossbows wish to file a query followed by thirty-three pleas for help: 'Ammunition limited by suggestions of creator.' Do you wish to provide new specifications for them?"

"Sure..." I pondered a moment, "Well, how about something like... I don't know - a pyramid-shaped head, except the head splits into three when it hits something?"

There was a sudden ping from Nordom's crossbows and a sheaf of crossbow bolts began spitting out from their tops, arcing into the air. Two panels opened up on Nordom's sides, and the crossbow bolts sailed into them with a rattle, one after the other. After streaming out ten or so, the crossbows were silent. I had a strange feeling that they were exhausted.

Fantastic.

"Maybe they should rest for a while... what about Wayward Item Recovery?"

"Affirmatory. Items appear in maze that were not present in original design of Rubikon Project. They must be gathered, catalogued, evaluated and stored to prevent interference. Modrons are sent out to retrieve them and secure them."

"Hmmm. Did you find anything during your last trip?"

"Affirmatory."

"Can you give me what you found?" Hopefully these goodies would be more valuable than the random crap Rubikon spat out as rewards.

"Affirmatory." There was a moment of silence, then the shutters slowly descended over Nordom's eyes again. A tkk-tkk-tkk rumbled from inside his frame, followed by a whrrr-klik. A hatch opened up in Nordom's left side, and he reached over with his free hand and passed off several objects to me, including a stream of copper coins.

"Order processed."

This was the best day ever.

Chapter 85

"Greetings, Iannis."

"You again." Iannis' eyes were haunted. In the weeks or so since I had last seen him he seemed to have aged several years. His slump was more pronounced, his skin thinner and more pale. Many sleepless nights strung together weighed down his eyes. "What is it you want this time?"

He must've seen Deionarra's sensory stone. I was suddenly hesitant to speak to him in this state, but reminding myself that he had only seen Deionarra's memories rather than my own I approached, "I'm here to pick up a legacy."

"Indeed?" he sounded only mildly interested, "Very well... do you remember the legacy in question?"

"The legacy is number '51-AA,' I believe," I said, reciting the number from the dodecahedron. It was indelibly carved across my memory, given how many times I had pored over that journal in a feeble attempt to stave off the madness of boredom. I have no need to read it again, unless I wanted to reminisce over the doodles and dirty sketches I made with my own blood.

He looked at me in surprise as I named the legacy. "That is extremely old... are you certain... I hope that wasn't one of the ones that were burned..."

"How old is it?"

"Well..." Iannis pondered it for a moment. "Several decades at least."

"Can you check and see if the legacy still exists?"

"Oh, yes, of course... It will take a moment."

"Very well, I will wait."

Iannis returned after a while, nodding. "Yes, fortunately, it was unharmed by the fire. All the articles are safe."

"Could I collect on it? I am the beneficiary."

"Of course.. sign here and here... on the dotted line..."

"There? And there? All right..." I scribbled a little X on each line in lieu of a proper name. Iannis frowned, but it seemed to suffice for him.

"There we are; that should be the last of the paper work. Here are all the items that were in the Vault... one looks like a Foundry receipt, though quite an old one, to be sure. Did the deceased have something commissioned at the Foundry?"

"I don't really know. Perhaps... I'm beginning to think just about anything is possible."

The package he handed over included a glass eye and what looked to be a fossilized piece of bread. Whoa. This was an ancient artifact I had read of in the Godsmen libraries... the Stone Gullet of L'phahl the Gross.

As the "legend" goes, L'Phahl the Gross was said to have been a promising practitioner of the Art, a sorcerer's apprentice to one of the Last Seers of Es-Annon. Despite his skill at the Art, however, his gluttony was the subject of much ridicule among his peers.

During the last great Massing of Es-Annon, L'Phahl was invited to dine at the center table, but unknown to him, his peers had filled his wine goblet with an elixir of turning flesh to stone to teach the rotund student a "lesson."

L'Phahl consumed such great amounts of food and drink during the Mass, however, that it diluted the potion's effects. Complaining of a stomach ache hours after the feast, the local healers discovered that L'Phahl's stomach had turned into stone, yet was still capable of digesting food. L'Phahl lived the rest of his days happily eating, though his gullet was a few pounds heavier

than before.

When he finally died, his stomach was removed as an oddity... and since then, it has 'wandered' the Planes in search of new stomachs.

I left this to myself for one reason. Might as well make the most of it.

GULP

Wow. Utterly revolting.

I really wish I had a glass of water to wash this down. Scraping the last bits of the Gullet off my tongue and swallowing them (thus making no waste of any magic whatsoever) I led us down to the Foundry.

Grace could do nothing for the cramping in my guts. It was either the magic kicking into gear or a mighty case of (ironic) indigestion from eating that on top of a heavy meal. Whatever it was, I was going to be paying the price the whole walk down to the Lower Ward.

I'll just have to rip out my eye and replace it with this new doodad later.

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I began to wonder if there were any clerks that weren't old, crotchety men. Nadilin was hunched over his desk, flipping through an old book, "Oh good day to you. Need any help, sir?"

"I'm here to pick up an item."

"Do y'have a receipt? You need a receipt or I can't give you anything."

"Yes, I do," I pulled it out of my pack. The paper was thick, but so old and dry it seemed like it might've cracked like ancient leather if I wasn't more careful.

Nadilin took the receipt from me and scrutinized it carefully. "This thing's over a hundred years old! How'd you come by it?"

"I left it for myself, but I got busy."

"That's a good one, lad. I'll just bet ye were busy!" He laughed to himself, going to the back room to sift through the inventory. "Ah here it is! You're lucky we didn't throw it away - we do, sometimes, or sell it off, when we can prove the customer ain't comin' back for his stuff. Well, here you go. Treat it well, y'hear?"

What he gave me was a shimmering piece of filigreed metalwork. It looks almost gauzy, but with thorned edges that made it difficult to handle. I discovered that it could unfold itself into a square big enough to walk through. I had no idea where it goes right now, but it must be important if I commissioned it for myself.

Nordom examined it curiously, and a lens clicked over one of his eyes.

"Know what it is, Nordom?"

"Negatory," he responded, "Item appears to possess anomalous spatial features encapsulated within itself. Analysis: effect similar to modron cube. Correlation of inverted spatial curvature patterns: 42.0045%."

"So it's some sort of portal, you think?"

"Think- think" he clicked, confused "I think, therefore I am... I think."

"Nevermind."

All you need now is to find the proper key.

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Sometimes when you awaken (especially if you're a child, I think) the world of dreams still clings to you, like the cloth of an ill-fitting shirt dragging across your skin. You look up, and see something that fills you with dread. A spiral pattern on the side of a wooden cupboard, the spots of paint that seem to connect themselves into the visage of a mask, or a dark corner untouched by dawn's light. In the back of your mind you know it's just an inert something, but until the last fingers of sleep peel away from your mind you lie, frozen in fear that it's watching you.

That's what I was feeling now.

In the gilded halls of the Sensoriums there was one Stone that I had intentionally avoided. I don't know why I was afraid of it. Its sickly green crystal seemed to pulse like a pus-filled wound. Where the silver bands that bound other sensory stones were delicate, almost chaste in constraining the memories that lay within, the coils of metal around this one were more like a cage trapping the horrors that lay within.

The inscription beneath it read, "The Messenger." The innocuous name made it all the more terrifying, somehow.

As I touched the stone, its green exterior sharpened, clashing, its brightness becoming more than I could bear, so much so that I closed my eyes to shut it out...

The skin along my arms are numb, as if all sensation had bled from them. Tired... so tired. I try and blink, yet the darkness remains; my eyelids feel soft and sluggish, unresponsive. The dirt floor is hard beneath me, and around is the smell of coppery blood and... herbs? Why am I here? I came here to - what? My memory fails me, but a growing panic begins to well up within my chest...

I try to get my bearings with a futile attempt to move my limbs. Why can't I move?

"Ah... awake now, are you? A-questioning all-a-done?" The voice is an old woman's, thick and scratchy, as if it is trying to force its way past a thick layer of dust. Try as I might, I cannot open my eyes and see the woman, but a shiver of fear crawls up my spine. Something is wrong, terribly wrong. I try to respond, but all I can manage is a ragged croak. I can't feel my tongue... my mouth seems blank and hollow. The smell of blood is thick in my nostrils, but why can't I taste it? And my eyes? What's wrong with my eyes?

"Now, a-see me you did, a-spoke you did and poorly, so the price have you paid, hmnnn?" The crone sounds amused, then her tone drops sharply. "No more of your questions; now you will LISTEN, and you will a-member my words, for in minding me, you shall live." She hisses. "Nod if you hear me, or ANOTHER bit shall I a-take."

I nod.

"A-member me, traveler. A-member me to a stone, one of the pretty

glimmers in your Festive hall - use it like a cup, pour what you feel into it, and know this: A-member me to a man who wears a skin of scars n' tattoos, who seeks memories but has miss-placed them; if smart he is, he will know the knowing of ME. Tell him to find me - or if I am not to be found, tell him to come to the glimmer-stone, and we shall speak, my precious man and I." The woman pauses, then hisses again. "NOD if you a-hear me, ragged thing!"

I nod again.

"Ah... pretty, polite to a-listen so long... when he comes to the glimmer-stone, tell the man to speak my name, and your pain shall not have been in vain..." The crone's voice trails off, as if distracted. I try to speak again, but there is only a sick gurgling noise, and flecks of fluid spatter against my lips, trickling down my chin. Instinctively I try to lick them away, but again my tongue doesn't seem to work. What happened? Who is this person? Why am I... the world is growing softer, the sensations bleeding away...

"Ravel! Ravel, it is I!"

Recognition that this was only a sensation, a memory stored within a stone jolted me awake quick enough that I was able to cry out her name. The cry sounded hollow, as if drowned out by the darkness I was slipping into...

There is silence.

"Ravel..?"

"Ahhh... my precious man." There is the slow shuffling of feet, and I feel a sharp pinprick in my left eye; I gasp, and suddenly, barely, I can SEE - with my one and only eye. I lie in a gray hut, upon a dirty floor, where blood, my bright-red blood has seeped into the surrounding gray dust. I curl forward, looking down. The film over my vision clears away a bit with each blink, and I look down. My arms are gone, my legs have been hacked off at the knees. Yet... I feel numbed, and there is no pain... only fear. There is someone above, someone looking down on me...

I look up through my bloody, blurred vision, to see a horrid bluish gray face, grinning with yellowed tusks. "Ravel is pleased - a-wondering I was if this messenger would make it, for weak he was when his bits were placed on my

plate..." She holds up a talon in front of me, and impaled on the tip of it is an eyeball - the right one. "Yet to the Festive hall he returned it a-seems, and our time two-together has he shared. And now you have come... success!"

"Ravel... how am I talking to you, if this is someone else's experience?"

"Of stones and experiences and telling will Ravel do, but not the telling of how she speaks to you now." She speaks soothingly. "Many are the branchings and twistings of Ravel, and many are her secrets. I need you, and I need you knowing of this."

"Ravel... I have many questions for you."

The crone shakes her head, my blurred vision seeing three images at once; her grayish hair is like brambles, drifting down her shoulders. "No, only time for answers does Ravel have, and she has no time to a-waste with your guess-questions. Know this, and in the knowing grow strong: you must FIND me, my precious man."

"But how? I do not know --"

"Tchhh! I am beyond knowing, in a Lady's place. Now shhh-and-a-listen to Ravel, for there is much you must do - to find me, a-three things must you do: find the door, know the key, then unlock the key."

"Door?"

"The door is not a finished thing... at least, when I last gazed upon it, hmnnn? But in the passing of time, perhaps now well-wrought it is. Go to the place of forges and steel; perhaps there you will find the door that takes one to me..."

The Foundry... the portal and the key... between his tantrums and his candy-chomping I remembered what Quell had told me. "Ravel, I have retrieved the portal, and I know that the key is a piece of you, but I don't know how to find it -- "

"The key is OF me, is it not... knot? Eh..." The crone hisses, as if trying to gather her thoughts, and my vision blurs again. "No picture is it, no tale, no stone, but the key is something of ME, a labor of my own flesh and blood. Seek it! Lives it does..."

"What do you mean when you say 'unlock the key?'"

"A-knowing the key is NOT enough, so Ravel thinks. Knowing it and unlocking it, two tasks that must be joined... for at times, a thing knows not its nature... but you are no stranger to that..." Ravel cackles, a long, hideous cry that fills my ears with pain...

"Farewell, Ravel..." I murmur. I feel sick trapped in this meat puppet. Deep down my soul screams to feel again, to breathe and shift and move and taste.

"Return - I will give what help I can..." Ravel gives a final smile, a horrible, yellow fanged grin; a blackish tongue darts from her lips and lingers at the edge, teasing. "But in the end, only the one question remains..."

"What do you mean, Ravel?"

"Only one question, this I ask..." Ravel's eyes blaze like fires, the red light turning her face blood-red. "What can change the nature of a man?"

At the question, a tremor passes through, like thunder, and I feel myself burn...

My vision cleared, until I was standing once again before the hideously green stone... it looked different than before, more... horrid, somehow.

Immediately I moved my limbs, flicked my tongue over my teeth and reveled in the fact that I was whole. I've been dismembered so many times before that it should've seemed like a second job, but the stark terror of being in Ravel's clutches so still sent a shiver of dread through me.

"It was one of those stones again, wasn't it, chief?"

I nodded, "I know what to do now. I know how to find Ravel Puzzlewell."

Chapter 86

"Do you know where I could find a 'piece' of Ravel?"

Annah wrinkled her nose. "A piece of that hag? Nay, I donnae know where yeh'd find such a thing." Annah thought for a moment, her tail waving slowly back and forth, then she smirked. It was a refreshing change: she rarely treated talk of such grim entities so lightly. "A-course, she's probably left enough o' her seed scattered around the Planes that yeh might be able tae ask one o' them."

"What do you mean?"

"Seed, kin, wee ones -- Oul' Ravel's said tae have a mess o' daughters, so the tale-tellers say - or just one, dependin' on which tale-teller yeh ask -- an' whether they're downing bub when yeh talkin' to 'em." Annah's voice dropped to a murmur. "Ravel birthed 'em from some fiend, the tales say."

"Do you think one of these daughters might still be around? They might know something about how to reach her."

Annah shrugged. "I donnae know. I sure as copper wouldn't want tae find one o' em. If they're half as mean as she is..." she trailed off.

~~~~~

Even without the tutelage of Fall-From-Grace, dialogues of the rarest kinds were being freely traded in the Brothel: poetic recitations done forward and backward and with every second word, philosophical debates sharp as a woman's tongue, contests of insults and barbed exchanges that tested the resolve and the wit. Soft, womanly scents bubbled through the air, and the clink of glasses heralded the bounty of tea and bubbly wine.

Annah had been somewhat resistant to return to the Brothel, but as we sat talking with some of the patrons, she strode in and approached us. As soon as she appeared, Nordom faced her.

"Attention, Annah! Morte wants to 'snuggle with your pillows.' "

As Nordom spoke, Morte rolled his eyes and frantically stage-whispered to him, "Shut up! Shut up!!"

"Oh, I'll give yeh somethin' to snuggle up to! Eejit!" Annah glared at Morte as she spoke.

Fall-From-Grace interrupted the exchange, folding her wings back. "I find it very fitting that your journey brings you back here," she said to me, "I'll prepare some tea for us."

"Mmm. I don't suppose you know of any rumors of Ravel's progeny?"

Grace's lips curved into a mysterious smile, "If I did, would you expect me to deny you the experience of finding out for yourself?"

"Good point." For now, there was only one person I knew of that could know.

Yves smiled pleasantly at my approach. "Greetings, again. Have you come to trade tales?"

"Yes, I have."

Yves nodded. "I would like that very much, yes. What tales will you trade?"

"Nordom: if you have a story to trade, please share it with Yves."

He chirruped, happy to tell his part. "In the 13.7th Revolution, we were required to fix gear and cog sub-set thirty-one in the fifth ring of Mechanus. We removed the obstruction and the gear turned as per its normal speed. Upon completing our task, we were then returned to the Source."

"What in the hells was that, you stupid polygon?! That's the most boring story I ever heard!" Morte snapped.

"It was what took place. With embellishments, of course."

"Embellishments?"

"I thought the return to Source was a particularly fitting image to close the tale."

Yves smiled. "A fine tale, Nordom. And now I've one for you and your companion... 'Flowers and Sensates.'

"There was a man who read much of flowers - essays, treatises, biological texts, poetry - and as such considered himself well-learned in the way of flowers. One day, he came across a half-blind gardener who tended the Sensate gardens. Who was blind in the way of flowers?"

Musing over such questions wasn't what I was here for. "Yves, I was hoping you might have stories about Ravel Puzzlewell."

"The tale of Ravel Puzzlewell, frightener of children, begins and ends with a question: 'What can change the nature of a man?'

"Many were the times she posed this riddle to those who approached her, those who sought to glean from her the strange magics that she alone seemed to possess. All attempted to answer her query, but to no avail... and they found the price of their wrong answer to be some horrible fate, always more terrible than the last victim's. To recount their various torments would be to speak of things that nightmares are woven from.

"The tale strikes me in this way: Ravel herself knew not the answer to this question, but she lusted for such an answer. Only the why of the matter remained in question. Why did the nature of a man matter to one of the Gray Sisters, especially of one of such power as Ravel?

"It is said that she put the question to the Lady of Pain; not directly, but shouted it to Sigil itself, daring for the Lady to answer. When no reply was forthcoming, she wove terrible magics that threatened to open the Cage and let the fury of the Planes roll in like a wave.

"She received no answer other than banishment. To this day, no one knows the answer to Ravel's question... and now there is no one to petition, for Ravel herself is gone, lost to the Planes."

"Hmm... I'd best ask a few others..."

"Wait... there is more. Though my tale ends with Ravel's demise, there are some that claim the hag still lives. There is a silent prostitute here who once talked of such things, but she speaks no longer. If she would speak to you,

she might tell you more of Ravel."

"What else can you tell me of this silent prostitute?"

"Ecco?" Yves frowned, thinking. "I once heard a tale of a girl who knew the word that, if spoken, would undo the multiverse. Perhaps this is Ecco. Ask Dolora, though... I understand that she sometimes meets with one who knew Ecco before she stopped speaking."

~~~~~

Dolora's cold, steely eyes flickered over me briefly. "Greetings. In what manner may I serve you?"

"Actually, I just had some questions..."

Dolora cast her eyes to the floor with a sound that might've been a sad sigh. "I am willing to serve you as a patron, but have no wish to answer other questions at this time... my apologies, but I fear you shall simply have to bear with that for the time being."

"What's wrong? Anything I can help you with?"

She looked up from the floor and into my eyes. Once more I was struck by the pale smoothness of her skin, the cold depths of her silvery gaze. "No... no, I fear not. My troubles are a matter of the heart. In time, I think, all things shall be resolved."

"Are you certain there's nothing I could do?"

"Certain?" Dolora paused, as if thinking. "No, I am not. My first love, Merriman, possesses still the keys to my heart. So long as he has them, I shan't be free to love another. This is the cause of my melancholy."

"Why don't you seek him out, speak with him?"

Dolora shook her head. "I may not leave this place. The reasons why are deeply personal, and not to be shared with strangers - even ones who might bestow a kindness upon me - but suffice to say that I cannot seek out Merriman myself."

"Then I'll find this Merriman, and speak to him on your behalf."

Dolora nodded, the slightest hint of a smile appearing on her lips. She bowed her head. "Were you to find and speak with Merriman, I would be most grateful. He is a member of the Society of Sensation, so you may wish to ask for him at the Civic Festhall."

~~~~~

When I asked around about this Merriman, I was given descriptions of a bitter, cantankerous old codger, despite his name. It was easy to find him... few were so jaded and cranky in this hall of delights.

The man's drab gray-white coat matched his frayed silver hair, and wrinkles etched deep crevices into his face. His mouth was twisted into frown that became even more severe as he noticed me coming his way. "Merriman my name may be, but merry I am not! Off with you, young one! No time for the likes of you!" He went into a fit of coughing from the exertion of shooing me away so loudly.

"Wait... Dolora wanted me to speak with you."

Merriman eyed me suspiciously. "That so? About what, eh? Hmm? Well?"

"She says that you're her first love, and that so long as you hold the keys to her heart, she'll never be free to love another."

"She told you that, eh? I'm surprised. Perhaps leaving her in under Mistress Grace's tutelage did what I couldn't... started to develop her feelings. In any case..." He patted a pocket on his tunic. "...I won't just give the keys to you."

"Wait - those are literally 'the keys to her heart?'"

He nodded. "That they are. Dolora's a Construct; didn't you know that? A creature of sorcery and clockwork mechanics she is, and one of my finest creations." Merriman sighed. "But cold, without emotion or character. I brought her to the Brothel and 'set' her so that she could not leave, in the hopes that the constant contact with so many others would begin develop her own personality. The keys are the tools used to 'set' her; she wants them because she feels that they're limiting her personal growth now, I suspect."

"Then why don't you just return them to her?"

Merriman scowled. "Because I've become a cruel and bitter old man, who sees he can get something out of you."

Grace's eyes became coolly disapproving, "Master Merriman, as a Sensate you would deny her the ability to experience the full richness of the Multiverse?"

He harrumphed. "You may be a master of words, Madam Grace, but I've well over a century of stubbornness under my belt. Don't think you can convince me or guilt me out of these keys."

"Go on, then... what do you want?"

"I want... I want to forget. I've lived almost one hundred and fifty years, now, and I've seen every sensory stone I've cared to in this grand hall. I've little time left to live, and am too weak to go out in search of wholly new experiences... so I need to find a way to forget them all. That way, I can start again in my final days..."

"So... do I just wallop you in the back of the head, or what?"

"No, you bloodthirsty lummo! I'll need something... some item, some concoction... that will allow me to forget. Like a draught of the river Styx; something like that."

~~~~~

I knew the answer lay in the art gallery. I'd seen it once before.

Yvana smiled and motioned me towards her. "Greetings, again. Do you have questions regarding one of the pieces?"

"Yes, I do... The Dark Birds of Ocanthus."

"All of them are chipped from the great magical sheet of black, infinite ice that rests in the black belly of the Plane of Ocanthus." Yvana paused, tapping her chin. "It is said that this sheet of ice is the final destination of the River Styx, and that the recollections of all that have plunged into the Styx's

memory-destroying waters still lie frozen within the ice."

"If the waters of the Styx destroy one's memories, would this ice from Ocanthus do the same?"

"I could only assume so, yes."

~~~~~

I sat at the bar, pondering over how to snatch a sliver of that ice. Stygian water, much less ice, was dangerous stuff. With its potent memory-obliterating properties, there had been some talk from the Guvners of restricting its trade, not that it was a widespread commodity: the black liquid was tough to transport due to its volatility: without proper containers the stuff would evaporate almost instantly. I would've thought that with its grim origins Vrischika would've carried it.

The older man next to me was staring into his stein of ale, misery etched into his features. The battered pewter mug was an unusual one, lightly engraved with strange runes and bearded faces, and covered with a coat of thin frost. He looked up as I turned to him. "Greetings... sir..." He slurred.

"Something wrong?"

He sighed, belched into his hand, and nodded as he took another pull of ale. "Aye, something's wrong, all right. I've gone and lost... my apprenticeship. Well hung over, I was, and botched... my mentor's last experiment. All for this damn... drink!" He sneered at the mug in his hand, but in seconds his expression softened and he took another swig. "Ruins everything, it does, this damnable drinking of mine..."

"Why don't you stop drinking, then?"

He shrugged and sighed miserably. "I simply... cannot. I want to, but I cannot. I just... need to drink. I try and stay away, but desire eventually... overcomes me, and I cannot resist. Such a... wreck I've become!" He threw back the last of his ale and called for more.

"I see. What's that mug you've got there?"

"This?" He looked down at the pewter mug. "I won this in a dice game. It's

enchanted to... keep whatever's in it freezing cold. In my case... cheap ale." He frowned, rubbed at his eyes, and took another swig of his fresh drink.

"There's someone you should speak to... Unfulfilled-Desire. You can find her in the Civic Festhall. Talk to her of your love for drink... you'll soon find you won't want it any longer."

His eyes brightened. "Truly? I shall go... speak to her now, then. I thank... you, sir." He paused, looking down at his empty mug. "Here... I would have you take this. I need it... no longer." He handed me the rune-covered ale stein.

This might just work.

~~~~~

The Dark Birds of Ocanthus... razor-sharp shards of carved black crystal that were in flight around a pedestal. Their swift, orderly orbits belied the torrent of icy wind that arose from the base of the art piece.

Granted I could've afforded the proper stuff, if I was able to find a vendor. This was just so much easier.

Sorry, Yvana.

I dipped the mug into the icy wind rising from the pedestal, catching a small shard with a slight clang. Peering into the mug, the Dark Bird glistened and clattered gently with a light shake. Only the mug's magical properties prevented the sliver of black ice from melting away to nothing.

~~~~~

Merriman squinted up at me. "Well? Have you something that will wipe my mind of these accursed memories? I certainly hope you haven't returned without... you'll never get the keys to Dolora's heart, that way."

"Here, take this mug... it holds a Dark Bird of Ocanthus, a sliver of ice from the River Styx. It should wipe your memories clean..."

Merriman took the mug and removed a piece of paper from his pocket. Without a word of regret or a final goodbye, he tilted the mug back and

dumped the ice into his mouth... it melted instantly, leaving him with a somewhat startled expression...

"Merriman...?"

Merriman looked at me, confused, then at the paper in his hands. He read aloud: "Congratulations, Merriman: you've begun again. Thank the man in front of you and give him the key in your pocket. Speak to Splinter, the man at the door to this building, for more information." He looked to me again. "Well... it would seem I owe you thanks, good sir. Here... take this key. I'd best find this 'Splinter' fellow and find out what's going on!"

"Thanks, Merriman. Good luck."

## Chapter 87

Dolora was busy with another client by the time I returned. To my grave misfortune, it was a Guvner, and one prone to long-winded and intricate debates on the histories of empires long forgotten by everyone else. Apparently Dolora, with a sense of logic and education that exceeds most, was one of his favorites. They'd be talking late into the night.

Thankfully every night Grace arranges for savory hors'dourves to be delivered from the Civic Festhall for the benefit of her late-night guests, so we won't be going hungry while we wait.

"I must simply disagree, my dear Dolora. The root cause for the shattering of the Compact of the Rose lies in the Fourth Dynasty, and builds up progressively through the three thousand years that followed. But to start from the beginning..."

Argh.

Frustration turns the spicy half-shell mollusks into ash my mouth. I wander the brothel, making small talk and trying to tease out what I could about the

silent prostitute.

"You mean Ecco? She's a dear. Quiet." Vivian frowned. "That may be part of the charm. There is all manner of speculation as to why she is silent, but I think t'was that her heart was most horribly broken."

"Oh, Ecco! Yes, she's a mysterious one, isn't she?! Do you know that she never speaks? Truly!" Nenny leaned in and lowered her voice. "I think she was emotionally wounded, so badly that she may never speak again!"

"Oh, 'tis Ecco thou speak of," Juliet sighed, "They say she is sworn never to speak again, for one reason or another. I cannot imagine why anyone would do such a thing."

"Yes... 'Ecco.' I knew another Ecco, once, though her name was written differently. I know nothing of this girl, though. Ask Dolora of her. She made friends of an old lover of Ecco's, I have heard," Marissa hissed from behind her veil.

"Yes, that's Ecco. She's very sweet, but so quiet. I understand that she said something, once, which caused some great tragedy... and because of that, she'll never speak again." Kesai shrugged, smiling. "An interesting enough story, but I don't know if it's true. Try asking Dolora... I've seen her talking to an ex-lover of Ecco, back from a time when Ecco was speaking."

It was late and I was exhausted by the time the paunchy little man finally left. Dolora looked crisp and cool as usual, refined and distant.

Her eyes flashed the moment I approached. "Did you find him? Has he agreed to return the keys to my heart?"

"Yes... I have the keys to your heart. Here they are."

"At last..." As she took the keys from my grasp, her hand brushed against mine - her skin is dry, but icy to the touch, like cold metal. "These will be of great use to me. I thank you."

I looked at her curiously, "I was hoping to learn more about your nature."

Dolora blinked. "Merriman never told me much regarding my construction. I know little of the inner workings of my body, much as you likely know little

of yours. Outwardly, though, I am a human woman in all respects... save for the texture and temperature of my flesh. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"What about your mind, your emotions?"

"Its functions are as much a mystery to me as any human's. When I first came to this place, I did not understand emotions, nor have any of my own. I have... feelings... now, though I am only beginning to understand them."

"What do the keys do, exactly?"

"I can only assume that Merriman made the keys so that there would be no risk of me drawing away from him before he had tired of his experiment. Now that they are in my possession, I am free to develop and possess my own emotions."

I nodded, satisfied, "What can you tell me about the silent prostitute?"

"Yes. Her name is Ecco. Her voice - and in fact her every means of communication - was stolen and destroyed. Ecco's words once wooed away the paramour of the godling Paramisha. Paramisha, in a jealous rage, tore away Ecco's voice, sealed it within a crystal vial, and hurled it into a megogalamdraga's maw. Ecco's voice is forever lost to her; only another, new voice could return to her the ability to communicate once more. I know this because I spoke to Paramisha's paramour myself, once."

As much as I would've liked to continue the conversation, the night had grown late and I had to leave. The girls were already cleaning off their makeup and loosening dresses. I bid a hasty farewell and wished Dolora the best of luck, promising I'd return the next day.

~~~~~

Ecco curtsied at my approach, her carefully painted lips forming the slightest of smiles. She was as pretty as any of the girls here, with coppery skin and a shapely body wrapped in translucent white cloth. It left just enough to the imagination.

"Is your name 'Ecco?'"

She nodded, smiling pleasantly.

"May I ask why you can't communicate?"

She sighed softly and nodded. I had the impression that many had asked, but she was glad to try to answer. I can imagine that most of her conversations are tragically unidirectional.

"Are you silent because of a broken heart?"

She smiled pleasantly, then shook her head.

"Do you know the word that will undo the multiverse if it's spoken?"

Her eyes widened in surprise... then she gave a beaming smile, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

That one was bizarre enough to be true in Sigil. I had to admit, it was rather disappointing that it wasn't. "Are you emotionally wounded? Is that why you can't speak?"

She looked at me strangely and shook her head slowly...

"Did your voice cause someone's death or some other tragedy?"

She paused at this, opened her mouth, then frowned. After a moment, she shook her head.

"Have you sworn never to speak for one reason or another?"

She scowled and shook her head.

Hmm. That would definitely be unbecoming of a Sensate. "Was your voice stolen?"

She nodded vigorously, clasping her hands together and smiling at me.

"Do you know of any way to get your voice back?"

She shook her head, her face wrought with frustration, then looked at me pleadingly, as if expecting an answer.

"I swear I'll look for a way to return your voice," I vowed.

Ecco nodded to me slowly, smiling at me with eyes full of gratitude.

Well. There was only one place I could think of to start looking.

~~~~~

"Ah!" Vrischika's lips peeled back to reveal a predatory smile, "If it isn't my favorite man!" She glanced at Fall-From-Grace, "And my least favorite woman."

"We're looking for something that can restore speech to someone who's had her voice stolen."

Her smile grew wider, "Whatever you wish, Vrischika can provide," she pointed at what appeared to be a tongue floating in a jar of brine, one of the exotic items behind the glass counter. It was pink and rubbery, pale from pickling and age. "This is a fiend's tongue... a cornugon's, I think, but who really knows? It's said that, placed into the mouth of any living thing, it will give the ability of speech, even if there was none before. I'm selling this oddity for only sixty-six coppers, should you want it."

"Gross."

~~~~~

Ecco looked at me hopefully as I approached her, biting her lower lip.

"I've gotten this Fiend's Tongue for you..."

She raised her eyebrow and gave me a skeptical look.

"I'm told that, should you place it in your mouth, you'll regain the ability to communicate."

She nodded and took the bottle from me. She gingerly picked out the severed tongue from the briny solution and, after staring at it for a moment in disgust, placed it into her mouth... suddenly, her eyes widened, and a burst of reddish light bloomed from between her lips.

"Are you all right?"

Ecco opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it once more... and spoke!
"I... I can speak again! Oh, joy! I than-daMN THEE TO THE DARKEST OF PITS,
THOU STENCH-RIDDEN WORM! KNEEL BEFORE ME IN SUPPLICATION,
INSECT!"

"Yikes!" Morte hid behind me.

I blinked, "Eh?"

Ecco yelped and covered her mouth with both hands... her eyes were wide with panic.

"It must be... the Fiend's Tongue..."

She slowly took her hands away from her mouth, nodding. "It seems I must
DEVOUR THY FRAIL SHELL AND CONSIGN THY SOUL TO THE ABYSS FOR ALL
ETERNITY! THOU SHALT SERVE IN MY BATTLE-THRALL 'TIL THE PLANES
GRIND TO A HALT! THOU ART MINE, MINE, MI-" Ecco shut her mouth again,
and began to softly, quietly weep.

"Wait... I think I might be able to find a way to help you at Vrischika's
curiosity shop... she has to have some way to cure you."

Ecco nodded and produced a slip of paper from her clothes... a promissory
note in the amount of one thousand commons, which the possessor could
collect upon from the Brothel. She gave me a questioning glance.

"Yes... this will be more than enough. I'll be back when I have the solution,
Ecco."

~~~~~

"Back again? And so soon, kitling!" Vrischika grinned. Her fingers must've  
been itching for gold already, "What do you need?"

"The, uh... Fiend's Tongue didn't exactly work as advertised. I need some  
way to soothe it."

Vrischika nodded, and pointed to a small glass phial labeled as 'Deva's



Tears.' "These were collected from a deva who was captured during a Blood War skirmish. The fiends tormented the imprisoned angel for eons before he at last escaped - this small bottle holds the twelve tears he shed in that time. It is said their touch will soothe the most savage anger... even that of a fiend's tongue." Vrischika smiled cruelly. "Their price is but nine hundred and ninety-nine copper commons."

I examined the tag, then looked at the others. Where the other paper tags were beginning to fade yellow with age, this one was fresh and new. I wouldn't be surprised if the ink was still wet.

"I remember seeing this. It was only a hundred commons before I went to Ecco with the Fiend's Tongue."

"Supply and demand, kitling. I have the supply, you have the demand. This is a much fairer trade."

"Count yourself fortunate," Fall-From-Grace murmured in my ear, "that she is not a baatezu."

Couldn't disagree with that, "I have this thousand-common promissory note from the Brothel..."

Vrischika frowned slightly, examining the note. "Well... I suppose I can have Standish fetch it, later. Very well; here you are." She handed me the item. "Please, enjoy your newest acquisition."

~~~~~

Ecco nodded as I approached her, a hopeful look in her eyes.

"I've brought you these Deva's Tears... they should soothe the tongue's cursing."

She nodded, smiling, and took the vial from me. Ecco placed a few of the sparkling blue drops onto her tongue: "I... I believe the Tears are working. Yes... they are! I can speak in my own voice once more - oh, how I thank you!" Ecco squeezed my hand and bowed her head gratefully, her eyes welling with tears of joy. She really had a sweet voice, like the chiming of bells.

I cut right to the chase: "Do you know anything about Ravel Puzzlewell? I've heard you have reason to believe that she still lives."

Ecco nodded, and lowered her voice: "In fact, I do... not only does she exist, she has children!"

I nodded. Any children might be sufficient to act as a 'piece' of her that might open the portal, "Where would I find them?"

"One of them is here, at times... Kesai-Serris. She is a child of Ravel's, though she is loathe to accept the fact. Who could blame her?" She paused for a moment, thinking. "I have never gotten her to admit it, though I am sure 'tis true."

Chapter 88

Kesai-Serris smiled warmly as I drew near her, pushing a wavy lock of hair away from her bright, crimson eyes. "Well, greetings once again... something I can do for you, hmmm?"

Could she really be Ravel's daughter? I looked her up and down... she certainly didn't look very haggish. Kesai-Serris smiled, probably taking my studying of her features as ogling. No few patrons must've given her such treatment. "If you don't mind my asking, what are you?"

Kesai shook her head. "What, can't you tell?" She drew herself up, thrusting her ample bosom towards me. "A woman!" She raised an eyebrow. "I can see my answer doesn't please you... I'm plane-touched, actually, like your friend here." Kesai indicated Annah. "That's all you need to know."

"Do you know anything about Ravel Puzzlewell?"

Her lips thinned. It was the barest hint of displeasure, but it was there. For someone so smooth and sensual she was very curt with her response. "No. Nothing."

"Are you sure? You seem suddenly upset..."

She narrowed her red eyes at me. "Of course I'm sure! Don't ask me of her again."

"Kesai? Are you Ravel's daughter?"

Kesai suddenly bared her teeth, her eyes narrowing to slits of blazing crimson. "What?! Where'd you hear such a thing?"

I licked my lips. I doubted this girl had her mother's power, but it was still best not to anger her. "Just a rumor, that's all."

"Ridiculous! I think I'd know if that wicked hag was my own mother! Now stop bothering me about it."

"Who is your mother, then?"

"I don't know, all right? My father raised me; I never knew her. But do I look like a night hag, to you?!"

"Well... there is the skin... and the eyes... and maybe the teeth, too..."

Kesai-Serris glared at me, her eyes blazing. "Perhaps we'll speak later, but I'm no longer in the mood. Farewell."

I really wish I was better with women.

If Kesai wouldn't speak to me about the matter, there were plenty of others to talk to. Gossip has a nasty habit of being molded as it's passed down from one person to the next nine times out of ten, but as with the tale of Ecco that last sliver often held some truth. If I was going to look for a story I might as well go to the source.

"I heard that Kesai-Serris is Ravel's daughter. Is that true?" I asked Yves.

"Once upon a time, an elderly man from the Clerk's Ward vanished, and his body could not be found. To conceal it, the murderer buried him beneath another body in the cemetery. A diviner told of where the body could be found, and so they dug, and uncovered a body, but not that of the elderly

man. They were confounded. They were forced to release the man, and it was not until they continued to dig to re-bury the older man's body that they found the second body.

"Sometimes one must dig deeply to find the truth."

Dig deep. Got it.

If it took one hag to find another I might as well go to the scariest chit I could find in the brothel. Marissa's red eyes gleamed at me from the blackness of her room. "Yes?" A faint hissing accompanied her query.

"I heard that Kesai-Serris is Ravel's daughter. Is that true?"

"I do not know... but I, for one, would not be surprised. For Hera's sake, look at the girl! Ask Juliette, though - the two of them were once friends... before Montague came along."

So I went to Juliette: "I heard that Kesai-Serris is Ravel's daughter. Is that true?"

She suddenly looked up to me, that distant, wistful gaze was replaced with the sharpness of recognition. "Ravel... hmm... ah! I thought I might have heard that name before. I know not the truth of it, but I have heard such a rumor. Thou may wish to ask Kimasxi Addertongue that very same question... they are half-sisters, thou see."

"Are they? Interesting..."

Really. It took a hag to find a hag.

"Oh, it's you again. Just can't get enough of me, huh?"

"I had some questions..."

She looked annoyed. "Fine, whatever.... ask."

"I heard that Kesai-Serris is Ravel's daughter. Is that true?"

Kimasxi shrugged. "Far as I know, yes." She looked suddenly suspicious. "Why?"

"I asked her about it, and she denied it."

"So? Not as if it's any of your business in the first place."

"I also heard you're Kesai's half-sister."

She harrumphed, "Yes, I'm related to that chubby, mewling, hook-nosed day-dreamer. Same father, different mothers. So?"

"I was hoping you could help me find out if Kesai is really Ravel's daughter."

Kimasxi frowned. "Normally I'd be loathe to help you like this, but I've a feeling it'd upset that flirting, preening doxy good and well. Tell her to ask our father... he's a powerful cambion, so she ought to be able to call to him right then and there. That'll get you your answer."

"Cambion?"

"Yes, cambion." Kimasxi rolled her eyes. "Didn't hear me the first time? Ears all stopped up with last of your brains running out of them?"

"I'm asking what one is..."

"My, you're Clueless." She shook her head sadly, tutting all the while. "A half-fiend, berk; sort of like you... but you're half dung, I think. You smell it, at any rate."

"Better that than half you, Kimasxi."

"You wish you were half-Kimasxi, sod... even if you ended up with a goat's bum on your shoulders it'd be better than that scarred-up face of yours."

~~~~~

Kesai-Serris smiled warmly when I returned, pushing a wavy lock of hair away from her bright, crimson eyes. "Don't worry; I don't stay upset long. Something I can do for you, hmmm?"

"Kesai, I talked to Kimasxi. She told me she's your half-sister, and that Ravel's your mother."

Kesai snarled, her eyes blazing with malice. "That... that... hells, how I loathe that woman! Why would you even believe that sort of tripe?"

"She says that you deny it, and in fact may not know it, but that it's true. She said you could ask your father... that he would tell you."

Kesai stared at me silently for a time. "Give me a moment." She turned away, and began to mutter softly... the air seemed to shimmer around her slightly, and a coppery smell began to fill the room, like the scent of warm blood...

I strained my ears, and tried to overhear what she was saying.

"Haghazananel, Banished Prince of Ithag, Marquis of the Bloody Shadow, my father, hear me, for I call upon you... Yes, beloved father, it is I, Kesai-Serris. I would bid you answer me one question, a question I've asked you time and again..."

She paused.

"Yes, beloved father. I cannot bear to have another ask me and not know myself. You must tell me... I have asked for nothing save this. Tell me, I beg of you..."

Again, she stood still for a moment.

"Y-yes... yes, beloved father, I understand. I thank you... farewell..."

I leaned back, "Well? What did he have to say?"

Kesai remained turned away for a moment before finally coming to face me. "I did not want to believe that wicked hag may have been my mother. I have lived long, I do not appear to age, and have... disturbing dreams, sometimes." She shuddered. "But still... I do not wish to be the inheritor of the evil she caused, nor draw the Lady's gaze as my mother did. Such evil things she did!"

"Tell me what you know of her, will you?"

"I heard she would pose impossible riddles to people, riddles she could

answer but no one else could. She would devour the person if they answered incorrectly, or leave them dangling in her horrifying gardens as examples to all. Those few who somehow escaped she tormented in their dreams, riding them like steeds, breaking their wills and hurling their souls into the colorless oblivion of the Gray Waste...

"Her magic was said to be beyond anything most had ever seen; it was imagination woven from nightmare and given substance. Stone and solid shapes bent to her will like soft clay; the laws of the Planes would bend beneath her feet and from nothing she could weave illusion... and from illusion, weave realities that could horrify and kill and confound.

"She was a mistress of all the Dark Arts, mistress and master of them all. She hounded a Guvner that dared quote Sigil law to her with shadows that devoured him all but his tongue, his fingers and the flesh of his face. She turned Mercykillers inside out, and shattered buildings of those who displeased her. Terrible, terrible powers were at her command. She changed her shape like water, and would use it to destroy some for amusement, and to steal knowledge from others. She was a monster, like all that has been spawned from the Gray Waste."

Kesai stopped to breathe, shuddering and wrapping her bare arms around herself as if cold. "In the end, she threatened to open the Cage and let the fury of the Planes come rolling in, like a wave. Fortunately, she did not succeed. She existed solely to cause malice... I do not know if she is dead... but I know, now, that she was my mother." Kesai's shoulders slumped, and her head hung down. "Oh, that I had tears, so that I could weep with sorrow!"

I reached over and tried to comfort her.

She suddenly fell into my arms, shuddering and wracked with sobs. For a time Kesai simply stood there, clinging to me... but then she pushed away. "Thank you, but... I'll be fine. I just need some time to think about it, that's all."

"I hate to ask this now... but I need you to give me a piece of yourself, Kesai."

She looked alarmed. "Pardon?"

"The portal key to Ravel's maze is a piece of her, and you are of her blood. It is close enough."

Kesai gasped. "You intend to seek her out?" Her surprise quickly changed to an expression of wariness. "What... what would you need of me?"

"Your blood, most likely. Only a drop or two, I'm sure."

She nodded. "But... do you have some way to carry it? A piece of cloth, like a handkerchief or something, you know?"

"One moment..." I dug around in my pack. Luis the Armoire had shot every wad of cloth he had at us when we wrestled with him... I must've tucked one piece carelessly into my pack. "Yes... here..."

Kesai took the handkerchief and gingerly pricked the tip of her finger on one of her fangs. After letting several drops of blood soak into the cloth, she returned it to me. "You're placing yourself in grave danger, you know. Even if the stories of my mother are greatly exaggerated, she's horribly powerful and completely evil. Good luck."

~~~~~

There were many things to be done before we left. It was the quest for the rough balance of packing for a journey: as much stuff as you can carry to cover all realistic contingencies, while keeping your pack light enough to not be bogged down with a couple hundred pounds of junk. Given the richly varied nature of the multiverse, it wasn't possible to cover everything. However, with a little advice from an old friend it might be possible to narrow down the range of what I had to cover.

Even though Ignus was gone, the Smoldering Corpse Bar was as hot and muggy as always, the air sharp with the tang of burnt metal. I was probably the only one sweating. Nordom and Morte didn't have any skin, Annah and Grace had enough fiend blood that heat didn't matter, and Dak'kon was... Dak'kon.

It was the kind of place where you'd peddle the darkest of secrets over a mug of watered-down ale, and seedy enough where a barfight can end up in a decapitation. A smiley old face was more than welcome here.

"Back for more, eh?" Ebb Creakknees leaned back in his chair. "Good t'see ye again, lad."

"Who's this, aye?" Annah eyed Ebb suspiciously, "I don't drink with hardheads, I don't."

"Former hardhead, lass, har!" Ebb laughed, patting his hefty paunch, "Too fat to chase you down the streets of the Hive, not fat enough to keel over dead. Workin' on that, though." With that he bit into the roasted lizard haunch he'd been dining on.

Annah pursed her lips, but eventually took a seat.

"Now, tell me what you've been up to, boy. You don't seem as green or clueless as you were when you first stumbled in here all goggle-eyed and askin' your barmy questions."

"We've been looking for Ravel Puzzlewell."

Ebb paused, teeth gnarled around a piece of thick cartilage. For a moment he stared at me dumbfounded, until a dribble of spittle wet his lips and he swallowed quickly, "Why the hells would you be chasing a chit like that? Women are always trouble, er... beggin' my pardon, madams," he indicated Grace and Annah, "But Ravel'll live up to her namesake with what she'd do to your entrails if you step wrong around her. If she still lives, that is."

"I think she may be holding my soul, or whatever allows me to die, prisoner. If I'm going to find peace, I need to seek her out."

Ashen-faced, Ebb stared at me, his bluff and friendly demeanor gone. I squirmed. It was oddly disturbing to see someone so naturally cheerful suddenly so quiet.

"OI! CANDRIAN!" he barked across to the next table. Half the patrons jumped and looked up, the other half were too sodden with drink to raise their heads. In fact, the guy in the corner was probably dead, "Get yer immaterial arse o'er this way!"

Candrian strode over, his limbs wavering like hot desert air as he moved. The chains and spikes and knives arrayed around him should've clinked, but the insubstantial nature of his entire body rendered his implements mute.

He turned his pale blue eyes on us and took a seat at our table. It was getting rather crowded, and I didn't quite want to know what would happen if I bumped his shoulder.

"Ah, greetings again. Have your travels brought forth what you need?"

"You look great, by the way," Morte bobbed, "More substantial. Been working out?"

"We're on it. Thanks for helping again with Ingress' situation," I added.

"It was nothing," He waved a misty hand, then directed his attention to my other companions, "Ah, you found new friends, I see. Quite an eclectic group... necessary in the Planes. Greetings, I am Candrian Illborne, traveler, dreamer, talespinner, and so forth."

"Ah, stow it, Candrian," Ebb pointed a thumb at me, "These addle-coves think they'll be struttin' into Ravel Puzzlewell's gardens and sniff her daisies or somesuch."

Candrian's eyes widened, "Truly? Hmm. Not even I would dare undertake such a quest. I fear trying to claw free of Carceri may be an easier task, or struggling free of the Negative Material Plane once more."

"I must, nonetheless. Do you have any advice?"

"Aside from suggesting that you turn back now? No, I am afraid not. However, some basic knowledge of the planes may help, and that I can provide."

Ebb harrumphed, "Aye, but keep it short. The lad'll need your advice, not your long wind."

Candrian's lips quirked into a wry smile, "Of course, part of the problem is getting into Ravel's maze. That is something few, if anyone, could shed light on. The issue is escaping, and how to survive on whatever plane you end up on if, by some miracle, you can."

"I've escaped one of the Lady's mazes. Hopefully I can pull it off again."

"Best you don't advertise that, berk," Ebb suggested, "Most wouldn't want

anything to do with you after, and I suspect the the Mercykillers would hunt you down for escaping the Lady's 'justice.'"

Candrian nodded, "Well, the Inner Planes are a relatively simple matter, whereas the Prime Material is of infinite varieties, it would be impossible to describe how to navigate among all of them. I suspect a thorough knowledge of the Outer Planes may be the most useful."

"Sounds about right. You mentioned Carceri... is that one of them?"

He nodded, "Ah, Carceri and its poisonous jungles, acid swamps, destructive waters, strung like a string of rotten pearls nestled within one another..." He paused and looked at me carefully, again fixing me in place with his eyes. "Remember this, seeker: Carceri is a prison, home to the gehreleths, one of the most dangerous types of fiends there is. The strength of the prison is the strength of the captor, as strong as the prisoner lets it be. Destroy the prisonkeeper, and a body can escape the Red Prison. There is almost no other way out, not when the gates close themselves against you and watch you spin off into the vast space surrounding the orbs. Be wary of Carceri, traveler, for its bonds can be greater than flesh...."

We continued talking long into the night.

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"Hello, Mebbeth."

The squat little woman pursed her lips and looked up to me, "You've grown much since I last saw ye, child. I sense the power in ye is strong."

"Only because of your teachings, Mebbeth."

"Ach, flatterer," she waved a dismissive hand and rearranged the herbs on her rack, "ye re-remembered more than I ever taught, if I reckon correctly."

"Still, it was because of your help."

"Hrmph. So yer off then, on that barmy quest to find the one who tried to break open the Cage?"

I nodded, "I just wanted to say goodbye, Mebbeth. Hopefully not for the last

time."

She drew a semi-circle over her heart and sighed, "I'm afraid that unless ye need healing, Old Mebbeth is useless to ye. Me charms and cantrips are but small magics compared to what ye can wield now."

"I didn't come for those," I said, then leaned over to plant a soft kiss on her pale cheek, "You were like a mother to me, Mebbeth. I just wanted you to know."

She stared at me, stony-faced, then nodded sadly, "Go on, then."

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"So..." I said after outlining my plans to Fell, "Got any advice?"

<It is unwise,> he said in the string of rebuses. It was an unusually deadpan bit of advice from someone who knew the Lady's wrath firsthand. Did he mourn what he lost, I wondered, this dabus who is not a dabus?

"Trust me, I've heard that plenty already."

<All I can offer is my range of tattoos. You have come far, and brought more tales that I may etch into your skin.>

"Let's see 'em, then."

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There are some who would say that this last loose end to tie up was the most important.

She strolled up to us, gliding like a swan on water. She was beautiful, seductively attired for a prostitute, a far cry from those I saw in the Hive. She smelled of expensive perfumes, and the lines of her face were subtly accentuated with lightly painted lines of soft, warm colors. She smiled as I approached her and curtsied gracefully. "Greetings, good sir. Seeking to quench a lust Mistress Grace's Brothel cannot satisfy, I hope?"

"No... but I had some questions..."

She puts her finger to your lips to hush you. "There is but a single question I answer, good sir, and the answer is this: 'yes, for only five hundred coins.'"

"Five hundred?" I blinked, "That's quite a bit..."

She smiled. "Oh, I assure you, good sir..." She leaned in close, to whisper warmly in my ear: "'tis worth every last copper."

"No thanks. I've got to buy some charms elsewhere."

"A pity. Please return should you have a change of heart, good sir - I'll be eagerly awaiting you. Farewell."

"Eh... say there, chief... what do you say?" Morte wagged his tongue eagerly, "How about spotting old Morte a bit of jink? It's been more a while, you know..."

I shrugged. We might not be coming out of it alive, so we might as well enjoy it. "Sure, why not. Miss?"

The young woman examined Morte critically for a time, then nodded. "Yes... yes, I think I could do that. Well, I could certainly come up with... something. All for the same fee, of course - a petty five hundred commons."

"Of course. Here you are..." I counted out the coin and some extra. She seemed nice enough to be worth it.

"All right! Thanks, chief!" Morte turned to follow the woman away.

We finished our preparations in my Festhall room while waiting for him to return.

"I must say," Grace said meditatively, "I have not had the experience of waiting for a skull to be serviced so before."

"Unpeeling the mysteries of the universe one sticky layer at a time, eh?"

"Query: What is the nature of this service?" Nordom chirruped, "Addendum: Would Morte require assistance?"

"Um. No, I don't think your tools are compatible for the job at hand."

"Nordom's utility kit can conform to eight hundred and ninety-three functions," he buzzed, "and with appropriate modifications can be increased to handle 22% more."

"I'm sure that someone, somewhere in multiverse, would be aroused by that."

The courtesan finally returned, Morte bobbing dizzily along beside her. He was coated with a glossy sheen -- as if he'd been waxed and buffed -- and had a red smudge on his crown in the shape of a pair of lips. "Your... mimir? ...seemed to enjoy himself, good sir."

"Morte?"

Morte seemed only dimly aware of my presence, and alternated between giggling to himself and sighing pleasantly.

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Breakfast was just a glass of lychee juice.

It was part of Candrian's advice. On the night before a big jaunt, stuff yourself with a large meal, then eat little to nothing the next morning. Keeps your energy up but your stomach light, if you need to run like hell. I looked over the leavings of last night's feast: the picked-clean carcass of a roast duck, a platter of empty oyster shells, a leftover crust of herb bread, and a now-empty pot of stew. There was a giddy, fluttering feeling in the pit of my stomach... I couldn't help but get the sense that this was our last meal.

"All right. Are we ready?"

"I've got your back, chief."

"Aye."

"My blade is yours."

Grace nodded, and Nordom simply peered into his lens and blinked. That's all I needed.

"Hang on to your blades. We're going in.", I said as I brought out the Godsmen's compact portal.

I unfolded the shimmering metal sculpture, and immediately it began crackling with life. Stretching and creaking like old wood, the metal stretched out into a circle, hovering in the air.

Here we go.

Chapter 89

It was like jumping into a pool of cold water on a hot summer's day. The leap from my cozy apartment at the Civic Festhall to the dimness of Ravel's maze left my head spinning, not knowing up from down, right from left. As in my own maze the air was cold, but whereas mine held the maddening chill of emptiness, here the air was moist. The dampness made it all the more grotesque.

The ground was unusually soft here, and as it squelched beneath my boots upon landing I stumbled, catching myself on hands and knees. My flesh landed softly, and beneath my palms there was cold moss. The earthy smell of rot was thick down here, the cold detritus clammy against my skin. Somehow, the moss seemed to move beneath me, writhing as if eager to lap up the warmth of my skin.

In the distance, there was the squeal of vines tightening and wood creaking.

"This..." Dak'kon murmured, "this maze is will made flesh."

"Oh the wonderful places you take me to, chief. Thanks. Really."

Nordom chirruped, "Portal detected."

"They're everywhere, Nordom," I grumbled, "Don't bother mapping the place... space has curved in on itself and all the roads lead back to the

center. Hell, it might be easier to find Ravel than to avoid her in here."

"Yer not makin' us feel better about it, yer not..."

"It's okay, Annah," I said, standing up and brushing the dirt from my palms, "So long as we're together we'll be fine."

"A-aye..." she muttered with a shiver.

Where once there were stone walls coated with a thin net of vines, now it was more plant than mortar. The walls breathed as we walked past, and the branches that grew layered over one another bent toward us, as if curious. There was something sinister about the foliage, something tamed but cruel about them. No woodland was this, wild and guided only by the balance of nature, but cultivated with a demented hand so that cruel, gnarled branches and poison thorns flourished.

This was Ravel's garden.

Wait...

I turned to my companions "Did you hear that?"

Annah gasped as the floor rumbled beneath us, and the earth cracked open as pale wooden branches curled out from amidst the shards of soil and rot. The creatures came with a keening, their cries shrill and crackling like dry wood. Sharp claws arched out, anchoring against the ground to pull their bodies from hiding. Standing full height they looked like leafless trees, with dull glowing eyes and winged horns where there should've been branches.

Dak'kon's blade silently cleaved through one, slashing off talons and branches and spraying long ropes of sap across the walls. The other creature shrieked, closing in with an unnatural, if clumsy speed. Too close to use magic safely, I thrust my dagger into its face. The force of the blow rebounded as the tip of my blade struck hard wood, and despite my grip my hand slipped along the handle, and the raw edge of steel cut against my fingers and my palm.

"ARGH!"

Pain lanced through my hand as the dagger clattered to the ground. Scarlet

drops sprayed over the creature, and where they landed they sank into its wooden skin as if it were thirsty for blood. Screw this.

One hand outstretched a missile of force erupted from my palm, shattering the one that had been crippled by Dak'kon into a rain of splinters. I turned to the one now looming over me, and pale white light bloomed against its body. The shock wave of the blast rattled me from my teeth to my boots. When the world came into focus again I stood up unsteadily, head still spinning from the concussive explosion. Morte was already spitting out bits of wood, teeth smudged with sap.

The plant-creatures fell one by one, and we wound our way through Ravel's maze.

We crept past muddy plains, fought through lush green lands hauntingly silent of insects or birds, inhabited only by bloodthirsty flora. Brambles tore at our skin, our clothes became sticky with sap and sweat and blood. Our boots grew slick with the juices of crushed moss.

And there, at the heart of it, was Ravel Puzzlewell.

She didn't look much like a myth, this plump, hook-nosed crone; outfitted as she was in a simple (if dirty) brown shirt and leggings, with a number of pouches hanging from her frayed belt. She seemed oblivious to our presence, more concerned with the tangled black roots woven together to form the floor of the maze than anything transpiring around her.

A tangle of jagged gray hair jutted from beneath the crone's hood, spreading down her shoulders like a mass of twisted gray roots. Sickly blue-gray flesh hung in loose folds from her face; her narrow chin, long and sharp, jutted forward in an extreme under-bite, and two filthy yellow canines protruded from her lower jaw, like small tusks.

"Ravel...?"

"Ah... visitors." The crone's voice was thick and scratchy, as if trying to force its way past layers of dust. Her eyes were a dull, bloody red, with black veins running through them like tree branches. As she gazed at me, a strange crawling sensation drew up my body, like snakes burrowing beneath my skin.

"Greetings... Ravel," I rubbed my tongue against the roof of my mouth, trying to work up some moisture. My lips felt suddenly dry.

"Well, now, my pretty thing, have you returned at last?" Ravel's face split into a grotesque smile, displaying a row of chipped yellowed fangs. "You were a-gone so long, I a-feared you forgot poor, lonely Ravel."

She sounded like a lonely old woman, waiting and pining for her children to visit. Would she pinch my cheek with those grimy talons? Offer me tea and candies from a dusty bowl, stuck together in a single sugary wad? There was power in those eyes, and age, and need... and if I could sweet-talk my way into her heart maybe she wouldn't flay us all alive. "How could I forget you, Ravel? I missed you, but you hid yourself in a place that was difficult for me to reach. Come now... did you not wish my company?"

"Ahhh...." Ravel's yellow smile widened, peeling back the folds of her skin, and she cackled softly. "Such sweet words... you already are a-knowing the answer of your asking, my precious man. I scattered clues like caltrops, and these were my means of a-guiding you to my garden. I a-feared it was YOU who had forgot I."

"I assure you, I did no such thing. I have returned to you at last."

"Have you? But WHAT has returned?" She squinted at me with her black-veined eyes and hissed softly. "Let Ravel see how you've a-fared in this life." She reached out, as if to caress me, and my eyes were fixed on those talons, each fingernail filthy and wickedly sharp.

With a gulp I let her feel me over, as if she were examining a prize horse.

Her ragged talons traced their way across my skin, and in their wake I felt the same strange tingling sensation from when Ravel first looked at me. Her eyes dimmed somewhat, and her talons slid gently along the contours of my face, lingering on my scars.

I was beginning to remember something, a memory bulging near the surface as if it were a bubble near bursting. I reached out to touch her and feel her features.

My hand touched Ravel's cheek as her talons caressed my face, and instinctively, I mirrored her touch - as her talons dragged along my left

cheek, my fingers dragged along hers. Her eyes closed, and mine followed.

When my eyes opened once again, it felt as if all the color had bled out of the trees and the maze; everything was a featureless, dusty, dead gray. Ravel's eyes were still closed, but as I watched, they slowly opened and she smiled: a sad, gray smile. I felt words rising to my lips, echoing something I had said in the past, in a different place, on another plane...

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*"It is said you are the greatest of the Gray Sisters, Ravel. I have traveled far to reach you," I say to her, hands upraised in peace.*

*She nodded, but slowly, too slowly, as if through a dream. When she speaks, her words are muted, as if being spoken underwater. "But why have you traveled so far? Your need must be great... yet you seem to have brought nothing that would interest me. You must PAY for my services..."*

*"My need is great. My currency is this: a challenge. Perhaps an impossible challenge... one I fear is beyond even your abilities...." My words are coy and sweet as honey. Try to barter with a night hag and you end up with your skin stretched out to cure in the dust of the Waste. Flatter, it is said, cajole and please, and you may come back alive.*

*The subtle twist to the words are just right to pull her strings. Ravel's eyes blaze a fiery gray, and the gray that is eating the landscape seems to ebb from her features. Her flesh becomes dark with her fury, black blood blooming at her cheeks. "There is NOTHING that is beyond me, foolish man! NOTHING! Pose your challenge, I will hear you!"*

*"Death waits at the end of life for all men. I need it to wait for me no longer... can you do this, beautiful Ravel?"*

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The vision cleared, the gray bleeding away from the maze, until the color resumed, my hand still cupping Ravel's cheek. Her eyes were closed, and she sighed. I withdrew my hand slowly, and after a moment, Ravel's eyes opened, and she gave a rasping hiss. "Yessssss..."

"Ravel...?"

Ravel's finger peeled back, and she looked at me sadly. "Oh, sad, sad, broken half-thing. All-a-pieces." She squinted at me again. "No longer the one Ravel knew are you... are you still a-broken, after all this sad, sad time?"

"Broken? What do you mean?"

"A body you possess, but a body of knowledge you do not?" She pointed her ragged talon at my chest, at my scars. "Many and such, such scars you have, all a-scrawled on your skin. Many tales does your skin tell."

"What tales does my skin tell?"

"Your scars and tattoos shout to me, 'here is a man in confrontation with the world.'" Ravel made a crooning noise, not unlike a dying bird. "Yes, such tales as would shrivel even a hag's ears..."

"Tell me these... tales. I would know them."

"The tales are many. They echo of balance imbalanced, trials of war, battles with fiendish elements, and a creature that feeds on others from a-far to sustain itself... and of torments. Such torments flesh has never known..."

"Balance Imbalanced?"

"Divided in two you were, when your mortality was peeled from you. No longer balanced, much a-broken in the separation... both a blessing and a mistake... but more mistake than blessing, Ravel thinks."

"You took my mortality? How?"

"Forgotten the how of it, I have... have I?" Ravel's gaze dimmed for a moment, the black veins swimming in her eyes. "And even if I a-membered it, I would never do it twice. Not forgotten the moment have I, after the break, a-seeing the pain stream from your veins, your cries like a wailing child, every bit of your being filled with emptiness. Terrible, even for these eyes."

I mentally probed that space inside, felt the jagged edges along that border between being and nonbeing. The void beyond always made me shudder, and now the emptiness sang even moreso.

Dak'kon would've disagreed, but some things are best left unknown. Knowing that the void was where my mortality had been torn from me by those talons, rough and raw and bleeding from the edges of spirit, made it all the worse. I could almost feel it again, like flesh being peeled away, layer after layer, until those claws hit bone, then went past... "What... what then, did you mean on Trials of War?"

"Great, great trials of war... much too much to be born by any, any mortal thing."

"What war?"

"This war touches ALL, my precious half-man. There is no place where its caress is not felt... did it touch you?" Ravel's voice dropped, almost bitter. "To this, Ravel says 'aye.'"

"That would explain the scars... what of these battles with fiendish elements?"

"Two fiends butt heads..." Ravel sniffed, as if in contempt. "Their tiny heads filled with ideas of how the Planes should be, yet can never be or the Planes they would be no longer. Such foolishness!"

And suddenly, the lecture Ghysis the Crooked made so long ago rang true. "You mean the blood war..."

"Aye..." she hissed. Her lips writhed with distaste. Some things were too terrible for even a night hag to stomach.

"What about this creature that feeds on others from afar?"

"No base hungers do you feel, but far, far more terrible ones boil beneath your skin. And such a cost..."

"Hungers? What do you mean?"

"I know not... knot? Knot the nature nor the cause of these hungers. But heed this: Coming events cast their shadows before them, my precious half-man... there is no a-saying of what these events will be, not even with Ravel's eyes."

"And these torments... what are these torments you speak of?"

"A lodestone pulls iron to it... and so do you, my precious half-man, but it is not iron, but tormented souls. As others suffer, they are drawn to you, and your path becomes theirs." She made a sweeping gesture. "Do you not see them in the eyes of those that have traveled here with you?"

"My companions? What do you mean?" I looked back to them, and already I knew what Ravel meant, and how deep those words would cut.

"Do you wish to explain, gith?" Ravel threw a burning glance at Dak'kon, tempered with a fanged smile. "Vows may prove tighter than any chain, no? The manacles of a race once enslaved, now a slave again?"

Dak'kon was silent, but his blade shifted at Ravel's words... the blade darkened, the edge sharpening until the karach itself seems to carry a horrible malevolence about it.

"Watch your words, Ravel..."

"The cog-box..." Ravel's gaze drifted to Nordom. "Once it knew only suffering's definition, but now it feels its sting. There is no room for '2' in the world of 1's and 0's, no place for 'mayhap' in a house of trues and falses, and no 'green with envy' in a black and white world. When it discovers how the planes turn, when it discovers the TRUTH behind loyalty and ill-logic, more torments will it know..."

"Ravel, leave my companions alone--"

"The chattering skull..." Ravel didn't bother to even look at Morte, as if he was beneath her notice. "Are the quips enough of a shield for what lies buried inside your brain-box, hmmm? Why speak truths when lies suffice?"

"Morte..."

"The Abyssal temptress..." Ravel sneered, her yellowed fangs piercing her purpled lips as she squinted at Fall-From-Grace. "A skin so fair, lips so rich, eyes that might cause you to forget Ravel herself... and yet she suffers, more than any other. When one turns on their nature, many are the torments that arise from such a betrayal."

"Ravel..." Grace replied softly, almost cautiously. "I have come to terms with m-"

"You LIE, succubus!" Ravel's lips peel back in a snarl. "You LIE! Do not DARE lie to me, when your heart is a BOOK to me! Every word you SPIT screams of your torment!"

"Have a care with your words, Ravel! Enough of this!"

"Ah..." Ravel gestured at Annah, as if she was for sale upon an auction block. "Look upon the feisty tiefling... such fiery hair and voice..." Ravel smiled, baring her rows of yellowed teeth. "Shall I speak of your torment, tiefling?"

Annah seemed paralyzed, her eyes wide as Ravel turned her black-veined gaze to her. I could see her trembling, her heart beating fast.

"No... no, I shall not speak of it." Ravel's voice dropped, almost in exhaustion, and the smile faded from her face. "Grown tired of cruelties and torments, Ravel has... the world is a-jagged enough place..." She turned again to me, her bloody eyes dimmed, and she sighed. I looked back to my companions, their old wounds opened, laid out for all to see. They looked at each other nervously, as if something profane had been revealed between them.

"And my precious, precious half-man... for you, the greatest torment of all... life forever-more. Can it be life a-cares for you as Ravel does?" She gnashed her yellowed tusks with a horrid clacking noise. "One so brave, so passionate, so terribly lost, sad, sad."

"Ravel, why did you make me immortal? I must kn-"

"A puzzle of bone and skin were you, always, intriguing, and the most beloved of all who came to me, petitioning, requesting, pleading... pleasing? Pleading for help." Ravel stared hard at me, her black-veined ember eyes narrowing. "So hard to see a-past the scars, to dig up the man-who-once-was underneath..."

"Ravel, can you tell me anything about who I once was?"

"A shadow with substance, a-seeking that which casts the light. I know you

more and no... know..." Ravel paused, her eyes dimming. "No more than I know the nature of ANY man. Crossed pasts have we... a man tainted with un-death, still feeling the pangs of separation, and an old withered crone, now all-imprisoned."

"Crossed Pasts?"

"Seems it that we are a-meeting for the first time? No, no, not, not... knot?" Ravel seemed confused for a moment, then shuddered, as if throwing off a weight. "Knot at all. An echo of a future meeting this is... or a past meeting, depending on which way time is facing."

"So this... this meeting echoes a meeting in the past?"

"The now and then - very... similar? So tangled the now-and-then is, both mirrored in each other... once and again, you come a-fore me with a problem, to challenge me for a solution to an IMPOSSIBILITY." Ravel hissed at me, and her eyes blazed. "Beautiful, ungrateful, beloved man!"

"What was this impossibility I asked you to solve?"

Ravel didn't seem to hear me - she still seemed to be in the past, for her eyes dimmed, as if looking far away. "Such fire in your eyes, enough to stir a Gray Lady's heart... passion to be free, but when freed, the fire in your eyes guttered out. With the separation, your life has shed all meaning, I fear." Ravel smiled with her yellowed fangs, then clicks them together, as if laughing. "Mayhap you should sit on your hind legs and limp your forepaws -- mayhap Ravel will give you a another scrap of knowing."

I looked back to my companions, then to Ravel, and knelt, "If begging will bring me answers, then I beg you, Ravel: Tell me what you know. I need your help in remembering what happened."

"Ah... a gentled heart now?" Ravel's black-veined eyes glinted, and the corner of her mouth twisted upwards, like a snake. "Has life a-softened you... ah, but one can hope."

"Ravel, I have many questions I wish to ask you..."

"Oh, MORE questions do you have?" Ravel crooned softly, but there was an edge to it, as if she was reprimanding me. "Tchhh-tcchhh. But you have

already asked soooo many." Ravel's black-veined eyes take on a curious gleam. "The time for MY questions is now, half-man."

"Very well, Ravel... ask your questions."

"Know this and know Ravel's law: if you do not answer my questions, no more of your questions will I answer, my precious man. Step a-lightly with the answers, or the asking shall TEAR you apart..."

"Your rules are fair. Ask your questions, Ravel."

"I would know why you traveled here with these others... know not the place they were traveling to?"

"Of course they knew. Who would not want to travel here to meet with you, beautiful Ravel? Few opportunities does life provide for such a meeting. They wished to see if the tales of your power and beauty were true... as I knew them to be," I laid it on a bit thick, but she seemed barmy enough to be capable of falling for it.

Ravel stared at me for a moment in silence, then her face split into a horrendous grin, her row of yellowed fangs glistening in the faint light of her eyes. "Ahhhh... my precious man, you carry only words..." A blackish tongue darted from her purple lips, and rolls around the rim of her mouth, as if anticipation of a meal. "...but you are WELL armed, indeed..."

"Only truths do I speak, Ravel." Behind me I could sense Morte rolling his eyes.

She nodded slowly, and her grin faded. "And they travel with you willingly?"

"They chose to walk my path with me. As I said, who wouldn't wa-"

"Chose? Ahh... a dangerous word. Is it so?"

"Yes."

"Yes?" Ravel threw a black-veined glance at Dak'kon, her voice like an arrow. "Is it choice, gith? Is it? Or is it a matter of two skies?"

Dak'kon's blade bled into a vicious dead black, mirroring his eyes... and to

my surprise, the karach edge silently split into jagged fangs.

"Ravel... leave him be. I will answer your questions, not them. "

"What of the cog-box?" Ravel turned to Nordom, sneering. "What does IT know of choice?" She snapped her fingers, like the sound of cracking bone. "There is only obey and obey, hmnnn?"

"Query: What does Nordom define /choice/? Define: CHOICE: The act of choosing, selection; the right or opportunity to choo-"

"Nordom, stop. This is between Ravel and I. Look, Ravel --"

Ravel turned to Morte. "Skull, skull, skull..." Ravel clicked her tongue after each word, and her smile widened. "Your expression is difficult to read without the skin wrapping, but I feel your FEAR from here. Coming here was not your choice."

"Well, I didn't have anything BETTER to do except go to one of the Lady's mazes and meet one of the vilest creatures ever to set foot in Sigil, so I said 'sure! Why n-?'"

"Morte, be quiet. Ravel, I..."

"Be quiet?!"" Morte clacked his teeth. "Like the hells I will! I think we've listened to this crone rattle her bone-box enough, and now she's got some pair of stones, saying I haven't got any skin! So WHAT if I don't?! Obviously the fact SHE has skin has done wonders for HER looks! Does she think I like being NAKED all the time? And another thing-"

"Morte! Cut it out! Ravel, look --"

"The succubus..." Ravel squinted. "Did she have a choice? Mayhap in her smooth-skinned mind of soft silks and hard truths, MAYBE choice... tchhh. But no. A Sensate MUST experience all, and to refuse to come - NOT a Sensate would you be. Still no choice!"

"Ravel. Enough of this..."

"The tiefling. The FIERY one." Ravel cackled softly, and her eyes kindled, as if amused. "No choice. At. All. When you feel instead of think, there is little

room for choice."

Annah made no response - Ravel's mere presence seemed to have silenced her. Her tail had stopped flicking, however, and her eyes had lost their hard edge.

"Annah...?" No, no I had to focus, "Enough with this, Ravel. What other questions did you have?"

"Shhhhhh... there will be time enough for you to speak, my precious man." Ravel tapped a talon against one of her yellowed tusks. "This question next: What do you feel for these that have come with you? Do they MATTER in your heart?" She smiled, black veins dancing in her eyes. "Or are they TOOLS for your will?"

"Why do you want to know such a thing?"

"Tchhhh... thick and stubborn as a githzerai! That is yet ANOTHER question, but the answer shall cost you nothing - my answer is because I WISH to know, no other reason. Now, surrender your answer from your skeptical heart."

"They matter to me."

"Even the gith?" Ravel's ember gaze fell on Dak'kon, then slid off to lock with my eyes again. "Speak what he means to you, and say it true, or blanketing my garden he will be."

"He is my ally. I know him. He is my friend," I replied, as firmly as possible. I was not going to let Ravel hurt anyone, least of all my friends.

"Ah..." Ravel nodded... then she smiled again, her talons tapping against each other.

"Does that surprise you?"

"What of the skull?" Ravel didn't even bother to look at Morte. "Surely he matters not to one such as you! Or... does he?"

"I like him... he is my friend."

"Curious, curious-er, curious-her..." Ravel smiled. "Quite the puzzle box you are a-shaping up to be. What else lurks in the dark places of your mind?"

"I hide nothing."

"Ah..." Ravel's voice took on a threatening weight, and she turned to Fall-From-Grace, her red eyes blazing. "And here is the core of it - the Abyssal temptress... does she rise above the merely carnal to you, or is she something else in your eye, hmnnn?"

Grace said nothing. She seemed to be studying Ravel intently... and I was suddenly struck with the feeling that Grace was sizing up Ravel for weaknesses. I hoped that if this degenerated further, the others would be as ready.

Ravel turned back to me, clacking her yellowed tusks, as if in anticipation. "Speak, precious man, but have a care where your words fall."

There was a hidden sharpness to her voice, like the serrated edge of a knife scraping against the inside of its sheath. Things had suddenly become quite a bit more dangerous. "What is she to you, beautiful Ravel? She cannot even compare to your looks, your intellect, your power," I asked.

Ravel slid her gaze off of me and narrowed her eyes at Grace. "Hmnnnnnn... so if I were to strike her down, snuff her infernal heart, you would not stir? Answer carefully..."

"I... retract my words. I do not wish her harmed," I said, licking my lips nervously. There was no lie about my feelings for Grace... I hadn't said anything at all on the matter.

"Pah! Contrary man!" Ravel's eyes smoldered, and as she turned back to me, the veins in her eyes had sharpened. "Which thought a-rattles about in your skull now?"

"I spoke falsely - I knew not what I said, but I have had enough of death... mine or any other... to last several lifetimes."

Ravel slid her gaze off of me and narrowed her eyes at Grace.

"Grace... I like her. She has many good qualities; I consider her a friend."

"Hmnnnn..." Ravel turned, clacked her tusks, then glanced at Annah with a sneer. "And what of THIS slip of flesh... the fiendling, the tiefling with the scarlet hair and the fiery passion. What is SHE to you, my precious man?"

Ravel had touched a tender spot with those words, as if she had pressed against an old bruise. Annah, who had lied to me the first time we met, and sent me down an alley full of muggers to my death. Annah, who was forced to guide me to where she had found my corpse, who scoffed at my oafish ignorance and clumsiness as she tried to keep several paces ahead of me. And she was the one whose lips tightened when I spoke to pretty women. She was the one who taught me how to sneak and steal on a cool night in the silent darkness of the Clerk's Ward, our bodies pressed against each other innocently in an attempt to pick each other's pockets.

I remembered the flush of her skin, her sudden shyness, her half-spoken confessions that ached to be heard, and were always brushed off as jest...

"Do yeh know I like the way yeh smell? Oh, aye - it drives me barmier than a Chaosman, it does." She sniffed up the side of my cheek, and she gave a low, eager hiss. "I see the way yeh look at me, and I like it. Yeh've got hungry eyes, yeh do. It makes me a-fire..."

And I remembered how I cradled her body in the alley, desperately trying to staunch the blood with my hands and keep the warmth from spilling out onto the cobblestones.

"I could fall in love with her," I murmured, and I knew it was the most honest thing I had ever said.

Ravel glanced at Annah, then snorted, her black-veined eyes gleaming. "Hmnnnnnn... so be it."

"Enough of these games, Ravel. Look -"

"My NEXT question is this..." Ravel's voice dropped, almost whispering. And suddenly, I had the strange feeling that she didn't want to hear the answer. "Why did you wait so long to return to me? Ravel grew a-lonely without you, precious man."

"The way to this place is difficult, beautiful Ravel. Efforts have been made to

insure you have little company, and many were the trials I was forced to undertake in order to stand before you. Yet I am glad to see you once again, Ravel - time has not dulled your beauty, I see."

"Your answers..." Ravel's eyes glinted, and her lips peeled back in a grotesque smile. "Your words are soothing and have not been heard in such a time... they stir even my black-brambled heart. No matter where your memories be, your charms remain, pretty thing..."

"Nay, it is your charms that persist, beautiful Ravel."

"Of charms, enchantments, beguilements... all these Ravel has mastered... yet, there is much it seems you could teach I..."

"Ahhhh, yessss. The third and last question... is this..." As Ravel opened her mouth to speak her final question, I was suddenly gripped with the terrible realization that this final question had murdered many others to whom it has been asked. I knew what it was, and I felt it welling up within me, compelled to ask it.

"What can change the nature of a man?"

Chapter 90

"What can change the nature of a man?" I murmured, repeating her words even as she spoke them.

"I see you have not forgotten..." Ravel smiled, her yellow fangs gleaming. "What is your answer?"

The words came out in a crackling hiss, like crumbling ash flaking away from a guttering fire. Hundreds, perhaps thousands had died because of those words. Each one was a petitioner for Ravel's wisdom, each daring to think that they could provide the answer. Each died slowly and horribly, driven mad with nightmares or wracked with blinding agony until those nearby

could slit the poor sod's throat out of mercy. It was almost hard to fear her, this squat and senile wart-skinned creature. Nothing could possibly live up to the stories of her evil, and this was perhaps what made Ravel so dangerous. Those would-be apprentices must've underestimated Ravel's cruelty.

I prayed that I wasn't so foolish.

The answer came gently, with a soft certainty to it, but it rang true as I looked her in the eye.

"You, Ravel. As you changed my nature forever."

Her lips peeled back in to an evil smile, and she cocked her head, teasing and coy. She seemed neither eager nor offended at the answer, and for a moment that made me unsure. "And that is your answer...?" The veins in Ravel's eyes began to shift slightly, "Be certain before you say."

"It may not be your answer, but it is my answer," I said, setting my jaw. My fingers itched and I felt the power of the Art welling up in me, just in case.

"And that is all I wished for, my precious man." Ravel's smile relaxed. "A simple answer, and in the end, many are the men have I laid low while they sought MY answer."

I paused, stunned for a moment, and the tension fell away like rainwater trickling off a roof. "That's it...? I thought..."

Ravel cackled. "Countless times has the question been asked, and not ONCE did the pathetic shells who came a-fore me answered with THEIR answer, but always sought to creep inside my mind and find what I thought... tchhh! There is no truth in that."

"I... don't believe you. In fact, I don't think they ever could have answered you true, even if it was true to them."

Ravel fell suddenly, strangely, silent. She watched me warily.

"You never cared about any answer other than mine. Ever. Did you? Yet still you asked the question, knowing that no matter what the answer they gave, they would die by your hand."

Ravel hissed. "Of COURSE your answer was the only one I sought, for you were the ONLY reason I asked the question! Did you think I cared for them...? Tchhh! Did you think I even cared a fraction of the amount for them that I cared for you, my precious man? Answer me that!"

"I'm through answering your questions, Ravel. Now you'll answer mine."

"Of course... ever questions, ever questions..."

"Why were you imprisoned, Ravel?"

"I tried to help a Lady and a-kindly she did not take to it."

"The Lady of Pain? You tried to help her?" Grace said, shocked.

"My offering of help was unwelcome. I tried to set her FREE; Sigil is the CAGE, a City of Doors and Locks, is a prison for her. It must be, mustn't it be? Why else call the city of Sigil 'the Cage?' And who is caged? The Lady! A prison so small for one so great. Unjustness, wrongness, intolerable to torment a woman thusly!"

"I think I know who should be in a cage..." Morte murmured.

"I tried to break the Cage, let the Lady go free." She made a shooping motion, her expression becoming pained as she scattered invisible birds. "Shoo, shoo, o pained woman, let Sigil's ring be broken so you might fly far from its filthy streets and the stupid dabus that dare not speak in words for fear their thoughts would be overheard!" Ravel's hands slowly stopped their 'shooting' motion, and she gave a slow sigh. "Before I could finish, I a-found myself here, and my memories none the better for the trip... much has slipped away, much forgotten, yes it was... is? Was?" Ravel smiled with her yellowed teeth. "The dwindling of memory has become a comfort to these old bones. Much have I forgotten... I am fortunate in that I still remember you."

"Ravel, but... WHY did you try to free the Lady of Pain from Sigil?"

Ravel's voice dropped, almost reprimanding. "I resent anyone, even a Power, being imprisoned and think that all, everyone ...whether stones, shores or quiet bladed ladies... should be FREE. Some have said more fool, I. Why risk such a thing, they said?"

"I think you did the right thing trying to set her free, Ravel," I lied. Still best to butter her up.

"I'm glad that we share a like mind and view like-minded on this matter. Yet... when I cannot let matters well enough alone... it seems to mine eyes that many are the lives and dreams that are a-left in pieces on the ground."

"Is that what you were trying to do when I met you so long ago? Were you trying to set me free?"

"Quite possibly, possibly quite. Life's chains and fear-of-death may have gripped too-tightly on the man I new... knew? Knew then, hmmm-hmmm?" Ravel picked at one of her jagged gray hairs, wrapping it around her finger. "No liking for chains and cages does Ravel have..."

"Ah, so I was caged somehow? Or chained? It sounds to me as if your memory is stirring, Ravel..."

"Yess..." Ravel blinked for a moment, and her black-veined eyes became duller, as if she has been struck with a heavy weapon. Her talon tightened around the gray hair, so tightly it looked like she was about to tear it from her skull. "Mayhap... you were a-trapped? But it was no normal cage that held you..."

"Do you have any idea what held me?"

Ravel looks confused, and her face twisted, as if she was fighting an unpleasant thought. "I have forgotten... mayhap a promise...? No, no..." Her finger tightened around the gray hair, and to my surprise, there was a snap like a twig breaking, and Ravel tore the hair from her head. A trickle of black blood wormed from beneath her skull cap, and she hissed in anger.

"Ravel...? Are you all right?"

"No MORE will I say..." Ravel's face wrinkled in pain, the talon covered with the blood-tipped gray hair - even plucked from her head, it looked jagged and stiff. "I do not know, and no knowing shall I share!" She stared down at the gray hair wrapped around her talon, and then she hissed, and flicked it to me. "Take this, and leave the past where it lies, half-man!"

"Ravel... who are you? Where did you come from?"

"I? Ravel am I, a maker and breaker of puzzles, a solver of what cannot be solved, a mind raveling and unraveling until the threads of thought are tied up like knots in a drunken man's hair." Ravel picked at another one of her jagged gray hairs, wrapping it around her finger. "It is enough, enough it is."

"But what are you? Some have called you are a 'night hag,' whatever that is."

"Night hag...?" Ravel gave a ghastly smile, her yellowed teeth like needles. "I am but a woman who has sorely... soarily? Soarily missed her beloved creation. Some have named me crone, gray lady, Yaga sister, night hag -- but MYSELF is my name, Ravel, Ravel who puzzles well, providing conundrums to decipher and laying impossibilities low. But..."

"But...?"

"MANY things are said about we gray ladies. A race are we 'night hags,' but an individual am I. Some call us evil of Old, stalkers of mortal dreams, the kindly ones, ugly, hideous things whose homes lie in the dark places of men's minds." Ravel's eyes narrowed to reddish sparks. "But that means NOTHING to me... what would one such as YOU call one such as I, pretty thing?"

"I find you beautiful, Ravel. Not perhaps to the eye, but your mind seems sharp and vibrant," I lied.

"Tchhh! Do you think I care for such truths?! A hex on inner beauty, no matter how long it may last the flesh. Think you ugly am I...?"

"Ravel, you are not ugly..."

"Yet ugly I need not be, pretty thing. My shape is but water to my will, and I may re-weave its fibers to a more pleasing tapestry..." Ravel glanced at Fall-from-Grace, then smiled and licked her lips. "Yes..."

"Ravel, what..."

Ravel had... melted into Fall-From-Grace, taking on her demeanor, her features, her clothes... "Is this shape more pleasing?" Ravel smiled, her teeth

now a brilliant, perfect white, the lips with just a hint of red. She had Grace's sweet voice, musical as the sound of chimes. "So cultured and breathtaking?" She motioned me to come closer. "Come, my precious man, my lips do not burn with Abyssal torments. Lay your lips upon mine."

"No, Ravel."

"Mayhap... is it the rougher woman that you crave, the one of passionate fire?" Ravel glanced at Annah, who stiffened as Ravel's gaze pinned her. "Mayhap it is HER that whets your appetite..."

"Ravel, stop this. I've no more time for your g-"

And then Ravel melted into Annah's shape, taking on her demeanor, her features, her leather vest... "Is it the rough-edged woman that you crave, the one for whom age has not yet tempered her passions?" Annah's... Ravel's... tail flicked, as if in anticipation. "Come, caress my lips with your own, and I shall please you."

"Ravel, stop these games... I have neither time nor patience for them. Resume your form."

I blinked, and Ravel had twisted back into her original form. "A difficult man to please are you! Pah! And wonder do they why there are no males of our kind!"

"What other shapes can you... have you turned yourself into?"

"Maybe some, Mebbeth none." Ravel seemed confused by the question. "I've not a-membered such, I've neen, I-vene, Ei-Vene, mayhap? Neither smarta nor Marta... so many threads and branchings, so many Ravels... always stitching and mending and growing are my forms."

"Mebbeth? You were Mebbeth?" I asked in shock. It couldn't have been...

"That may have been one of my names... yes?" Ravel looked more confused, her black-veined eyes becoming misty. "Names are difficult to remember..." Her voice became faint. "Like calling across a great distance..."

"Mebbeth was kind to me and helped me, Ravel. That means YOU helped me. I thank you."

At the mention of Mebbeth, all the color bled out of Ravel's face until she was gray and ashen -- literally. It was as if the color just... vanished. "And who might ye be, hmmmnnn? Does yer path bring you back to Ol' Mebbeth's door, child...?" Her face was that soft plump mound of gray, her voice that sweet old creak, gentle and motherly.

"Yes, it does... Mebbeth... I, uh, came to learn more of the Art. Can you teach me any more?"

"Pah! I am but a midwife, child, such power as the Art commands is much beyond me..."

"I... don't think so. I think you may have more to teach me than you may realize. Much more."

Then came the question like an echo: "Ye want to learn the Art, ye do? Why do ye want to learn such things?"

"Because I may need it to solve the mystery of who I am," I murmured again. The words echoed back to me from the past, when I was still so new to the world, pleading at Mebbeth's door for help.

After a moment, Ravel... Mebbeth... nodded. "The Art may help, it may not, and ye must not rely on it ta solve all o' yer problems." She sighed. "Child, it's most like only going to add another chip to yer pile o' questions..." She leaned in close. "But if ye'd know, then listen..."

Mebbeth... Ravel... whispered something, and I felt different, changed somehow. It was something horrible she had whispered to me, something about how the Planes worked, but my mind had shut out her words, and I couldn't recall them. Just thinking about them set my heart pounding... It was a secret I'm not sure anyone was ever meant to know. Ravel watched me, studying me.

"I-In her own way, Ei-Vene helped me as well, Ravel. That means YOU helped me. I thank you," I said, swallowing hard.

Almost unconsciously, Ravel's hand reached out for me, and just for a moment, I could swear they were Ei-Vene's talons...

Ravel's left hand plucked a hair from her head, hooks it around her talons, and lightning-like, she jabbed another talon into the skin near one of my scars. It was barely more than a pin-prick, but it looked like she was about to start stitching me up.

As it was with Ei-Vene, the sensation was curiously painless, but the thread and stitching seemed to be going much deeper, almost INSIDE me, without actually going beyond the surface of the skin. In moments, Ravel's talons drew back, and I felt... better, stronger. Ravel muttered in Ei-Vene's voice: "Dum zomfie..."

"Marta was barmy, Ravel, but she was not unkind and not unhelpful. If you were her, then you mean me no harm. I thank you."

And as I said her name, Ravel's face seemed to shift... her blue skin sagged, until she was wearing the same sour, curd-faced expression I had seen on Marta's face. "C'mon, now... don't be all-difficult on Marta..." She raised the talon of her index finger like a scalpel and advanced upon me. "False, nasty, corpse."

Ravel's filthy talon jabbed into my abdomen, then pulled it brutally downwards in a saw-like motion... but there was no pain. I watched as my skin peeled slowly back from her touch -no blood issued from the wound. "Look at this, Marta... look at this..."

Ravel's free hand dug into my chest, where she looped my intestines up like yarn, and plucked them from my stomach... as she did, my stomach sealed up, as if time was going backwards. Marta... Ravel... held up my intestines like a trophy. "Pretty, pretty, eh, Marta...? One shouldn't swallow such a thing, no, no..."

I felt my stomach, whole and pebbled with crisscrossed scars as before. There hadn't even been the slightest tugging feeling in my guts. "Uh... can I have those back, please? I might need them later."

She handed me the ropy mass... despite the freshness, the fluids surrounding my intestines had dried like resin. It felt more like a loop of glazed... rope.

"Uh... thanks. I'll treasure this always."

Marta... Ravel... nodded slowly. "As well he should, shouldn't he, Marta? Yes... yes, he should, Marta. Powerful magic to be found the guts of an immortal, yes... not like teethies... or eyes..."

I nodded, and her Ravel's face had become her own again, as if nothing had happened. "You helped me thrice already. Would you help me again, then? The legends claim you are a powerful mage, Ravel. Can you teach me some of the Art?"

Ravel frowned disapprovingly, her bluish skin twisting like a rag. "Does Ravel know the Art?! Is your mind gone a-way of the mortality, a thing all up-and-lost?! I have forgotten more of the Art than you shall..." She jabbed me with one of her talons. "Ever." She jabbed again. "Know."

"Can you teach me some of the Art, then?"

Ravel narrowed her black-veined eyes, studying me. "Mayhap I could be persuaded by one such as you... though any other would NOT have such a chance, nor the boon I offer. Are you a rudimentary student in the arts or am I facing a tried-true-and-tired... attired? A-tired master?"

I shifted, "Somewhere in between, beautiful Ravel. I still have much to learn."

"Flatterer... and yet your words warm me." Ravel's voice changed, alternating in pitch, like someone plucking a stringed instrument. "Much have I learned tending this garden. Charms and incantations, distilled from the barbs..." She began to hum slightly to herself. "...rhyming, swaying ways of the consonants constants and motions that bring the briars to your aid... listen, the branches will speak of it."

I closed my eyes and listened.

A great trembling passed through me then, as if dozens of barbed snakes were burrowing beneath my flesh. My veins writhed, sinew twisted and stretched from muscle and bone. Just when I thought the pain was more than I could bear, I suddenly, instinctively, began humming, the same tune that Ravel did... and the pain ebbed. In the distance of the maze I could hear the clicking of the tree creatures, as if responding to my call.

I continued to hum.

Ravel watched with a curious light in her black-veined eyes. "Such power..." She gave a soft hiss, as if in wonder, and her lips peeled back in a smile. "It a-touches all that hear it. You are powerful, my precious man, so powerful... one day even the Planes may bend to your will..."

I opened my eyes and shook my head, "I do not wish such a thing, Ravel. There are many who would walk that path, but not I."

Ravel nodded, then nodded at my hand, which to my surprise, held a number of black-barbed seeds. "Take those seeds. Use them as you will... and to this, I grant an additional boon." She plucked a hair from her head and took a handful of the seeds, placed them in her palm, then crushed them. A small trail of blackish blood ran from her hand, but when she opened it, there was no wound... only a necklace of black-barbs, woven around a lock of Ravel's gray hair. "Take this; it is of me, and it will serve you well."

I took the seeds and the strange barbed charm. I recognized them, then... they were of the same seed that Mebbeth had given to me so long ago, when I was training to become a mageling.

"Save those seeds, precious man... use not all of them, for they may prove more useful in other places in this maze... but if powerful you are, these places you will find."

I tucked it all away, and sighed. So she was amenable. "Why did you make me immortal, Ravel?"

"It's what you wanted, seedling, and you asked so sweetly... now how could Ravel say 'no' to one such as you? Immortality was your solution and your challenge to me."

"My solution? But why?"

"I don't know, seedling. Time has chipped away at my memories as well, it would seem... seam? If you remember, tell me... I'm a-curious myself. It must have been something important... isn't it in the nature of a man to want to live forever?"

"Only if what lies on the other path carries greater pain," Dak'kon said. His

voice was soft and certain.

"Ravel... this is very important; do you have any idea why I asked you to do it?"

"Death was a thing you needed to dodge. An easy thing to say, mayhap, but to DO, it is not! Immortality, even with its flaws, was the best solution this withered mind could untangle..."

"Yet..." I probed.

"Lead is not easily a-changed to gold, but it is possible, thought the unwise... un-whys? ...Ravel. If water can be drawn from blood, mortality can be taken from a mortal, peeled back like a sticky film...."

"So you pulled it off?"

"The gulf between man and unman is great. You traveled the distance. I provided the means, but you crossed on your own." Ravel slapped her head and raked her hand through her hair. "Bad Ravel! Mortals are too flawed to be made to last. Still they break! They must be dragged kicking and screaming into an unhealthy new mold."

"Unhealthy...? So the ritual was flawed?"

"Shortcuts must be made, and they can break the molded... for it is not always the mold that breaks, but the substance poured within it. Force something into a shape it was not meant to be, and it breaks! I thought the material was of stronger stuff, but you have been broken."

"But I am immortal - surely that was a success?"

"You have survived long, immortalized one, but you have become the prey of the creature that is life." She cupped her palms, then reversed the motion, forming a canopy with her hands. "The body is but a hut for the soul. But now no one dwells in your hut."

"What went wrong with the ritual?"

"Puzzle-fleshed broken, beautiful, beautiful mortal man, the ritual was not... knot? Knot... not a finished thing." Ravel's brows wrinkled, and her talons

picked at her hair again, tugging on a lone strand. "The ritual gave you what you wanted, but ..."

"But..."

"The ritual gave you what you wanted, but great were the costs... the casting of shadows, the quiet, violent deaths of the mind, and the pain-taking emptiness... these things, a-dangerous were are in such a fragile vessel, no matter how strong a mortal man. Regret them and the ritual do I."

"Casting of Shadows?"

"Ungrateful shades... but ungrateful without cause? The shades... they hate you, Nameless One, for they are fathered by you, your children, once forsaken, they will never forgive. They will do everything they can to destroy the parent... such is the way of children."

The shadows... the words chilled me to the bone. My eyes scanned the maze, watching for a flicker of darkness or the flutter of a shade, like the hem of a robe. "How do I father shades... these shadows?"

And then I felt them, writhing in the corners of existence, wedged in a sliver between being and nonbeing. For a moment they clawed along the walls of existence, hungry for vengeance. The hate poured off of them in waves, and as they welled up from the lightless depths of Ravel's maze, it seemed as if a tide of hatred was rolling in to swallow me up. My throat seized, my hands went to my dagger, but suddenly lost the strength to grip it. The thrumming of the Art, so often like the resonance of a glass struck with a spoon, was suddenly silent.

And as quickly as they came, they disappeared back into nothing.

"You cast shadows on existence, Nameless One. With every death, a shadow arises fresh from the fields of your flesh. They a-wander for a time, but always they a-return, looking to murder their parent. Such is the way of many offspring..." Ravel pursed her lips in disapproval, then suddenly poked me in the chest with a talon. "...and thankless young men such as yourself."

I shivered, and the strength returned to my muscles, "Then what do you mean by the quiet, violent death of the mind?"

"A thousand deaths, and you recover from each. Not so the mind, the mind is much more fragile. Its scars run deep and do not heal. The brain is encased in a hard bone shell, difficult to breach, but with no defense against that which eats at it from within."

Deionarra had spoken of such. I had already known the answer to the question the moment I asked it, "And the pain-taking emptiness?"

"You have a whole where... wear? Wear your mortality once lay within your shell." She made her hand into a fist and shook it. "Rattle-rattle goes the hollow man, a baby's plaything, with naught but a tiny stone that a-clatters and clacks in your frame."

"Despite these problems, it seems like the ritual worked..."

"Do you doubt Ravel? Of course I delivered on what was promised! Not long after the spell a-drew to a close, I killed you to see if it had worked. You struggled so, but I kept my grip tight and watched you die your first of many deaths." Ravel clacked her teeth. "Then was I a-learned in its flaws..."

"What flaws?"

"Ego enwraps us like a prison. Forgot I did that it oftentimes serves as a shield." Ravel clicked her tongue. "My pretty, pretty thing, there is much wisdom and understanding in the truth that life is a preparation for the ultimate goal: death. Our life is a means by which we learn how to die. If we FORGET such things..."

"So that's when you discovered I lost my memories when I died..."

"Yess..." Ravel nodded. "Unfortunate... without the mortality to hold such memories tight, the shell a body is..."

"So you took my mortality from me... is it still intact?"

Ravel seemed surprised, her eyes widened in recognition. "Yes, yes, yes! Fear not for a broken mortality... if you are here... hear? Hear a-talking at me, intact your mortality must be. Such a thing can not... knot... not be destroyed as long as you exist. You are an anchor of your mortal soul. As long as you are intact, so shall it be. Made to last are you..." Ravel smiled and gave a wheezing laugh. "For life swallowed you and spit you out!"

"It swallowed him, but I don't know if he came out of that end," Morte muttered.

"Enough of this -- look, Ravel, you took my mortality from me, and it has caused more harm than good. I would take it back now - you have had it overlong, I think."

"Ah... you make a demand...?" Ravel's black-veined eyes sharpened and twisted, taking a disturbing awareness, and she bared her yellow fangs. "No, no, no. That, Ravel, I, will not do. What is undone cannot be done."

"Why not?"

"Ravel cannot give such a thing to you, my precious man, for Ravel has nothing to give... I never possessed you or your mortality... though I wished to keep them both in my garden as selfish affection's keepsakes, trace the patterns of your flesh... but such things Ravel could not bring herself to do..."

"Why not?"

"Yeh loved him!" Annah broke her silence - she sounded astonished. "Yeh loved him, yeh did!"

Ravel gave a low, wide smile. "Is that so hard for you to believe, fiendling...?" She cackled softly to herself. "Does Ravel being Ravel, and thus, a myth, not deserve to carry such a feeling in her black-brambled heart...?"

"No creature is undeserving of such a feeling, Ravel." Grace spoke softly. "The histories do not paint such a compassionate picture of you, however..."

"Tchhh! The past is past, and histories care little for a-speaking the truth of it..." Ravel frowned, then her voice dropped slightly, threateningly, as she studied Grace. "The feeling brushed me, yes... and now hold your silvered tongue, Abyssal daughter. I need not your soft words to cloud the air here - the man and I shall speak, and you shall bow out of this. I shall attend to you shortly."

"Enough, Ravel: If you don't have my mortality... where is it?"

"I don't know, sweet thing. But if I were you, I'd get it back quick-quick. No telling what horrible things someone could do to you if they held your mortality for RANSOM." Ravel clicked her talons together. "It would like be holding someone's sweet, succulent soul... a puppet dancing on someone's strings, would you be, and a most sad puppet, too... two? Know where it is, I do not."

"Hold a moment... you say YOU don't know where my mortality is. Do you know someone who DOES know where it is?"

Ravel smiled horribly, her tusks gleaming. "Clever, clever, clever you are... yes, there is ANOTHER who might know the things that Ravel does not..."

"'Another may know?' Who?"

Ravel's eyes dimmed, as if she was staring at something in the distance, and her voice slowed. "A... fair-skinned one... must you ask. An angel, a deva, one who soars on the wings of morning and with his hands, is the architect of horizons. He lies, lies beyond my keeping, in another cage, in another prison... in his knowing is the knowing of what you wish to know. Ask him your questions, listen to his answers, use them as guides."

"Where can I find this angel?"

"In a-leaving this prison, to another cursed prison will you arrive... though it may not appear as such to casual glances. Step a-lightly, and find the golden link in the ever-shortening chain. The light shall give the dark of the matter, and new paths shall open to you."

"Delightfully cryptic... though not surprising. Thanks."

Ravel cackled. "Of the past I am not held to particulars... you are fortunate to receive anything, o caustic one!"

"Oh, am I? It's just that the chain of who knows what and where they are never seems to be a smooth series of links," I grumbled.

"Ahhh..." Ravel smiled, holding up one of her talons. "And that is why you must keep each link safe, for if they are not smooth now, imagine what the chain will be like when MORE links shatter... time and death are not as patient with others as they are with you."

"What are you saying?"

"What if one of your precious links was to die? And what if you forgot yourself again? What would you do then? Where would your stolen mortality be, then... it would be LOST forever, for there would be no one left to ASK how to reach it. Tracing your path would become harder... mayhap IMPOSSIBLE..."

"True enough," I said softly and stood there a moment, puzzling over whether there was anything else to ask. "Thank you for the information you have given me, Ravel; I must leave now."

"Hold..." Ravel's voice dropped to a low hiss, like that of a serpent. "The most important question you have YET to ask, my precious man. Has it occurred to you yet?"

And it came to me, one last piece of knowledge that I needed, "Yes... I need to know how to leave this place. Do you know the answer to this question?"

"I know the branchings of this place, the twistings and bendings and burrowings. Though there are no leaves here, one may take their leave when they wish it."

"So you DO know how to leave?"

"Wrap your hands about you like branches, make them encircle your chest like a cage. Step from the edge of the maze into the darkness, and into another cage your body shall go - a simple leaving, but there is NO return when that final step is taken, so TAKE heed and TAKE what you need before you take the step."

"Which of the edges of the maze do I leave by?"

"Which, a question posed to the witch... which? One of the edges knows, not I. The remembering of which has failed me, and the edges of the maze have had little to say on the matter."

I blinked, surprised. "You've known how to leave? All this time? Then... why don't you leave?"

"Why stay when one can leave is your question to me?" Ravel broke into a crooked smile, displaying a row of fangs. "I turn the question upon its head and send it a-scurrying back to you. The answer lies not in the staying or leaving, but in the causes and reasons, my precious half-man."

"Don't you want to leave?"

"It is a want, a once-want, but not a now-want, and more and more a not, naught, knotted-want. What do I need that lies beyond my brambled walls? It is a cruel, jagged world beyond the edges of this maze, and Ravel has pulled enough of its shards from her skin."

I gave her a polite bow, "You have done me a great service, beautiful Ravel. Thank you for hearing my request and sharing your knowledge with me."

Ravel gave a crooked smile, all tusks, and then cackled softly. "Ah... it is I who thanks you, my precious man. Long has it been since such sweet flattery has been brought to this maze... I wish to grant you a boon, my songbird."

"No boon is necessary, beautiful Ravel."

"Your protestations have no place here, songbird. Shhh... I would tell you a secret..."

"Very well..." I said with a gulp. She had yet to hurt me, and few had such opportunities as this.

"Then listen to me... close your eyes, and I shall let you see the nature of the multiverse..."

I closed my eyes, and as I did, a sharp, stabbing pain lanced through my right eye. My eye... one of my eyes... opened... and I saw Ravel before me, her own blood-red eyes gleaming with delight; one of her talons was extended, and is tipped with my blood... and an eyeball. Mine.

"What... did... you... do...?" I moaned, putting a hand to my face, feeling the eyelid indent unnaturally under my touch.

"A boon I have granted, songbird. A twist of perception, a tap into the branches of the mind, a tap into the roots of Ravel's knowing have I granted

you... a piece of me..." She took the eyeball, and I watched in disgust as she pulled forth a black seed and placed them both in her left palm. With a grotesque smile, she crushed the two of them with a sickening crunch that left me tense. "Ahh..."

"Give... it back..."

"Of course, precious man..." Ravel opened her palm and my eye lay there, seemingly untouched, staring at me. She placed it between her thumb and forefinger, then before I could react, she stabbed it into my empty eye socket.

"Erhhkkkk..."

For a moment there was an assymetry to my vision... my normal eye saw things normally, but the one Ravel had jabbed back in felt heavy, weighted somehow as if it were made of lead. But through that orb the world around me seemed to hum, shadows dancing among objects, auras branching and twisting, dancing like seaweed moved by the waves. The visions danced as if they were afterimages burned into my retina, and slowly they faded. Even after everything readjusted, the Planes seemed different, as if I were seeing the Planes through Ravel's eyes as well as my own.

I'd better be careful about who I flatter from now on, especially if they're within stabbing distance.

"A piece of me lies in your good eye, precious man. When you see the Planes through that eye, you will understand MORE than you once did... wiser you will be, and more experience of the Planes and their turnings will you understand... and that is all."

I nodded, massaging my face and wiping the blood away, "Very well... thank you, Ravel. I must bid you farewell."

As I uttered my farewell, a crawling sensation ran up my skull - and Ravel's black-veined eyes took on a strange, predatory fire.

"You're not going to let me leave, are you Ravel?" I murmured hoarsely.

"A perceptive question - yet it not the real question." Ravel's voice lowered to a grim whisper - sad, and mournful, that sent a faint echo through my

mind. "The question is do you wish to leave me, half-man?"

"I do not wish to be trapped her in this place, Ravel. It is your home, not mine. I need to find my mortality, and become whole once again."

"No, know, no... know THIS..." Ravel raised a taloned finger, as if warning me. "Know it is OUR home, my precious half-man. Two immortals shall we be in this black-brambled garden, and I shall keep you safe from the Planes."

"Fair Ravel, you helped me when I came to you so long ago, and you have done so again. I shall not forget what you have done. But now I must leave - I have to know more about myself."

There was a terrible shimmering in the air around Ravel - and the sound of snapping twigs and cracking tree limbs, and the horrid sound of the trees bending and splintering...

"Wh--?"

Ravel's lips peeled back and her voice became shrill, like a howling wind. "What do YOU know of KNOWING, half-man?! KNOW this: KNOW you will stay here until the END DAYS in my brambled garden, never to leave, and you shall LOVE me, as you were MEANT, as you PROMISED!"

I opened my hands, tried to calm her down, "I'm afraid I would be poor company, Ravel. And I cannot stay in any event. I'm afraid you must allow me passage."

"I shall NOT let you leave -I have the power to KEEP you here, and I shall USE it. My black-barbed maze shall NOT allow you to travel beyond it while I LIVE, my precious, precious man..."

"Ravel, I don't want to fight you... don't do this. Allow me passage, and I shall return to visit you. You need not be alone in this place," my voice became pleading, desperate. Behind me I could hear the nervous unsheathing of blades.

"RETURN?! RETURN as you CLAIMED you would so LONG AGO?! No... no, you shall not LIE to Ravel TWICE! No more CENTURIES will I WAIT for you..." Ravel's lips peeled back as she shrieked, and her talons grew, lengthening into fiendish claws. "Here in my garden you will STAY, and a-wander the

Planes you will NO LONGER...!"

"Ravel, calm yourself, there's no NEED for this..."

"You have forgotten your PLACE, HALF-man. Humility is in order. Attend me, my pets!" she crooned, making a twisting motion of her hand. The soil trembled beneath our feet, the walls writhed with animalistic life. The pungent scent of rotting vegetation and damp moss grew thick in the air, and in an eruption of soil Ravel's tree minions came to her aid.

"Trigits..." I said quietly, suddenly knowing their name. Ravel may have been their master, but I now shared her power. I could feel the pulse of sap along the walls, the curve of each wood fiber. Each branch, each twisting, could be mine to command if I could just focus...

"Gather to me..." I intoned, in my hoarse guttural voice, attempting the same twisting motion with my hand. With that same thrumming, that same shudder of soil and rot, three more trigits pulled themselves from the soil, at my command.

Ravel cackled, "Need you more PROOF, sweet manling, that you and I were meant to be together?!"

Branch crashed on branch and vine tangled vine. The air was filled with the sound of splintering wood and flakes of falling leaves. I felt the air hum with Ravel's power as she raised her hands, and a shield of violet-black nettles curled around her, and my bolts of force crashed impotently against her shield.

"Take care of the trigits!" I cried to the others, "I'm moving forward!"

The witch's mad cackling pounded in my ears, and lightning cracked down on the enemy trigits. Fall-From-Grace's incantations had taken on a deadly edge, and now her powers were channeled towards combat. The shock was enough for me to get in close to Ravel...

With a flick of Ravel's claw, a mass of thorny brambles burst from the earth and encircled my leg, their barbs carving deep into the bone and holding me in place. I howled in pain, like a wolf caught in a bear trap, writhing on the ground and trying to pull my leg free. Held fast, my hand hacked away at the bone as much as I could, desperately trying to sever my leg to free myself

before Ravel could kill us all. For the first time I cursed my regenerative power... muscle and sinew was snapping back into place as fast as I could cut, and each stab of my dagger could only ever dent the cartilage of my knee.

"Let us be alone together now, sweetling," she hissed, forming her hands into a circle and pressing down. Her palms trembled with the force, and a black ichor of liquid shadowstuff drew towards the heart of the chamber, forming an orb that hummed with power.

"NO!" I screamed, as the black sphere burst.

In a flash it crystallized, like hardening sap or cracking ice. The stuff creaked as liquid shadow became solid, and my friends became encased in what looked like violet glass. Dak'kon, Annah, Morte, Grace, Nordom... frozen stiff in glassy shadow.

"I will never let you go again, sweetling..." Ravel hissed. She approached me eagerly, talons clawing at the air, lips hungry and wet from her serpentine tongue. If I didn't move out of this bramble, it would all be over...

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*Mebbeth's hut smelled of dry herbs. "I returned with those herbs you wanted... now maybe you can get this damned bramble-patch off my wrist."*

*"Is that so?" Mebbeth glanced at the barbs that surround my wrist. "If so, think it off, then."*

*I focused.*

*Creaking and snapping, the black-barbed branches unraveled themselves from my wrist and formed into a tangled ball of brush and twigs; it looked like a nest of dead black snakes.*

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With that thought the thorns digging into my leg withdrew and the brambles crumbled away. She was hovering over me, blinking in surprise, when I hurled one final bolt of force, compressed as thin as my little finger.

A bright nimbus of light surrounded my hand as the ray of force shot forward, shattering her barbed shield, spearing through her black heart.

For a moment Ravel looked down dumbly at her chest. Dark blood was pouring from the small wound already, running down her blouse in ebony rivulets. She looked up to me, the fire in her eyes dimming, lips turned down in a sad frown. Her mouth opened as if to say something, but slowly, quietly, her eyes rolled back and she fell with a quiet thud against the earth.

The legend was dead.

Chapter 91

I could feel them gathering the moment Ravel died, scuttling along the edges of reality and billowing in like black mists from the edge of oblivion. The shadows that raged and hunted without limit.

They were coming for us.

I was numb standing over Ravel's corpse. The blood continued to trickle from her body, and the blue-violet hue that tainted her skin was draining away. Those eyes, once filled with fire and barbs, were glassy and pale, like a doll's. I made quick work searching her body for whatever we needed to get the hell out of here.

A scroll, a devilish-looking eye, a shard of Ravel's fingernail that looked cruelly vicious as a weapon... strange charms, but what else could I expect to dig up from a crone trapped for centuries in one of the Lady's mazes?

"Ye've got what yeh wanted now, let's give this place the laugh, aye?" Annah seemed just as stunned. She didn't even bother to make the sign she usually did to ward off evil.

"Yeah," I grumbled. For a moment I was tempted to run my fingers through the hag's hair... I almost pitied Ravel now, fragile as she seemed lying in the

moss with a trickle of blood crusting down the corner of her lip. I'm not sure she lived up to the legends of her cruelty, "Let's get the Hells out of here."

"Portal detected!" Nordom whistled.

"I'm telling you, Nordom. They're ev-" I paused. Something in my pack felt... active, as if it were setting off the nearby portal Nordom detected. This wasn't something I expected: in the first maze I'd escaped from the portals were ever there.

I pulled my pack open.

The space beneath one of the overhanging branches began to glow softly, and flickers of the nascent portal revealed what looked like a small brambled room beyond. The strange black-barbed charm Ravel gave me was writhing, like a dying snake.

Keeping my pack open, I moved closer to the overhanging branch.

The strange charm, using its barbed seeds, bit gently into my skin. Using its barbs like treads, it climbed up my left hand, where it wrapped itself tightly around my index finger. In response the light grew brighter, beckoning us to step through.

Fortune favors the bold.

We were still in the maze, but the floor of the new chamber was puckered with rough polygonal indentations, like the scales of a wrongly-healed scab. Here and there mounds of violet dirt lay barren save for three sickly twigs in the center... it looked as if they had devoured all the other vegetation around them.

They were like thin, grasping fingers, and had none of the black barbs that coated the branches elsewhere in the maze. As I examined them, however, a magical vibration in them thrummed with a melancholy song, like the faint vibrations in the rest of the maze. Yet they were more insistent, like the wailing of tiny children.

"Hey chief, when you're done playing in the mud there we should probably get going..."

"One second, Morte," I raised a hand to shush him. I swayed with the rhythm of the vibration, and once I recognized the nature of the resonance I began to hum, the same tune Ravel had used to call upon the Maze's power.

As I began to match the timbre of the vibration with my own voice, the twigs suddenly began twisting within their dead circle, the fingers thrashing, grabbing for something. I knew, instinctively, they were clutching for a black-barbed seed.

Still humming, I tossed one of the seeds into their midst.

The seed flew right between the branches, and the three twigs twisted around it with a crack, splintering it. The twigs stopped thrashing and slowly grew, thickening to become branches. The branches twisted around each other, then with a crack they snapped at the base, rolled across the floor, and stopped, deathly still.

The three-twined branch still hummed in my hand, like a heartbeat. It was obviously magical, and powerful. I could feel the branch responding to my humming, and a tremendous amount of power lay in it: a trace of Ravel's power, but perhaps mostly by my own force of will.

"Whoa, neat."

I grinned at Morte, "Very."

Exiting was like most bodily functions: the way out was harder than the way in. Sharp and misty predators, with serpentine hair and whiplike limbs, hounded our every step. There were greater shadows, with claws of darkness honed and rarefied into midnight blades that burned with frost. And then there were the trigits: the ever blood-hungry trigits.

If every ounce of crippling nausea and fear-induced incontinence hadn't been sliced, gouged, and beaten out of me long ago I would've soiled myself until I bled over facing the shades. They shrieked when they came, their hisses incomprehensible to my friends I'm sure, but to my ears there was the underlying hiss of unbridled fury.

I could almost understand what they meant, like overhearing the whispers of a deadly secret. They screeched of stolen futures, of fates unmade, of fury and vengeance and thirst for agony. It terrified me, but I still took point:

my body had increased its regenerative capacity, and if I should die that would be the least of our problems.

Every inch had been won with blood and sweat and the sizzle of mana coursing through my veins. Missiles of rage burst open wispy black shadows, and storms of lightning arced down halls thick with foliage. We left behind a swath of sublimating shadowstuff and smoldering plant matter as we went, until Nordom chirped:

"Portal detected!"

I completed a gesture and the hall was seared in a storm of fire and ice, and then circled my hands around my body like branches, as Ravel had told me. Space rippled out before us, and with hot desert wind blowing against our skin, we were gone.

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To say that Ravel was a twisted creature was to speak truth layered over truth.

It was as much a paradox as her name. To ravel is to ensnare: She is the one who enwraps her victims in vines and nightmares, riding dreams like steeds and breaking those captured in her black-barbed garden beyond breaking. To ravel is also to unbind: she is the one who unstrings truth from its bonds and opens up puzzles better left unsolved.

Ravel is a twisted creature in more ways than one. While it was true that Ravel had always been perverse, she of all night hags had been a master of bendings. Ravel bent reality to her will and cultivated the brambles of the Art. Root and seed, fruit and vine had all been mastered by her while mortal lives fell like autumn leaves. Yet she had only learned that no thorns could go as deep as a rose's when she met him.

Her shrieks rattle the cobblestones of her home. Brambles shiver and gray dust shrinks back at her cries, boiling away at her inhuman screeching.

"WHY?" she howls, and none could answer.

The tears, thick and greasy, carve fat runnels down her face. They drip from her long nose and down her chin, despair splashing to the earth drop by

drop. Long scratches had been gouged in the soil and stone around her, and her nails are filthy and worn from rending the earth and tearing her garden to shreds. Shattered glass and ceramic litter her lair, and old potions bubble and sizzle on the stone where they had mixed haphazardly.

When the thrill of the ritual had finished thrumming through her, the giddy satisfaction of finishing such a task was not there. Such a terrifying thing to see, even through a hag's eyes. How he had twisted and writhed, chained to the altar, his screams of agony shaking him to the bone. The mortality twisted in her claws as she pulled, ripping it away and tearing the sinews of the soul. The sound of its bindings snapping under her fingers, the slick, wet feel of resistance... it seemed an eternity of struggle before it burst free, like pus from a lanced boil.

When it was over he lay trembling: mewling like a kitten, tender and vulnerable and shuddering like a newborn babe. He was limp against the cold stone, eyes vacant and pleading for the pain to stop.

Yet as with all things Ravel was thorough, and she had plucked up the dagger without a thought. Numb and cold from the struggle, she found her hands moving on their own: holding him down, pressing the cold tip of the blade against his breast.

He mewled weakly, tried to fight off her grip. But his palms were slick with sweat, his muscles had been drained of their strength, and his flesh was so tender and soft...

"Hushhhh child..." Ravel murmured, surprised at the softness in her own words even as the blade slid in with merciless purpose.

His breath rattled in his throat. His head rolled back. His limbs flopped to their sides.

Already the prickleshorns were blooming, sharp and venomous, nourished by his blood.

He lay still. Something was different. A strange feeling trickled through her, something that made her black heart quicken, her gnarled fingers trembled. Little by little, the horror crept through the dark recesses of her mind. A chill she'd never known before siphoned the little warmth she kept in the core of her being.

Already the moistness of his skin was growing clammy beneath her palm. His skin was growing pale, his lips blue-gray. The heat of his flesh was seeping away.

"No... no no no no..." she murmured, eyes wide, too panicked to move. "What has Ravel done? Can she fix this? Can I fix this?!"

And then she felt it. A pulse, faint as the squeak of a baby mouse, but the next was stronger, and the next stronger still.

Ravel had known that mortals could weep with joy, but it was only now that she knew what it meant. Blood-red and black-brambled eyes damp, heart warming, she laughed with delight. Giddy as a maiden, Ravel fell to her knees. The trembling of fear that all had gone wrong was trickling away, and for once her laughter was sweet, her fingers tender on another's flesh as she cradled his head gently.

"Oh beautiful man..." she had blubbered through the warm tears, "Oh sweet, beautiful man... you have come back to me." In her heart she promised that he would never feel pain again, that all he wished she would pluck from the threads of reality, if only he would walk with her through the garden, hand-in hand.

But the first three words from his lips made her blood run cold.

"Who am I?"

She lies curled on the floor, trembling with sorrow. When the sobs taper off into the soft, quiet weeping that comes when there are no more tears, she shrieks again, forcing them out... the earth is stained black with her agony. It will be days until there is nothing left, when all that remains is a hollow core that, for a moment, dreamed of love.

In the ages to come the Planes will tremble at her name. Men will break in her talons, their souls will be snagged by her barbs. Sigil will bend with her power and the Lady will be summoned in the chaos. Ravel was strong in many things, but if she had one weakness, it was that she never had the strength to end it herself.

Of all puzzles, she would never know why until he returned.



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Her mazes were cold and still. Already the songs of the trigits had gone silent. The brambles grew wild and twisted, and leaves fell like shedding flakes of skin.

The brambles grew into the flesh of her corpse, desperately nourishing themselves on her cold blood even as they die. Roots dipped into the gaping wound in her breast and into lips parted by a tongue fat and swollen in death. Her once-burning eyes stared off into the distance, glassy and blank.

With the grim determination of an executioner, one creature floated forward, reality rippling as he moved. He seemed to be nothing but twisted branches himself, but with an aura that caused existence itself to scream in his wake.

Ravel's body lay still. Yet there was a twitch, a disembodied swishing motion of her arm as if trying to wave the creature away. Her voice was distant and hollow as she hissed, "Off wit ya! Dead I am."

The creature was not amused, and its voice tolled like a deep, sonorous gong, "THEN DEATH'S KINGDOM HAS SEALED ITS GATES TO US BOTH. ARISE, CRONE."

"Sh-sh-sh... away wit ya – I'm dead, and no traffic with the living may I have."

"I CARE LITTLE FOR HOW YOU DIE, BUT I WARN YOU FOR THE LAST TIME: ARISE, OR I SHALL SLAY YOU WHERE YOU LIE."

The brambles crumbled away and flaked into ash as she stood, dusting herself off. The swollen tongue withdrew, the redness blinked back into her eyes once more. With a clean hand she wiped away the wound, and stain and tear were wicked away like a smudge, leaving the flawless cloth of her blouse beneath. "I had thought that dying at his hand would fulfill the requirements the past put forth," Ravel hissed.

"YOU CANNOT HAVE THOUGHT THAT ONE WOULD HAVE A CHANCE... YOU WERE INDULGENT WITH HIM TO LET HIM THINK HE WAS SUCCESSFUL."

Ravel pursed her plump, warty lips, and placed both hands on her hips as she pondered in wonder. "Powerful this incarnation is, and kill me he could've, but for a few tricks I possess. Fortunate was I."

"FORTUNE ABANDONED YOU THE MOMENT I FOUND YOU. HAS YOUR LIFE PREPARED YOU FOR WHAT IS SOON TO COME, HAG?" the words resonated in the chamber, the creature's voice certain and final.

"I am not afraid, not of the likes of you, ragged thing!" she snarled, stabbing a finger at the creature as it floated, "Weak Ravel may be, but a few tricks has Ravel learned over the years, and I have known you would come!"

Flames roared forth from the executioner's talons, spearing through Ravel's body. Her skin shriveled, her flesh split in the heat, and vines and leaves spilled forth to be consumed in the fire.

It took a moment for the thing to recognize the brambled corpse for the illusion it was, but it was all Ravel needed, peeling herself from the shadows behind the creature. Thorns circled her in a shield, plates of force surrounded her body. With a gesture she called for every ounce of power she could, splitting space and time, milking the elements, fusing agony to fuel her magic. From every inch of the maze the black shadowstuff poured, breaking against the creature in waves. The storm of it all sent a blackblast that shook Ravel's crystal shield, and would've crushed towers into powder, turned mortals into damp red mist.

"Witness Ravel's anger!" she shrieked, and lightning speared through the mist.

But then Ravel saw it... its pale limbs twisting, swimming up from the morass. Without a word the creature's talons curled, and the resonance that thrummed gave her enough warning to refocus, drawing the threads of protection upwards.

The missiles came, one by one, planar energies battering the shield of vines and force. The shriek of each approaching bolt came just as the last blasted with the force of a ballista. The momentum carried through to her hands, shook Ravel to her bones.

It was cracking. Her armor was cracking.

At first they were hairline splits, but along the growing web of crackling energy pieces flaked off, sublimating into nothing. Ravel refocused, murmuring another incantation. The shield would hold, but she would need to re-weave it if she wanted its full protection.

But then the small, green threads began to invade those hairline cracks.

It was all he needed, a razor-thin crack, a small hole a needle could slide through. Ravel shrieked as the threads caressed her, leaf-green flames burst from her flesh wherever they licked. The salvo of planar bolts had ended, but Ravel fell to her knees, clawing at the flames and screaming as they began to eat down into her bones.

Fire bloomed around her. Ice crackled and crushed her bones against the ground. Blood misted the air over her pulverized body.

And it was over.

It floated over the corpse in triumph. "NO LONGER SHALL YOU TROUBLE EXISTENCE WITH YOUR PRESENCE, WITCH."

Interlude

"Well, I suppose that's the end of that!" Jeanette Dovel Four-Winds barks out a laugh, "Ho, Shara! Ye've got a reputation for treating your storytellers well! Where can a salty ole lass wet her lips around here?"

"A round for you, girl," Shara snaps, "But your crew will have to flash copper before they see a drink."

"By buccaneer's beard and the honor of the Astral pirates, I wouldn't think otherwise! Ye still take qualia in exchange? Ah there we go lass, a good immaterial sensation for a physical one. Fair trade and all!" she says, hopping down from the stage and snatching up a mug.

Immediately in a blur of color, a figure backflips through the crowd. There is a strange suppleness to his limbs, an odd snap of bone and joint that belies what seems to be more a mimicry of human form than true anatomy. The man snaps his head back, standing with a thin-pressed smile and arched eyes. A shock of fiery red hair sprouts from his head, and though his baggy coat is ill-fitting he doesn't seek to adjust it.

The colors he wears are eye-wrenching: mustard yellow breeches against a purple waistband, both slashed in black and wrapped in a coat of firey orange. His shirt is black as sin and embroidered with blood-red flames. The only thing even somewhat dull about his appearance is his overly large brown boots, and even those he wears without a concern for fit or comfort.

You've seen many Planars in your life, and from the narrow gaze on that bony face you know there's something sinister behind those eyes.

"Well la! Just in time, then!" Jeanette kicks back a seat and props her boots on a table, hoisting up her mug.

The man gives a smooth bow, though one that seems more mocking than anything, "I've listened well and eagerly, o sailor of the Silver Sea. You have a compelling story to tell, and a tale I'll not forget. But I'm certain I will beat you by far, in tales of how we acquired our journals."

"A challenge! Well met, good sir. But rather unfair to declare yourself the victor when the defender has left the field of battle!"

"Calm yourself, Jeanette," Oudilin says smoothly, strumming his harp with one hand, "What is your name, good sir, and where do you hail from?"

"My name? Where do I hail from? Such odd questions, for the answer to both are one in the same: Ileron of Sen-Tau."

Epetrius blinks, cocking his head, "Surely you jest."

"Nay. That is who and where I am."

The Guvner shakes his head, and makes a show of wiping a particle of dust from his spectacles, "Ileron, if that is your name, is a myth. I myself visited the Prime World of Sen-Tau in an archaeological expedition twelve years ago, and all anyone could find resembling civilization was some crude ruins

of sun-baked clay brick," he scoffs, "Even the Sen-Tau Wanderers that call themselves the People of Ileron will admit it, as much as they like to claim that they dream of a city of gold and crystal. If you claim to come from the mythical paradise of Ileron, much less the world of Sen-Tau, then you're twice as barmy as the pirate."

"I have heard of Sen-Tau," Scii-Tavakis murmurs, gazing into the obsidian point of her spear, "A desert world, so barren that it would make Athas look like a lush paradise."

"But I am Ileron," the man's lips peel back into a cold grin, "For I was once the city itself."

A stubborn denial seems to form on Epetrius' lips, but he merely resigns himself to shaking his head.

Ileron nods in approval at the silence, and begins.

"Lo, I have had many names across the ages: Shangri-La, El-Dorado, Es-Annon, Tir Na nOg... but the oldest and truest of them all is Ileron, for even though I no longer stand on the world of Sen-Tau how could humanity not dream of the Palace of Ten Thousand Suns? The Arch of Crystal Dreams? Who could forget the Coullan Wings that swam through the skies, ferrying people along avenues of pure hope?

"At dawn the morning winds would blow through the Spires of Harmony, and I sang my denizens to wakefulness. At dusk the kiss of twilight would fall upon the Silvered Quarters and I lay my people to rest. Sweetwater flowed free through the aqueducts and they were my veins. Polished golden marble shone by day and glowed by night, and the walls and buildings were my bones. Every hour the Citadels rang their bells and the priests sang paeans of joy over their lives, and the resonance of their prayers was the beating of my heart. The gods themselves smiled on my libraries and temples, blessed the smallest inn and dimmest alley, for all Ileron was utopia. It was the city of dreams.

"Can you imagine, then, the sheer boredom that a city such as I would suffer? To be the shell of such rejoicing, but never partake? To be the boundary and border, but never to know the adventure of crossing one? I was both prison and prisoner, paradise and purgatory.

"For millenia I lay in languor, feeling the millions of footsteps across my walkways, listening to the mind-numbing murmurs of joy and wishes of good fortune and prosperity. Until one day, long ago, it was time for the Festival.

"They came from distant lands: magicians from Yudanii, whose coats held nine hundred folds and just as many secrets; alchemists from Braen Woods, who carried the Elixir of Truth; long-haired dancers of the Star People, wearing gowns of spun moonlight; shirtless men of the Takka spinning fire-staves and sweating with celebration. Each delegation came bearing gifts, thanking Ileron and its people for the gift of happiness, and for allowing them to see the dream of paradise fulfilled. They laid their gifts at the Celestial Court at the Palace of Ten Thousand Suns, each more lavish than the last, until finally, a young boy came to place his offering on the altar.

"He was small, and young, and terribly malnourished, but he came because Ileron barred no one from its pleasures. In a small box of pressed paper was a crystal sphere banded with silver, pulsing with a sickly gray light. It was a sensory stone, and it contained the memories of who you call the Nameless One.

"I was intrigued, and for the first time I learned firsthand what it was like to explore planes beyond my own. No dry books or texts on the Outer Planes were these, no, but experience, rare and new.

"And so inspired I picked myself up from the world of Sen-Tau, taking my veins which once fed the people sweet nectar, my bones which once housed men and memory, the beating of my heart which once kept faith and joy and hope. I took the history of Ileron with me, leaving behind only the people and the memory of what once was, fading like a fecund dream as if the city never existed.

"For many years I fled and the Gods of Sen-Tau chased after me. Many times they tried to slay me and lay me back to rest on the world which I once called my home... where I once was home. But the people of Sen-Tau are scattered, wandering the planes and weeping with lament over losing what they never knew. Each year that passes more of the People die, and each year the power of the Gods fades.

"And so I hid myself here in Sigil, the City of Doors. Oh such wonder to stand

in a city, where no longer am I a border, but a man who has infinite borders at my fingertips! Endless possibilities and places to travel, no longer a place, but an individual! No longer am I imprisoned by duty: here I shall wait and bide my time. No Gods can enter Sigil... and so I am safe from their blades of starfire and opalescent fury. And when the final Wanderer dies, when the Gods breathe their last and are interred in the Astral, I shall be free. Free to cavort across the Planes! Free to sing and revel and explore, crossing borders, walking roads, passing through gate and door and threshold! I shall dance forever, and never die."

He digs around in his coat. "Pockets!" he grins, "Truly a wonderful thing of mortals. If you kept your hopes in pockets rather than temples, you'd never lose them. Ah!" Ileron pulls free a small sphere, the size of a peach and banded with silver. It pulses weakly with a gray light, like a mournful fog.

With that in one hand he pulls his shirt open with the other, and where there should be a wedge of bare chest there is instead a flash of light, and a series of silver-gray arches flanked by lush green leaves. Down through his heart is a gilded path, as if inviting you to in. The smell of fresh, clean air washes away the rankness of the bar, and down the road you see a circular glass. Behind that window, in contrast to the greenery surrounding it, a desert land of cracked clay terrain and wind-borne sand sprawls across your vision.

"Come now," Ileron murmurs, "and walk with me through my gardens, which were once paradise..."

Chapter 92

I coughed.

Dry clay cracked beneath my boots, the land mummified and brittle like an old scab. The air carried a coppery scent, like tarnished metal. Now and again my scars tugged at me: the arid clime was drying out my skin, shrinking it so that the crisscrossed mesh of puckered flesh shrank back,

tugging against me tight like a net. A figure in brown linen flickered in the corner of my eye, tugging a scarf tight to keep the dust from his nose and mouth. Aside from that and the scattered pockets of civilians whispering among themselves, the streets were mostly barren.

The silence unnerved me. Sigil was a bustling metropolis, and Ravel's maze a labyrinth of singing vines and crooning plants. The starkness of Curst was jarring, and every scratch or creak of a door had me on edge. It was a city of traitors, and I could feel the knives pointed at my back already.

A two-legged, green-scaled bird pecked at a tuft of grass and a chirp sounded from its throat.

"Trichas," Morte said, and that was all. Whether they were wild critters or livestock I didn't know.

"Hey you!" a gravelly voice cried out, "Where the blazing Hells did you come from? Don't you know there's a lockdown?"

"What can you tell me about this place?" I asked.

"We're under lockdown right now because of the plague. Don't know what's causing it, but we're quarantining sections of the town 'til we find out. You want something else?"

"Well... I AM looking for a deva."

The guard scoffed, "Then you're looking at the wrong end of the Great Ring, berk, because even if there were one here, you'd not be finding it. It'd be locked away like a miser's gold."

Annah was standing beside me, and with the barest movement she nudged the side of my boot with hers. For a moment I almost checked my coin pouch, when it hit me. In a town like this, you keep a span away from anyone who looks at you, and give twice as much space for the guards. Who knows what they would do?

Muffled noise from one of the alleys we walked past confirmed Annah's suspicions.

"Where'd you hide it, Jansen?"

The dull crack of flesh sounded in my ears.

"Just tell us!" another guard snarled.

"I can't!" Jansen wailed.

One of the guards spotted me, and he paused long enough in administering the beating to give me a cold stare, "You didn't see nothing, not if you know what's good for you." He turned back to his victim.

I knew I was going to regret it, but I turned away. I asked a few more seeking out the deva, but most were... less than helpful. Going at it alone wasn't going to work.

Conjure up the smell of bilgewater and mildew, of rags rank with both yet using them for scrubbing glasses so filthy it's still an improvement. Imagine the dozens of black-rimmed eyes flickering upon you for half an instant, so quick that you barely realize it'd been done and you wonder what's going on behind that feigned disinterest. See yourself counting out exact change, because you know the coin you'd receive in return otherwise would've in all likelihood been nestled between the scabby breasts of a pox-ridden whore recently.

That's luxury compared to the Traitor's Gate Tavern.

I sat down at the bar. The cushion of the stool was so worn that I might as well have been sitting on bare wood with a crusty leather sack layered over it.

"Carceri whisky, please," and for once I was glad for the coarse grumble in my voice. It scared off most of the rats. Note that I said 'most.'

"Oi, boss," a hooded man greeted me. His robes were stiff with sweat and grime. A mold-black tongue flicked out over teeth as yellow as butter, "Ye look like ye had a tussle. Need a rest, boss?" His hand was already sliding beneath his robe.

"Don't worry about me. You should have seen the other guy."

And in a flash he was gone.

I looked back to the barkeep as he grunted, a shotglass full of some reddish spirit. I tossed it down with a grimace... it was as spicy as anything I'd ever tasted before. It was only later that I learned the whiskey here was distilled from fermented Carceri rust-peppers.

"Looks like you can hold your own in more than one way, berk," he said with a curl of his lip, "You looking for work?"

I scrubbed my tongue against my teeth, the heat of the drink still on my lips, "I'm already burning the candle at both ends. I will in a an hour or two, at least."

He chuckled, a haggard and grim man. His coarse face was lined and weathered, and his eyes were red-rimmed. "Welcome to the Traitor's Gate. I'm Tainted Barse, the innkeep."

I caught the strain in his voice, "Is something wrong?"

"What's wrong is that my daughter got herself kidnapped by slavers, and now the place is going to fall behind on its bills and I'm going to lose the place to one of those rich pikers in the first circle." He looked at me more closely. "You're the fellow asking about the deva, ain't you? Tell you what. You help me out, I'll help you."

I blinked. "What do you know about the deva?"

He smiled craftily. "You're looking for him, ain't you? I can tell you that he's hidden far beneath the prison. I can tell you how to get there, too, apart from being arrested or trying to bribe your way in - which wouldn't work anyway."

"What do I have to do for this?"

"Go over there and talk to Marquez. He's the ex-Harmonium fellow. He knows about these slavers - and he holds the first part of the key that'll put you on the path of seein' the deva. There are five parts to the Key, but it ain't a physical key. When you've got the parts together, you come tell me - and it unlocks knowledge in my mind. 'Til then, though, it stays secret. You got to satisfy the keyholders."

"Why was the deva imprisoned?"

He looked at me closely to see if I was joking with him. "I told you they discovered him buried in the earth, right? That means I have no idea how he got down there. I wish I was powerful enough to trap a deva. That'd be some power worth havin'."

I gave a wry nod. "Seems like such a friendly town, though. Still, doesn't seem like the folk here are the type to be capable of offering a deva that sort of... hospitality."

Tainted Barse shook his head, but he seemed to agree. "What this place is, more than anything, is a hotbed of rumors and innuendo. No one trusts no one. Y'don't do favors for someone without makin' sure they're in your debt. Everyone hates everyone else, and everyone's looking for a hold to get on everyone. Someone like you... you're a ripe target of opportunity for people, because you don't know the politics. And I guarantee you'll be sucked in."

I grunted, "What's with the town being so abandoned?"

"Heh. Troubles a-plenty, as always. First, they keep digging holes in the ground to make the prison bigger - and they discover this deva, wrapped up in a big obsidian bubble, chained to the floor. They take his sword and use its power to keep the criminals in their cages. They're busy debating what to do about the celestial, tearing their hair out trying to figure out how they can make a profit off its discovery and cross their 'friends'... and then the plague hits."

"Plague?"

"That's right. Something that lays folks low. Makes people all ornery and bad-tempered - and too weak to do anything about it. The guards've closed off portions of the town, and they're all tight-wound. They'll take you into jail on the slightest pretext these days. I don't know how you got in to town, but you ain't getting out unless you find a portal." He scrubbed a glass impatiently, his hand so tight on the rag that it squeezed out a bit of the drippings. Green-brown water trickled down the inside of the glass, "Ye'd best talk to Marquez, cutter."

"Will do," I nodded. It was as much eagerness to get started as it was the need to get away from the nauseating sight.

Marquez was a burly blond man wearing the armor of a Harmonium officer. His face was rosy with drink, and behind his smile, his eyes were filled with bitterness. He launched into speech without preamble. "Here's the deal. Slavers have kidnapped Barse's daughter. It's your job to get them back. I'll tell you where to find them; you go kill them and report back to me, and I'll help you find the deva you're looking for. I'll even teach you weapons. Agreed?"

"I have a few questions about this, first..."

"A few questions? No. There are only two possible answers. Are you for slavery, or against it?"

"I'm against it." I could hear Dak'kon's karach blade sharpening at those words, and even standing still and silent his thoughts seemed to cut the air.

"Then you'll help, right? Yes... or no."

"I'll help."

I looked him up and down, the red-laquered armor making his allegiances clear, "Who are you?"

"I'm Marquez, formerly a Measure Three of the Harmonium. Formerly, I said, because I quit not so long ago."

"Why? What's your stake in this slavery thing, anyway?"

"I found out that the Harmonium - a group I'd believed in from the start - was buying people, kidnapping them, taking them against their will and ruining their lives. It was sucking the life out of people for daring to be different, and I couldn't take it anymore. The slavers you'll be fighting are old comrades of mine." He spat on the floor. "Berks. Liars. You can't trust anyone anymore."

There was no lack of alleys in Curst... the buildings squatted next to one another as if they were themselves too suspicious to get closer, to wary of one another to be further apart. Most were set up on the fringe of the town like a man keeping his back to the wall so that no one could plant a dagger in it. In this way suspicion bred suspicion, as the filthy crevices that were

formed were rife with the detritus of humanity.

The Harmonium in Sigil weren't exactly the most friendly of factions, but even in the seediest corners of the city I could trust that they, at least, would uphold the law.

Two of the soldiers held the girl, a slip of a woman in a torn dress. Tears bled the makeup onto her cheeks, and her face was wet with weeping. She looked up and gazed at me with red-rimmed eyes, "Please... please... save me from these men..." The girl's voice was so quiet, so broken.

A Harmonium officer, older and more scar-faced than the rest, caught me staring. He was dressed in his ceremonial armor, and the fact that he was in charge of the slavers made it all the more obscene. "What do you want?"

My eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here?"

He grinned, "Hardly the appropriate way to greet a Measure Two Harmonium officer. Skatch be the name, and my men and I are gathering recruits to teach them about right and wrong. As you can see, they're not always willing... but we'll make them see the light eventually." His voice had an unctuous tone to it, almost soothing, "You'll make a good recruit, I imagine."

"I'm not interested."

"That's too bad." He gestured to his men. "Ignore the girl. Take him."

The power of the Art was boiling in my veins before I knew it, a moderately-difficult twist of fate that I could best be described as a karmic inversion. Balance in All Things, as Dak'kon so often intoned, a spell that had been scribed in the Circle of Zerthimon itself. It was useful, if limited for a githzerai - but for an immortal, the effect had few downsides. I gave the slightest smirk as I felt the spell take effect.

The Harmonium rushed me, axes swinging, spears stabbing. A polearm's pierced edge impaled me, and I felt the blade tear through my belly and rupture my organs. My stomach clenched, the fluids gushed deep inside. Just as I coughed and tasted the blood on my lips I could see the Harmonium officers around me doubling over with gurgling screams, the same wound appearing on each of their bodies. Those that didn't double over in agony let

the momentum of their attacks carry them, and an axe smashed down my shoulder, shattering my clavicle and leaving a deep furrow from back to chest. Another spear, catching me lower, in the kidneys, as the soldier doubled over in pain.

Those three wounds were enough to kill the less seasoned slavers, leaving only Skatch on his knees, blood spilling from his mouth.

"What the Hells are you?!" he gurgled.

I said nothing, too busy tugging the spears from my guts to bother answering. I snarled as I twisted the one higher up... damn thing had a head that caught between two ribs.

Unable to attack me, Skatch twisted around, lunging desperately at the girl, his knife drawn. It was the flailing of a bitter man bent on destroying what he couldn't have.

Karach rang against armor and bone, and Skatch's head fell to the ground. His body swayed and fell over it, blood still spurting from the stump of his neck. Dak'kon's eyes were cold as he wiped his blade. He had no love for slavers.

This woman could only stare at us. "You've saved me... thank you so much! I would be dead or worse without you..." She opened her arms and moved to embrace me.

My wounds were already beginning to knit shut, but I grunted as she squeezed tightly; her cheek, wet with tears, pressed against my chest. After a time, she stepped back and looked up at me, smiling. "I must leave... but let me say 'thank you.' I shall not forget your kindness."

Annah rolled her eyes and gave a sour "Hpmh."

I nodded simply, spitting out a wad of blood and saliva, sucking the iron tang of it from my tongue before spitting again.

She flinched slightly, and gently stepped over the bodies. She gave a slightly distraught, nervous smile. "Uh... farewell, stranger, and thank you."

"Sure. Farewell," I grunted.

Chapter 93

Marquez looked up from the table as I approached. "You here about Barse's daughter Jasilya?"

"She's free. She should be back here shortly."

He clapped me on the shoulder. "Good work. You want the first part of the key that will get you under Curst? Here it is: 'Such place eternal justice had prepared for those rebellious...' Go talk to Kitla over there. She's got the second part of the key."

That could wait until the morning. All I wanted at the moment was a bed I could lie on until my wounds knit shut. We paid for our rooms and headed upstairs, passing by small groups whispering to one another, each with a practiced way of surreptitiously glancing at us as we walked past. More than one pair secretly passed coin for small satchels of contraband in exchange, hidden behind prostitutes who displayed their wares so broadly you'd think they were getting a cut from the hidden smuggling done behind their backs. If Annah hadn't taught me so well to keep an eye out, I would never have noticed.

Upstairs a particularly twitchy man glanced at me with a wince. His gaze wasn't nearly as practiced, and he held himself with a tension that spoke of him being an outlander. I approached the mousy little man with darting frightened eyes. "Please don't hurt me!" he whispered. "They'll kill me if they find me!"

I blinked, "Who will kill you?"

"The guards. They're after me. I think I offended someone with a question, or said something to the wrong person. I was just offering an opinion, but it seems like you have to speak in a certain way here. It's all corrupt!"

"Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Berrog Quickshoes, traveler and problem-solver. I guess you could call me a thief, but I prefer to call myself an engineer - traps and puzzles and so forth. I only use my skills for good ends - I hate to harm anyone. I guess that

they use engines for different purposes here." He shuddered.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to Curst because I'd heard there was a deva trapped here, and since I have some archon friends back in Mount Celestia, I thought I could be of assistance. This town, though... this place is a cesspool and I can't trust anyone! How can people live like this? I need to get out of here!"

A long way for a man to go, from the heights of Mount Celestia to the fetid hole that was Curst. I recalled casual conversations of the plane with Ebb Creakknees: a realm where all things have their place, and all things are beautiful. It's a realm where winged archons wheel in the skies in exquisite patterns that could break your heart. The fruit grows larger, the game bigger, and all homes are open in Celestia. The poor sod was close to breaking down... he wasn't made for the treachery of Curst.

"You'd best go then. The entire city is on lockdown, but you might be able to find a place to hide properly when it's lifted."

He looked at me with disbelief in his eyes. "Thank you! You'll not see me again!" He scampered away.

~~~~~

"Chief, there's a corpse outside of our room."

"Looks fresh," I said with a nod.

"It's kind of bumming me out."

"We'll drag it off later, I guess." At that moment I missed the Hive. The air was foul and you could also get murdered without a second glance, but at least bodies would've been dragged off in a blink by a Collector.

I will admit, I was half-surprised to find there wasn't a dead prostitute lying in my bed. A dry, musty smell hung in the air and dust patterned the edges of the carpet in thick layers. A screen was set up in one corner of the room for changing, and the ramshackle furniture looked to be on its last legs. I ignored the rust-brown smears and streaks on the walls. At least the bed was nice and big.



"Hey Annah, I want to talk to you." The six most terrifying words that could be said, by man or woman.

She paused, arms folded beneath her breasts. Her fingers twitched, as if caressing the hilts of her punch-daggers.

"Why don't the rest of you guys see what Barse is serving up for supper?" I said with a wave. It was about as clear a dismissal as I could make, but Nordom for one blinked.

"Nordom does not require sustenance. This unit is self-operating and fueled on planar ener--"

"Oh pike it you stupid polygon," Morte grunted, "Just get your metal backside downstairs."

"By your command."

Annah's tail flicked nervously once the door shut, "Aye? What is it yeh want, then?"

"In the maze, Ravel said you were tormented... what did she mean?"

Annah frowned. "She meant nothing, she did. Barmy hag talk, it was."

"Annah, I know I draw torment to myself. I know about Morte, Dak'kon, Nordom, and a little of Grace. Are you sure she didn't mean anything?"

"It was NOTHING. If yeh donnae know what she was sayin', I don't either." She gave a flick of her head, as if to say her issues were her own. I could respect that.

"Well, if you want to talk about it, I'm lis--"

"I..." Annah's gaze dropped for a moment, and her shoulders sagged. "I donnae why I'm travelin' with yeh! I donnae know why I went with yeh tae find Ravel!" She frowned, but she seemed more confused than angry. "It makes no sense, it does, and I donnae like it.

"I..." Annah took a deep breath. "I think I have feelings for yeh. It feels

strange, it does... I don't think I've ever liked anyone. But yeh..." Annah gave a half-hearted shrug without meeting my gaze. "I donnae know what it is about yeh, I mean -- yeh're daft a lot of times, yeh walk like yeh're hips are broken, yeh're clumsy, yeh smell like a zombie, but..." She sighed. "I like yeh."

"Annah, why didn't you say something? We could have settled this long b--"

"It's cause I think yeh're doomed." Annah suddenly met my gaze. "I think yeh walk with chains, but yeh don't know it yet. So I... feel for yeh, but I'm afraid for yeh... an' that's killing me, it is. I cannae let yeh come tae harm, but I donnae know what tae do to stop it!"

The heat of her voice rose with each word. Her teeth bit down on blood-black lips. There was a hunger in her gaze. When we first met she had lied to me and sent me to die in an alley. When Annah stood by my side she had fought at my command, bled for me. Annah, so superstitious that she froze in fear at the mere mention of the Lady, followed me into Ravel's maze. I could still feel the warmth of her blood trickling into the street, the desperation when I tried to call her soul back to her body...

In an instant I grabbed the back of her neck with my free hand, and Annah's features became stone as I pulled her to me and kissed her on the lips.

At first, it was like kissing a wall, then she started slowly kissing me back, hesitant at first, then with more confidence, her teeth lightly biting my upper lip. She snarled in the back of her throat, and her tail started snaking around my leg, then squeezing, each squeeze matching one of her bites.

"Would you two cut it out before I have to get a dabus to separate you!" Morte hunched. I didn't even hear the door open. "Or at least allow me to cut in."

For once Annah ignored him. I wanted to throw something heavy.

We continued, sharing the warmth of each other's bodies, the moistness of our lips, when suddenly Annah's skin grew warmer - radiating heat, like hot coals. I pulled back, Annah's teeth giving one last bite, and she looked at me in confusion, then anger. "What is it, then? I'm not good at it, am I?"

"No, it's your skin - why are you getting so warm all of a sudden?"

"Aye?" Annah frowned, and looked down at herself; small wisps of smoke were trailing from the edges of her jerkin. "Fiend blood, it is..." She raised an eyebrow. "Never had that happen before, though."

"What? No one's ever kissed you before?"

She shrugged. "No one ever dared tae. An' even if they did, I doubt it woulda been like that."

"I'll take that as a compliment, then."

"Aye... eh..." Annah glanced around, and her tail was flicking erratically. "Are we gonna go down ta the bar now or what? We don't have time tae be standing an' chattin', we don't."

"Well, I'm not done kissing you yet. Come here," I grinned.

She stepped back, alarmed. "Nay - who knows what would happen next - maybe my body'll turn tae flame, it will! Yeh and your lips keep your distance!"

"All right - THIS time. Let's move on."

I tried not to laugh when we left, closing the door and locking it behind us. In the corner of my eye, though, Annah seemed to be smiling.

~~~~~

"It tastes like cranium rat."

Then again, just about everything tastes like cranium rat. I gave the stringy piece of tricha meat a poke. It was a sloppy bowl of stew that I suspected was just white stuff and water. If I wasn't certain that the ale here would give me the runs, I would've asked for a drink to wash the mealy taste of it out of my mouth.

Annah winced, spitting a bone gracelessly onto the table. I shoved my bowl aside in disgust and stood... the sooner we found that deva the sooner we could leave. At least, we could if I could find a way around the quarantine.

Kitla was a tall, striking woman who stood staring at the walls of the tavern without seeing them, her hands slowly curling into fists and unclenching. When she saw me her eyes darted across my scant clothing and gear, and then back to my eyes; a sardonic smile crossed her face, and she looked away again.

"Greetings."

She looked back at me and scowled. "Do you always make a habit of talking to strangers?"

"If I need to ask them questions, then yes."

"What a fascinating life you must lead to do such things. Sadly for you, I'm busy. I'd appreciate being left alone."

My finger tapped impatiently on her table, "I understand you're the next person I'm to talk to about this key."

"About the key, hm?" She arched an eyebrow at me. "You want to know what you have to do for it, don't you? It's easy enough, friend. Interested? Of course you are; you've come to talk to me about it. Are you ready to listen, I guess, is the real question."

"Tell me what I have to do."

"There are two men here, named Crumplepunch and Kester. Crumplepunch is the smith, Kester the distiller. They both owe me a lot of money. One of them owes the other as well, though, and so neither of them is paying me. They're arguing about an inheritance; get me the legacies they're holding on to. I can bargain with them very effectively, then. Failing that, get them to solve their problems with each other - or kill them - and I'll give you the second part of the Key."

~~~~~

He was bent over the anvil, tongs in one hand and a hammer the other, with a face that looked like it'd taken a few poundings itself. Small brown scars flecked his skin: burns from stray embers and sparks accrued over the years. A sweat-stained leather apron was bound tight against his bare torso, and he glistened with the sweat and the glow of the forge. His face twisted into a

sour grimace, and he glared at me for interrupting his work. Crumplepunch seemed a little slow, but earnest - not as poisonous as the others in this town. He reminded me of an ox. "Aye? What d'yeh want?"

"Are you Crumplepunch?"

He nodded, his thick brows furrowing. "Crumplepunch Malako, the town's smith. Yeh want somethin'?"

"I've come from your brother about a question of debts between you two..."

"Oh, yeh have, have yeh? Is my business with my book-learned brother the whole town's gossip, then? Is my younger brother spreadin' stories against me? Am I t' be slandered jest 'cause I ain't educated? The planes be against me!" Each word became more heated until he was shaking his fist at the sky.

"I'm actually interested in clearing the matter up."

He looked at me shrewdly. "Here's the story, then: Our father was a barmy ol' basher, but a wealthy one. He left us his smithy and his distillery when he died... but now my brother's tryin' t' cut me out of the distillery, which always made more coin, and I'm tryin' to get it back. I got a legacy to prove it, but I ain't so smart with this stuff and I don't trust anyone in this town t' help me. Yeh help me, I'll give yeh some jink, and I'll live by yer decision."

"All right. I'll need your legacy to look it over."

"Well... all right. I guess yeh got t' study it up and make sure it's on the up'n'up." He passed me a crumpled wad of paper.

The wadded-up piece of old vellum I unfolded was heavily creased and covered with soot, pored over much by someone with very dirty hands. No amount of squinting could make it clear, but from what little I could decipher Malako Senior didn't exactly have the brightest torch lit. While the distillery was to be split between the two brothers, there were no details for the actual division.

Two weasel-eyed guards flanked the entrance to the distillery. Excessive for a distillery in a hive of rats, not enough for a business in a town of thieves. There was only one purpose for those two, and that was to provide twice as much muscle than Crumplepunch had. Kester kept a tight grip on his

business, and wouldn't let his brother get his ham-sized fists in.

He was a lean man, with deeply tanned skin and piercing green eyes.

"Welcome to the Malako Brothers Distillery!" he cried, as if he could think of no one he'd rather see than me. His lips peeled back into an unctuous grin.

"What can I do for you today?"

"Kester Malako, right?"

"Yessir, proprietor and half-owner of the Malako Brothers Distillery. Can I sell you something?" His grin slipped slightly. A layer of syrup floating over a venomous core. I hated him already.

"Half-owner?"

"Yes, indeed. My brother also owns a part interest here, though I don't know that I'd call it an 'interest,' seeing as he spends so much time caring about it. Listen, do you want to buy something?"

"What can you tell me about your brother?"

His face darkened. "His name is Crumplepunch. He's the blacksmith here in town. He's doing his best to make sure my business doesn't succeed, and... why am I telling you this? You're a total stranger."

I shrugged, "I'd like to help." If my voice had a little less gravel in it I would've probably sounded more convincing, but looking him in the eye when I spoke was enough. Few in Curst could do that.

"You would, eh? All right. Take a look at this. This is my copy of the legacy our father left for us. Here: You can clearly see that the money that's supposed to come to us should build up this distillery, not just get split between the two of us. Yet my foolish brother insists that we just take the cash, instead of building toward the future. Get his copy of the legacy, or talk some sense into him, and I'll see you're well rewarded."

"I'll need your copy of the legacy to look over."

He looked at me suspiciously, and then relented. "If it'll get it done faster and better for me, then all right. Here."

Kester's copy was carefully-folded and well-pressed, as if he stored it in the pages of a book. There was nothing else to be gleaned from this copy, neat as it was, but I needed no other information from this.

Just leverage from holding the original pages of the will.

~~~~~

"Have yeh made up yer mind yet?" Crumplepunch grumbled, pulling a white-hot ingot from the coals.

"The two of you should split the money from the two businesses down the middle. It's clear that your father wanted it this way." With everyone vying for an advantage in Curst, even the mayor would've been too preoccupied with intrigue and advantage to mediate and declare the fairest solution.

"Yeh mean split the proceeds from both businesses, aye? In that case, I'm in favor of it. Yeh done me a good turn, friend. Yeh ever need quality metal work done, yeh come here."

Kester wasn't quite so happy about the good news when I told him.

He sputtered, "But... but... that's just... but... All right. I accepted your word on this. Just don't expect any good treatment from me on this. Get out of my shop." He tossed over a bag of coins, a sour expression on his face. "I promised you this, and you'll have it. Take it."

Jerk.

Chapter 94

Kitla sighed sourly when I told her of how I'd resolved the issue. "Thanks for solving this thing, but... look, I have a lot of planning to do. Let me just give you the Key and we'll call it even, all right?"

I nodded.

She concentrated for a moment, and her voice took on another, deeper tone as she intoned the words: "Here their Prison ordained in utter darkness..." She paused, and spoke normally. "For the third part of the Key, go talk to Nabat over there." She yawned mightily, shooing me off. "I'm exhausted. Take this, and then leave me alone for a time. I need to think about my next step here. Farewell."

What she handed me was a worn spell scroll, and though it was otherwise featureless, I immediately sensed the power contained from it. Hmmm...a spell to hurl my enemies screaming into the Abyss? I'll take it.

Nabat was an angel-faced man, his eyes squinting nearly shut as if unwilling to watch the world's horrors or to let the world see the horrors inside him - and yet his face was creased with smile lines. His voice was friendly and lackadaisical as he greeted us. "Hi. I hear you're looking for a certain Key." "Let's be quick about this," I grunted. Just a few more to go.

"The caretaker of the town dump is a man named Kyse. Scuttlebutt has it that he's got plenty of gold hidden underneath his floorboards - and that there's a gang of ruffians who're planning to take it from him. I've got my reasons that they don't. Go talk to Kyse and get the story from him. Do it, and I'll give you the Key. And if you're interested, I can show you some tricks of stealth."

"Why is this so important to you?"

"Does it really matter? What if I said he was my grandfather? What if I said I wanted revenge on the people who are going to try to attack him? What if I said that I wanted that money for myself? Does the motivation matter? You're getting what you want - the Key - and I'm getting something out of this for myself."

~~~~~

Odd that I could get nostalgic over a dump like this. With its piles of trash and piled like bricks and mortar with curving paths in between, there was a hominess to it that reminded me of Ragpicker's Square, so long ago when I first awoke in Sigil. The caretaker himself was a scruffy old man who reeked of garbage, bent over with weariness yet somehow more vital than most of



the people of this town. His eyes and posture were more vibrant, as if he didn't quite belong here. He looked up at us as we moved between the stained rubble, and straightened his back. "Come to see Kyse? Heard stories of wisdom and righteousness? Examples to be set and lived by?"

"Are you the caretaker?"

"I am Kyse, caretaker of the town's refuse. I tend to their garbage, and in metaphor I have seen a fair number of souls float this way as well. I am the voice that urges them to goodness - and I fear they ignore me."

"You sound like you know more of Curst than its other denizens, old man."

He shook his head in pity, "It is a town that is on the brink of disaster. All manner of evil is being done here, and nothing is as it seems. All is hidden beneath a veneer of civility, but the venom scars those who breathe it in. This is a poisonous town, filled with poisonous people."

He leaned forward conspiratorially then. "I've a secret entrance into the underground here, a secret place almost no one knows. There is a way into the undercity..." He paused. "But I have never used it. Should I go down, I foresee that I could never return. The way down is slippery, and the rubble would collapse behind me. When I'm ready to die, I shall slide down there and let the monsters feast on my bones."

"Well aren't you a sunny one," I glanced back beyond the gates. I couldn't blame him though... every inch of Curst festered with cruelty and selfishness, "I heard that you're having trouble with a group of thugs."

Kyse nodded, "Wernet is the man, a leader of lice, a collector of sins. He tells me I have coin, that I should give it to him, but my wealth lies solely in my heart and my faith. I have told him this. I fear he does not believe. Go, convince him of this. Please. He stands in Inner Curst, on the southern side, near the wagons."

"What does Wernet have against you anyway?"

Kyse sighed, "It escapes my knowledge. Rumor has it that I sit upon a wealth of gold, that great riches had come to me. Untrue, untrue... the only riches I have are those of my faith, which sustains me in a town of deceit. I have tried to pass my wealth along but so few here wish to share it with me."

Dak'kon and Grace nodded respectfully before we left.

Going out into Inner Curst during the day was like pulling the burlap sack off the head of a Hive-born hooker: all the scars and warts and flavors of ugly are there to behold, with a shock that would've given you second thoughts. Worse really, because when it came to Curst I couldn't exactly dim the lights to get through the ordeal.

A ramshackle guillotine had been proudly set up at the town square, blade and basket stained with smears of scarlet. There was a rankness in the air about it between the coppery tang of fresh blood and the scabby must of old, and flies were fattening themselves on the callous justice of the people.

The Gate to Carceri squatted in the middle of the ward like a great four-legged insect, black razorvine twined around its stone arches. Each one was festooned with various skulls along its length, some spiny, others horned, none of them human. They moaned quietly through their eyesockets in the breeze.

In one alley, a ring of civilians pared away the hours by forming a circle around a pair of trichas that snapped at each other with vicious beaks and clawed with feet bound with plaits of barbed wire. In the corner a pair of bleeding tricha corpses lay, necks slashed open and heads laying at odd angles. More flies danced over their filmed-over eyes and entered and exited their gaping beaks, ghostly silent against the background of cheers and gamblers placing bets. In the evening the dead would be gutted and carved for their meat.

Then there was Wernet.

He was burly, with a bestial strength to him like that of a rabid bear. His face was scarred and creased with countless tales of violence, and his voice came like gravel scraping over a seabed. "Wha' d'ya want, berk?"

"I've come to talk to you about Kyse, the dump caretaker."

"Aww, has the poor li'l man heard we was coming for his money?" He scratched himself. "You go back and tell him he's givin' it up or he's a dead man. Go on, now."

Crap.

~~~~~

You'd think that building a barricade out of garbage would be easy. Without a care for what you're handing it should've been a simple matter to toss heaps of junk into a large pile at the gate of the dump. But too many irregular scraps: half-broken boxes and twisted sheets of metal, left hollows that weakened the mass of garbage that we piled to keep the gang from flooding in. Safe or not though, we were ready.

"Sending others to do your work?" Wernet growled, "Dirty play, old man. You'll pay for that."

Annah's punch-dagger was up to its hilt in scum when she stepped out from behind a thug, a cold look in her eyes

"If we're gonnae play dirty..." she said smoothly, ripping the blade free and pushing the corpse over, "Might as well use all th' tricks we've got."

~~~~~

The upside about a nice fight is that afterward, once you're strutting down the street clothed in blood, no one else wants to raise steel against you. The dregs of the tavern snuck a few quick peeks, but surreptitious glances aside they did the smart thing and ignored us.

Nabat gave a huge smile as I walked in. "I hear you're done. That means you get the third part of the Key." His eyes blazed for just a moment and the verse tolled forth: "...their portion set..." When his eyes returned to normal, he shrugged. "Not much of a verse, I'm afraid... but it'll have to do. Thanks for your help. The next portion of the Key is with Dallan. He's the one with the young female friend over there."

"Why did you want me to save the old man? Isn't this supposed to be a town of betrayal?"

He chuckled, "They used to be my gang. Then they ran me out for taking their money - even though I was framed. I planted the rumors about Kyse myself - I knew that they'd fall for it, and either someone'd take them out, or they'd leave evidence that'd bring the guards down on them. Either way, I

win."

~~~~~

I was getting quite sick of being bounced between bar patrons like an idiot. What really topped it all off was the fact that this Dallan didn't even seem to be paying attention to me. No, his eyes were on the woman in his arms, with short-cropped hair, bodice and skirt the same drab mustard-yellow. She was pretty enough, I suppose, but even as I stood quietly, staring them down until they would look at me, the pair simply stared into each other's eyes and giggled stupidly.

Dallan finally gave me a glance. He had stern blue eyes and shoulder-length black hair. Whatever he looked at seemed to smolder under his gaze. "I'm Dallan. You're looking for a Key," he said with a large smile.

"That's right. What do I have to do for it this time?"

"It's simplicity itself. One of the city leaders is having a bit of... political difficulty, shall we say. One of his enemies on the city council is causing him some trouble. Go talk to him about it and see what you can do to help him out. His name is An'izius - he's a githyanki, and you'll find him near the gate to Carceri in the center of town."

Dak'kon's gaze hardened.

"Is he a friend of yours? Are you looking for a particular outcome to this?"

Dallan's smirk grew wider. "Let's just say that I trust to your discretion. You'll see what I mean."

~~~~~

An'izius circled around the Carceri Gate. He was sallow-skinned, thin of face and mean of eye, stalking deliberately. I could practically smell his rage.

"What do you want?" he snarled, looking up to me.

Dak'kon's gaze was hard as steel and twice as sharp, "We are to help a githyanki? What draws him here, away from the song of blood woven by his brothers?"

The githyanki's eyes narrowed. "I have cast aside the hatred I bore for your people. I have risen above the petty feud between our two races. For this they exiled me - but in my heart, I have bested them. Can you say the same?"

"All right, you two... cut it out. I had some questions."

"What are they?"

"A friend told me you were in need of help."

His intensity doubled, and his voice sounded like it could've ground away stone. "What have you heard?"

"Simply that you were having difficulties with a political enemy."

His eyes widened for just a fraction of a second, and narrowed again. "I see. And are you going to help me?"

I shrugged, "It depends on what you need from me."

"It is of a delicate nature. A rival requires education. You won't need to kill her, if this makes you squeamish."

I mulled it over. Not having to kill to get something done for once was rather refreshing, a good stretch and crack of the moral knuckles. "I'll do it, then."

"This is what you must do: The woman, Siabha... she has been selling her influence to the highest bidder, undercutting my position with the Burgher of this town. I wish you to humiliate her. All you need do is tell the Captain of the Guards that she has attempted to hire you to attack me, and you shall be well rewarded. You can find her - if you desire - near the Administration building."

~~~~~

Siabha wore a haughty expression on her aquiline face, and her contempt for me was obvious as she spoke. "I am a busy woman. Do not detain me long."

"I spoke with An'Izius. He had an... interesting proposition."

Her eyebrows furrowed. Clearly she didn't expect someone as rough-looking as me to be playing it subtle, "He's plotting some sort of defamation of me again, isn't he? What will it take to reverse his latest trick? How about if I double whatever he's paying you?"

Double, eh? "He sent his regards. That's all."

She sneered. "Yes, I'm certain that's all it was. Remember... whatever he offered, I will double. Think on that, stranger."

~~~~~

"Well? What of your progress?" An'Izious whispered.

"Your rival has offered to pay me a large sum to double-cross you."

"What? I'll double it myself!"

I grinned. "You've got a deal."

"Then go! Go! Or I shall have you flayed!"

~~~~~

"Well?"

"He's offered to pay me a large sum to double-cross you."

"Bah! Enough of this! I shall match his promise, but I will not raise it any further." Siabha smiled challengingly at me. "You'll have to make your own decision. But remember... I may be able to offer you a little something more."

~~~~~

It was with great pleasure and satisfaction that I approached the guard. Getting passed back and forth between two clients like a cheap prostitute wasn't exactly the kind of job that would satisfy my pride.

The captain of the guard was a crisp, militarily-efficient man, dressed in the

standard rust-brown armor. He turned a contemptuous eye to us. Not that I blamed him... with the coat of scars I definitely look like a troublemaker.

"What do you want?"

"One of the officials of this town has asked me to murder another one of them," I pointed a thumb towards Inner Curst, "I thought I had better warn you."

His eyes sharpened behind his helm. "Give me the name. Who's planning what?"

"An'izius asked me to frame Siabha, who asked me to do the same to An'izius. They're both corrupt."

He nodded, and spoke in a crisp, clipped manner, "Both of them, eh? Good. This should solidify my control in this city. They'll be gone before you know it. My thanks, stranger."

Crap. I think I've just been duped.

## Chapter 95

"I heard all about your fine work, friend. That was an interesting little turn-around. How'd you like Curst's politics, hm?" Dallan quaffed his ale. "Here's your payment from my end." His voice deepened, taking on an almost ritualistic tone: "As far removed from Gods and light of Heaven..." His voice normalized, "For the final portion of the Key, talk to Dona Quisho over there."

"Why did you want that matter taken care of, anyway? What was your connection?"

"Because An'izius forbade me to play in this city." He spat on the floor. "Because Siabha refused to aid me despite our long friendship. She said the

time wasn't right to play her hand. Because he was a power-hungry mongrel, and she a self-aggrandizing whore. I knew that, one way or another, one or both of them would fall."

The crawling feeling along my spine wasn't that of another memory resurfacing.

Dona Quisho was a red-haired woman, short and plump. Her face was lined with cares, worries, and hatreds that seemed to have festered for far too long. She rasped out, "You're the one wantin' to get underground, aye? You'll need to do Dona Quisho a favor before she gives you her piece o' the key. There's a fiend locked up here in town. I needs him freed." She pressed a scroll into my hands before I had a chance to react.

"Why?" my eyebrows furrowed and I looked down at the parchment in my hands. The ink seemed to breathe its words beneath my hands, and the clean, violet ribbon seemed to be the only thing holding in the thrumming feeling of malevolence.

"Because it's mine! Because I sacrificed so much for it! Because they took it from me and hid it from me and locked it away and no one would ever help me when it was all I ever wanted for myself!" Her voice grew sly, cunning. "But now I have knowledge you need, and you'll never get it unless you let Agril-shanak go."

"I don't hold with freeing fiends."

She cackled in my face. "That don't matter. You need the fifth part of the Key. I've got it. 'Less you're willing to find another way into your precious underground, you got to do what I say."

"How do I know it won't go on a rampage?"

A little smile filled her eyes, one of the most poisonous smiles I had ever seen. "That's not a problem that concerns me. You cut your own deals with the fiend. I just want him freed."

"What do I have to do?"

"Find the grain silo in town. Find the pentagram inscribed into the floor in it. Use that scroll nearby, and when Agril-Shanak appears... free it. Make



whatever bargains you like with it, but set it free. I don't care what you do then."

~~~~~

I wondered if my boots were clean.

Really, you're about to release a soul-devouring horror of the nether realms to wreak havoc on the Planes at the behest of an addled old hag. You're doing this for some unknown purpose, in a town where ignorance has led you down the worst path imaginable.

And the only thing you can think of is whether your boots are clean when you're tromping on what's left of the Town's grain supply.

The grain crunches beneath our feet, the ladder rattles as we ascend. Kept on focusing on the little things to keep myself sane.

Of course, I couldn't be nonchalant here.

Right in the center of the loft was an empty pentagram. The air was dry and cold, and there was a scent in the air, of old magic gone stale and evil permeating the area, held in rein only by a circle of bone-gray ash.

The air darkened for a moment, and there was a sense of wind rushing through my head and my heart, bringing a cold chill that seemed to freeze my insides. When my vision cleared a towering fiend stood, over fifteen feet in height with a dog-like head scraping the ceiling. Its massive torso sprouted four arms... two that ended in pincers, and two with clawed hands. Sharp fangs shone ivory-yellow and violet eyes glinted with fiendish intellect. It gazed at me steadily.

"Uh, wow."

The creature's gaze never wavered as it continued to stare at me. I swallowed, not knowing what to say until I felt a tugging sensation at my mind and a voice rang in my head. "Greetings to you as well, human. I am Agril-Shanak. Why are you here?"

"I have some questions..."

"Questions... this amuses me. You may ask." Its eyes stared into mine in the most disturbing way. I was confident in my mental fortitude... I'd gotten out of plenty of scrapes out of sheer will alone, but Agril-Shanak was more alien a force than I'd ever faced.

"What are you?"

"Some call me a fiend... some a friend. I am Agril-Shanak. I am tanar'ri. I have achieved my status through hard work, treachery, blood, and fear. I am a creature of nightmare." He fell silent.

"Who calls you 'fiend' and who calls you 'friend,' exactly?"

"The ignorant who cannot see beyond fear and prejudice. It is their shortsightedness that causes them to label me such... and those who desire power often see me as a means to an end. It is they who call me friend."

"Those are vague answers..."

"Ah, but they are answers nonetheless." He leaned toward me. "The only answers I will give you..."

"What are you doing here?"

"Awaiting my freedom. Perhaps you have come to grant it? You have the scroll..." He pointed a clawed finger at the parchment Dona Quisho gave me.

"How did you come to be trapped here?"

"I do not know..." There was a long pause before he continued. "I was summoned and I answered the call. A greater force then intercepted me and I came here. I have been trapped since."

"Who summoned you?"

"You know the answer, you hold the scroll in your hand. It was Dona Quisho."

I nodded, "Dona Quisho sent me to free you. How do I do that?"

He pointed a clawed finger at the edge of the pentagram. "Simply break the

diagram by erasing a small portion..." He looked at me, his eyes boring into my skull.

I paused, "What's in it for me if I do?"

"My gratitude will know no bounds. I will lay the planes themselves at your feet... free me!"

"I need something more concrete than words... if you can't deliver, I'll just be leaving."

"Very well..." I could feel his eyes boring into me as he thought. "I will grant you a magical weapon, a weapon of great power, a weapon to bring your foes to their knees... I will grant you Heartgrinder!"

"Heartgrinder?"

"Yes... A weapon dear to me, but one I would sacrifice for my freedom. What say you? Will you free me for Heartgrinder?"

I glanced sideways at Grace. If anyone knew the heart of a tanar'ri it would be her. She returned the gaze with a firm coolness, and the barest hint of a nod. "Do what you must," she seemed to say, "so long as you are willing to pay the price."

I had no interest in fiendish weapons, nor in any power that carried the stink of the Lower planes. I knew I'd be opening a Pandora's box doing this... but by all the Powers I'd gone this far. At the very least I'd have eternity to hunt down Agril-Shanak and correct things with the edge of a blade. Until then, robbing him of some power might help limit what havoc he would wreak.

Somehow, I had the feeling that his release would be inevitable anyway.

I knelt, touching the diagram, and a surge of energy washed up my arm. With a quick stroke I erased a part of it. Just as quickly the energy faded and a cry of triumph roared within my mind. "Free at last!"

"I'll take Heartgrinder now."

"Yes... I will abide by our bargain, human. The weapon is yours and freedom is mine. A fair trade..." He glared at me and then a rusty axe appeared in his

hand. He held it out. "It looks like nothing... but it is powerful."

I was momentarily skeptical, but a touch of that rusted axe told me all I needed to know. It screamed with power and a thirst for blood... such a weapon shouldn't be in anyone's hands, much less a fiend's.

"You have done me a great service and, out of gratitude, I will not slay you." He pointed a clawed finger at me.

"Know this, however. If ever we meet again, you shall rue the day. Farewell."

He was already gone when I murmured beneath my breath, "I look forward to it."

~~~~~

"You're done, ain't you? Yes, you are... but where's Agril-Shanak?" Dona Quisho crooned.

"I'm sure it'll be around shortly."

She cackled. "And we shall make our plans and lay our traps and they shall rue their mistakes, oh yes." She pressed a bag of coins into my hands.

"Here's the last part of the Key: 'As from the Center thrice to the utmost pole'. Go on back and talk to Tainted Barse now; he'll steer you right." Still cackling, she gathered her belongings and scurried out.

Barse was still polishing a mug with a filthy rag. Seeing me come up to the bar he casually pulled out a shotglass and filled it with a good shot of strong liquor.

I downed it in one gulp. The stuff had a hard time affecting me, but I might as well try after all I've been put through for this poem:

"Such place eternal justice had prepared for those rebellious  
Here their Prison ordained in utter darkness  
Their portion set as far removed from Gods and light of Heaven  
As from the Center thrice to the utmost pole."

Barse nodded, "Are you ready to go? There's no coming back - the door'll be locked, barred, and magically protected once you pass through. You want to

do this?"

"Trust me, I'm in the mood to put something in its grave, and I doubt you'd enjoy having me around for that."

He gave a curt nod, "Good luck, cutter. You'll need it."

## Interlude

Ileron of Sen-Tau stares morosely into the distance, as the alleys and avenues wending through his body take on a darker edge. Not a single shadow falls over chalk-white plaster. The blossoms of his gardens are as full and sweet with nectar as they could be. Yet once he stops speaking, the silence of his streets begins to swallow everything else. The stillness of the temple bells leaves a phantom ringing in your ears, like the echoed tingle of a lost limb.

You lick your lips, just to experience the taste of your naked flesh. You drum your fingers silently for the simple sensation. Anything at all is better than the ghostly quiescence of an abandoned city.

When his voice breaks again it is old and tired, "I have seen lands like this Curst before, in dying nations where people bled away little by little, leaving only the pus of society swelling in their wake. I've caressed the walls of these cities, and they spoke to me in the groans of a diseased man, slowly eaten by the plague from within.

"Men flourish and fall like leaves. Each generation lies forgotten, buried beneath the snows in winter; trampled into detritus in the spring. What remains is the tree that held them. The death of men is no matter (no offense to you, good citizens); for one such as I, it is the worms, and the blight, and the white moss that poisons the roots that are the dirge's echoes."

Scii-Tavakis' grip on her spear loosens, as if she no longer possesses the

strength to hold it up. Gone is the confidence in her voice, and memories of a dying world mists in her eyes, "And what, pray tell, is it that you hear when you speak to the city of Sigil?"

A flash of intrigue lights Ileron's eyes for a moment. His lips purse, and a smile begins to quirk at his lips, spreading into a milk-toothed grin.

"The Nameless One," he continues cheerfully, "slid beneath the skin of the city, crawled through the contours of its flesh like a surgeon's probe. Finally, he had reached its bones, and pulling himself up by its sinews he followed the flow of its pulse, towards the heart of what was the diseased town of Curst..."

## Chapter 96

They say there are two great forces in life that make the multiverse go 'round: love, with all its devoted, enveloping pleasures; and hate, the all-consuming obsession. A good philosopher could give a good argument that all action in life is built around one of these two forces in some way. Creation and Destruction. Life and Death. Ying and Yang. Eros and Thanatos. Personally, I think there's a third option that cleaves between the two.

Cold, directed purpose.

I mean, let's have an earnest conversation here. Even with my feelings for Annah at one side and Morte's jabbering on the other, the axis becomes less of a principle of contemplation and more like something you grab at a moment's need so you can impale a critter with the pointy end (probably the "hate" part of it). It isn't love that I feel when the resonance of the multiverse is flowing through me, nor is it hate that causes me to turn a trelon into a bubbling smear spread across ten square feet of masonry. It's just the annoying fact that I need to get from point A to point B and these damn things are blocking my view of the destination.

Though if we're on the subject of trelons, might as well say this:

I hate these things.

Trelons are more claw and fang than they are flesh, come at you in swarms, and their only two forelimbs end in giant claws. Punching one is like swinging into a sack of razors. How do these things even mate? Their existence is either one of lifetime chastity or a brutally kinky cycle of murder-suicide.

My magic blasts had broken the horde's charge and softened them up, and I simply ran into the fray while Nordom unloaded his seemingly endless supply of bolts into their flesh. Dak'kon and Annah tried to help, and for a moment I was worried my screaming would've made them more eager to leap into the orgy of blood and rending flesh. Once they were able to parse out my words through the wet gushing sounds, however, they reluctantly stayed behind. Morte was unusually obedient in this regard.

I couldn't regenerate as fast as they could hurt me, but like many melee battles I was engaged in it was one of attrition.

"Ow..." I grunted, sitting on a trelon corpse and waiting for my wounds to knit shut. We were far from any safe haven, with no immediate place to rest. We needed to ration our resources, and that meant hoarding our magic, from my force blasts to Grace's healing.

It made for slower going since I had to sit down and take a long breather each time we encountered trouble, but ironically charging into a storm of teeth and claws was the safer alternative. Immortality has a terrible way of changing the mechanics of war.

Of course, this didn't mean we were wasting time while I was waiting for my sinews to reconnect.

"Annah, could you go scout out the area?"

She gave a proud nod as if eager to put her unique skills to good use, and immediately vanished around the corner. Even knowing she was just around the bend I had to strain to hear the slightest padding of her soft leather boots.

I had to admit that I was nervous for the first ten minutes or so. If she'd been spotted and hurt because I'd ordered her out I didn't think I would be

able to forgive myself. But an hour of nail-biting and foot-tapping later, I felt a tap on my shoulder and glanced up at Annah. My wounds had mostly healed over by then.

"Find anything interesting?"

"Monsters a-plenty," she replied, biting one lip, "Nasty collections o' demons to tha north. Big flabby things a-quiverin' like jelly, an' a horde o' creatures round as they're tall, wit flesh pebbled like stone. One o' the big winged ones might've caught me scent, looked like an abishai's great-uncle he did."

"Lemures and Nupperibos, chief. Foot soldiers of the baatezu."

"And a cornugon, if we extrapolate to guess what the winged creature might be. Strange," Grace murmured, "That here we encounter the forces of law and evil in such numbers. Particularly odd to see a cornugon so far from the schemes of Baator. And Dona Quisho had summoned a glabrezu, a demon of mindless chaos."

"What do you think it means, Grace?" I asked.

She shook her head, "The schemes of the baatezu require careful reading and study of their strategies, something difficult given our lack of information and time to pursue the matter. Needless to say, Curst hides more in its heart than any would let on."

"Save perhaps the deva," Dak'kon intoned, "If it is his knowing that we must seek for your sake, we may probe his knowing of this city as well."

"Sounds peachy."

"Aye, but there be some people down 'ere as well. One southwards, th' other far west. I donnae know how they've avoided the nasties, or if they be friend or foe."

"Hmm. What did they look like?"

"T'chah. One's a hermit. Th' other's... well, let's settle on the fact that he's donated ta a greater cause, aye?"



"You've done splendidly, Annah." I pondered for a moment. I knew full well the extent of my power. Dak'kons tutelage and emphasis on knowing oneself had served me well. I'd perused plenty of books about the variety of planar creatures in the libraries of the Great Foundry. Nupperibos and Lemures were minor concerns. An abishai wouldn't live much longer than a pack of trelons, if that. A cornugon... well, that one would be troublesome. Doable, but troublesome. They were cautious schemers, however, and wouldn't engage in combat against an unknown foe unless they were sure they had planned out a solid strategy beforehand.

Might as well get that out of the way first.

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Dealing with the Baatorian hordes was a minor matter. It was no small amount of energy I expended with that, but sometimes you just have to send a message. After working through the group of fiends, we met the cornugon.

If he was angry at me for slaying his mindless underlings, he certainly didn't show it. The power baatezu sought came from the mastery of their anger, after all. It was vaguely humanoid, covered with grotesque scales, with huge wings folded to make him look smaller than he was. A long, prehensile tail slid along the floor with a sinuous, rhythmic motion, and keen eyes watched me approach with amusement.

"Greetings."

It barked out a laugh and smiled at me. "Yes... greetings to you, little human."

"Who are you?"

"My name is not important. If there were a reason for you to know me, you would. If you need to attach a name to me, you may call me Tek'elach." The creature smiled.

"I've been told that you're a cornugon. A greater baatezu."

Tek'elach glanced at Grace, the flesh of its maw curling into a partial sneer. Those sinister eyes twinkled then, and sniffing the air it shifted its gaze to

Morte. If he had a colon, Morte may have just emptied them. "Yes... does this surprise you?" Tek'elach looked at me expectantly.

Something was definitely up here. You don't see lords and barons mucking about in the caves beneath a planar backwater, "I just don't see why you'd be here. Aren't you supposed to be fighting some Blood War or something back home?"

It frowned. "Yes... there is the Blood War. But, that is far away for now and need not be spoken of..."

"Why not?"

"For no other reason than I choose not to... for now." It glared.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"My business here is my own; I don't see it as a concern or yours." It smiled knowingly at me. "I suggest you change the subject."

"I don't understand, why the secrecy? You give me the impression that something else is going on here."

Tek'elach looked at me with mock surprise. "Do I? Or do you choose to interpret my words or actions to suit your own needs? Either way, I have answered your question. I will speak no more on this matter."

"Then what can you tell me about the city of Curst?"

It frowned and gave serious thought to my question. "It is a forsaken place... a place of betrayal and chaos... a city balanced on the edge of disaster. Travel wisely within its borders."

"Balanced on the edge of disaster?"

It sighed and looked away. "This is a border town, little human. On one side, are the outlands. On the other, is the plane of Carceri. So long as the status quo in Curst remains balanced, this will continue to be a border town." It paused for effect.

"I've heard as much. Go on."

"If things get out of hand in the city, it could slide into Carceri and become one with the plane. Impose too much order, and it ceases to be a border town by sliding into the Outlands." It shrugged. "That is the way of such places."

My eyebrows furrowed. I'd heard of such before, and seeing the planes had strained my sanity time and again. But for an entire city to move was hard to believe. "You're saying the city could actually be... displaced?"

A mock smile curled on Tek'elach's maw. "Yes..."

"If that were to happen, what could be done about it?"

It shrugged. "Determine which way the city has slid and apply an opposing force. Too much order? Instigate some chaos. Too little order? Impose more law. If you were persistent in your efforts you could pull the city back to its border status... or slide it to the opposite side."

It smiled again. Tek'elach certainly seemed amused, and I was certain I wasn't going to like the reason for it. "You've been very helpful... Which brings up another question... Why?"

It gave me a confused look. "Why what?"

"You baatezu are supposed to be the incarnations of evil. So why are you being so helpful?"

It barked out a laugh. "Do not mistake my help as kindness, nor me as anything other than evil. I am helping you because it serves my needs... nothing more."

"How does helping me serve your needs?"

"How indeed..."

For a moment I stared him down, through eyes black as sin and bone-yellow teeth of a jagged grin. No, I didn't have time for this. I had other things to do. There was still the hermit and the other man to investigate.

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Voorsha was a rat-faced, middle aged man in shoddy clothes. One hand rested on his dagger, the other fiddled with his collar. He hadn't expected to see anyone else down here, and wariness warred with relief until we made introductions. After that, what sparked in his eyes was opportunity.

"What are you doing here?"

He stared at me blankly then shrugged. "I'm a... trader. This is my storage area."

I looked around. A still, some goods covered with a tarp... it certainly wasn't hard to figure out what was going on. "What do you store here?"

"I don't see that that's any concern of yours."

"I'm just curious..."

He shrugged. "Well..." He gestured vaguely. "Ale, mead, and... other goods."

"What are you so nervous about?"

Voorsha began to fidget. "Nothing... Can we change the subject?"

"No, I think you're up to something and I want to know what."

He glared at me then sighed. "I'm... bringing the stuff in through... alternate channels. The guards don't know..."

This guy was either a great sneak or very good at bribing, because he sure as hell was a terrible liar. "You're a smuggler."

He frowned. "I'm a bootlegger. Sounds better than smuggler, don't you think? Say... how'd you like to help me out... for a piece of the business?"

"What kind of help?"

"Well recently there's been an unusual amount of... activity down here. Loads of trelons swarming in, this stink of sulfur that wasn't here before. I think I even saw a few fiends through one of the deeper tunnels. Mostly they keep to themselves but... there's a gehreleth nearby. It's been trying to

kill me and that makes it hard to get my stuff out. I need someone to take care of it."

I blinked, "What's a gehreleth?"

He shrugged. "It's just some dumb creature intent on eating everything it sees..."

"Why don't you deal with it yourself?"

"I'm not a warrior, it would kill me outright." He glanced at my scars. "Anyone who can survive what you obviously have should be able to deal with it."

"What do I get if I take care of it for you?"

He smiled. "I can use a partner. Business is good and I can't distribute everything by myself. We'll split the profits down the middle. What do you say?"

"Sure, why not."

His smile broadened. "Great. Anything else?"

"I'm looking for a deva. I've heard he's in Curst."

Voorsha frowned. "A deva... I've heard rumors..."

"What rumors?"

He shrugged and looked away. "Some digging was going on down here to expand the prison. Word is they broke into an unknown chamber by accident..." He turned back to me. "Found something or someone there, imprisoned. Some say it was a deva that was found. Others say it was baatezu, and others say it was a tanar'ri. Don't care myself. Whatever it is, I intend to stay away from it."

"Where is this chamber?"

"I have no idea. Keep poking around down here and you're likely to find it... not that that would be a good thing, mind you."

~~~~~

The gehreleth was a tall, slender creature with long arms and an elongated head. Several fangs protruded from its oversized mouth and its fingers ended in long claws. It gazed at us steadily as we approached.

Nasty as it was, the creature was in no hurry. It leaned forward and sniffed me, then reached out with a clawed hand and pinched my shoulder. It licked its lips. "Ye're a little tough, but may be tasty none the less."

"I have some questions "

Its mouth split into a toothy grin. "Conversation before dining is fine. What do ye want to know?"

"You're going to eat me?"

Its smile grew even larger. "Aye, as soon as ye finish with ye damn fool questions."

"What are you?"

It lifted one arm and scratched his armpit lazily. "Gehreleth... Farastu. Name's Ghrist..."

I blinked, "What's a farastu?"

"I am a gehreleth. My station is farastu," it said, pointing a finger to itself. With that Ghrist belched and a noxious odor filled the air. Yech, smelled like gar-bar farts.

"What are you doing here?"

It yawned and a wave of fetid breath washed over us. "Lookin' for deva. Good eating. Suck the marrow from his bones."

"There's a bootlegger down here who wants you dead."

It gazed at me blankly then nodded. "I know... tried to eat him the other day. He got away. Tried to catch him, but he has his place trapped." It

shrugged. "I'm patient. One day he'll make a mistake."

"He sent me to kill you." Might as well be honest. It's not like this was going to last very long anyway.

Ghrist blew its nose into its hand then flung the result aside. It wiped the hand dry as it answered me. "Oh... just one more reason to kill him then... and ye."

"You're not much of a conversationalist."

It gave me a broad grin. "Good. Tired of questions, time to eat."

The moment its jaw dropped to snarl and leap, Annah's punch-daggers carved two new smiles along Ghrist's throat. Venomous blood spurted from its wounds as those filthy hands clutched at the lacerated flesh, bilious black fluid spurting from between its fingers. A stab of a dagger and a swing of thought-honed karach was all that was needed then.

I gave Annah a thankful nod as I wiped the mess from my hands. Our group was a well-oiled machine by now. Annah was able to read the real purpose behind the chat without the slightest signal.

I stuffed the severed head in a fresh sack. Not much of a conversationalist, but good enough for my purposes, I suppose.

Chapter 97

Voorsha glanced up at me. "Hello... again. What can I do for you?"

"I've killed that gehreleth for you.

He looked surprised but quickly recovered, and his throat bobbed with a heavy swallow. "Uh... that's great. Good job."

"You said you'd make me your partner. I'm ready to collect."

"Yes... I did say that." Voorsha nodded, staring at us for a moment before he began to fidget.

After all the things I've been through, I had my doubts as to whether Voorsha would keep his end of the deal. "You didn't think I could kill the gehreleth, did you?"

He stared at me a moment longer then sighed. "No, I didn't... It seems you've exceeded my expectations... I was hoping the gehreleth would deal with you and save me the trouble. Now I guess I have to take care of you myself."

The moment his hand slipped behind his back my arms had already shot out, gripping him in a headlock. Stupid berk. If we could take down the gehreleth what chance did he think he had against me with the little pigsticker in his hand? Held as he was, he drove it into my kidneys in quick succession. Wounds like that and you'd bleed out in thirty seconds usually, but all he inflicted was a dull trickle as arteries and veins knit shut as quick as a pinch of my fingers.

This was the last time someone in this city was going to use me. It's poked the bear one time too many.

I did it nice and gentle, adding the pressure just a bit, working a moment to get the grip right. It was a favor no one else ever gave to me... though given how ungrateful this little weasel was I doubted he'd appreciate it. One quick twist, a wet pop, and it was over. Easy. Painless. Like dipping him into a pond.

I let his body slump gently to the ground, head flopping around a neck freshly endowed with a few more degrees of freedom. Then I picked his pockets for good measure. Chump change, really. Sifting through his goods just turned up a bunch of black lotus and other assorted narcotics. Nothing useful.

But Annah had said that there were two people down here.

He was a dirty man, hunched and crabbed with age and darkness. His lank, greasy hair flew from his shoulders as he saw us, and his eyes went wide with fear. His fingers began twisting through arcane patterns. I recognized

the somatic components... vaguely. Something painful, but a spell of divine origin.

I put my hands up, "It's okay... I'm not going to hurt you."

He stopped mid-gesture, "Ach, another visitor, eh? You'll all be wantin' to scare the ol' hermit half to death, eh? These tunnels're no place for a casual spring walk, y'know. What d'you want from me?"

"I'm looking for a deva."

He shook his head "Heard rumors about it, but this ol' hermit ain't seen it. I thought it might be underground, since this place locks up all good things, but I still can't find it. If I could, I'd ask if it'd heard about my god." He rattled off another sigh, and looked down the hallway. "Somehow, it feels like it'd be off to the west there. But I still haven't found it. It must have a guardian." He winked at me.

"What can you tell me about this place?"

"This place? Full of monsters, criminals - I'm not one of 'em - and other folks who mean a body harm. Still safer than the city above, though. At least down here you know where you stand. Up there? Nossir."

"What are you doing down here, anyway?"

He sighed noisily, caught himself, and looked around wildly for a moment. "I came to Curst because my god was exiled to Carceri. I've been movin' closer to him alla the time, but I'm not goin' into the prison plane after him. I'm tryin' to find a way to get him out. Since he's a power o' good, he shouldn't even be there, but that's how exile works, I guess."

"How long have you been here?"

"Too long, too long, in the service of a god who's all but forgotten. I remember him, though... I'll find him, if I have to duck all the monsters around forever. I'll find him." He stared off, mumbling.

I looked him up and down. The little man hardly looked like the type who was able to defend himself properly, "How was it that you survive down here anyway?"

A grin split his face, "My god may be imprisoned but he still grants some measure o' power. This ol' one has set up wards, he has. Not too powerful mind, and hard to maintain, but they serve well enough. If yer as friendly a group as y'seem, I'd let you stay here the night to rest up."

We'd been working hard to conserve our strength, but a little rest wouldn't hurt. If the deva was heavily guarded, we'd need every drop of strength to make our way through.

~~~~~

A ragged curtain cloaked a small corner in solitude, and the light of a single candle cast Grace's shadow against the tattered cloth. She knelt in prayer, still and silent, but the flickering of the candle's flame made her silhouette dance.

"I sense you, old friend," she murmured, "Please, come if you wish to talk."

I cleared my throat. My guttural croak was a rough contrast to her own sweet voice, "I'm sorry if I've interrupted your meditations."

"Not at all," she said as I peeled back the curtain, "One can only experience silent meditation so many times. There are few new sensations for me to draw from solitude."

I held back another apology, this time for taking her so far from her duties running the brothel. After all, she would consider it a fair trade... collecting fresh new experiences from our journeys must've benefited her in ways I couldn't imagine.

"You must miss your students."

"They will manage without my presence," she said, snuffing a stick of incense in a small bowl of sand. "Perhaps Ecco would need some guidance, now that her voice has been restored," Grace smiled at that, "She will benefit from finding her own way. Nenny and Kimasxi were always quite independent... though perhaps a little more meekness would do them well. And Yves... well, there are some tales I cannot tell her."

The pause snagged at my mind, "Why is that? Is it a story you don't possess,

or one you won't give?"

Her rosebud lips quirked in a soft smile, "Ah! You do have a way of drawing answers from others. But a lady must have some secrets."

"I'm sorry if it's impertinent, Grace. I'd just like to know more about you. I know Morte so well, and Dak'kon, and Annah. I have no idea what goes through Nordom's head- that's his nature, I suppose. But I don't know much about you."

The smile faded from her face, and she used the lingering stub of the candle to light a new one. Her eyes stared into the budding flame, and shone with a pained sobriety, "That is correct. Yves needs no more tales adding to her misery... and my tale would not serve her search for truth."

"Would you tell me?"

"It is a long tale, and not as interesting as some would make it out to be." She sighed. "It is intertwined in other tales of war and slavery - it is not a pleasant story."

"I would still hear it."

"Very well... know my past is not a long one, at least by tanar'ri standards. I do not know if you are familiar with the tanar'ri, but we are a race of the Abyss, a staggered series of Planes filled with chaos and evil hearts."

Her hands folded in her lap, and she looked up into my eyes. I felt a little lightheaded, and was held in place by her gaze. "I am a tanar'ri, a fiend, a succubus... I grew up upon the first plane of the Abyss. My mother, Red Shroud, was a succubus herself - as I'm sure you are aware, succubi tempt mortals to bring their souls to the Abyss. My mother was among the finest, seducing countless mortal men to their eternal damnation. She now dwells in the Abyss, selling her children into slavery."

I felt my hands tighten at my sides, "Your mother sold you into slavery?"

"Yes, she sold me to the baatezu, the blood enemies of the tanar'ri. I think she rather expected that they would kill me -- despite her knowledge of other subjects, she knows little of their culture and the delight they take in tormenting others."

"How did you escape?"

"The baatezu are a proud species. The thought that a tanar'ri could best them at anything was intolerable to them. So I challenged one of the proudest of the balor to a contest of improvisation, and my tanar'ri nature afforded me an advantage - you see, the tanar'ri are creatures of chaos, wild and unpredictable. The baatezu are more cunning, with orderly hearts. They understand improvisation, but they are not its best practitioners. And thus, I won my freedom - and my path brought me to Sigil. It was there that I established the brothel, to give those lustful fevers that strike the mind more avenues of expression rather than the simply carnal."

I knelt down next to her, "When we were in Ravel's maze, Ravel said you were tormented... are you in pain?"

Fall-From-Grace was silent for a moment, her gaze becoming distant. When she turned back to me, her eyes were a strange shade of azure, a shade that mirrored sadness and tears.

"I will tell you this: the baatezu are not human. Their lusts lie in power, not for the flesh, and they care nothing for raping or rutting as humans do when they hold another human prisoner. The torments of the baatezu are far more subtle and far more damaging than any violation of the flesh, and the scars last far longer."

For the first time she paused, as if uncertain of what to say. A cold chill ran through my bones... for Grace to be struck silent, even for a moment, was disturbing. It was a relief when she finally spoke, each word slow and deliberate, "Ravel sees much with her black-brambled eyes, some things which are hidden to other's eyes, even things about their own natures." She shook her head slowly. "Sometimes... sometimes, the pain makes itself known. I have learned it is a...difficult thing to turn on one's nature."

"Are you all right?"

She smiled, very faintly, and she met my gaze. "Yes... you are kind to ask. The pain still makes itself known, but I came to terms with my nature many centuries ago."

"Very well, th-"

Grace stopped me before I could continue. "I thank you for asking about my well-being. Your concern is not unwelcome."

Were those my hands that wrapped around her body, I wondered? Was I really that bold to hold her, the way a man would cradle a woman, crossing the invisible barrier that separated a student from a teacher?

But she sighed, and the confused tension melted away as her hands held my shoulders. Her wings draped around us like the folds of a cloak. She was soft against me, in a way I never thought was possible with another. We shared our warmth, just for a moment. There was nothing to be said, no more to be explained. For a pair of Sensates, the experience was enough to pass understanding between us.

It was then that I felt it on me... the eyes, the sharp tang of pain, the barbed hook that snagged at the soul.

I looked over my shoulder, and spied the milk-white tip of a tail flicker around a dark corner.

"Annah?" I stood up, and Grace's wings unfolded from us. I pulled away, suddenly noticing the tightness of her bodice against my chest for the first time.

"You should go," she murmured. Mentally, I thanked her for understanding- I couldn't bear the guilt of leaving her in the cold.

Down the tunnels I crawled, tasting the air for the presence of the wards. I could still feel their resonance down these side passages, so it was safe, but far enough down and it would end. I was thankful for the lessons I shared with Annah so long ago. Though the going was hard the small signs were there: the stirring of dust, the slight swish of dirt left by a snaking tail. She wasn't even trying to hide.

But then the taste of the wards began to thin, like watered-down broth.

"Annah!" I hissed, seeing the flash of red hair, the flick of a white tail, "Come back!" But my voice seemed to only spur her on, like the crack of a whip.

"Annah, it's not safe here! Damn it, come back!" I growled, but I couldn't

keep the strain from my voice. I'd dragged her back from death once, and I wasn't about to do it again, "Please!"

My heart drummed against my chest, the blood pounded in my ears, heat swelling behind my eyes until I was almost blind from the panic and worry. I was going to lose her, oh Powers above I'd never be able to find her if she really did try to escape. The girl could squeeze through a crack half the size of what I could get through, or lose herself in this maze of passages if she got her head together and covered her tracks.

But then I saw her, huddled in a corner, hands wrapped around her knees. I was panting by then, relief intermixed with caution... if I said the wrong thing, she might bolt again.

"Annah..." I breathed, "Would you come back? Please? It's dangerous here." We had left the limits of the wards long ago.

She mumbled something.

"I can't hear you. Let's go back and talk about this."

"I always thought yeh were th' idjit," she murmured, "Thought I was th' clever one."

"You're not stupid, Annah. It's... just a misunderstanding. Grace was just so hurt, she's been through so much. All of us have."

"Aye. Yer gonna try an' convince me she's just a friend?"

"She's- it's complicated."

She was silent for a moment but slowly got to her feet, "It's not her I worry about. I jes cannae do this anymore. It's too hard a-knowin' what path yer goin' down, seeing yeh take one step after another t' yer end," she couldn't look me in the eye, "We're done when this is over. I have me own way t'go."

I nodded. Maybe it was for the best. "Come on. Let's go back."

She silently followed me back to the camp. All the while, she hung her head down, as though she couldn't bear to look at me any longer. And for once, I didn't know what else I could say.

## Chapter 98

"So it's a prison?"

Annah's tail flicked in annoyance, "'s what I just said, innit?"

"How big is it?"

"Real big."

"Looks like 'twas used as a mine long ago," Annah continued, "All th' tunnels 'ave these rails an' rusted carts. Old tools jus' gatherin' dust now."

"Oh Powers above, not the Curst prison, chief," Morte shook his head, "The city is on the edge of Carceri... once they put 'em in this hole they sure as hell do everything they can to keep them here."

"How many guards, Annah?"

"Enough ta paint yeh red from eyes t' arse ten times o'er, I'd say," she scoffed, "Unless yeh have somethin' new in yer bag o' tricks."

"You know, I might just have that."

Annah explained the layout. The entire complex was just a pair of long tunnels flanked with small alcoves dug out by miners long ago. It was there that the dozens of guards squirreled themselves. A barred-off branch lay off to the far north, but the entrance to the prison proper arced to the west. If we were going to start somewhere, we might as well storm the prison.

It was almost insulting how easy it was. Once you claw your way through the black-barbed maze of an ancient night hag, flesh and steel are as much a barrier as a screen of beads.

Just brush 'em aside.

Men fell to spell and blade. Limb flew apart in wet bursts and scraps of armor scattered along the stone floor like fallen leaves. Mentally I screened out the screams, the blood, the waste. Few were innocent in Curst, and I was glad for that. It saved me the trouble of having to sift through the

bodies of sinners and count the saints.

One-eyed, white-haired, long scar from temple to cheek. Knife to the throat.

Moldy-mouthed and black-toothed, lips flecked with foam. Decapitation.

Twelve thugs in the armor of city guards. Impaled with blades of ice.

The stragglers scuttled away, terror fueling their flight. Metal boots slipped on icy ground and hands grasped at whatever support stood close by: a frost-coated wall, a crystalline spike stained with blood, impaled corpses still twitching like grim fruit sprouting from those branches of cold glass.

My breath misted out in front of me as I wove laces of unbeing. In battle the world slipped away, purpose the only thing guiding my limbs. When the clangor of fighting died down, the shrill cry of the prison alarm began to sound like a chorus heralding our coming.

The last of them fell, twitching under a blade of karach. He was spitting, growling curses too filthy to name, and Dak'kon silenced him with a quick, merciful twist of the blade.

Entering a prison was always the easy part, I figured.

Prison bars blocked the portal, each heavily thorned and gray-white like bone. I gripped the smooth middle of one, gave it a tug. It rattled in my grip, but not by much.

"Any idea how to open this, Annah?"

"T'chah. Stand aside."

Five minutes of probing, twisting, and clicking later, we were in.

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For the first time in my life, I knew serenity.

A tender light filled the grimy chamber with the softness of quiet afternoons and warm sunrises. Motes of dust danced along those rays. There, on the bier, was the deva: a being with skin of the purest ivory and hair of blinding

white. His wings were charred, the feathers destroyed, yet he still radiated peace and love. He stood as if in meditation, taking no notice of our presence, holding his arms out to either side. Chains held his forearms tightly, attached to the dais on which he stood.

"I've been looking for you, deva."

He raised his head and rested his gaze upon me. His voice was pure and melodic, "What is it you wish of me, mortal? Speak your mind and leave me to my memories of paradise." Immediately his face tightened and changed into a frown.

His gaze turned to Morte. "The stench of Baator lies thick about you, skull."

"You don't smell any better. When was the last time you bathed?"

"A deva... yet those chains do not seem to bind him so much as smother his mind..." Grace breathed.

"The chains do not hold him. Belief chains him," Dak'kon murmured.

He looked back to me with a stern countenance, "You keep foul company, mortal... but ask your questions of me, and leave me to my memories of paradise."

"Who are you?"

"I am Trias the Condemned, Trias the Wounded, Elysium's lost child, a general of the Hosts of the Upper Planes," a shadow passed over his face as he became lost in his own thoughts. "Never again shall I see the Upper Planes, I fear, the ordered beauty of Arcadia, the vistas of Elysium, the Seven Mounts of Mount Celestia... all the ugliness contained in these Lower Planes is effaced there, where it is truly possible to believe in redemption. Too many look only to the Lower Planes for their inspiration and aid, I fear..."

"I have heard rumors of a plague that emerged when they opened this prison. Are you at the heart of this?"

The soft rebuke rang clear in his voice, "It is their own doing. In forging these chains for me to wear, they tempered the links with bitterness and betrayal. Their short-sightedness has been their downfall; had they heeded my

warnings, this would not have happened." A great sadness filled his eyes.
"My heart pities them."

"How did you get here?"

"Betrayed, in the town known for betrayals. I thought I could spark the light of goodness here, set a few souls free of the traps they created for themselves. Instead, I found myself ensnared, quite against my will, by my former cohorts, bound up in this lightless bubble beneath the earth." He looked to me then, his eyes pale and white, "You are not from these accursed lands, mortal. Why have you come here?"

"Ravel the hag told me to seek you."

"Ravel... Ravel..." the name echoed throughout the chamber, and I shuddered. Dead she might be, but part of me was still afraid that her spirit might answer the call, "Her name strikes sparks in my memory, but... no, it is gone. These chains are like the murky waters of the Styx - the longer they remain, the less I remember. Should I be freed, I could answer your questions to your satisfaction."

"What can you tell me of those chains?"

"These chains are of such a make that they bind me without binding. They drown memories, slowing holding them beneath a stagnant river so that my knowledge slips and ebbs. I cannot break them with my strength... only an immortal divine force, an act of justice and mercy may shatter them."

Dak'kon was right. Belief chains him.

"How can you be freed, then?"

"An act of kindness done to me shall set me free. My sword - my soul - is an agent of such kindness. Fetch the blade for me and strike my chains off. It is kept somewhere in this prison, in a locked and guarded chamber. I know the combination to the entrance." He spoke three arcane syllables that burned into my memory. "Free me, and I should be... in your debt. Perhaps I can aid you in what you seek."

"You know of what I seek?"

Trias smiled, sadly. "No. But you wear the marks of it upon your face and carry it within your heart. Should these chains be lifted from me... then I should be able to divine your purpose more deeply, guide you more truly. Until then..." The deva shrugged. "Until then I cannot even give you the benefit of good advice. These chains smother memory and instinct."

Chapter 99

The gate that the deva directed me to was held in place by massive locks and barbs. Annah studied the mechanism for a minute, stood, then shook her head.

"'Tis locked by magic rather than gearwork. I cannae get past it," she grumbled sourly.

That was no problem. I spoke the three syllables that Trias gave me. At the first the gate creaked and groaned. The metal barbs twisted and pulled on the second, and on the third, the gates sprung open.

The guard on the other side blinked at seeing us. "What in the Nine Hells are you doing down here?" he growled, "Are you the berks that've been settin' off the alarms?"

"The deva sent me," I shrugged.

He smiled, "You'll be joining the celestial choir soon enough, berk."

They were dealt with quickly.

We walked down halls devoid of hope, where desperation and isolation drove men mad. They reached out from between the bars with unwashed hands, screaming obscenities. The hallway was a gauntlet of curses and screams. A faint fecal stench was in the air, and my head swam with nausea at the stink of human bodies. The ranks of prison guards broke against us in waves. Even though we were soaked in the blood of their companions they

fought with a cornered desperation as we continued deeper into the prison.

The screams died down in the bowels of this rotting cage, as cells became occupied with dried husks of men: some still lived in catatonic fugues. Others were more fortunate, and they lay in bloated repose, a fine nesting place for flies and maggots when they weren't whittled away to bone by time's blade.

The worst of the traitors were housed here, and a couple of fresh new faces gave cold greetings through the bars.

"Dog!" Siabha spat at my feet, "You dare poison my life with your presence again when your false words imprisoned me here! Traitor! I hope the Styx swallows you and spits your bleached bones on the shore, that they might be whittled into flutes for an army of dung-eaters!"

An'izius glared bitterly at me and said nothing. He merely spat on the ground at my passing and turned away.

We finally reached the heart of this monstrosity, and the grandiosity of it was somewhat spoiled by the assorted crates piled up against the walls and old ore carts left to rust. Once this might've been the inner sanctum of a neat, organized prison. Now it was just a storeroom that housed a big pile of crap, though there was one exception.

A curved silver blade hung in the air at the center of a platform, its edges lined with runes that hummed with power. It cast motes of light as it spun, suspended in the air with the sad beauty of a caged bird. If there was anything else in the planes that carried the same perverse wrongness of seeing this celestial blade bound and locked away like a trophy, I've yet to see it. A moment's admiration and disgust, and I began to reach out for it.

It was then that a grossly corpulent man, with folds of fat oozing every which way, sidled up to us. His eye slowly turned, and when it landed on me I stopped, suddenly hit with a feeling of unspeakable danger. "I hold the true essence of the sword. What you see there is a shallow shell. The blade is in me. You must defeat me to reach it."

"Who are you?"

His deep voice rolled out from the layers of fat. "My name is Cassius. I was

the greatest weapon of a dead Abyssal Lord, and his heirs seek me yet. I am a dread secret in the heart of the chaotic planes, and I am the guard of this blade."

"You were a weapon?"

"I was once the most effective weapon in all the Abyss, shaped to my master's will. I could take the form of any creature's doom. I have slain more foes of my dead lord than most have moments in their lives. My brother, my pale shadow, my Xekiel, slays still in the depths of the Abyss."

"Why did you leave?"

"My master sank into the heart of the Abyss while I was out a-slaying. When I returned from the assassination, he was gone and his heirs came baying to claim me. None of them could tame me, and so I left. This duty is pleasant. Those who come - I slay. It is not an onerous task."

"I have come for the blade." I was wrong. An abyssal weapon guarding a celestial one... irony abounds in the Planes.

His voice was cavernously deep. "This sword powers the Prison of Curst. Its removal shall free all the prisoners condemned to be forgotten. I am charged to prevent this from happening. Do you wish the blade?"

"Yes."

"Then these are the rules. You must choose between three options: Strength, wits, or speed. Should you fail at any of these, I shall destroy you."

"I choose wits."

"Then I shall ask you three riddles. Should you fail, I will destroy you and fashion pipes from your skull, and play a song of torment on your spirit for eternity."

"Very well. Ask your riddles."

"We begin with a classic riddle: What walks on four legs at dawn, two legs at noon, and three at dusk?"

This was easy. "A human, who crawls on all fours at birth, walks on two legs during youth, and leans on a cane during old age."

"That is correct. For the second riddle: I groan, but words never escape my lips. I may be empty, but never am I full. What am I?"

"Are you hunger?" I answered.

"Yes. The third riddle is this: What flies, and cannot stand still? What devours all it touches, yet eats nothing? What can never be lent, yet is always wasted? What is always spent, yet never earned?"

I knew the answer for this as well, "The answer is time."

"You have bested me. Your appearance led me to believe that your wits were a match for your scarred exterior. I have failed in my duty, and I yield the blade to you. I must depart this place."

"Thanks," I muttered as he burned away in an angry flame, leaving only a greasy black streak upon the floor. Celestial Fire hummed in my hands.

I'd ended one injustice. It was time to end another.

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"What need you, mortal?" Trias intoned, eyes closed as if trying to grip onto every ounce of self he possessed.

"I have your sword."

He looked shocked for a moment. "Celestial Fire? You have recovered my blade? Will you free me? Then strike a blow against the chain!"

I held the blade awkwardly in my hands for a moment, balanced on the edge of indecision. Something felt wrong about wielding something so otherworldly: it would've been like swinging a piece of art, or dulling a ritual blade against a rock. I hefted the unease aside on one hand and squelched that giddy, primordial sense of mischief that craved destruction on the other. I did this because it was right.

The chains sundered easily under the blade, and the sound of a thunderclap

resonated between my ears. I tumbled from the dais, the blade slipping from my grasp. I was dimly aware of the line of whirling light, the blade spinning from me, and snatched by the hand of its master. With that my vision swam with opalescent light. I must've caught myself instinctively, because when my senses returned to me I was propped up on my elbows and looking up to the deva, who unfurled his charred wings, bare bone slashing the air.

"I thank you for freeing me. I owe you much." Trias breathed. His voice was beginning to take on a sense of clarity, like a man finally awake and about, freed from his sickbed. His eyes were alight with recognition, looking about his surroundings. "I remember now... the lost souls I had tried to redeem. The traitors, bitter, the condemned... whether or not they deserve their condemnation. Such battles to be fought..."

Fall-from-Grace broke in suddenly. "You refer to the Blood War then, Lord Trias? What are your thoughts?"

"You are perceptive, tanar'ri." His eyes flashed lightning. Whether he was displeased at the uncomfortable topic broached or that he was speaking to a member of a species so ideologically opposed to his own, I wasn't sure. "The hosts have let their hearts falter, for they dare not confront the fiends directly. Where is their spirit, their love of purity? My lords direct the war from afar, manipulating the fiends into costly battles with one another, giving them weapons and filling their minds with the knowledge of how to hurt each other more effectively so that they might not look up and see our golden fields."

"How can this be changed?" I asked, brushing myself off.

Trias settled back, though his charred wings rustled slightly. "There are ways to change even the minds of immortal generals, mortal. Someday, they shall see, of that I have no doubt."

I glanced up at him, "If I may ask, how did your wings get burnt?"

"It was part of the grand betrayal of this city - they seared my wings as they manacled me, that I might not flee them even through the earth. It is the nature of this place that things of beauty are not tolerated." He stretched his limbs and sheathed his blade, "The people of this town - traitors all - know nothing of truth and beauty. They cannot tolerate it. They lured me

here and chained me. Mortals do not possess the perspective that allows them to grow the strength of character to rise above desires, as I sought to teach them."

"I disagree, Lord Trias. You simply had an overabundance of trust in your spirit for them," Grace rebutted.

A sneer twisted his beautiful face. "Surely, mistress tanar'ri, you don't believe that mortals can ever gain that perspective? Not when you are what you are - your very nature cries out to subdue any chance mortals might have to rise above their base instincts." He turned away from Grace, "Now what would you ask of me, mortal? I'm afraid I can offer little in the way of boons. Do you seek power over the minds of your fellow mortals? Do you hope for wishes to be granted? Do you want wealth? Do you seek more souls to torment?"

"I seek knowledge, not power or wealth."

"Then speak your desire."

I stood, looking up at him, "My mortality has been stolen from me. I wish to reclaim it."

"You speak foolishness," Trias waved a dismissive hand, "Yet... there is one who might be able to help you with what you seek. It is a fiend, named Fhjull Forked-Tongue. He shall aid you." The deva's lips quirked in a small smile. "He is under an obligation to do charity."

"How do I reach him?"

"There lies a portal to the north of this prison. Its key is a broken chain link." He looked meaningfully at the shattered links around his feet, stooped, and plucked one up and pressed it into my hand. "An appropriate key for one who seeks to leave Curst."

"My thanks. Farewell."

"Farewell, mortal. I have... business... to attend to." He looked meaningfully at the ceiling of his prison, and leapt into the earth above him like a diver into an ocean, leaving behind only motes of starlight.



## Chapter 100

The northern tunnels were ancient, the shoring crumbling at the edges. Any moment the place could've caved in on us, and we had to step carefully, checking the integrity of the walls frequently. A knock on stone here, a prod of a beam there. When we did pause I tried to focus, sifting through the bog of forgotten thoughts in an attempt to conjure up some familiarity. Nothing. If I had been a miner in a previous life, it didn't seem like I picked up much. Pity, that. It would've been useful, if only to prevent myself from being trapped for a few centuries under a mass of rubble.

Even the roaches didn't dare come this deep. Anything living had abandoned this place. Anything dead had long ago withered into dust. Even the drip of water, so faint and rhythmic in the higher tunnels, was gone from here. Our footsteps were grave and lonely such that even Morte shut up by now. It was like walking through the hollow of a dry old bone, the marrow cored out long ago so that not a scrap of flesh remained.

"Still nothing, Nordom?" I asked, breaking the silence so suddenly that Annah jumped.

"Negatory," he chirped in that sexless drone, "No portals detected. Confidence interval at 99.9998205%."

"Three significant digits is enough, Nordom."

"Affirmative!"

Well, at least someone was cheerful doing his work.

We had stopped at an intersection when something snagged at my consciousness like a barbed hook.

Was there an instability in the walls I had noticed? A weak support beam? I paused for a moment, head tilted and trying to listen to the echo of memory. No... it was something deeper than that. More primal, akin to the animalistic fear of the dark and the terror of predators in the night.

There's nothing to be afraid of... I told myself. There were no signs of life, and decades of dust coated the ground... not even the undead would leave a

trail so unmarred.

But still that familiarity dug deep, an insistent buzz that deep down this passage, danger lurked.

Well, I never had a sense of self-preservation.

The moment I passed through the arch I could smell it, the stagnant musk of old magic crumbling with age. The walls of the chamber were unusually smooth, as if hewn by an unnatural force. Yes, there was enchantment here, ancient wards that seemed to be binding something tight. I probed a little, feeling for the little threads, and each spiraled into the center like cobwebs.

It was there in the center of the chamber that it stood: a towering, empty suit of armor - but the plates were suspended in space as if secured over an invisible frame. Red veins ran across the length of the metal greaves, and a huge, double-edged executioner's axe rested in its hand. Engravings decorated the surface of the armor, the most prominent of which was a crimson serpent with its wings outspread.

Morte hissed at the sight of that crest.

The armor was archaic and the shoulder blades were just that - a great ridge of blades sprouting from the shoulder plates. I almost would have taken the ridged blades as decoration, but they looked too heavy and dangerous to be anything more than an additional weapon on an already menacing suit of armor. The armor itself bore dents and other marks of battle and its surface has been scarred by age and rust. It seemed to carry those pits and gouges as marks of pride, like a thug whose skin was crisscrossed with his past.

I stepped forward and took a closer look at the battle axe. It was reminiscent of an executioner's weapon; the head had been forged into the likeness of a blood-red serpent with its wings outspread, the outstretched wings curling to become the edges of the axe. The axe itself was huge; even wielded two-handed it would require tremendous strength to use effectively. Yet it rested in the disembodied gauntlet of the armor almost casually.

I looked up. The helm resembled the skull of some creature; curved metal teeth lined the bottom edge of the faceplate, hanging down over empty space. The helm rested in the air, its interior hidden in shadow.

I felt the beginnings of a memory stirring....

"Vhailor...?"

The name spilled from my lips in a shock. It was the barest whisper, but it echoed strangely in the chamber. I had no idea where the name came from, but I knew it belonged to the armor. The air stirred, just enough to send a crawling sensation swimming through my skull and a knot to tighten in my heart.

I opened myself to the memories and they rose like a miasma bubbling up from the bottom of a swamp. As I stared upon the suit of armor the shadows beneath the visor took shape... coalescing into the features of a powerful, ebony-skinned man. His eyes were like fires, and he bore numerous scars... was this 'Vhailor,' when he wore flesh? He seemed hauntingly familiar... both as a suit of armor AND as a flesh and blood human.

"Chief- maybe this isn't-"

Morte started to interject, but I needed to know-

"Vhailor..." I murmured, placing a hand on the chest plate, "Awaken."

A flare of brilliant red light from beneath the helm burst like a sickly crimson dawn, lancing out to almost blinding intensity; I shielded my eyes from the glare - when I uncovered them, two embers burned within the shadows of the helm.

"I have AWAKENED."

The voice was spectral, hollow, and echoed within the suit of armor. It was not a human voice... more like a presence, force. It didn't sound like anything alive... or like anything that ever lived.

"Who are you?" I murmured.

"I am VHAILOR."

"What are you?"

"I am a MERCYKILLER."

As Vhailor pronounced the word 'Mercykiller,' Annah and Morte stiffened. Even Dak'kon and Grace pulled back a step.

"Mercykiller?" I knew of these. They were the grim, dark-armored executioners of Sigil, but I had always thought it a title. Vhailor pronounced it with a weight that was more than that: it carried a cold sense of purpose, direct and keen as a blade.

"Mercykillers serve JUSTICE. Justice PURGES evil. When ALL have been cleansed, the multiverse achieves PERFECTION."

"Why are you called 'Mercykillers?'"

"Mercy is a shield used by the WEAK. Mercy is WEAKNESS. Mercy is DEATH. NO ONE is innocent. Mercykillers slay mercy and its WHORES wherever their plague has carried them."

"I disagree," I said shaking my head, "Mercy is strength - and there are times when even justice can be unjust, especially when carried to the extreme."

"Chief... if you want to keep breathing, please don't contradict the Red Death," Morte said in a whisper.

Vhailor dismissed my words and stared down at me, "MERCY eats at the heart of JUSTICE. NO ONE that lives is INNOCENT."

"How long were you imprisoned?"

"Time FLED as I lay imprisoned. Time bears no MEANING. Only JUSTICE."

"Do you know why you came to Curst?"

"Much is lost of my journey. I traveled in search of BETRAYERS. They found me and imprisoned me. An act of TREACHERY."

"What betrayers?"

"Curst is a CITY of BETRAYERS. It is a city that defies JUSTICE. I came to CLEANSE it."

"How were you imprisoned?"

Vhailor was silent for a moment. The embers in his eyes flickered.

"Vhailor? Do you recall how they imprisoned you?"

"I do not KNOW."

A crawling sensation ran up the back of my skull then, and I realized something was wrong. Vhailor didn't realize that he was dead. I held my tongue on this... if this was revealed, it could be dangerous.

I quickly changed the topic. "You say you serve justice, Vhailor. How?"

"JUSTICE uses Mercykillers as her EYES. JUSTICE uses Mercykillers to dispense her WILL. When SENTENCE is passed, she LENDS us her STRENGTH."

"Strength? How?"

"The STRENGTH of JUSTICE depends on the harm the INJUSTICE has caused."

"So... the greater the injustice - the greater the crime - the more strength 'justice' lends you?"

"When the INJUSTICE is great enough, JUSTICE will lend me the STRENGTH needed to CORRECT it. NONE may stand against it. It will SHATTER every barrier, SUNDER any shield, TEAR through any ENCHANMENT, and lend its servant the POWER to PASS SENTENCE."

As Vhailor intoned the words a crawling sensation passed through my body - so strong it made me shiver. I had heard these words before, and I knew them to be true.

This could prove useful. "Can you teach me how to use an axe as you do, Vhailor?"

"There is nothing I can teach you. It is not the HAND that wields a weapon. It is the WILL."

"What do you mean?" I asked. It sounded so close to what Dak'kon had taught me. Indeed, Dak'kon gave a respectful nod at Vhailor's words.

"When the WILL is strong, the BLADE is strong. When the cause is JUST, the blade strikes TRUE. When MERCY eats at the heart, DOUBT, HESITATION, COMPASSION follow. The blade becomes as DUST."

"My will is strong, Vhailor. My conviction lends my blade strength."

Vhailor's ember eyes fell upon me. A heavy silence hung in the air as he weighed me.

"Your WILL is strong. Your DISCIPLINE is strong. Your WILL is the will of LAW."

"Then how do -?"

"KNOW THIS: There is nothing on ALL the PLANES that can STAY the hand of JUSTICE when it is brought against them. It may unmake ARMIES. It may sunder the thrones of GODS. Know that for all who BETRAY justice, I am their FATE. And fate carries an EXECUTIONER'S AXE."

"I see."

"NO, you do NOT see." Vhailor's eyes burned like two torches in the shadows of his helm. "PRAY you never WILL."

"Then teach me, Vhailor."

"Open your eyes to me, and you shall SEE the PLANES through the eyes of JUSTICE."

"Very well... show me what you see."

I gazed into Vhailor's eyes, and the twin fires suddenly FLARED...

"Wh..."

The fanatical zeal crashed against me like a wall of iron: a cold direction of purpose and loveless law distilled into its purest form. For a moment we were linked, my vision to his. Where Dak'kon's mind was like a well-forged

blade, disciplined will tempered by the fires of knowledge, Vhailor's was pure, brute force: unthinking, unbending, a massive boulder crushing everything in its path. The flare blinded me and when I opened my eyes everything seemed to carry an EDGE to it, as if reality had gained an extra angle. I could feel the smallest flaws in the threads of existence, see the weight of imperfection in every shadow.

It was as if I could somehow CLEAVE every object I saw just by looking at it. There was no remorse, kindness, love, or even hate... just monolithic purpose.

"Vhailor... is this...?"

"SEE all things. SEE their strength. SEE their WEAKNESS. JUDGE all things. If MERCY has eaten their hearts, they will FALL beneath JUSTICE. Your WILL gives you the RIGHT. Your DISCIPLINE gives you the RIGHT."

I felt sick.

I shook off the residue of what he shared with me. No, I couldn't harden myself as he did.

"Power doesn't grant us any right to judge, Vhailor," deep breaths now... "It is the knowing of who we and others are that does. You're mistaking strength for law."

"JUSTICE sees through my eyes. The EYES of a MERCYKILLER can see the CRACKS of WEAKNESS, the FRAILTIES, the wounds of MERCY upon the HEART. In SEEING, I KNOW the guilty. he rumbled coldly, I KNOW their FEAR."

"You claim to be the avatar of justice, Vhailor, but what do you know of it?"

"All I see is JUDGED. I may look at the heart and mind of another and KNOW them. The eye of JUSTICE sees through ME." He pointed his axe to Morte - "The skull knows MUCH. Yet it knows NOTHING of justice. Many with hearts like the skull's now lie within PRISONS and GRAVES."

Morte yelped, then floated to hide behind me.

He looked to Nordom. "The MODRON is of no consequence. It can DEFINE

justice, but it does not UNDERSTAND it. It is not satisfactory. But it is ENOUGH."

He turned to Grace. "TANAR'RI are BORN from chaos. They care NOTHING for JUSTICE. The SUCCUBUS knows of JUSTICE, but she has TURNED from it. MERCY has POISONED her heart."

"Stop this, Vhailor!"

But Grace stood proud and spoke calmly, "I know of justice, Vhailor. I temper it with experience and wisdom, and when justice is tempered with those two truths, it becomes stronger. I know of mercy and forgiveness as well, for without them, the Planes would be a much crueler place."

Vhailor's eyes flared. "MERCY eats at the HEART of JUSTICE. MERCY devours all that is PERFECTION. COMPASSION and FORGIVENESS are MERCY'S POISONS."

"No, Vhailor they are not," Grace continued, as if she were debating over a cup of tea, "They are instruments by which another soul may be redeemed, elevated and strengthened. In so doing, the multiverse is strengthened. Therein lies the perfection you speak of."

"You are WEAK, SUCCUBUS. You are as WEAK as all your KIND. Where your KIND seduces with the FLESH, MERCY has SEDUCED you. You are MERCY'S WHORE. You are NOTHING."

Fall-From-Grace drew herself up at this. "Am I, Vhailor? Then judge me with your sight, see if you find me wanting. See if you can find the weakness that you claim eats at me."

Vhailor's eyes flared as he stared at Fall-From-Grace, the two embers burning like torches. Fall-From-Grace met his gaze steadily, her eyes crystal and determined.

"The ROOTS of WEAKNESS are there. You BELIEVE yourself STRONG, but MERCY will feed upon the roots. It will DEVOUR your WILL." Vhailor paused for a moment, and his next words fell like a hammer. "Yet... OTHER weaknesses do you HOLD in your HEART, SUCCUBUS. That is what MY eyes see. You CARE. In CARING, you have become WEAK."



"On that point, we are divided, Vhailor."

For a moment I thought that would be the end of it, but Vhailor was silent for only a moment before he faced Dak'kon. "This githzerai's heart lacks the PREJUDICE that poisons his KIND. Yet he exists in CONFLICT with himself, for his WORD is his WILL and his LAW. Where the githzerai thrive in chaos, this one suffers."

"Prejudices? What do you mean?"

"The githzerai race burns with PREJUDICE. There is no place for PREJUDICE in JUSTICE'S eyes."

"What prejudices?"

"By its nature, prejudice TAINTS justice. Githzerai are prejudiced against the githyanki, their racial cousins, and the illithids, who were the OWNERS of the gith peoples. Hatred for BOTH the githyanki and illithids burns in the githzerai heart."

"Prejudice taints justice, eh?" I looked to Grace, who still stood confidently before Vhailor. Her features were smooth, but there was a hardness to her now. She was wary. "And what of what you said about Fall-from-Grace?"

"My words did NOT stem from prejudice. They stem from OBSERVATION and REMEMBRANCE."

Annah stepped back when Vhailor's cold gaze fell on her. Her fingers twitched, itching to unsheathe her punch-daggers, but it was never wise to bare steel in front of a Mercykiller. "The tiefling is TAINTED by the Lower Planes. Her blood leaves no ROOM for loyalty to JUSTICE. She understands JUSTICE, but she IGNORES it." Vhailor's eyes flared to torches. "She will not IGNORE ME."

Annah's eyes narrowed. "Yeh best be keepin' yer blind eye off me, spirit! I'll have no dealin's with yeh, so I won't."

Vhailor's eyes took on a blood-red light. "Tiefling, ANSWER me: Have you ever committed an INJUSTICE?"

As Vhailor's eyes fell upon Annah, she flinched, as if burned. "Nay, spirit, and

yeh've no business a-questionin' me, yeh don't."

"JUSTICE gives me the RIGHT."

"Aye? An' what justice might THAT be?! Yer justice is not MY justice -- it's as hollow as yer suit o' armor! Yeh make yer OWN justice which yeh blindly ignore when it comes tae judgin' yourself!"

"Mercykillers ARE justice. Our actions are ABOVE question, TIEFLING."

"Oh, aye?" the heat in her voice grew, "Well, yeh and yer Mercykillers swung many o' me friends from the leafless tree in the name o' justice when the inclination struck yeh! Burn in Baator's fires, yeh cursed half-dead thing, and may the Powers water on yeh fer good measure! I wish yer armor ta be dropped into the Foundry's vats an' melted down so that not a plate remains!"

"For the LAST time, tiefling, have you ever committed an injustice? REFUSAL to answer is an admission of GUILT."

Annah looked desperate. "Nay, so I haven't. Now leave me be, damn yeh!"

"You have REFUSED to answer to JUSTICE. I will PUNISH you."

"No, Vhailor, you won't," I stepped between them, "You have no right."

"JUSTICE gives me the RIGHT. Guilt CLOAKS her like a second skin."

"Stop your questioning, Vhailor." Fall-From-Grace's words were spoken without the slightest hint of a threat, but somehow, they felt dangerous. "This is not a court, and you will not place her on trial in my presence. Leave her alone."

"She WILL be JUDGED."

"To do so, Vhailor, you must go through me," Grace's wings unfurled, "I will not allow her to be harmed."

"All that stand in the PATH of JUSTICE shall be SENTENCED. You have EARNED your fate, SUCCUBUS."

"I won't let you harm either of them," I answered. Dak'kon unsheathed his blade silently. Morte's jaw chittered in anticipation, or perhaps it was fear.

It looked like we were about to see what happens when an immortal being meets an unstoppable force.

## Chapter 101

Vhailor hefted his axe towards me, "So the whore that is MERCY shows itself. WEAKNESS has poisoned your heart."

"Mercy is not weakness, Vhailor, nor is it incompatible with justice," I challenged him, "How well have you served the greater good by abandoning it? What do you see when you look at yourself?"

"I am VHAILOR. I am a MERCYKILLER. My ACTIONS speak my heart."

"That's not what I asked."

A heavy silence stifled the air... but Vhailor didn't break it. His ember eyes matched my gaze without a flicker.

"I asked what do you see when you look at yourself. What do you see when you judge yourself, Vhailor?"

"I do not JUDGE myself. I am a MERCYKILLER. My ACTIONS speak my HEART. My WILL is JUSTICE'S WILL."

"So you're beyond justice?"

"I SERVE justice. I am never BEYOND justice. NOTHING is beyond JUSTICE."

"Then take a look at yourself, Vhailor. What do the eyes of justice see when it looks at its servant?"

The embers in Vhailor's eyes suddenly went black, and there was a terrible silence in the air.

Just when I was beginning to wonder if Vhailor's eyes would re-light, there was a FLARE, and I was forced to shield my eyes.

"Vhailor..."

"I am VHAILOR. I am a MERCYKILLER. My ACTIONS speak my HEART. I am JUSTICE'S SERVANT."

"But... Vhailor, what did you SEE when you looked inward?"

His voice grew into a roar, "I AM NOT FOUND WANTING. WHERE MERCY LIVES, I SHALL KILL IT. WHERE COMPASSION POISONS THE HEART, I SHALL BLEED IT FROM ITS VICTIM. WHERE LIARS AND BETRAYERS OF TRUTH FOSTER LIES, I SHALL ANSWER THEIR LIES WITH JUSTICE'S BLADE."

"But what I asked was..."

"WHO ARE YOU TO QUESTION A SERVANT OF JUSTICE? YOU ARE NOTHING. YOU ARE A SHELL. I WILL NOW SEARCH YOUR HEART. WE SHALL SEE IF YOU ARE FOUND WANTING."

"But..."

Vhailor's burning red eyes fell upon me, tearing at my skin, blistering it, then peeling it back - but there was no pain, just a wash of dizziness and a sense of drowning. My head snapped back, and a familiar electrical tingle ran through my scalp...

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I run the checklist through my head to make sure everything is in order. It's a short list... I have a much larger body of random contingencies to execute if things go wrong. If I'd learned anything in all these years, it's that the best-laid plans go out the window the moment they're executed.

A temporary setback, I remind myself, and not for the first nor last time I chastise myself for going too far. It was necessary, of course. It always is. If I had been a bit more careful however, they wouldn't have had to chase me

out of Sigil. Ah well. Just wait a generation gathering information in the Outlands and even the Harmonium and the Mercykillers would forget. Time and patience were often keener weapons than a Doomguard's blade.

And how powerful a weapon do I wield, if I have all the time in the multiverse?

The slow, rhythmic clank of armor echoes down the hall, heralding his approach.

He steps through the portal, glancing this way and that with the wariness of a hunter. Then his cold, piercing eyes direct their gaze at me, bloodshot with the labors of his tireless crusade. His ebony face is bedecked with scars, carving puckered flesh into a cruel scowl that terrified his prey into submission. Just watching him enter I could feel the force of his presence, as if reality were bending to the will of his judgment.

His armor gleams in the dull torchlight, and his face is locked in fury. He has come for me.

"You have found me, Vhailor. You have traveled a long way... I imagine it was not easy finding me."

"Justice led me to you. Where you walk, you leave a trail of SUFFERING." The man's voice rumbles, full of anger and fury and flesh and blood... he is dangerous, but still he is only a man, and I have defeated many such men. "I will see you brought before the Sigilian courts and punished. If you deny it, then SAY it, and I shall judge you."

I scoffed, "I deny it. Judge me... then I shall judge you."

"Judge ME?" Vhailor's eyes burn and he grips his axe tightly, the muscle cords in his neck and arm tightening as he begins to swing it, slowly, menacingly. "You have no RIGHT to judge me."

"Yes, I have, Vhailor, for I know your heart - and my power gives me the right to judge you. But I shall not judge you now: You must rest within this cage until the day I can set you free to walk the Planes once more."

Vhailor turns from me, staring at the walls coldly. The wards are snapping into place, rooting him to the spot.

"I eluded you up to this point, Vhailor... why do you think I agreed to meet you here? Did you think I was surrendering? Or wished to fight you? No... this is the gate town of Carceri, Vhailor. Even Gods are held prisoner there. You are powerful, Vhailor, but the energies of this place allow even the mightiest to be caged here."

Vhailor turns, but some of the fire has died in his eyes. "This is treachery."

"Treachery runs through this place like veins, and it is that treachery that lends me the strength for this enchantment - that is why I was forced to meet you here in Curst. I can leave this cell, Vhailor, but until I come for you, you cannot. Your crusade for justice is truly remarkable, but it will be forgotten, and perhaps in time - even justice will forget you."

"You go beyond denying yourself justice, but you are denying my crusade..." his voice is cold as steel.

"I know of your mission. But that will have to wait until I am done with my mission, and this is the second time you have found me and attempted to judge me. I will not allow it to happen a third time."

Vhailor says nothing - never has something sounded so FINAL. It is a terrible judgment on him, a judgment that carries no justice at all.

"I am immortal, Vhailor - but you are a... strange one. Justice has touched you, and that justice may be more powerful than whatever it is that sustains me. Still, take heart: I do not wish you to die... perhaps one day I will have need of someone who has the power to kill me. So here you will remain until I come for you."

I give him a friendly smile and walk past. He strains to turn his head, the bones of his neck creaking as he watches his quarry leave out from the corner of his eye. His jagged teeth are bared, his breath strained as he huffs through his flared nostrils. Vhailor bites his lip, and blood intermingles with the foam that flecks the corner of his mouth.

My footsteps are soft against the bare stone. They had deemed these shafts too dangerous to explore just last week. A word with the foreman, a little gold pressed into his palm, and he would happily board up the entrance. I hum a merry tune to drown out Vhailor's roars of fury fading behind me.

~~~~~

The memory blackened, running into darkness, and suddenly, I was facing the spectral Vhailor again, his armored visage empty of flesh - only the burning embers. I had dragged myself back from a span of many years. So many years, enough for a man to die many deaths. Or perhaps just one.

"Vhailor...?"

"You shall be JUDGED."

Vhailor's burning gaze fell upon me along with a strange sense of detachment, almost as if I was stepping back outside of my body. There was a faint whisper, a crawling within my skull, and suddenly I knew that no matter what Vhailor claimed to see, he would only see what I WISHED him to see. Even the simplest of deceptions he had to accept - I was a closed book to him.

"Have you ever MURDERED another?"

"No," I lied, even as I recalled the kindly face of the linguist Fin Andlye.

"Have you ever committed INJUSTICE to another?"

"No," I said simply, and Deionarra's voice seemed to whisper in my ear.

"Have you ever WRONGED another?"

"No, I have not."

*Morte howls - howling in pain, screaming for someone to stop, to stop killing him... and my hand, lashing out, again and again and...*

*"Damn you, skull, you LIED to me. I'll THRUST YOU BACK IN THAT DAMNABLE PILLAR AND LEAVE YOU TO DIE-"*

"I swear to you, Vhailor."

*"Dak'kon, zerth of Shra'kt'lor-Drowning, last wielder of the karach blade, know that I have come to you with the words of Zerthimon, carved not in*

*chaos, but in stone, carved by the will in an Unbroken Circle."*

*Dak'kon's eyes flicker over the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon.*

*"Take it..."*

*Dak'kon's eyes turn from the stone and flicker over me, and he hisses again, throat too dry for a moment to muster the words. He blinks, slowly, then speaks, his voice barely above a whisper, but the words are what I wanted to hear. "My... life is yours... until yours is no more..."*

*"I have never harmed another..."*

*"Look into those flames, supplicant!" I snap, growling in his ear, "Raise your head, look!"*

*The boy is shuddering from the pain... tears blur his eyes as he raises his head to look into the fireplace. The flames cast his face in a red, gaunt glow...*

*"If that is what consumes you, enough for you to intrude upon my meditations, then I shall teach you of the shaping of flames, supplicant."*

*My hand lashes out again and clamps onto the boy's wrist. He howls as I drag him closer to the fireplace, then thrust his hands into the coals - there is a crackling, a hissing of burning flesh, and his screams - so terrible, yet-*

*"...not in all my lifetimes."*

*I hum a merry tune to drown out Vhailor's roars of fury fading behind me.*

*It took all I had not to vomit at the barrage of memories hammering my conscience.*

*Vhailor stared at me, his eyes burning brightly. I felt the same stare as before, the tearing and peeling back of the skin, as Vhailor seemed to dissect me. A wave of nausea swam through me, churning the bile in my stomach and turning my guts to water. I could feel myself drowning, in his gaze, deeper this time... until my vision almost faded to black...*

*"KNOW THIS: There is MUCH that CANNOT be seen in you. I shall WATCH*



you. You may not HIDE from punishments for CRIMES to come.”

"So we can leave?" I coughed, propping myself up on my hands and knees. When had I fallen? My head was swimming.

"NO. I have judged the guilty." Vhailor's eyes flared, and he raised his axe, his gaze searing Annah to the bone. She stepped back, the spit and vinegar now tepid and dull. "You have EARNED your fate."

He swung.

Too slow... I reached out, the weaves of magic slipping from my grasp as the heavy blade fell. Strong enough to cleave through flesh and bone as if it were butter, force great enough to sunder the barriers of treachery. He was fueled by a will that clung to this world to correct an injustice he couldn't name. So much power.

And I was too slow.

The crack of white-hot light, like burning metal, blinded me for an instant. A cold terror chilled me as my vision swam into focus. Would I still be able to pull Annah back and bind her spirit to her shell, I wondered, if the final judgment of a force like Vhailor was what killed her?

And then I saw it, the frail old warrior standing between justice and the condemned, karach blade trailing sparks in deflecting the axe.

Dak'kon.

Vhailor roared. "ALL THAT STAND IN THE PATH OF JUSTICE SHALL BE SENTENCED."

Dak'kon spared no words, and Annah backed off, giving room for the two to circle. Dak'kon danced from one step to another, his forms flowing and light. I recognized the stances: Thel'dekon's Pace, to dodge the heavy blows. Four Leaves Falling, the two-handed grip for parrying. The sharp song of his zerth blade played a harsh duet against the heavy slams of Vhailor's axe. Focused as he was, it was only a matter of time before he was overwhelmed. Even the sharpest sword couldn't protect one from the force of an avalanche.

Annah was circling, trying to find a weak spot. Grace was bolstering

Dak'kon's strength with spell after spell, until a nimbus of light shone from him. It wouldn't be enough, and I was still struggling, slowly, with the Art. It was a contest of Wills, and we needed every drop we could milk out.

"Nordom!" I called, "Nordom, listen! As Creative Director, I have some orders for you!"

"Status: Awaiting orders," he chirped, as if a behemoth wasn't breaking against our allies not ten paces away.

Vhailor's axe gouged deep wounds in the walls of his prison and splintered beams into twigs. Dak'kon was skilled, but each dodged blow, every axe swing deflected down an angle drained his stamina. Vhailor was tireless, his juggernaut strength beginning to overwhelm the Zerth.

"I order you to be MORE than you can be, Nordom," I gasped, feeling the power begin to flood back into my hands, "I order you to become stronger, faster and more focused than you've ever been. I KNOW you can do this, because I BELIEVE you can do this."

Nordom stared at me in silence. His crossbows had also fallen still.

"Now repeat the following words: 'I am a strong modron.' 'I am a fast modron.' 'I am a powerful modron.' 'My Creative Director believes in me.' 'I am focused for my Director.' Come on, repeat it!"

Nordom spoke, but his voice no longer carried the normal metallic wobble: It was flat. Focused. Emotionless. "I am a strong modron. I am a fast modron. I am a powerful modron. My Creative Director believes in me. I am focused for my Director."

With a mighty heft, Vhailor swung an overhead blow. With one hand on the hilt and the other on the dull side of the blade, Dak'kon blocked Vhailor's final judgment. The force of the strike brought the Zerth to one knee, the thought-honed edge gouged the axe blade an inch deep. Vhailor withdrew the weapon, his roar of retribution sending a rumble through my being.

Another overhead swing and the force of the blow hammered on Dak'kon's blade, down his arms, his spine, and through his leg. The strain was too much, and with a roar of pain his knee shattered against the stone floor. White slivers of bone splayed out like the thin roots of a tree. Dak'kon's

blood spurted from the shattered joint, and it took all his strength not to collapse.

Morte gnawed on one shoulder spike, but with a yelp he was thrown aside.

Annah had circled around by then and leaped on Vhailor's back with both daggers drawn, stabbing down on each shoulder blade. Where the wounds would've collapsed the lungs of a living being, on one such as Vhailor it was useless. He spun, the blades of his armor slashing Annah along her middle as a gauntleted fist cracked across her cheek. She was thrown back by the force, slamming into the wall where she slumped, silent and bleeding.

"Now FEEL those words, Nordom!" I demanded, and finally the bolts of force shot from my fingertips, shattering against Vhailor in hollow cracks, "BECOME stronger. BECOME faster. BECOME more powerful. Let that energy within you SURFACE and use it to make you NORDOM."

Nordom's eyes widened, and I could FEEL my words taking hold - a spark, just a spark of the energy inside of him... if I could coax it out... bring it to the surface...

"KILL," Vhailor roared.

Spears of frost blossomed in Vhailor's path. They slowed him, cracking against his armor. But each swing of the blade felled those blades of ice like wheat.

"Come on, Nordom... Strength! Speed! Power! Focus!"

"AFFIRMATORY." The pupils of Nordom's eyes suddenly klicked and became brilliant white dots, like tiny suns. His hands cranked, raised above his head in a curious flying motion, and then settled back to his sides... when they descended, Nordom seemed more... definite. Sharper to my senses, somehow. Something had changed.

"...Nordom?"

"ORDER PROCESSED." Nordom blinked, and suddenly the crossbows snapped forward. His voice was uncharacteristically deep, as if he were speaking from within a huge stove, and then it resumed its normal tone. "O-o-o-rder processed!"

Steam spurted shrilly from his vents.

WHEEEEEEEEE!!!

The bolts flew from Nordom's crossbows in a storm of missiles, three-pronged and barbed, designed for piercing armor. They peppered Vhailor's body, dressed him in dozens of quills that staggered him as my fire and lightning seared seared away. For a moment it seemed as if it would be enough. He crumpled, steaming with streaks of fire, crackled with electricity. Metal creaked and warped under the strain. Spiderweb cracks began to grow where the bolts had pierced.

But he stood, lumbering, shouldering aside the magics that raged against him. With one swing he knocked Nordom aside. With another I felt my bones sunder, stunned at the odd sensation of numbness as my severed arm flew aside, twitching on the ground. The momentum of the strike knocked me from my feet, and a deep-throated scream rumbled from my throat as I felt the axe fall again, cleaving through the joint of my other shoulder. A heavy boot kicked aside my other arm. Vhailor turned away, leaving me gurgling in agony as he made towards Grace.

"We're not finished, Vhailor..." I coughed. My boots scraped against the blood-slick floor as I tried to stand. It only served to nudge me towards the wall.

Grace knelt beside Dak'kon, hands on his knee. The warm light of her faith flooded around his leg. She looked up even as her lips murmured the prayer, features calm even as the avatar of justice stormed towards her.

"Vhailor, you lumbering abomination! I was your greatest prey, and I killed you long ago!"

That got his attention.

Vhailor stormed over to me, dragging me up by the sash of bone I wore. He stood me upright, slamming me against the wall with one hand. The blade of his axe was raised in the other. His gaze burned into mine silently.

"That's right, Vhailor. Your final crusade. You hounded me through the planes because of my crimes, because suffering trails in my wake like a jilted

lover... but I killed you an age long past. I can still kill you now." I coughed wetly. The blood from my useless stumps trickled warmly down my sides.

"You have hidden your GUILT well but you have no WEAPONS with which to SLAY ME."

"There are weapons more powerful than justice, Vhailor. The truth, for one..."

"YOU LIE."

"You died long ago," I spat in his face.

"LIAR. I LIVE."

"Then what happened to your body?" my leg twitched. My head rolled as my consciousness began to ebb. No, I needed to focus. Needed to talk.

"I LIVE. While those CONDEMNED still require PUNISHMENT, I LIVE."

"Do you FEEL alive, Vhailor? Remove your gauntlet, see if your eyes see skin," I chuckled, the weakness making me giddy, "Touch your axe to your arm - does it draw blood? And your eyes - they burn like fire, but can they shed tears? Your spirit remains, Vhailor, but you no longer live."

For a moment... just a moment, Vhailor's eyes flickered.

And then the bleeding stopped. The regeneration was kicking in. My wounds were beginning to knit, sluggishly. New blood began to pump in my veins, and my coarse voice grew in conviction. "Do you even RECALL what you once looked like past the armor, Vhailor? I do. You were once a man of flesh and blood, dark of skin, eyes like fires... numerous scars you bore on your flesh, and many were the justices that were committed in your name. But now that man is dead. And only the tormented shell remains."

"I... remember." Vhailor's eyes flickered, more erratic than before. His axe fell to his side. "The memory is... DIFFICULT to remember. There was a DEATH... and I have CHANGED. I am not that ONE any longer. What AM I?"

"I don't know, Vhailor. The man that was Vhailor is dead... you are something else, now."

"JUSTICE was my cause. The FLESH... the FLESH could not remain. Yet JUSTICE needed to be SERVED. There was the DEATH of flesh, but the WILL would not let go... there were MORE to be punished. ALWAYS more. JUSTICE... JUSTICE would not have been served by my DEATH."

"Then you are only LYING to yourself by thinking you live. You're DEAD, Vhailor. What JUSTICE is served when the servant of justice lies to itself?"

"CRIMINAL..." he rumbled, but it was only an echo of his once-formidable presence. "The GUILTY must be PUNISHED. I LIVE to bring RETRIBUTION to those that defile JUSTICE's name... the blade edged towards my neck."

"But you DID die, Vhailor, long ago. And now it's time to let go."

My words seemed to echo, gathering power as I spoke them. The truth rang like a gong, resonating between us both. The embers in Vhailor's eyes flickered - and then guttered out. His armor collapsed, the axe and the metal plates clattering to the ground with a crash. As they struck the earth, however, they rose - clouds of dust - ash and rust particles rising from the metal as the plates and axe aged, decayed, and disintegrated right before my eyes. All that remained were a few pitted metal plates as gravestones that Vhailor ever existed.

"Rest now, Vhailor," I murmured, slumping to the ground with a groan.

The adrenaline trickled away, and left agony in its wake. Cheek pressed against the stone I grunted, tried to breathe.

And then I felt it. The crack of stone. The growing tremors as the shoring of these tunnels began to buckle under the strain. The battle had left their mortal wounds on this abandoned mine shaft.

Dak'kon was limping towards me, Annah's body slung over his shoulder.

"We need to get out," I groaned, "The tunnels are collapsing. Can someone pick up my arms?"

"Portal detected!" Nordom chirped, my severed limbs flopping into his pack.

"About damn time," I grunted, "Which way?"

It took an effort to stand, and I stumbled down the hall with Grace supporting me. I could feel the chain link growing warm in my pocket, resonating in answer to the portal's call. And there it was, a bending of space, a twist of blue-white, and a long, broad desert opened out in front of us.

We stepped through, and the caverns behind us crumbled in a crash of stone.

## Interlude

"How dare he?" she snarls, slamming a gauntleted fist on the table, "How dare he?!"

The patrons around the Mercykiller withdraw, retreating into the press of bodies despite the stuffiness of the air, saturated with sweat and damp exhalations. The packed bar clutches the mass of body heat tight. Now and again a draft blows through shattered windows and open doors, and everyone breathes a little heavier, as if they could drink in the coolness.

Others wipe the sweat from their brows. Not you, however. No, you muse, it's the kind of happy warmth that would put you to sleep... one of those natural, comforting sedatives, like the laziness after a large meal or the melting embrace of a loved one's arms.

Still, you plink down a few coppers for a chilled wine punch. It's odd order on most nights as cold outside as this, but Shara Six-Blades had smiled behind the counter and coyly suggested that patrons buy what they could. The ice is sure to run low soon.

She's making a killing.

Ileron of Sen-Tau cocks his head, eyes flashing with cruel amusement. His lips press tight, as if holding back a stream of scathing words. But all that

escapes is a curious,

"Oh?"

"Vhailor was a hero. He is a hero," the Mercykiller pounds a spiked gauntlet into the table. Shara Six-Blades raises a disapproving eyebrow at the new gouges, but says nothing. "A bust of him stands proud in the entrance hall of the Prison. Many have made lone crusades into the lawless Outlands so that they might live as he did. No one knew what became of him when he vanished so many years ago, but we always believed he died seeking justice!"

Ileron rolls his head in a disturbing fashion, as if it were dislocated from his neck, "In a manner of speaking, he did."

"Vhailor's quarry fled him! Left him to die only to return and slay him again!"

"I know something of laws, girl," Ileron smiles, "I once held the finest courthouses in the multiverse and the wisest Chief Arbiters served justice in my squares. I have learned much in all my centuries holding them against my breast. Most importantly, that law and justice mean nothing."

"Sacrilege!"

"Do not think to debate me on matters of faith either. No, the Nameless One was right. Yes laws are made by men, and thus justice, too, is defined by men. But more than that, law is made by men who have power. Men who have been born to power or been given power by an electorate. Some have been raised to it, or stole it through cunning or force. Some just have the power to... walk away from it all, and leave such petty responsibilities behind." Ileron makes a show of kicking his legs in a small jig. "There is no transcendent wisdom to justice."

"Then why would people seek it? Why do the wronged crave retribution? Why do we nod at seeing the wicked suffer for their crimes?" Her words are rich with conviction, but her two companions shift uncomfortably in their rust-brown armor. You can see the doubt smoldering in their eyes, the threat of apostasy gripping their throats.

"Clearly because you are sadists."



"You are an abomination! I should bring retribution upon you now, and deliver you to the Powers you have fled from!"

Ileron's cold smile deepens, "It is the right of all beings to seek freedom, girl. You would bring me to justice, but at the price of murdering me and sending me to be enslaved once again. This is the inherent contradiction in you Mercykillers, that you commit such atrocious crimes to punish other atrocious crimes. The winged serpent you wear as an emblem is eating its own tail."

"Our cause transcends such petty concerns. It is the law itself that grants the power to execute criminals." She places a hand on the hilt of her blade, and Ileron has only to raise a hand to stop her.

"As I've said before you so rudely interrupted, justice stems from power. It becomes obvious then that just as there are many forms of power, there are many forms of justice. And I'm quite sure you've heard of mob justice."

The unnamed Mercykiller looks around her, at the unsheathed daggers and scarred fists, the brass knuckles that have been slipped on and the fingers traced through the air, leaving burning sparks of readied magic.

"A story..." she murmurs in an icy fury, "You condemn yourselves over a piking story."

"Go on then. I'm sure you can see you're no longer welcome here," Ileron gives her a mocking wave.

The three shoulder aside the bar patrons on their way to the door, armor spikes narrowly missing quite a few eyes.

Ileron taps his chin thoughtfully. "Hmm. She could prove to be quite troublesome."

"Have no worry, troublemaker," Shara says, passing out more cold beverages. "The Red Death has no jurisdiction over arrests in Sigil, only the Harmonium can do that. And I have bribed enough hardheads to know that they lack the single-mindedness of their twin bretheren."

"Hmm. I suppose even if that fails, I could claim to bear diplomatic immunity. I am the last legitimate representative of the Prime World of

Sen-Tau, after all."

"I was thinking of protecting my patrons, you idiot."

Ileron blinks, looking back to the crowd, "Oh yes. Well, I'll just continue then."

"That would be my recommendation."

## Chapter 102

The pale desert noon blinded me, and I stumbled. I'd fallen to my knees, and out of instinct I almost tried to catch myself with my hands. The searing pain was a fast reminder though, and I had to snap my torso back to maintain my balance and keep from getting a mouthful of sand.

"The Outlands again. This place never loses its charm does it, chief? We'll probably want to find some shade and get you stitched up since you've been... well, you know."

"Don't even say it, Morte."

"You're thinking it. That's enough for me," Morte grinned.

It only took a few minutes to get myself fixed up. Nordom held my arms in place while Grace sewed me back up. I didn't need much to be held together: with my natural regeneration, the splintered bone was regrowing, blood vessels and muscle tissues were already knitting together. The nerves were always the last to heal, however, and in that time my fingers twitched with unconscious spasms as they wired. That didn't mean it didn't hurt like the Nine Hells, though.

Annah was the first to see it.

"Oi. What's that, now?" she murmured, pointing to a line of dust thrown up

along the horizon.

"Sandstorm?" I murmured. It didn't quite make sense. The air was still with a dull, dry heat... not the sort of air that would brew a storm.

"Uh, chief? You should know something about the things that live in this part of the outlands."

"What's that?"

"They're always hungry."

I could barely curl my bicep, much less make a gesture. It would still be a good hour before I could cast the simplest of spells, and in the rush from the Prison and the battle against Vhailor we'd been left feeling like a lump of butter freshly pounded from a churn. It was then that we turned to the most reliable combat strategy in such times.

"Let's run like hell!"

Panic tends to call up certain reserves of stamina you've never realized you had, and our flight took hours with us swallowing blood charms like candy to keep our strength up. Dak'kon's leg was crippled until Grace could mend it properly, but he was still able to grip my neck. My own arms flopped uselessly behind me as I carried him, and the absurdity of the situation left him mumbling some bitter oaths in the Githzerai tongue.

Grilligs scaled the cliff faces like insect swarms, leaping towards us with talons thirsty for fresh blood. Gronks roared at our passing, teeth eager to crush bone and suckle the sweet marrow within. The sohmein, though, were the real pissers. Running like the wind with wide, toad-like grins, they pursued in a mindless stampede at the sight of our movements, and tried to run us down seeking our flesh.

Then, little by little, the packs broke away like slivers of melting ice.

We bent down then, Annah fairly collapsing as she took in ragged breaths. Dak'kon nearly leaped off my back, eager to stand on his own again. Even Grace seemed a little out of her normal composure. I could almost taste the blood in my lungs, as if I had been sucking down air so hard it had sliced the inner lining of my trachea.

The massive skeleton of some dead creature loomed before us, and Nordom gave a confused chirrup, "Anomaly encountered. Readings abnormal... un-un-unable to process."

Whatever it was, its presence drove off the hordes that chased us. Outside a ring of stones had served as a campfire, and a tripod of metal beams suspended a copper cauldron over the unlit coals. A few skulls and ceramic jars had even been carefully arranged, not so much a threatening set of decorations as much as it was... domestic. We took a quick breather, enough to quench the fiery ache from our muscles. I didn't trust first appearances: if there was a fight ready within we couldn't nap and get a full rest and wait for it to come to us.

The entrance had been hollowed out from the side of a skull as wide as a cart. It led down a flight of stairs into an impressive burrow, with walls of dirt packed so densely that they might as well have been stone. The air was keen with the acrid smell of bitter herbs and the musk of abyssal worms, gutted and hung to cure like hams.

This was indeed the home of Fhjull Forked-Tongue, and he wasn't happy to see us.

He was a broken fiend, with one tattered wing and covered in scars. His voice was clenched, angry, and despairing, issuing from behind gritting teeth. "A tanar'ri in my home!" he hissed at Grace, "Of all the indignities! Why don't you invite your whole filthy species in?! Feh! The fetid stench of a tan'nari! I can smell it for leagues! Show some respect for my home! Can't you find some fumes or acidic vapors to try and drown your scent? Feh! I'll never get that tanar'ric stench out of the place. It'll draw baatezu from all over the planes."

"I like the way she smells. It's pretty," Morte quipped.

"Oh, and it's not just any tanar'ri, but a tanar'ri whore who's just walked into my home... things can't get any worse. Come in! Come in! Please, my home is your home!" He waved his hands in the air in despair. "Why don't you invite all the rest of your Abyssal harpies into my home to torment me?"

"I extend my greetings to you, Advocate Infernus Forked-Tongue," Grace nodded with a slight bow. "I will take your suggestion under consideration."

"Have you come to kill me?! Torment me? If so, know that I still have much power at my disposal!"

I raised an eyebrow. I'd met fiends cruel, malicious, and cunning. But I'd never encountered one that seemed so bitter until Fhjull, "I have not come to kill you."

"Feh! We shall see, we shall see! If you do not intend to kill or inflict pain upon me, I fear that the torment is of a subtler nature... by far, the worse of many such pains."

"A friend told me that you're under obligation to perform charity. I'd just like the answers to some questions..."

He winced at that. Apparently it was true. "Feh. Speak. Speak your piece."

"Where is this place?"

"Feh. A blasted crater in the Outlands that reflects the emptiness and hollowness of my life. Feh. I need little. Marrow from the creature supplies me with food and the peculiar energies of the place prevent scrying fools from finding me... though apparently, idiots can still find their way here."

"What is this creature?"

"This is the skeleton of Ul-Goris, the father of the goristro. They're living, bearlike siege-towers, juggernauts of chaos, huge, practically unstoppable, highly resistant to magic... and Ul-Goris' bones, in the crater where he fell to his death, radiate much enchantment that prevents magic to spy me, keeping this pitiful frame alive for a few more desperate years. Feh!"

"What makes your life so empty anyway?"

"Had you walked the scalding streets of Dis and smelled the sweet stench of burning of flesh, breathed deep the poisonous vapors of Stygia's ice floes, led armies through the night-lit palaces... you would not ask this question, near-man."

I'd had enough of his grousing. Fiends were dangerous enough to face off, and even talking to a baatezu could mean disaster. They had a reputation

for twisting the smallest of promises or hints of obligation against others, after all, "I was told that you would know of my mortality. It has been stolen from me."

Forked-Tongue scrutinized me closely for the first time. "Memories run like hollow canyons through my mind, almost-human. Many creatures have I met in an immortal's time... though I do not believe you were among them," he shrugged, "You all look alike to me... and I think I would have remembered the scarred flesh of your body... it is much like the breathing paintings that bedeck Bel's gallery of skins in Baator, except with less grace and more passion in the scar strokes."

I stepped back when he reached a clawed hand out, but he pressed forward, tracing those yellowed talons across my puckered flesh, "The violence is great, nearing acceptable levels, but the scars are applied with almost tanar'ric crudity, without any care for maximizing the pain of the recipient. A baatezu artist would be much more devoted to the following the paths of pain across the body. Some of these wounds look to be clean kills, others look as if a blind butcher were carving up human steaks."

He scoffed, as if I'd offended his aesthetic sensibilities. "Feh. Human art makes me ill sometimes. Such potential, wasted."

Grace sounded bemused. "Is Advocate Infernus Forked-Tongue implying that we tanar'ri are a crude people?"

"Feh! To say that tanar'ri are crude is to insult crudity. Any lesser race that revels in chaos, allows itself to be pulled and drowned in its stagnant tides, and calls it 'evil' are not a race at all. They are beasts."

"Surely you simply object to the implementation of evil, rather than the degree. Many among the tanar'ri would claim that the closer one is to the primal nature of evil, the more true they are to the idea."

"Feh and double feh! The tanar'ri beasts want to strip law and order from the face of evil! Inexcusable! Intolerable! I cannot --"

"From a baatezu point of view, it may indeed seem intolerable," Grace began to counter, "However... Advocate, many tanar'ri philosophers would argue that the baatezu are to be no less excused for excising passion from violence, excising passion from the very essence of evil. The baatezu would

replace rage with cold methodical cruelty. And thus, the old debate continues: Which is the greater evil? Efficient evil or passionate evil?"

"Feh! You say that simply because you are... what you are." Fhjull wagged his eyebrows at her, then waved his claw dismissively. "At least I am still allowed to be cynical."

"Great," I interrupted before this went too far, "Let's get back to discussing my mortality, instead of my scars." Grace inclined her head slightly in concession.

"Very well, very well." Fhjull scratched his head. "If I recall correctly - and there is so much I do not! - I have heard of a case such as yours. It makes you immortal, does it not?"

"Yes."

"If so, then death itself is no longer sacred. Feh. In my day, mortals remained so and knew their place... now everybody and their mother has the curse of eternal boredom. We should have a gathering and invite everyone across the Planes and offer them immortal contracts... it would save all of us hard-working baatezu a great deal of effort. Feh."

He prodded my chest. Hard. "You know that if everyone was immortal, this entire petitioner system would be up the famed fecal creek. Feh. Immortality is not a trinket to be given to unruly children such as you."

I nudged his claw aside, "Be that as it may, but tell me what you know of my mortality."

"Feh... as I was saying, I recall hearing somewhere about a place called the Fortress of Regrets." He thought for a moment. "Yes... yes, that's it."

"What do you know of the place?"

He smiled widely, hissing with glee. "I am pleased to inform you that I do NOT know. Not at all! I cannot help you to get there, and that chills my heart in such a delightful way. No. I. Cannot. Help. You. Oh, how I have longed to say those words. How sweet they tas-"

"Do you know someone who does?" It was mildly disturbing to see a fiend

so... giddy.

"Eh? Enough of your cross examinations! Yes, yes, I know somebody who might know... on Baator lies a pillar of betrayers, liars... and sages. Despite their nature, their knowledge is considerable. They might know where you can find this Fortress of Regrets." Fhjull's face curdled into a sour snarl, his tone bitter that I'd been able to pry that one out of him.

Much better.

"How do I get to Baator?"

"Hold on, chief... Baator is BAD news," Morte floated over between me and Fhjull, "This fiend is probably holding out on us... and even if there we find the Pillar of Skulls, we can probably find somebody else who knows how to reach this Fortress without going to one of the most dangerous planes in the multiverse."

I mulled this over. Morte would know best on this matter...but then again, I could see how he could be opposed to visiting the Pillar. "Are you holding out, Forked-Tongue?"

"Feh! I have not told you of the nature of this cursed contract, but understand this! I can NOT withhold this information. The Pillar... is your only hope. There is a portal outside my home. It lies in the hand of this giant creature. Go through the arch formed by the left arm of the creature and you will be taken to the Pillar of Skulls. The portal will be active for you now."

"And how do I return once I have gone?"

"Eh? Return? Why, I hadn't thought of that. To return from Baator, you need knowledge and a piece of jagged obsidian to cut your tongue. That knowledge you will gain from the Pillar. But there is no reason for you to return here. And no desire on my part to see you again."

Morte waved side to side mimicking a shake of the head, "It's a dangerous place, chief. I'd rather not go. I've been, and it isn't pretty. All right?"

"We have no choice, Morte. But I have need of more..."



"How can MORONS speak so much?" Fhjull grunted. "Speak. Speak. Feh!"

"I'm in need of some aid."

He emitted a strangled croak. "I have some few... very few... items that I have accumulated over the years. They are... precious to me... but if you need them..."

"I sure do. Let's see what you've got."

He snarled. "I entertain no thoughts of strangling you and leaving your corpses for the trelons."

He had a nasty collection of fiendish weapons and charms: from cruel blades to collections of worms.

"Feh... that is Hatred's Gift," he said of the axe, "a fine weapon for one such as yourself. I don't think you'll want it... there is a curse laid on it. Perhaps you would reconsider..."

Cursed perhaps, but I didn't like the idea of a fiend having a weapon such as this.

"Those? They are kassegs," he pointed out when I asked of the larvae, "parasites that will lodge in your brain and devour your mental energy with no appreciable benefit... Feh! Cursed contract! They boost your mental power, something you surely could use! Take them! Take them!"

"That old thing? Feh! That is the Gordian knot," he said when I curiously eyed a complicated loop of string, "Cut it, and you become twice the leader you are already, heh heh. And of course it comes with its own price, one I am thankfully powerless to stop."

And then I looked through his collection of scrolls.

"Bah! You will strip me of all my possessions! You want spells? Feh! This is what I have, bloodsucker!" He rattled off an impressive list.

By the time I was done he was close to tears, "You have ruined, destroyed, eviscerated one of the most unique spell libraries in the multiverse... for all the good it will do you. I have no more spells to give you."

For a moment I'd held some measure of sympathy for him, but a being like Fhjull hardly deserved any shred of pity for the evils he's wracked the planes with across the eons. There was just one last thing we needed before we trekked off to Baator.

"I need a place to rest."

"WHAT? I must endure your presence even longer? Will this torment never cease? Feh! Fine, then, fine! Spread out across the floor! Raid my larder! Knock over my experiments! I'll just be over here fuming! Feh!" He stormed off.

"Thanks."

I'd been told by sages and prophets alike that I spread torment wherever I went. For once, though, that sat nicely with me.

## Chapter 103

After using the portal Fhjull indicated to us, we found ourselves in a shallow cavern. Looking outside, Baator was just about what I had expected. A cold wind blew across the craggy land. It whipped up a crimson wind, and the dust carried the iron scent of pain and whispered promises that could be fulfilled at the right price. A red sky roared overhead, tense as the edge of a storm. Sinister black moons hung like bodies in gibbets, bound in their orbits and gazing down upon the blasted lands in silent agony.

We emerged from the cavern, shielding our eyes from the blood wind. The mouth of the cave seemed to breathe the air like a sucking chest wound. I led the way down, quickly, afraid that if we lingered the cavern would swallow us back up.

"Where is the Pillar, Morte?" I called to him, getting a mouthful of that dust. It tasted acrid and corroded my tongue.

"I'm- I'm not sure..."

"You know where it is, Morte. The sooner we get to it the sooner we can leave."

He gave me a nervous glance, a criminal returning to raid his old prison, but he nodded, and floated higher to get a good look.

Annah began to make a move.

"No, Annah. No scouting this time. We need to stay together and I can't be sure that the fiends wouldn't be able to spot you in some other way."

"Tchah!" she scoffed, but looked relieved that she wouldn't have to go off on her own.

Dak'kon knelt, his knee fully healed under Grace's tender ministrations. His hand extended with a feather-light touch, examining the patterns of stone and sand.

"Do you see something?"

Dak'kon stood, one hand on the hilt of his blade, "I have traveled these lands long ago. When I laid my first oaths to the blade I had joined a rakkma, a hunt to exterminate the illithid threat. Many of the foul mind-flayers we had slain, and in our quest we had learned of a stronghold in Baator. The rumors whispered that the illithid menace had dealings with the lord of Dis, the second of the nine layers."

"What kind of deal?"

Dak'kon's gaze hardened, "An exchange of chattel slaves for knowledge of pain. Many of the People were said to have numbered among them."

I held my tongue and allowed him his moment of silence. By his tone the affair did not end well.

"We had been fools, and were lured into the baatezu trap. The documents we had obtained in the town of Ribcage promised safe passage, yet they cowed only the weak and ignorant denizens of the Pit. The greater baatezu

knew them for the forgeries they were. Many of my bretheren died as we fled, embracing their blades to silence their knowledge of githzerai arcana before it could be bled out from them."

Grace shook her head, "Your people suffered from no folly, Dak'kon. Few know that Lord Paracs has no official capacity in Baator. He sells false documents of passage at exorbitant prices, and leaves the buyers to suffer their fates."

"Several bands have passed through recently," Dak'kon continued, "Perhaps a small contingent returning from a campaign in the Blood War."

"So we don't even have the protection of fake documents. Great."

Dak'kon shook his head, "Such a thing would be of little use. The tracks of one who passed are too large. They belong to the greater baatezu: red abishai if not a cornugon. They would not be fooled."

"But they can be broken," I said, readying my spells, "Fhjull is testament to that."

"Chief," Morte bobbed, "It's over this way."

Our progress was measured in such cruel increments: abishai blood, black and oily, sizzled against the stones and marked our passage. Shorn wings and severed limbs lay scattered on the red sand, and their former owners, screeching their rage in reptilian snarls, were silenced with swift efficiency. We moved in the steps of a dance, each participant with its own role. Steel and bone and will-forged metal shielded the core of our group, where magic and missiles flew out to crash against the hordes.

Dak'kon in particular fought with a fervor that he would usually reserve, I suspect, for illithids and githyanki. Where githzerai use order to shape chaos to their will, this entire plane used order as shackles against all who would enter. It was an abomination in his eyes.

Me, I just needed answers.

Finally the lumbering cornugon that directed the group died under the bites, the stabs, and the bolts of force.

The Pillar of Skulls sprouted from the center of a clearing, ringed on all sides with craggy mountains whose peaks pierced the sky. The Pillar itself had the bile coming up to my throat... this horrible, towering, pulsating thing. Loathing churned my stomach, and a faint sense of familiarity prickled at the edges of my consciousness. The innumerable rotting heads which made up the vast pile constantly shifted and throbbed, alternately bickering, weeping, conversing, shouting and whispering to one another. Heads constantly bubbled to the surface of the stack from somewhere within its foul core, while others sank back into the grisly pillar. They stacked towards the sky: a string of stinking orbs that were less like bone and more a collection of pus-filled boils, layered over one another into a diseased foam that begged for a lancet to burst them.

It made me itch.

As I made to step closer to the Pillar, Morte hissed to me: "Pssst! Chief! Chief... listen, I can't let that thing see me. You've got to get me out of here... drop me off somewhere, pick me up later or something..."

"All right Morte, we'll see if you can hide in-"

All the chatter, laughter, and mad screams abruptly stopped. The dozens of heads that lined the pillar's surface slowly turned to face me in unison. They regarded me silently, their breath fetid and moist upon my face... until they noticed Morte cowering behind my back.

"Oh, no..." Morte whimpered.

Every head on the pillar's surface spoke at once to make the thing's voice - a terrible, burbling sound that bubbled forth while foul, stinging vapors and putrid corruption streamed from their mouths. "YOU AGAIN... 'TIS BEEN A LONG TIME, INDEED." Many of the heads began to gibber and drool, chanting "...skull, skull, skull..." gleefully, licking their lips, their eyes fixated upon Morte.

"I have come for answers," I said.

"SILENCE! WE SPEAK NOT TO YOU, BUT TO THE SKULL. WELCOME BACK, LITTLE ONE. HAVE YOU AT LAST DECIDED TO RETURN TO THE FOLD, TO ACCEPT YOUR FINAL FATE, TO TAKE UP ONCE MORE YOUR SACRED DUTY?" Several heads burst forth from the Pillar's core, gnashing their broken teeth

and wailing: "Yes, come back! Come back to us, skull! Skull..."

Morte shook with fear, his teeth rattling. "I can't go back, chief! I can't! I can't! I can't!"

"He hasn't come back to you," I said as I placed myself between Morte and the Pillar, "But I had some questions, Pillar of Skulls..."

"THE SMELL, 'TIS STRONG. IT SHALL CROSS THE PLANES, SOON, AND BEL WILL COME," they roared. Some sang the words with delight, others wept. Some shrieked, chanted, wailed, moaned. It was enough to drive a sod to madness.

"The... smell? What do you mean?"

The heads' eyes turned wetly in their sockets to stare at Annah and Grace. "THE SMELL... THEIR MUSK... THEIR TANAR'RI MUSK. THE BITTERSWEET SCENT CARRIES, AND WILL ATTRACT BAATEZU, SOON. THEIR LORD, BEL, WILL BE ANGRY."

"Oh, that's just great," Morte moaned. Annah stepped closer, eyes wide as if about to cling to my arm for safety.

The heads turned their gazes back to me, though a few still snuffled noisily. "IF HAVE YOU QUESTIONS FOR US, YOU HAD BEST BE QUICK." A few of the heads squinted and gurgled softly; they might've been laughing at us.

"As I said before, then: I had-"

Before I could finish, a portion of the pillar trembled as yet another head oozed its way to the surface. After some of the noisome slime had sloughed off, my eyes widened.

It was Pharod.

Pharod's head spat out a mouthful of bloody cysts and croaked: "Annah, me darling child! Is that you?"

"Da! What yeh be doin' in this place?" she cried in horror.

The other heads remained mostly silent for a time as Pharod's spoke... only

a few whispered quietly to themselves, making wicked sidelong glances at Annah and her foster father's head. "I was wrong, my dear girl, about the Sphere. It wasn't enough, no, and now look where I've ended... I beg of you, lovely Annah! Save your poor father! Save me! Oh, please, save me! Save m-" But even as it spoke, Pharod's mewling head began to sink back into the Pillar's core...

Annah stared hard at the pillar, eyes narrowed, her fists clenched and tail rigid. A mixture of fury and anguish was smeared across her trembling face.

"Annah, I'm so sorry..." Grace murmured, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Annah smirked, spat, and turned away from the pile of rotting heads. She shrugged, but wouldn't look at either Grace or me. "No matter."

"Did you love Pharod, Annah?" I asked.

Annah turned, eyes blazing. "He was my Da." She bared her teeth. "I hated him. He only saw in me a way to scarper more bodies, more jink an' more junk ta line his vault. 'Annah dear,' 'Annah lass, yeh're the most precious thing in me vault,' he'd lie. An' he'd lie. An' he was weak o' mind an' weak o' body. An' he smelled o' corpse rot an' had all the feelin's o' a vulture picking at a corpse."

Annah's voice lowered, but the fire in her eyes burned brighter. "And he was the only one ever ta show me a scrap o' kindness. Is that what yeh wanted ta hear, is it? Yeh pleased now, aye?"

"ENOUGH," bellowed the Pillar's stinking heads. "WE TIRE OF YOUR INSIGNIFICANT PRATTLE, AND WOULD KNOW YOUR BUSINESS WITH US."

"Questions. I had questions..."

The heads shifted sluggishly across the face of the pillar, nodding and murmuring before speaking in its ghastly voice: "ASK A QUESTION OF US, THEN, AND BE PREPARED TO HEAR OUR DEMANDS - YOU SHALL RENDER UNTO US A SERVICE FOR YOUR ANSWER."

"Who am I?"

The heads gurgled and croaked their reply through rotted lips: "WE WOULD

ANSWER THAT QUESTION FOR A SERVICE..."

"What's your demand, Pillar?"

The pillar's heads all turned to leer at Morte. "THE SKULL... WE DEMAND THE SKULL AS TRIBUTE. RETURN HIM TO US, AND YOU SHALL HAVE YOUR ANSWER."

"Don't put me back in there, chief. Please!" he wailed, eyes panicked.

"CEASE YOUR FEEBLE PROTESTATIONS, SKULL! THE DECISION IS NOT YOURS!" The pillar's many heads swiveled slowly to face me, their eyes narrowed. "TOO LONG HAS HE CHEATED HIS FATE; HE IS OURS. WERE YOU TO RETURN HIM, WE WOULD BE MOST WELL-DISPOSED TOWARD SUCH A GIFT... WE WISH TO SAVOR HIS SCREAMS..."

The stack of heads began to writhe and boil, heads thrusting to the surface to howl and babble before sinking back down. They drooled and chattered: "I cannot wait to savor his screams!" Another: "Screams be damned! The torment is what's best for one so annoying as he! I shall yank his teeth out, spit them into his brain pan and shake him like a babe's rattle!" And another: "Oo! Oo! I'll eat his eyes out!"

"You can't have him!" I snarled, "What else will you accept?"

The pillar leaned towards me, the eyes of its heads narrowing. "THERE IS KNOWLEDGE YOU POSSESS THAT WE WISH FOR OURSELVES. WHERE DOES THE FIEND, FHJULL FORKED-TONGUE, RESIDE? TELL US, AND WE SHALL ANSWER YOUR QUESTION." The stench of the pillar's hot breath surrounded me as it awaited my reply.

Evil as he was, I couldn't betray Fhjull. "Fhjull has hidden himself well in a demi-plane of a long-dead sorcerer's devising. He appears only occasionally within Sigil, and it's there that I met him."

The pillar savored my gift for a time, its heads cooing and whispering to one another.

"And my answer...?"

"NOT WHO -- WHAT. YOU HAVE BEEN DIVIDED. YOU ARE ONE OF MANY



MEN -- ONE IN MANY MEN. EACH ONE -- WHETHER GOOD OR EVIL -- A MONSTER, WHO CASTS A SHADOW UPON EXISTENCE."

"A... shadow upon existence?"

"OH, YES." The pillar's heads narrowed their eyes and smiled grotesquely. "EACH TIME YOU DIE, 'IMMORTAL,' YOU CAST A SHADOW... EACH TIME YOU DIE, ANOTHER DIES IN YOUR STEAD. THESE SHADOWS... THEY GATHER, HUNGERING FOR YOU, WITHIN THE FORTRESS OF REGRETS. HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU PERISHED, NAMELESS ONE? HOW MANY HUNDREDS... THOUSANDS... HAVE DIED, BECAUSE OF YOU?" The pillar trembled with wicked glee; its heads pulled faces and gurgled mockingly at me.

"Is that all you have to say, Pillar?"

The heads abruptly ceased their laughter. "NO. YOU BEAR MANY NAMES; EACH HAS LEFT THEIR SCARS ON YOUR FLESH:"

The names rolled from rotting lips in a grim incantation, rhythmic and terrible, "LOST ONE... IMMORTAL ONE... INCARNATION'S END... MAN OF A THOUSAND DEATHS... THE ONE DOOMED TO LIFE... RESTLESS ONE... ONE OF MANY... THE ONE WHOM LIFE HOLDS PRISONER... THE BRINGER OF SHADOWS... THE WOUNDED ONE... MISERY-BRINGER... YEMETH...

"YOU ARE AS SILVERED GLASS THAT HAS CRACKED... SHATTERED, AND THE PIECES SCATTERED ACROSS HISTORY. YET ONLY ONE PIECE IS OF IMPORT. REGAIN THAT, AND YOUR LIFE SHALL BE YOURS ONCE MORE. THERE WILL BE A PRICE. THIS PRICE WILL BUY YOU A CHANCE. WITHOUT THE CHANCE, YOU ARE DOOMED. YOU HAVE LOST THAT WHICH IS NEVER MEANT TO BE SEPARATED FROM MAN. YOUR MORTALITY HAS BEEN STRIPPED FROM YOU... LOST. IT EXISTS, BUT YOU MUST FIND IT BEFORE YOUR MIND IS LOST TO YOU AS WELL."

And then it clicked into place. The death of Pharod, the shadows beginning to hound me soon after. It was too convenient, the way they always pursued us as if sent by a guiding hand, striking when I was weakest. The shadows must've been the ones that murdered Pharod, who had pointed me along the path I now walked on. Yes, nothing could've left that stench of dread when I found his broken corpse in Illwind Court.

I needed to know. "Somethings hunts me, doesn't it? Who is my killer?"

The Pillar remained strangely silent; some of its heads simply looked away, while others shuddered with pained expressions. Eventually, they gathered themselves and spoke once more: "WE... DO NOT KNOW. THOSE HEADS THAT ONCE CONTAINED SUCH KNOWLEDGE HAVE BEEN DESTROYED - REMOVED FROM US. WE CANNOT ANSWER YOU THIS QUESTION."

That only confirmed my fears. "How do I reach the Fortress of Regrets?"

The words bubbled forth, voices diseased and grotesque: "WE WOULD ANSWER THAT QUESTION FOR ANOTHER SERVICE..."

"And what might that be?"

The pillar's heads -- save for the hissing of foul vapors issuing from rents in its rancid surface -- remained silent for a time. Finally, it answered: "THERE IS AN OBJECT IN YOUR POSSESSION THAT WE WISH FOR OURSELVES. THE MODRON CUBE: GIVE IT TO US, AND WE SHALL ANSWER YOUR QUESTION."

I shook my head, "I can't do that. I am their Creative Director, and I will not abandon the rogue modrons. What other gifts would you accept?"

The pillar's heads frowned, their eyes flickering this way and that. Suddenly, they all came to rest on Fall-From-Grace. "SHE WILL DO... YES. THE TANAR'RI. GIVE HER TO US... WE WILL CONSUME HER ALIVE, BATHE OURSELVES IN HER SWEET BLOOD... THEN, WE SHALL ANSWER YOUR QUESTION." A number of the heads began to moan with longing, calling to Grace: "Yes, Tanar'ri, sweet succubus, wicked thing, surrender yourself to us..."

Grace stared silently at the Pillar.

"You must be mad. I won't sacrifice her for an answer."

A deep rumbling issued from within the pillar; more heads wormed their way to its roiling surface, dissecting me with their scarlet eyes. At last, their gaze found Annah. "THE FIENDLING! GIVE US THE TIEFLING GIRL, YES... WE SHALL TEAR HER APART WITHIN US, REVEL IN THE BASKING OF HER SWEET, FIERY BLOOD... THEN, WE SHALL ANSWER YOUR QUESTION."

I felt Annah's grip tighten against my skin, nails digging deep into my flesh.

Fear warred with disgust in her eyes.

"I won't sacrifice anyone! If you wish to deal with me ask for something I can give."

The mouths of every head on the pillar's face split in depraved, sickly grins; they chortled and burbled, laughing at me. "YOU HAVE NOTHING FOR US THEN... SAVE YOURSELF. COME, IMMORTAL... GIVE US A TASTE OF YOUR UNDYING BLOOD. THEN, WE SHALL ANSWER YOUR QUESTION." The heads clacked their teeth together, drooling and smacking their split, pus-covered lips in anticipation...

"Very well. I agree to your demands."

"APPROACH US, THEN... YES, COME CLOSER..." The heads seemed to draw back within the Pillar as I approached it...

Though I drew only a single step nearer, I suddenly found myself much closer to the pillar's writhing surface than I had imagined. Before I could react, it pressed forward into me like a wave of broken bone and rotten, worm-infested meat. As the rancid darkness enveloped my flesh, the pillar's heads began to consume me alive...

My shrieks of agony mingled with their cries of ecstasy, dozens of jaws gnashing, hundreds of teeth sinking into my flesh. I could feel their slimy tongues lapping at my skin, drinking from my wounds. Somewhere in the midst of it all I must've vomited, and the bile that stained the heads smeared against my cheek as they fought for a taste. When the pain and horror and humid stench finally began to seep away, I found myself being held up by Annah and Dak'kon. Grace was checking over my wounds. My entire body ached and I was unsure of what, exactly, had just happened. What I was certain of, though, is that my body was somehow weaker for whatever ordeal it just suffered through. The grotesque heads leered down at us, grinning and smacking their lips...

"ALREADY YOU POSSESS THE KEY, AND NEED ONLY THE LOCATION OF THE PORTAL THAT SHALL LEAD YOU THERE. WE KNOW NOT WHERE THE PORTAL LIES, BUT MIGHT TELL YOU ITS KEY: 'REGRET.'" Many of the pillar's heads began to weep and moan: "Yes, regret! Regret!"

"Regret?" I murmured, accepting a perfumed handkerchief from Grace to

wipe the ichor from my cheeks.

"YES... YOU MUST HAVE EXPERIENCED REGRET TO BREACH THE FORTRESS. WRITE IT UPON A PIECE OF YOUR FLESH AND YOUR PASSAGE THROUGH THE PORTAL IS ASSURED."

"And the portal... you say you don't know where it is?"

"YES... ONLY THREE HAVE KNOWN THE WAY. THE FIRST ONE WAS YOU... THOUGH YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN, NOW. THE SECOND LIES BEYOND THE PORTAL, AND SHALL NOT EMERGE. THE THIRD..."

I listened intently, "The third..."

"...THE THIRD ONE YOU HAVE ALREADY MET. THEY KNOW OF YOUR CONDITION, THE FORTRESS AND YOUR NEED TO REACH THERE... BUT THEY SHALL NOT HELP YOU. THEIR SHIELD IS ONE FORGED FROM THE COLD METALS OF LIES AND DECEPTION, A THING YOU CANNOT HOPE TO BREAK WITH MERE WORDS. YOU MUST DO BATTLE WITH THEM."

"Who is it?"

The heads remained silent for a time, giving me naught but smug smiles. Finally, they spoke: "YOU HAVE MET THE LIAR -- AND NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME. THE LIAR KNOWS... BUT DID NOT TELL YOU. A PETTY BETRAYAL BETWEEN IMMORTALS..." Some of the decomposing heads rolled their eyes and snickered at me.

I scanned my memory, sifting through the dozens of faces I had known. Yet only one came to mind, implausible as it was. "Trias?"

"OH, YES... THOUGH WE KNOW HIM BY HIS FULL NAME: TRIAS, THE BETRAYER!" The pillar shook with mirth, the pile of rotting heads tottering back and forth as it laughed at my distress. A few of the heads chanted mockingly: "Betrayed... Betrayed... Trias, the Betrayer..."

"But... he said he didn't know..." I murmured in shock. A deva... how could a deva betray me? Betray anyone?

"HE LIED TO YOU." Some of the heads squinted, gurgling and chortling softly -- laughing at me. "BEWARE WORDS SOAKED IN HONEY; THEY ATTRACT ALL

MANNER OF WASPS."

And then it dawned on me. She knew.

*Ravel's eyes dimmed, as if she was staring at something in the distance, and her voice slowed. "A... fair-skinned one... must you ask. An angel, a deva, one who soars on the wings of morning and with his hands, is the architect of horizons. He lies, lies beyond my keeping, in another cage, in another prison..."*

The bastard knew.

Trias, claiming he couldn't help me until he was freed and his blade returned. Fhjull Forked-Tongue... exiled from his people, a Baatezu somehow cheated in a contract with the deva...

And Ravel had known.

"How did he come to know of this?"

"TRIAS EXCHANGED WORDS WITH YOU ONCE, LONG AGO, WHEN YOU KNEW THE WAY. YOU SPOKE YOUR HEART, AND TRIAS -- IN THE WAY OF ALL GREAT BETRAYERS -- LISTENED WELL TO BUILD YOUR TRUST. SHORT THE CONVERSATION WAS, THOUGH FILLED WITH MEANING. MEANING AND DEATH IS WHAT YOU SEEK... TWO SEPARATE THINGS THEY ARE FOR A NORMAL MAN. BUT FOR YOU... ONE AND THE SAME."

"Why would he lie to me?"

"THE ANSWER IS NOT OURS TO GIVE. YOU MUST SEEK HIM OUT YOURSELF, AND ASK HIM."

"That's all I wished to know," I murmured, still stunned, and turned around to leave.

The pillar halted our departure with a sudden demand: "STOP - GIVE US THE SKULL. WE SHALL NOT ALLOW HIM TO GO. HE IS OURS. HE SHALL NOT LEAVE AVERNUS." The heads began cooing at and taunting Morte: "Yes, Skull, don't be shy... come back, Skull... it's comfortable in here, Skull... come, come back... it doesn't hurt, Skull... 'tis great fun to be without a body, living in a pillar of rot with one thousand other, lying heads..."

Morte shuddered, "Let's go, chief."

I gave him a nod, and walked away.

The pillar's furious heads began to howl and bellow out across the planes. The very ground beneath us shook as the thundering cacophony rang through the whole of Avernus, the shrill chorus of countless sinners. They rattled the stones, blasted the dead air, stirred the bleak red sky into a storm. Their fury called all the hordes of evil upon us.

We covered our ears, nearly blinded and deafened by their terrifying song, and fled back into the blasted lands of Baator.

## Chapter 104

We loped through the blasted valleys of Baator with the shrieks of the damned behind us, but they were muted by the troubles that lay even more distant in the past. A ringing horror sent shudders through my chest, the kind that resonates when a niggling doubt blooms into full, terrible realization. It was much like leaving a fire unattended when leaving the house, only to realize partway through your day that the hut you left behind, an hour's walk away, may now be a pile of smoldering ash.

The race back seemed to take twice as long, each step lengthened with that sense of panic, each moment stretched thin with the tension that gripped me.

Lured by the scent of tanar'i blood, they came in a horde of fangs and claws. Thinking they were facing a Blood War invasion, the cornugon and his abishai lackeys expected a concomitant amount of brutality.

We didn't disappoint them, with me choosing to vent my frustration on the field of battle.

The strange, sulfurous musk of Fhjull's abode burned my nostrils. He looked at me through slitted eyes, an uninvited guest come to rummage through his belongings and upset the tidiness of his home. "Feh! So you've returned! And what did the Pillar speak of? Did it answer your insipid questions?"

I grimaced, saying nothing, but Fhjull caught my mood and a dry cackle shook his shoulders. He wiped the tears from his eyes and grinned at me, "Ah, when the rare idiot does go to the Pillar of Skulls to seek answers, he rarely enjoys the answers he receives."

"Trias was the one who sent me here under false pretenses," I snapped, "I wouldn't have set foot in Baator if it weren't for him."

Fhjull stiffens, his sudden mirth dead in an instant. "Trias? Trias the Betrayer sent you here?" His claws clenched and unclenched. "This is the final indignity! That self-righteous bastard! Kill him, and I will reward you with all that I have at my disposal! Flay his skin and bring it to me so I might wear it as a cloak... hurkkk!"

He gagged, eyes bulging. "I mean... no, no... do not harm the deva. It would be wrong to do so...I was mistaken. Mistaken, I was."

"What did Trias do to you?"

"Feh! Years of service as an Advocate Infernus! Painstaking detail and organization. I never questioned my superiors. I did ALL that was asked of me. I punished those below me with the cruelest and most inventive punishments when they failed. THEN... one slip, and it all comes crashing down! All due to CHANCE. CHAOS. RANDOMNESS. And the lesser races wonder why the baatezu wish the multiverse to be an orderly construct."

He paused, hissing in anger. "The deva lied. It lied. Trias the betrayer tricked me into signing a contract, and I, blinded by the possibility of capturing him, walked straight into his trap. If he dies, the contract is over... but I have not been able to find him, and if I did, how would I harm him?! What am I to do? Even these treacherous thoughts make my mind burn in pain. I was so sure I had that paragon of self-righteousness. That short-sighted greed cost me the rest of my centuries of glorious conniving and entombed me in this sinkhole of good will. Bleh."

Fhjull scraped his tongue with his teeth, trying to clear the bad taste of

those words from his mouth, "And now I am cursed to do good deeds, to aid those in need of aid. Feh! An eternity of curses on Trias! A pox on his blessed aid! May all the dung heaps of Maladomini rain down upon his head!"

He ranted for a few more moments longer. "That skulking pseudo-child of light! That contemptible... aggh... I mean no harm to him and his treacherous, lying, no-respect-for-the-law ways! Feh! He is a deceiver, mortal, and you should trust him in nothing. I mean this, of course, with all due charity and..." Forked-Tongue spat on the ground, "... kindness. His deception has cost me an eternity... unless he should die."

His toothy grin was surprisingly hopeful.

"As much as I like what I've seen of his work," I said, and Fhjull grunted sourly in response, "I have to agree. Something is... off-balance."

"So perhaps... you would have to kill him. For the greater good, of course."

"We'll have to see. But don't think you can go back to ravaging the planes, Fhjull. I know where you live. And I have all your weapons, your spells."

"We'll see..." he hissed, as if pondering my demise.

"Now I'll need a way out of this Powers-forsaken place."

"Feh... does this mean that you shall leave me to my solitude once again? Then I proclaim, with as much delight as possible, that the portal lies under the arse end of this creature's bones. It will return you to that groveling hovel town of Curst, from whence you came, and I can think of few more befitting ways for you to travel."

No time to lose, I figured. We stepped through the portal...

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What fresh hell was this...

A cold desert wind blew through the ruins that once held Curst. Fractured foundations and pillars sprouted like jagged teeth. Splintered posts curled up from the ground like the remaining fibers of an uprooted tree, still bleeding with sap. There was a freshness to the damage. It was clean and

new, and I looked around warily, wondering what could've done this, and whether it was still here.

"It's shifted..." Morte murmured, "The whole city's been shifted."

Still numb with the shock of it all I found myself fiddling with a handful of dust, watching it spill from between my fingers. That wind carried the sand away, whipping it into ribbons until it vanished in the distance.

"Trias..."

Curst must've been right on the edge of Carceri, held back only by the thinnest margin of belief, the faintest flicker of good. Trias didn't have to do much to break that tenuous link, but I was certain he had something to do with it nonetheless.

I stood up, alert as a hound and scanning the rubble.

"Do you smell that?" I whispered.

"What? Smell what, chief?" Morte turned around.

"I'm... not sure." My gaze shifted, head flicking this way and that, trying to trace it. There was a faint miasma in the air that smelled of dread and rotting dreams. And it was familiar.

"If you're going to spook me chief, you could at least be specific about it."

"I sense it as well," Dak'kon's voice was low, almost muted by the unsheathing of his blade, "We have encountered its like, bound as the condemned on the Pillars of Silence."

~~~~~

*"Seeking to remove yourself from this box, eh? That spell is the worst of them all. Basically, that particular spell draws energy from the current owner of the box and uses it to power one of the spells of confinement. That isn't the worst of it," Shilandra smiled softly, as if in pity, "The fiend inside can smell this energy and would more than likely hunt down that person should it escape. It's really a no-win situation to own that box. Either it drains you dry of your energy, or the fiend within kills you."*

"That damn barmy dreg-sipping priest said he'd banished it..." I growled.

*I swallowed, "I'm sure a fiend of such power that it required so many spells to contain it will have no problems making its way back here. And when it does it's going to be looking for you..."*

*"I have taken that into consideration. You see, each side of the pyramid contained a portal to a different plane. In effect, I scattered its essence far and wide across the multiverse. Did you know there are races out there that consider demons a sort of delicacy?" He began to chuckle softly as he reached into the pyramid and sifted through the ashes of the box, removing the gem that was attached to it. "Payment for my services. I will use this to help rebuild my beautiful cathedral."*

"...Said he'd scattered the remnants all across existence..."

A roar echoed in the distance, feral and furious, and thrilled with the blood of the hunt.

"Oh crap."

It clambered over the broken rubble of the city, and its screams sounded like a cheese grater drawn across my brain. Immediately the force bolts sprung from my hands, sending thunderclaps against the creature's chest. Some seemed to punch through its hide, others slid uselessly past its skin, like a stone skipping across a pond.

"Oh cra-"

WHAM

I spiraled through the air, several ribs crushed and splintered bits of bone punching through my lungs. I was thankful for the sand even as I spat it out. If it was stone I had landed on, I would've left a crimson smear five feet long. I picked myself up, sand shifting beneath my feet.

Dak'kon dodged beneath the fiend's swings, blade flashing and sticking its hide like a pin. Annah circled around, tail flashing and flicking up arcs of sand. Crossbow bolts peppered its body. If there was anything I hated about my life it was this: first to be hit, last to join the fray.

Unfortunately, I got exactly what I wished for.

Its nostrils flared, sucking in the dry desert air and devouring the scent of battle, tasting the smell of its prey. Then it looked to me with those feral eyes, burning with an cruel and alien intelligence.

I licked my lips, and spun around on my feet, breaking into a run as it barreled past Dak'kon. The gith blinked in confusion, Annah picked herself up and cursing up a storm after being thrown off.

And I ran.

I turned around periodically, a jet of force flaring from my hands each time. In one breath I murmured a prayer of thanks to the spellweaver who designed the Force Missiles to seek out its targets, precluding the need to aim. In the next breath I cursed the creature's magic-resistant hide.

We made a ridiculous train with me dashing ahead in a panic, leaping over rubble and dodging around broken pillars and leftover masonry. The demon lumbered in pursuit, smashing through any obstacle in front of it. The others trailed behind, ducking past rocks and splintered beams hurled by the fiend's fury. Adrenaline and regeneration gave speed to my limbs. Each twisted ankle popped back into place with newly-growing sinew. Each fractured tibia or bruised shin mended even as I limped along, leg flopping to one side.

It's an ancient instinct, the chase. We see it between wolves and deer, bears and men, even with children at play. Once something runs, something sparks in the back of the primal consciousness. The urge to chase rolls forward, building momentum with each step, until you've got something barreling towards you in a mindless game of catch.

Until you face it.

I turned around, my lungs searing with each breath. My vision swam, but I could see the heavy bruises and sheared skin left by the missiles I had slung over my shoulder. I kept the mantra in mind: Face your enemy, and it will stop. Stare down your aggressor, and it will give pause. Doesn't work with fiends, though.

It crashed into me, all claws and teeth, breath fetid with the scent of rotting flesh from past meals. My last spell went off between us, and lightning bloomed in a crack. I felt my limbs spasm, my arms grow numb, pain lacing along my spine like a skewer through a boiled rat. When I blinked and took my first breath after, the smell of burning meat filled my nostrils. A weight lay over me, something wet and foul-smelling...

My hand shot into the gaping maw just as it clamped shut... the dagger was tight in my fist, the blade turned up towards the roof of its mouth.

The force of the bite drove the dagger tip into the hard palate, lodging it into a wedge of splintered bone. The creature shrieked, every instinct telling itself to open its mouth. But still it held fast, refusing to let me go. Those dead-pale eyes stared into me, brows arching with hate.

"You can't move your limbs, can you?" I coughed, "Still numb with shock?"

A rumble bubbled in its throat, and I felt a pressure in the front of my mind. It invaded my consciousness, and its twisted thoughts pressed against mine. <My hunt is tied to my liberator, and I will devour him to restore my strength. Did you truly think that any box with a pretty trinket on it should be opened? You freed me, you stupid little primate.>

"I don't think you'll be doing much devouring as you are," I grunted, and the creature's jaw tightened against my arm as if in denial. Yet the blade scraped just a little deeper. "You'd think that we're in a stalemate..."

<Your strength is gone. Mine is growing with each drop of your blood in my belly. The taste of an immortal is sweet.>

I ignored him. "...but you should know about the most powerful weapon we stupid primates have."

A sense of amusement filled my mind. <More of your small hedge magics?>

A grim smile spread across my lips. "Opposable thumbs."

And then I drove one into its eye socket.

It screamed, limbs spasming, claws twitching as the crawled forward, trying to gather the strength to gut me. It was a race between us... what would

meet its mark faster, my digit worming its way to break the eggshell-thin bone of the socket, driving slowly in to stir its brains? Or would it be the fiendish claws still creaking with electricity, eager to pierce my chest and rupture my heart?

We'll never know, because in that instant a pair of daggers punched through each side of the fiend's neck, and the creature's head rolled forward to slap me in the face.

Its breath really, really stank.

"Don't know what I'd do without you guys," I grunted, working to shove the colossal beast off of me. When I cleaned myself off I had Nordom pin it with a few more bolts for good measure, then sliced it apart in case some power allowed it to revive once again. I heard the dull clink of something metal hit the ground.

"Well hello," I declared happily as I held up a blood-covered ring, "What's this?"

"Imagine what treasures you'd find if you searched through things other than a creature's guts," Morte grinned, "Now if you're finished, I've found something you might want to see."

Past the fallen remnants of the gate to Inner Curst, in the heart of the ruins, squatted the four-legged set of arches that held the gate.

As I approached, the rotting heads on the gate began to speak, chanting words back and forth between themselves to form coherent sentences.

"Gone, gone. Lost to the betrayer, lost to the light."

Their moans bubbled and broke incessantly, like waves crashing against a dead shore. "Gone on the wind, swept on a tide of evil. Through the gate, gone, gone. The town, gone, lost to its own hatred. Through the gate, into the Red Prison, the prison plane... Carceri."

Their keening song built, weeping rising to a peak, "The prison plane... chaos, evil... worlds within worlds, orbs within orbs, strung out like malign pearls in the skies... the Red Prison, doom of titans and gods alike."

"Can't you speak normally?"

The heads continued to moan, "Beyond the veil all is... shadowed, illuminated. Nothing translates. Nothing easy. No."

"Then why are you still here?"

"Betrayed, despised, framed... punished, executed, made an example of. Hung here by enemies. Lost, lost, lost." Their breaths rattled as one.

"Is it just me, or are there far too many talking, disembodied heads around these days?"

The heads paused. They looked at each other for a moment, and then back at me. They hung shamefully from the gate.

"Never mind that," I sighed. I needed answers, and this wasn't going to be a pleasant trip, "Do you have any idea how to get there or get it back here?"

"Through the gate, into the prison... no return from the prison, no return. Go through the gate, go through the gate... your destiny awaits you there."

I looked up, gaze firming. Those words sounded much too prophetic for my comfort, "What do you know about my destiny?"

"The deva awaits you." The heads fell silent then, leaving only the thrum of the portal to be carried on the wind.

## Chapter 105

Bands of toxic gray clouds crept along the curve of the sky. For a minute all I could see were fleeting shadows scuttling through a blood-red mist. Moments ticked away with the pounding of my heart as my eyes adjusted, interrupted only by bestial screams and shrieks of agony. Yet too soon the world came into sharp, terrible focus.

Deep scarlet light seeped and rippled from the sky as if I were looking up from the bottom of an ocean of blood, watching the distant light ripple through ribbons of blackness. Now and again jagged flecks of lighting tore between the clouds like white-hot wounds. There was carnage. Everywhere, carnage... the few guardsmen of Curst fended off the hordes of the crimson night. The wounded crawled down streets flecked with acid, writhing as their flesh sizzled and smoldered. Scaled beasts galloped through the streets, devouring the dead and wounded with equal measure. The condemned citizens wailed in terror and despair, screaming against the madness that ate inwards from the edges of the city.

Some profited from the chaos. Thieves emptied houses with impunity, tossing the civilians into the streets and leaving them to the beasts' fangs. Thugs dragged screaming noblewomen into the alleys, their gowns torn and tears black with melted eyeliner. Wizards stood on rooftops, many leveling their magic not against the demonic hordes, but the citizens below. Flashes of cast spells lit up faces demented with glee... old grudges would be met today.

On a high balcony, floating above the stench of chaos and murder and death, was Trias, his skeletal wings unfurled and gaze hard with cold satisfaction.

And the burning question was this: where in all the **hells** do I start?

A familiar figure peeked around the corner, and recognizing me he loped forward. I backed away, but squinting a little I saw that I knew him too. It was that smelly old man, Kyse the Caretaker.

"You have returned to a town of calamity, traveler. The deva rises triumphant above the wreckage, having dragged us here to our dooms. There is only one way to return - and that is to strike the deva down, to cause the town to recant its treachery and deceit. The stronger the belief of the town in forgiveness, the weaker the deva."

"Trias did all this?"

"The deva rose from the ground and condemned the town's iniquities. A great confusion arose as the buildings tumbled around us - and then we arrived. There is only one way to combat Trias - and that is to weaken him by good deeds and turning the townsfolk's minds away from chaos and evil

toward goodness. Otherwise, he shall surely triumph. I have work to attend to. Should you require resting, seek the old barracks or the distillery," he pressed a spell scroll into my hands, "Now take this. It will aid you."

We made our way through the streets, blood hot with battle. I had to fight hand to hand mostly... my larger spells could mean collateral damage, and we needed to save as many citizens as possible. Nightmarish horrors fell with slashed throats or snapped necks.

We cleared the sections of the town as best we could, and finally in a small eddy where the violence had shrunk into a trickle I heard a moan of agony.

Beneath the wheels of a wagon lay an aging githzerai... trapped during the chaos. He spat a bloody wad, and grinned up at me. "Not going to help me, are you? That's what brought us here in the first place..." He laughed weakly.

"Who are you?"

"He is a true traitor to the githzerai. He has cursed our people." Dak'kon drew his blade. "That is reason enough for him to die."

"Put the blade away, Dak'kon," I urged, "We don't have time for grudges."

"Yes, put the blade away, zerth dog. I spit on your teachings. Wear your chains a little longer." The githzerai turned his head toward me. "I am Tovus Giljaf. I used to be the Burgher of this town... until the accursed deva boke free."

"What can you tell me of the deva?"

"We had imprisoned it, oh so many years ago. I thought it perfectly hidden from all sniffing dogs and traitors. Suddenly it burst from under the earth, blazing, and my beautiful, beautiful home... slid." He looked at me intently. "I would have my revenge. Free me, yes?"

"You were the Burgher of this town?"

"My compatriots... and I... we were using this city as a base to return ourselves to power... but that is another story for another day."



"You and yours have peddled secrets of The People to Prime Worlders," Dak'kon declared coldly, "Exchanged knowledge of tactics and fortress locations for trinkets."

"I can't say I think much of your town," I said wryly, firing several purple bolts down the street at a passing gehreleth.

"I don't either... but it's mine, and to see it lost to that preening, self-righteous deva... it is more than I can bear." He coughed wetly. "Free me, and I shall aid you in your revenge on him. My guards can hold off the monsters for a time."

"Relax. I'll pull you out."

Dak'kon eyes hardened, "You cannot trust this one. Let him perish here, under the cart."

"No, Dak'kon, we're pulling him out."

Tovus' thin mouth compressed further still. "Then lift, damn you, and be done."

We gathered around him, two on each side. Grace knelt over him, administering healing and ready to pull him out the moment we unpinned him. Yet as we prepared to lift, a cry of agony sounded from the other side of the cart...

"Aieeee! I'm on the other side! You're killing me!"

The voice was familiar...

"Berrog?" it was that rogue... the self-described engineer who came searching for an imprisoned deva. "What are you doing here?" We set the cart down gently, and Tovus snarled in frustration as the weight bore down on him again.

"What are you waiting for?" he cried out, "Free me!"

Berrog Quickshoes moaned, "I only came to Curst to free the deva... creature of good.... but I was misinformed. I should never have come..."

I circled around the cart, and there he was. Coughing blood, the axle pressing down on his ribs. "What happened, Berrog?"

"I was... fleeing the city... when it began to slide. I was near... him..." he indicated Torvus, "and he grabbed me. The wagon fell from the sky, and he tried to shove me under it... while he escaped. But I still ask that you ... find a way to free him as well."

Dak'kon nodded to me coldly. Maybe we should just lift from this end and crush the damn gith.

"I still command the guards of Curst..." Tovus pleaded. His voice sounded frantic, no doubt with the fear that I would allow Dak'kon to execute him right then and there, "I can inspire them, aid them, slow the tide of monsters that stands between you and the deva... free me, and your tasks shall be easier. Free him, and you gain nothing."

"You gain nothing by freeing me... I confess to that," Berrog admitted, "But surely... the tide of goodness will swing... if you save me without thought of gain... better still to save us both."

"How about if I lift this off both of you? My companions and I can do it if we throw ourselves into it."

We couldn't count on leverage to free them both. We'd have to lift the cart straight up, and with the rubble weighing it down our task was all the harder. No time to clear the stones away either...

My muscles strained as I lifted from Berrog's end. Annah, Dak'kon, and Nordom lifted from the other. My knees buckled. The muscles of my lower back seemed to twist into a knot. But inch by inch the cart rose, until it was loose enough for Grace to help pull Berrog out, kicking and shuffling. On the other end of the cart someone let out a pained wail.

"Tovus?" I called, "Tovus!"

"The sod's fine, chief!" Morte replied, "I just had to bite on something to get him out."

Great.

"My thanks, mate," Berrog dusted himself off and checked his body quickly for wounds, "I've had enough of this burg. I'm back to Mount Celestia. I hope your good deeds stand you in... good stead wherever you're going." He gazed off toward the deva standing on the balcony. "I can't believe I came here to see... that." He shook his head, then ran off.

Tovus winced sourly and adjusted his now-frayed knot of hair. "You have my gratitude... human. I go now to the walls to aid my guards. My city shall not perish." He gave me a crooked smile and pulled a scroll from his coat. "I do not envy you the conflict with the deva. He is a fearsome opponent. Here. Take this. It may help."

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A large guardsman bellowed orders to the civilians gathered around him. He glared at us through the slits of his helm. "What d'ya want, piker? An' make it quick, afore we get ta workin' 'ere."

"What's going on here?"

"What's it look like, ya sod?! We're about ta loot this warehouse. Ya want in on the action, or not? 'Cause this ain't gonna be some sorry-arse, disorderly mess... we're doin' it **right**, an' I'm givin' the orders."

"We've been pulled into Carceri, yeh idjit!" Annah snapped, "Did yeh think ye could just go skippin' off down the road with a sack o'er yer shoulders an' be done wit it?"

The guard ran a finger along the edge of his axe, streaked with hastily-wiped smears of blood. "Oi, I've killed 'alf a dozen already t' get here. Don't assume I'd think twice about sendin' yer pretty head bouncin' down those steps."

I gestured subtly to signal Annah to tuck her blades away, "If we can calm things down, it'll help the town slide back onto the Outlands. Once Curst is wholly overrun with monsters, how long do you think you'll live to enjoy the spoils of your looting?"

"But..." he blinked. Treachery had been bred into the bones of these people for so long that they'd still live as thugs with the end of their world staring them in the face. "Ah, hells; ye'r right." He shouted to the looters who'd gathered around him: "Right! You heard the man, let's get goin'! And if

anyone speaks o' this if we get the town slid back... ye're dead! Now let's go! Move!" He turned to me again. "And as fer **you**: ye've a better brain on yer shoulders than it looks. Good man."

I tried the door. Locked. If there was anyone inside they were either civilians that needed to stay hidden, or else they were skilled enough fighters that needed to get out here to help clear the streets.

"Think you could open it quickly, Annah?"

"Tchah! Just yeh watch me."

The metal lockpicks slid home. In record time she gave a couple of scrapes, a twist, and a firm tug, and the lock clicked open. I didn't even have time to blink.

Dim lanterns hung about the warehouse, shedding a diseased orange light about the room. I'd expected yelps of fear, maybe even a few sods stuffing their pockets and packs with whatever goods they could carry. Damn, I even expected the ring of conspirators huddled together muttering their plans.

What I didn't expect was the slightly stooped old man. A full grey beard clung to his face and a lion's mane of grey hair flared out. What would've been warm lightning instead cast a hellish glow about his face, giving the old man a sinister appearance. He wore a couple of shoulder guards as armor, and in the other hands he held a helmet. Long gray curls of smoke trailed from his pipe, and he fingered the tobacco pouch at his waist. I'd seen him before: that misleading bulk, a band of belly fat hiding years of well-trained strength and military skill. There was the hefty wheeze, the friendly twinkle in his eye that now seemed disturbingly sinister.

"Ebb?" I croaked, my voice all the coarser with shock.

A halo of smoke wreathed his smile, "Well met by chaos, traveler. What brings you to these parts?"

"What are you doing here? I thought you'd retired from the Harmonium."

He bowed as low as his paunch would allow. "As you can see... I'd joined a different crew. You come to a warehouse full of plotters and schemers, lad. With the old order falling apart here, we think it's best to make sure its

pieces are swept away and the people introduced to a new freedom. We're a dangerous bunch, you see."

I blinked, "You're **Anarchists...**"

"Correct, my friend," he tapped his head in a small salute, "Ebb Creakknees, formerly Harmonium Third Measure and currently leader pro tem for this cell of the Revolutionary League. With the order of the town toppled, we're in a... unique... position to ensure that our views are heard. And I'm in charge of this little band of adventurers - only for command purposes, of course! When the people see that their leaders've failed them, chances are good they'll crush the power structures that've repressed them and make something new, something beautiful. We're going to help them."

I ignored the diatribe. "Just as well that you're gathered together. There's a lot of chaos going around in this town, and I'm seeking allies in stamping it out."

"You seek allies against the chaos?" Ebb shook his head sadly, "Yet we seek to increase the chaos, to overthrow the old order, to ensure that the old schemes do not rise again. It's our job, after all..."

"It might be what you do, but you don't support destruction for its own sake. Anarchists destroy so that others may rebuild. There'll be nothing left of Curst if this keeps up."

His self-assured exterior slipped for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that while you've been plotting the overthrow of the city government, evil has come to Curst and is currently destroying what's left of the city. Just look outside!" I raised my hand, firing a bolt of lightning through the ceiling. Tiles and splintered wood rained down, revealing a gaping hole the size of a melon. The Anarchists unsheathed their weapons, but held their attack. The tortured red sky wept through, casting the group in a hellish glow. "The treachery of this town has turned on itself. We've been dragged into Carceri."

Ebb and his crew blinked, looking up at the swirling mass of gray and red, mouths agape. "I had thought... no. Not another sandstorm. But... we must do something! All our work will be for naught if they're all dead! Here. Take this." He handed over another scroll and turned to his brethren. "We must

go, or all our work will be for naught! Come on!" He raced for the door, his companions in tow.

"Good luck..."

Chapter 106

Initially I thought it was thunder that tore through at the wall between Inner and Outer Curst, as if the chaos weren't enough without a Carceri storm ravaging the city. When we arrived at the epicenter, however, the crushed masonry and trampled bodies weren't the result of a tempest.

It was a battle between two fiends.

Agri-Shanak, who I had released from the grain silo... And Tek'elach, whom we had seen so secretively huddled in the guts of Curst...

"Bar that, chief!" Morte cried out through the din, "Just let them kill each other."

We gave them a wide berth.

"Morte, I need you to tell me about those blob creatures we saw beneath the city."

"Blob... oh the lemures? Yeah nothin' special, chief. Just baatezu foot soldiers. Don't think we'll have to worry about 'em unless they swarm us."

"Morte is correct," Grace added, checking over Dak'kon's wounds, "They are among the lowest of the baatezu order. Mindless, obedient... and the smallest scrap of their flesh can regrow the whole. I had once observed a cornugon general gather a hundred thousand lemures, ordering them to swarm across a battlefield."

She shook her head, "They flowed like water, clawing blindly at the tanar'ri

horde. Waves of amorphous flesh broke against the enemy as the ocean eats away the shore. Nine out of ten in the baatezu army died, but the ceaselessness of their attack won the battle. Afterwards, in a single day, the sea of lemures regenerated and the army was reborn for the next wave."

Dak'kon nodded, derision sharp in his voice, "I have heard of such stories among battle-brothers as well. These tactics underlie the savagery of the Blood War... neither the lemure horde nor their tanar'ri foes **know** what they do."

I shook my head, "We need to slide Curst back. Now."

"Speak fer yerself," Annah panted, "Some o' us need a breather between shivvin' fiends left an' right."

"We can't rest, Annah," my voice was hard, and she flinched as if cut by the edge in my tone, "Trias hasn't just condemned a city of traitors. He's brought it directly into the Blood War. Curst has become the launching point for a mass baatezu attack against the tanar'ri."

If Morte could've soiled himself, he would've right then. "Don't suppose there's a chance we can run like hell?"

"Yeah. Right this way," I pointed my blood-soaked dagger to the sound of battle, and took off.

"You know I hate it when you agree with me sometimes!" he called out, floating as fast as he could.

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We had to redouble our efforts in securing Curst, and by a stroke of luck An'izius was dragged past me by two guards, the madness of desperation in his eyes.

"Please, stranger! You must help me! Convince the judge that my alleged crimes are no crimes at all!"

I ran up the stairs towards the makeshift gibbet, to the sour-faced little man who raised an eyebrow at my approach. He spoke in the tone of an overfed, arrogant nobleman. "Mind you, sirrah, that you're interrupting an official

process, and watch your words carefully: I am a powerful magistrate here, and would hate for you share this man's..." He indicated the condemned An'izius. "... rather **sorry** fate."

"You can't execute that man. This sort of thing's why Curst slid into Carceri... and it's what we need to stop in order to get the gate-town back on the Outlands."

"**Wrong?** You quickly forget that I am a magistrate, sirrah. I, myself, decide what is right and wrong in this town!"

"You know this isn't **right**. Yes he conspired to frame another, but you know you're only going to execute him as a scapegoat. If you carry though with this, it'll only add to the chaos that threw this town into Carceri in the first place," I stabbed a finger against his sweaty chest, "We have to put an end to this madness so we can get the Curst back where it belongs... before we're **all** killed."

The judge furrowed his thick brows, forming a bushy, white 'V' over his eyes. He looked to me, then to the gith, then to me again. "Both clever and wise are your swaying words, sir... and I thank you for your timely aid. It is well appreciated, by this town as well as the accused. There shall be no more hasty executions. Guards! Release the man."

The people's eyes were glazed with bloodlust, their voices ragged from screaming hatred with the mouth of a mob.

"The bureaucrats! The bureaucrats!"

"What are we gonna do with 'em all?"

"KILL! KILL! KILL!"

The plump little official clawed at my kilt, mewling, "Please! Save me! They're trying to kill me just for doing my job! I didn't mean any harm! Can't they see they're the ones bringing this town to ruin? Please... you have to do something!"

The grizzled man leading the mob gave me a look of contempt. "Whaddye want, berk? Can't ye see we're busy cleanin' out the trash that got us into Carceri? We get rid o' this sod, we're golden. We're back in the Outlands, no



problem."

"What's happening is that your mob mentality is nailing this town even more firmly to Carceri. Forgive him and work together to repel the evil that's overtaking the town, and chances are far better that you'll be 'golden.'"

"But he... he... Crap. All right. You got it." He raised his voice so the crowd could hear him, "Let him go! We got a whole city to take care of!"

A slim man stood on a parapet, clad in flowing robes. His face was dark with anger, and he shouted at his subordinates as they moved with brisk efficiency. "Hurry it up, scumbags! We only have so much time to make a sacrifice!"

"What are you doing?"

He looked back at us with irritation sketched across his features. "I'm capitalizing on the chaos, berk. Now's the best time to take slaves, while everyone's worried about putting the town back into order. If you'll excuse me, I've got business to attend to." He turned back to his men.

"Too many people are adding to the chaos and evil done to each other. If you would have your men aid in the defense of the town, you might shift the balance again."

He called out to his men. "Stop what you're doing!" He looked at me thoughtfully. "So you're saying we won't need a sacrifice to the gehreleths?"

"Of course not! This entire town will be a sacrifice unless you work with the other citizens."

He cursed. "Just my luck. Had quite a haul, too. Okay, boys, set 'em free! We got us a town to save!"

The fighting was dying down, the chaos was being contained. Men were being hauled down the streets, broken and bleeding, but thankfully alive. Men who just a day ago would've glared with suspicion gave thankful nods to one another. Hands that once held knives ready for a neighbor's back were clasped to haul the wounded from the wreckage of buildings. In the distance I could see the heads of Agril-Shanak and Tek'elach on pikes, grimacing at each other in hatred even in death.

A dirty man, hunched and crabbed with age and darkness, shuffled over. His lank, greasy hair flew from his shoulders as he looked around. It was the same hermit we'd met underneath Curst. When he spied us he blurted out, "Kyse the caretaker told me you'd be along. You've done a fine job of weakenin' him... the town's chaos is subsidin' and his plan ain't workin' so well. Head up and finish the job."

"How do you know this?"

The earth trembled then, like the cold shudder before a sneeze. Something new was in the bones of this city. It was beginning to recover the sepsis that had infected it. Curst was just on the edge of shifting, with one last barb holding it back.

"I can **feel** him up there, waxing and waning like a burning moon. I can **hear** him wondering when you will come. He aches for confrontation."

I looked upward to the balcony on which he stood, ribbons of divine fury spreading like morning mist, "Then he'll have it."

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We were far from the first to break in. With the doors smashed in from the back, a herd of wild sohmien had been stampeding through the hallway. Looters stuffed sacks full with anything, too panicked to care about the crash of porcelain breaking or metal denting. It was no longer about greed, but base instinct running wild once all control was lost.

We put them down like rabid dogs.

The second floor was more bothersome.

Curst guards, corrupted or decieved by Trias, stood guard for the Deva. The four we dispatched with ease. Those in the next room were beset by other foes.

Gehreleths, rabid with hunger, were surrounded by the traitors of Curst. The massed throng of clashing demon hide and rusted steel was deafening, and the confusion blinded them to our presence. They gave us marginally more trouble.

Of course, they underestimated my magic. Shimmering blades of air made it almost too easy.

Finally, each footstep bought with blood, we ascended the staircase to the upper levels.

Beneath the stink of blood was the dry, brittle smell of bureaucracy. Perhaps it was a proud city, long ago. Once-lavish blue marble was set in the floor, now scuffed and scratched. A ceremonial gong stood covered with dust and dented. Faded banners, once heralds of the city's pride, were now stained with streaks of blood: the final indignity to Curst.

A dying guard lay moaning on the floor. His armor had been thoroughly savaged, the flesh underneath it looking as though it had baked in the heat of a thousand suns. He gasped up at me from the ruins of his face, "The deva... is strong. Do not enter... until you can... defeat him." He died quietly, before Grace could reach him.

The heavy iron door crashed to the ground, smoldering and dented. I lowered my hand and we approached Trias, weapons drawn.

He gazed out over the expanse of the city, the small guttering battles dying out like the embers of a passing forest fire. Once from these peaks you could see a blue and cloudless sky draping over desolate desert sands. Now a dome of red and black smothered the jagged landscape of snaggletoothed peaks, stones dry and cracking as if they were waiting to be wetted with new blood. The acrid stink of the air, like a hot grease fire, stung my nostrils.

And there, pristine and pure and ringed with a storm of opalescent light, stood Trias. He was an island of cold serenity, divinity made flesh. All that marred the perfection of his form was the dead clatter of his wings, yellowed bone rattling in the noxious wind. He made no move to acknowledge us as we approached.

"What do you hope to accomplish here?" Trias' voice resonated as he looked out over the city. The fires of the damnation below flickered hot in his eyes, like the light of forge-flames on a blacksmith's cheeks. "Much good you have done in such a short time, mortal. It shall not be enough to keep these traitors from realizing the depths of their folly."

"Why did you lie to me?"

Even with his plans gutted he still spoke grandiosely. If Trias were a lesser being he would've sneered. "You were in need of direction. The price of your need was betrayal. How is that you believe that you have earned the right to any truths in this life or the next? Such arrogance. Indeed, it was your duty as a lesser being to free me. I owe you nothing, and it is what I have given. I gave you more than you deserved. You freed me to help yourself."

Once I had seen the lemures gathered, the Baatezu hiding beneath the city, the pieces had all fallen into place. "There's a portal to Baator in Curst, isn't there?"

He turned to me then, face calm, the slightest quirk of his lips the only outward sign that he was impressed, "Very good, mortal. The pox that has eaten away at your mind has left some faculties intact, at least. Yes, there lies a portal to Baator, in the arch to the inner city. Long has it lain forgotten, the key known only to a select few sages, who now lie dead. Only I hold the key."

"And by bringing Curst directly to Carceri..." I continued, "The baatezu can bypass any of the tanar'ri defenses along the borders of the Gray Waste. You've created a new launching point directly into the heart of chaos."

"A temporary advantage," Trias said dismissively.

"Why have you done this?"

"A city of betrayers have been betrayed and received what they have deserved. There is no 'why'. It seals my compact with the Lower Planes. The greater good is served."

"You made a compact with the Lower Planes?"

"One cannot scale Mount Celestia without an army. The composition of that army is of importance to me. It is much easier to hire such creatures than force them into an attack."

My eyes widened, "You're going to attack Mount Celestia with **fiends**? Is consorting with them not against your nature?"

The deva's face darkened. "I am doing this to redeem the name of Good!" he snarled. "While the generals of the Upper Planes cower behind their golden gates and feed a brutal war that devours the innocent, I will bring them into confrontation with what they fear most, and through that confrontation, they will overcome their fear."

"Do you think that you can end the Blood War by taking it to the gates of Paradise?" Fall-From-Grace stood straight, hands folded, "The evil in the Lower Planes is nigh-infinite. The legions of the Baator and the Abyss reflect this. Before you arm yourself with nothing but pompous arrogance, you should remember the terrible power of infinite evil focused toward a single goal. Do not give them an excuse to take the Blood War to the Upper Planes or the multiverse will suffer.""

"You assume much of their chances, tanar'ri. An idea whose time has come is stronger than any army. And what know you of military tactics, **temptress**? Your skills lie in other pursuits." His eyes traveled over her body. "Leave strategy to those of us who understand it."

"One can learn from all things, if one is perceptive enough, my lord," Grace bowed her head, "One would do well to remember that a wise man takes every opportunity to learn."

"You are a mystery to me, tanar'ri. This is, I am sure, precisely as you wish it to be."

I shook my head, "Do you think to solve this problem by betraying your **homeland**?"

"I shall speak of betrayal to you, human. Betrayal is an abandonment of the war against evil. Betrayal is cowardice, selling weapons to your adversaries out of fear that they might stop killing each other and turn upon you. Betrayal is refusing to lead by example. Betrayal is letting the fiends run rampant through the Planes until evil has corrupted all hearts. Ask not why I scale Mount Celestia and seek to set fire to its comfort-laden slopes with war. It is no betrayal."

"You would taint the essence of good with evil incarnate. That sounds like betrayal."

"There are many definitions of betrayal. One must live long enough to

experience them all. Even your life, were it not fraught with forgetfulness, does not have the range of centuries necessary to appreciate them. Such a betrayal is no betrayal at all."

A long, pregnant silence hung between us, until my words pricked it like a bubble, "What really happened to your wings, Trias?"

"Baator's fires burn hot indeed, but they are candles compared to a father's anger," he fluttered the burnt shreds of his wings. "There is no pain like being cast from Mount Celestia."

"So you're fallen, then? Why should I believe any of your words?"

"Speak not to me of treacheries and falling, mortal. I am willing to sacrifice even myself that Good might triumph."

"That's noble, Trias, but what gives you the right?"

"I am **here**. I see the evil. I am willing to act on it. My **will** gives me the right."

"One's will does not give one the right. Stand down, Trias. You can still be redeemed."

He scoffed. "You are not one to speak of redemption, mortal. You reek of evil; your words are snares and lies. No, this plan shall continue, and we shall see Heaven's gates burning, by and by."

"Then we shall fight."

"It has been a long time since I have wielded my blade against another. We shall duel, you and I."

Trias' blade burst into a cold blue flame in his hands, and he struck at the ground. The mortar reverberated like a gong, stone cracking like old paint. Horned sohmeyn burst from the floor, slaving with carnivorous hunger. Their fangs dug into my flesh, threatening to drag me down with their weight. They were no true match: Dak'kon beheaded one in a single blow, Morte bounced between them tearing back with his own teeth. Nordom's bolts pierced between pupil-less eyes, and they toppled mid-gallop while the ones behind trampled over their corpses.

We could deal with the sohmein well enough, but Trias was using the horde to buy himself time. He'd encased himself in blue planes of force, was ringed with shields and barriers against blade and magic alike. Lightning lanced from his blade, and bolts crisscrossed arced through the air over the heads of the stampeding sohmein. Annah's punch-daggers caught the first of it, and she was flung past. Nordom's limbs rang with an unnatural clangor as another bolt cracked through him.

The landscape began to move.

No, it wasn't the landscape. Two armies clashed in the distance, spread like a field of swarming ants. The baatezu had poured out from the city to secure the surrounding area, and what few defenses the tanar'ri had were being overrun by the lemures. Flabby pink bodies seemed to blend against one another, mixing and merging like the brew of a cauldron, washing the stink of chaos clean from the rocks of Carceri as the ocean ate away the shore.

We needed to end this.

I shoved outwards, knocking the herd aside with a hemisphere of violet force. If I could focus just right, gather the threads together... raw energy alone wouldn't be enough.

I reached out with my consciousness, felt the heavy clutter surrounding us. Not enough mass to do enough damage.

I extended my awareness further, to the bricks and mortar of the building itself. Still not enough.

Up and out I stretched, my consciousness thinning, mind threatening to snap at spreading it so far. Just along the edge of my limit I could feel it, like I was scraping it with the edge of a fingernail. That... I think that could work.

I squeezed the raw threads of force upwards, fountaining it into the sky. The crack of it, loud as a thousand thunderbolts, shook the balcony and threatened to split the building in half. A few stray sohmein were drawn into it. A few were flung a dozen feet into the air before they crashed down again, spines shattering like twigs. Others were flung from the balcony. Happy coincidence. Up it went, a pillar of violet force piercing the sky.

The great asteroids floating in the void rolled, quiet and serene in silence...

The shattered remnants rained down on us. My focused was stretched, but I was able to protect my allies from the brunt of it. Apple-sized stones rained down, tearing through mortar and flesh with equal measure. Sohmein burst apart into clouds of blood and broken antlers. The balcony lurched, the metal framework supporting it twisted like stretched sinew. Even behind his shields Trias flinched as meteors exploded against those crystal planes, white-hot flames from the stars themselves.

The thunder of the storm echoed in my ears, and deafened as I was the silence seemed all the more profound. Even Trias seemed shocked, and his eyes widened further as he stared, blinking into the distance.

All that remained of the lemure army was a greasy black smear. Few scraps would remain intact to regenerate.

Dumbstruck, Trias wasn't prepared when a plane of **karach** carved a long scar across the blue plane of his shield.

Another two, from Annah's punch-daggers came from behind, blades aching to dig into his back.

Above, Morte happily bounced away, a cobweb of cracking blue crystal growing with each blow.

I'd had enough energy in reserve... and a final burst of concentrated force streaked over Dak'kon's shoulder as I sped towards the fight, shattering the barrier, shards splintering into blue-white light as they fell. Trias stumbled back right into Annah's daggers, and she twisted them with a sneer. A twist of Dak'kon's blade and Trias' palm was slit down the middle, between two fingers. His heaven-forged blade clattered against the stones.

He fell to his knees, blood spilling from his lips as I pointed the tip of my dagger beneath his chin.

"I yield to you this hour, mortal. My imprisonment has weakened me... in my state, I am no match for you," he said smoothly. Pride still shone in his eyes until Annah ripped the blades from his body non-too-gently, milking out a cry of pain.

"Trias, even if you were in your full glory, you'd be no match for me. Now tell me what I need to know."

"Stay your hand, mortal. You came to me in search of knowledge that is known to me alone. No one else in the Planes may speak of what I am to tell you. If you truly wish this knowledge, you must promise to spare my life."

Dak'kon's eyes narrowed and he kept his blade at Trias' neck, an executioner readying himself.

"T'chah! 'e's lied ta us a-fore, how do we know 'e won't again?" Annah snarled. Her hair was a mess an stood on end from the blast of lightning she took. With that tail whipping back and forth she looked like an angry alley cat.

"It would be prudent to hold," Grace said, resting a hand on my shoulder, "We know Trias for what he is now. If his answers don't set us on the path you seek, we know who to return to for the truth once more." She directed a calm but piercing gaze at the deva.

I nodded, and pressed the tip of my dagger once more into his chin to accentuate my point, "All right. I vow to spare your life if you give me the knowledge I seek." With that, I withdrew my blade. Dak'kon did likewise, and Annah's lip curled before she followed suit.

Trias stood, ignoring the grave wounds he'd suffered. "The portal to the place you seek lies within the torus above the spire, in the city of Sigil, the City of Doors. In that city, there is a place where the dead of your kind are taken..."

I blinked, "You mean the **Mortuary**?"

"It is where you awoke of late, is it not?" he almost smiled, "The planes seem filled with such ironies of late. So **close** you were, then..."

"What is the key?"

"The Fortress of Regrets is mortared with tears, and like calls to like. To enter the Fortress, you must contribute something to it. When you pass near the portal, should you carry regret in your mind, you will feel the presence of the portal, like the cold embrace of death."

"And?"

"While this chill bathes you, you must tear off a scrap of your own skin, and write a regret upon it with blood from your left index finger. The portal will open, and you can discover the truth behind the Fortress of Regrets - and perhaps meet its keeper."

I looked at him warily, "How do you know this?"

"Many alliances have I sought across the Planes. My search brought me to the Fortress, where I spoke to its lord and keeper of its shadowed halls. No doubt you should wish to return to Sigil now," he pointed behind me, "The blood you have on your hands shall act as the key to this portal; simply step through the door by which you entered, and you shall return."

"What can you tell me of the Fortress?"

"Its halls are dark and seem empty - but like you, it draws tormented souls to it like a lodestone. Like you, it is empty and yet full of time's cast-offs. Like you, it is a monument to torment. Shall I tell you of these souls, wanderer?"

I gestured for him to continue.

His bloody smile widened. "They are the souls of those who died in your place. They have become shadows that you may live. They are **your** shadows, the shades you cast upon existence, and they will find you, wanderer, and they will make you suffer for their torments. You will receive your due at their hands, you and those who are foolish enough to accompany you."

"What can you tell me of this keeper?"

"Powerful is that one. You shall not best him, and you shall not be able to wrest your mortality from his cold grip. It is lost to you. You have embarked on an errand undertaken only by fools," Trias said, shaking his head.

"Foolish I may be, but I will know more about this keeper."

"A man's mortality is a compass that points his way in life. If it may be grasped like an object, much can be learned about the nature of the man it

was torn from. Your adversary knows more about you than you will ever know. He has watched you and studied you across many of your half-lives. I know his heart. He will not return that which you seek."

"What will you do when I have left you, Trias?"

He looked out sadly to the fields of Carceri, at how close he had come to victory, "I shall once again attempt to levy a host against the gates of Paradise. They will not have me back, and there is no other purpose to my existence."

"Trias, have you forgotten the face of your father?"

"What do you mean?"

"The Upper Planes are the home of justice, beauty, and goodness. They are also home to forgiveness. Go home. Admit your error and beg forgiveness."

Trias opened his mouth for an angry retort... and paused, reflecting. He bowed his head. "You speak convincing words, mortal, and their wisdom pierces me. I shall seek the forgiveness of my fathers, and accept any retribution they choose," he glanced at his blade lying on the stones, then looked away. He would leave the past behind. With that he reached into the folds of his robe and withdrew a scroll. "Take this, and farewell, mortal. If we meet again, it is my hope that I will be redeemed."

Trias raised his arms then, and leaped off into the sky. Slowly he vanished in the distance, winking like a star, until finally he vanished among the black clouds of Carceri.

I blinked. They were not so black now.

The balcony rumbled beneath us, and we stumbled as everything shook. It wasn't the damage I had done to the building, no... the entire city was shuddering with new, fresh life. Pale gold-silver light flickered among the clouds, and flashes of blue filtered through the red. The stuff that bound Curst to its new home was stretching, snapping thread by thread. Curst was **shifting**...

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Bule'zakrai was no fool. Any promotion in the Baatezu ranks came with its dangers, and not just because his old comrades might assassinate him out of envy, or because sometimes the higher-ups considered it a grand joke for hated enemies to be placed in positions of high responsibilities. The higher you climb, the more narrow the path, and the more jagged the rocks underfoot after all. Then the one who promoted you, who you thought was at your back the whole time around, would give a little shove and watch as you spatter on the stones below. Oh, what a laugh. He'd done it hundreds of times himself, and it always brought a giggle.

No, Bule'zakrai always preferred middle management, even if it meant he was more expendable as simply a courier of messages between the lower baatezu and the higher. Still, at least he didn't have to get his hands dirty. Nor did he have the responsibilities that could also lead to brutal, peel-my-hide-and-salt-me failure.

Of course, when Bule'zakrai was brought to the Crimson Hall Of Tapestryed Flesh and forced to kneel before the Black Duke of Thorns, he couldn't help but feel a bit giddy at the position that was assigned to him.

Grand Blood General of the Festering Horde. He still loved the sound of it, and would hiss out each syllable in his head every chance he could get. Five hundred thousand lemures at his command. Eighty thousand clueless mercenaries: humans and gith and tieflings who had signed up, blinded to the fine print by the glitter of gold (and supplied with eighty thousand pairs of leather chaps). Twelve hundred abishai, and a smattering of kytons and kocrachons.

To think that idiot Fhjuull Forked-Tongue's blunder actually worked out for the best!

"The surrounding valleys have been secured, Grand Blood General," an imp reported, cowering at his master's feet. Bule'zakrai grinned. Cowering was oddly satisfying now that he was on the other end.

"Excellent. Gather the corpses of the mercenaries and the tanar'ri filth. We'll strip them bare of flesh and begin construction on a fortress here immediately." And his throne of course. A Grand Blood General must have a proper throne. "Focus on barricading the passes, and once we have our reinforcements we'll storm the the Plains of Varakiim." Yes, once those lands were secured from here the long stretches throughout Carceri would

fall. Even if by some miracle the Tanar'ri took those plains back it would be decades before they recovered.

Any minute now the deva would head to the fortress of Alkazuk, the mouth end of the portal between Baator and Curst. It had taken decades to build that stronghold for this attack once Trias had outlined the terms of the contract. Bule'zakrai couldn't wait... he had only been able to squeeze a tenth of his horde into the bowels of that wretched desert hovel, and the rest were eagerly waiting in Alkazuk for the deva to grant them the portal key. He'd have the full command of all his forces then. Twelve other hordes were also waiting to spread across Carceri like a plague, true, but Bule'zakrai would have first pick. And a Godsman-commissioned siege engine of all things, to tear through tanar'ri armies and sunder their walls! No fortress would stand against the forces of the baatezu!

Bule'zakrai was just mulling over all the fine things he would collect when blinked. Somehow the clouded sky seemed to be flickering, as if peppered by thousands of needles...

The booms sounded then, shattering the entire encampment. Lemures burst like lanced pustules. Human mercenaries ran screaming, consumed by fire and smashed by meteor shards. The abishai ran berserk, shrieking and tearing through their allies.

There was a deafening crack behind Bule'zakrai. For one moment he felt weightless, the next it was an ordeal simply to breathe. He clawed himself up from the ground, the smell of blood-soaked earth heavy in his nostrils. Bule'zakrai grabbed at the imp, hissing out hoarsely,

"Report!"

The imp simply flopped in his talons. At least, the half of him that Bule'zakrai held did.

The Grand Blood General looked out among the wreckage. He could only spot a handful of lemures wobbling mindlessly among the ruins. What human mercenaries that remained alive were fleeing into the mountains. Most of the abishai were hardy enough to survive, but too many lay smoldering. Far too many.

"The damn tanar'ri filth will pay!" he hissed, looking back to Curst. Any

moment now his horde would be pouring through in a river of flesh and fang and fury. Oh whoever was responsible would die along the span of eons, and already he was planning out the devices that would separate the joints with maximal efficiency.

Bule'zakrai gasped. A golden glow surrounded the city, encasing it like a shell. Violet streaks rippled across its surface, pebbled with dusty imperfections like burnished steel. A low hum rang across the battlefield, once encampment, now smoldering ash-heap. The golden light built, and Bule'zakrai howled, his cry matched only by the roar as Curst vanished.

No reinforcements. No new Godsman-craft siege engine. No fancy new throne. If only there could be enough tears, Bule'zakrai would have wept. The higher you climb, the more narrow the path, and the more jagged the rocks underfoot. Somewhere, in the spans across the planes, someone was laughing.

Far in the distance and almost out of earshot, the gehreleths roared.

## Chapter 107

Curst flew from the blasted plains of Baator in its iridescent shell, surface rippling and shifting colors like the skin of a soap bubble. Beneath us the blasted peaks of Carceri bled away, and in a flash we floated above the gloom of the Gray Waste. Just looking at it I could feel hope and aspiration draining from me, bled in steady runnels. Beneath us the world seemed to **turn**, and in an instant we floated along the veins of a single leaf, its waxen surface broader than an ocean. Looking up we could see the branches curling up to impossible heights, on which worlds hung like dew-kissed fruit.

"Yggdrasil," Morte gaped, "Wow, never seen it from this view before."

In another flash Curst hung between two cubes a thousand miles long, their surfaces peppered and scarred with old battles. The two flat planes were quickly pressing in on each other, and for a moment the denizens of the city

let out a massed cry of terror before we winked out again. The echo of a world-shattering crash seemed to linger in my ears.

In another moment Curst spun on the outer edge of a giant gear, among the great clockwork realm of Mechanus. In another we dangled, floating down gently as broad rivers and meadows spread out above and below, open air sandwiched between two paradises. In the distance a flock of sheep glanced up at us from the top of a hill, then returned to grazing.

We spun through an amorphous mist, where isles of earth and water hung, where air crystallized and fire frosted over. Dak'kon gazed out at the expanse, eyes misting with nostalgia as the wind rippled against us.

We passed through realms of howling winds, between mountains spewing fire to the stars. Curst floated along great rivers where the dead sang their pale lamentations and streaked past verdant peaks where the Powers and devas dwelt. Curst's equilibrium had been disturbed, and now it swung among the planes like the weight of a pendulum, slowly honing in towards the center with each tick.

Finally, in a satisfying **pop** like the cracking of a joint, the city flew over a desert plain where broad mountains stretched into the distance. On it flew, over windswept dunes and waterless sands, its shadow chasing away herds of sohmein and wild trichas. Spiraling in on a single point the bubble paused, the heart of it stirring like an egg about to hatch. My heart skipped a beat, and it began to crack.

The buildings fell in clusters, dropping down with neat precision as lightning forked between the original stone foundations and their walls. The strain was too much for some, and more than one tower collapsed with a squeal of twisting metal and splintering brick. For the most part we landed safely: the government building we ourselves stood in gave nothing but a simple lurch. The last huts fell home as the final droplets from a pitcher.

Moments of silence passed, until one shout sounded. Then another. And another. Soon the entire city was screaming in jubilation, laughter and tears mingling as the people bounded into the streets.

Behind us, the portal waited.

As beautiful and terrifying as our journey was, I never thought I would miss

the stink of the Hive so much.

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The door creaked as I pushed it open. I had been hesitant to come, anxious that I might face her again. Or worse, I wouldn't see her at all.

As I entered Mebbeth looked up from her bed, her face ashen as if she were gravely ill. As I watched, creases spread across the folds her face like cracks and her gray eyes flickered, as if having trouble focusing on me.

"Mebbeth, are you all right?" I knelt down next to the layers of woven mats she used as a bed. The air smelled dusty. The medicinal scent of the drying herbs had turned stale.

"Aye..." She smiled weakly. Her voice was scratchy, as if trying to force its way past layers of dust. When she spoke, it was like an echo. "I have... a little longer..."

"Mebbeth..." I took her hand in mine. It was cold and dry, and flecks of her skin fell away and clung to my palm, "did you **know** you were Ravel?"

She took a deep breath... her words came slowly, her voice rattling in her throat. "Mayhap... Mebbeth has forgotten herself many times over... I have dreamed that I was someone else..." Each word was heavier than the last, as if centuries of weight were pressing down on them. Her body seemed to shift slightly, as if wanting to **relax**, let go.

"How could you not know who you are?"

"How is it **ye** do not know yerself?" Mebbeth licked her lips. "Many things... even bits of the self... they fall through memory's cracks, shadows of things forgotten, these memory thing-pieces, maybe bad... maybe good."

"But why Mebbeth? Why the disguise when you could have been Ravel again?"

"Here, in this place, all I did was the mendin' of things and bodies, settin' bones, deliverin' babes... in all these things, I was content." She sighed. "As for being that **other**, that Ravel..." She licked her lips again. "I think... ye take for granted what a comfort it would be, oft times, to misplace a memory or

two."

"I wasn't sure if you would be here, Mebbeth, after what happened..."

Mebbeth nodded - every movement was pained. "Aye, my precious one..." She winced as she took a breath. "Seeing ye here... it is like an echo. Little time remains... the threads, these Ravels... they are unraveling as we speak."

"Are you in pain?"

She nodded. "Yes... yet it is the irony which hurts the most..." She gave a sickly smile. "An act of kindness, thrice repaid... it is the way of the Planes that my few acts of kindness should be the death of me." She laughed softly. "Yet I have no regrets..."

"I have questions, Mebbeth. I need to know who **did** this to you. Can you t--"

She held up her hand to silence me. "Precious man... I would have ye hear me, this last time..."

"Mebbeth, there's not much **time**..."

"Precious man..." She sighed. "All's I wished to do was set the Lady free of her Cage... for ye, all's I wished for ye was to **live**... and for me daughter, I..." She sighed. "There is a saying on the Planes... that a hag's kindness is crueler... than her hate, and poisons all it touches..."

"I'm sorry things turned out as it did. If I could have saved you, I --"

"I am dying now..." She blinked her rheumy eyes. "My end... it's traveling from all of time's directions, all of Ravel's threads are unraveling..." She coughed. "Yet..." Her gray eyes locked upon mine. "Mayhap not all is lost... one of my black-barbed seeds from the maze... did ye bring one with ye?"

"Yes. Here."

"Ah..." She took the seed gingerly, and she slipped it into her graying locks. "So the Unity-of-Rings is served..." With a flickering glance, she raised her hand and beckoned me to come closer.

She whispered something softly under her breath, then clasped my head in

her hands and placed a paper-thin kiss upon my forehead. I closed my eyes as her lips touched my skin...

"May the Planes receive you kindly, Mebbeth."

She sighed, long and slow as her chest fell for the last time. Little by little her skin flaked away, drying up and shedding like autumn leaves before crumbling into dust. I sat beside what remained, the closest thing I'd had to a mother.

That afternoon, one more name was chiseled on the black obelisk before the Mortuary.

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Those who look forward tend to prepare for their own deaths. They purchase a plot, visit the gravesite to check the view. In a way what I was doing wasn't much different.

It would be a while yet before I stepped through that portal. My visits to the Mortuary were brief, merely testing the waters of what I was about to do. The smell of incense greeted me like an old friend. Then the sharp, cold fumes of formaldehyde cut through the sweet smoke as I ascended the staircase. It brought back old memories. Strange to think of this as home, but it was the closest I've ever had to one.

*Always a place I could reliably come back to,* I thought wryly.

"So... you return once again. Have your memories left you as they have so many times, Restless One?" Dhall took a rasping breath, then broke out in a fit of coughing. Despite the wet hacking his quill never blotted the page he had been writing on.

"No, Dhall," I smiled softly, and he returned with a gaze that spoke of his weariness with the world, "You've always said I would return here... that it's the way of all things flesh and bone."

"For what purpose?"

"To thank you for saving me so many times, old friend. Now I know what I have to do to break this cycle. I've found information as to where my

mortality has been trapped, and soon my journey will be at an end."

"As is mine," he murmured, "Soon... very soon I will meet the embrace of oblivion."

I nodded. In a way, Dhall had been waiting for this longer than I had.

"We are all dying, Restless One. Where others struggle some accept. If I could muster hope I would wish you peace," he coughed, lips wet with phlegm. Dhall paused, looking up and gazing out at my friends, "And if I could lament I would mourn for your companions. You have condemned them, as you have condemned others before."

His tone was flat and unaccusing, stating simple fact.

"Deionarra..." I murmured. Unconsciously I clutched my chest.

Dhall nodded.

"She spoke to me of a prophecy... that I would meet enemies three. Creatures of Evil, Good, and Neutrality that have been warped by the Planes," Were they Ravel, I wondered, and Trias? They **seemed** to fit the pattern. If truly they did I had one foe left, one I knew nothing about...

"She spoke to you?" Dhall's voice dropped to a whisper. "Are the fevers upon you, Restless One? She has reached the True Death and passed well beyond your reach."

"She spoke to me, Dhall. Her spirit resides here."

Dhall slowly drew a semicircle in the air front of him with a finger. "This is an ill omen, Restless One. It would be best if you merely dreamed the conversation... yet it bodes ill if you did not."

"I didn't come to speak of omens, Dhall. I wanted to ask if you knew anything about the Fortress of Regrets and its master."

For a long while Dhall stared at me, then shook his head, "You seek the forbidden, Restless One."

"My existence is an aberration. I **am** the forbidden."

Dhall wheezed, clutching his chest. I waited patiently for him to catch his breath, and when he looked up to me again his eyes were cold and dreary.

"The records we Dustmen keep have noted little of it. All we know is that it is ancient, that it is the nest of countless tortured souls, flitting through the shadowed halls like wasps..." he coughed, pulling a rag from his robes. It came back yellow with sputum and speckled with red. "Two hundred years ago the Doomguard planned an assault on the inner sanctum. Three of their Nether Ships could not breach the walls, and nothing remained of the assault to tell exactly what happened."

There was little more Dhall could say, and we left unsatisfied.

We walked through the embalming rooms, the only sound aside from the occasional groan from a zombie was that of our footsteps. It was a cold, hard sound... hauntingly rhythmic in what would otherwise be silence. Only occasionally would I see the gray swish of a Dustman robe, gliding past archways and behind columns like the trails of a ghost.

"Hey!"

I spun around quickly, whipping out my dagger. Annah and Dak'kon followed suit. Nothing but zombie workers. The whole chat with Dhall had left me unsettled if I was this jittery.

Morte had been the one to speak up, and he had just floated over to one of the zombies, "Chief, check out this one."

"Not this again."

"Naw, chief. **Look.** I think we know this guy."

I leaned in. His features had withered, with flesh pickled and gray-blue with preservatives. Yet there was something about the arch of that chin, the remaining tufts of those brows that did seem familiar. The number "331" had been chiseled into his skull and his eyes and lips were stitched closed. A gaping hole had been torn in his throat, and he smelled foul.

My eyebrows furrowed in curiosity. I leaned in, whispering in the soft murmurs of the dead. The words were dry and creaked with age, but the

zombie's head creaked up in recognition. Those who weren't practiced in the Stories-Bones-Tell would never be able to recognize that sliver of consciousness that remained.

"Wh-wh..." The zombie was awkwardly getting his voice back, and he sounded alarmed. "Who's there?! Answer me!"

"Can you not see me?"

"Blind I am, in death as I was in life... now answer me. Who are you?" He calmed down a bit on hearing me, and the voice was familiar.

"Who are **you**?"

"I..." The zombie became silent. "...my name... has fled me. I... can no longer remember who I am."

*I cradle her body, pressing my hand to her side to keep the girl from bleeding out. A dark red stain pools beneath her, staining the sky-blue dress. I click my tongue... what an annoyance she is. Cost a small fortune to get something so nicely embroidered yet cut for travel, and she had ruined it with her own clumsiness. Damn girl's useless in battle. This would never be worth it if she dies before I need her to.*

*"The last of them are dead," our companion reports, that hood obscuring his face. Damn fine thing that he's blind as a bat. I'd learned to school my features to look as calm as possible, but with him that control slips frequently and I find myself grimacing. I can never fully trust someone I can't look in the eye.*

*"My love..." she murmurs in my arms.*

*"Shh, it's all right," I wave at the man standing over us until I realize he can't see my gesture. Tch. Another one of those slip-ups.*

*"We'll need some blood charms to heal her up. Good work with the guards there..."*

"...Xachariah?" I murmured.

"Wha... you!" The zombie seemed shocked, but gladdened. "By the Lady's

Gaze..." His tone took on a sense of wonder. "Aren't you **dead**, cutter?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I am a stable hand in the most lifeless place of all. Be it that I could pass beyond the Eternal Boundary and have a Plane to call my home, but much of my soul was squandered, and now I am here."

"What can you tell me about our travels?"

He cocked his head, "Why? Have you forgotten yourself?"

"In a manner of speaking... yes, but I know that we were companions once."

"A motley crew we were... a half-dead man who couldn't get himself penned in the dead-book if he tried -- so ugly all the Powers of death wouldn't take 'em -- a wailing advocate's daughter, a gith exile, a bobbing jackal-tongued skull, and a half-sodden blind archer like myself."

"My love..." "Wailing advocate's daughter?"

"That feisty chit-who-would-be-a-soldier swore she'd follow you to Baator and back, and by the Powers, she was so addled by the thought of you without her she did just that. Cared little for me or the gith, and a bare little it was. She was wild with heart poison for you, she was, proof she was barmy. I don't understand what the womenfolk saw in yer scarred mug, but it set their blood a-boil," Xachariah chuckled, "She was some rich scut from the Clerk's Ward, and you needed something from her, and the only price was that she came with you."

I winced. Deionarra's fate had eaten at me for so long. The things I'd seen, the snatches of memory I'd experienced, that terrible encounter with her Sensory Stone that left me crumpled on the ground and weeping in Grace's arms... what did my past incarnation plan for the poor girl? "What did I want from her?"

"One of the darks I never did bring to light, cutter. Perhaps you tell me?"

"Sorry, Xachariah," I sighed, "You said you were a blind archer?"

"That I was. You truly have forgotten, haven't you? All men see with more

than their eyes, cutter... some of them better than others. I sensed the hearts of my foes - **your** foes - and my arrows always struck true. Ah, those were some times..."

"And what about Morte and Dak'kon?"

"Wait, what? That pickled meatsack better not be talking crap about me, chief."

"That filthy-talking skull was hankering for a bruising, so it was!" Xachariah hissed, "Always smarting off, it was, and making fun of my condition!"

"Uh, he says he misses you, Morte." I was pretty sure that sounded convincing.

"Hmm. Guess we got the wrong deader after all."

"And the grim-lookin' gith..." Xachariah continued, "unfriendly and silent, like all their kind. Didn't trust that gith a lick, I didn't. See, cutter, them spindly giths care only about two things: keeping out of slavery and killing them squid-headed illithids. Everything else is just lower down the slope, and he didn't give a damn about any of us other than you. Always on guard, even when you wanted to be alone to scribble in that damn journal..."

"My journal? What about it? What happened to it?"

"That scrapbook that you'd stitched together outta yer own flesh and had more pages than I had years in my life! Good fortune indeed if you've lost that ghoulish book! Always scribbling in it, you were, and it smelled a fright. It was like you were afraid that at any moment someone would take it away... you wrote in it 'til skin tore from your fingers and I wondered if you were trying to spill out your brain box through your pen. Sometimes we would hold up for days while you wrote. I hated that infernal book. It seemed to hold you by the heart, and not in a kind way. The last I heard of it, cutter, it was in your possession. If you don't carry it, I don't know where on the Planes it could be."

Damn. "What led you to this state, anyway?"

His voice dropped, as if ashamed. "It's a hard path following in your footsteps, cutter, and many terrible things did I see. I took to drink, and

became half-sodden with the stuff. Once, when I was sodding drunk, I signed my body off to the Dusties. Fate decided ta kick me when I was down, and I died shortly afterward."

"What can you tell me about my previous life?"

"Well... you were a strange one, always suspicious and watching for something... reckon somebody like you had got enough enemies in yer lifetimes. And there was no denying that anybody who messed with you ended up in the black chapters of the dead book."

I nodded, "Anything else? Any specifics..."

"You could be damnably ruthless, too... like when you made me sign that contract, or abandoned that one mewling chit on Avernus. We had a Balor of a time, as well," he laughed... a creaking, dry sound, "None of us ever even entertained the notion to jump ship on your watch, son."

"I... see. What else? Anything you could tell me would help."

"At your core, you looked at what happened to you like taking territory in a war; everything was like a battle to you, and you were the most ruthless bastard I ever near met. Naught else mattered except for solving that goal. Poor Deionarra with her sobbing and pleading with you didn't sway you none, the gith warning you about your strategies, and poor Xachariah just trying to hold on when we hit the Planes. You were tough like you couldn't die, but we were only human. Now I guess we're all in the dead book... or in and out of it, so to speak.

"You left something when you left us, cutter... you left Dak'kon without a master, and the skull without a friend. Me? You stabbed something so deep inside me, it never came out when I was alive. Caused my blood to run cold, it did, that thing sitting like a lump of lead in my chest."

"What is it?"

"I... I don't know. But it changed me, somehow. Changed my insides. I was already dying when you put it in me, so I wasn't too concerned about it at the time."

"Can I have it back?"



Xachariah shrugged, "It's buried pretty deep, but I have an idea of where it is. Without a scalpel and some directions from me, you won't be able to get it out. You got a scalpel?"

I unsheathed my dagger, "I've got this."

"Then open me up half a hand's width below the sternum, and feel around for it."

I slit the stitches of his body cavity and reached in. His torso was surprisingly wet and cold.

"A little more to the left... a little more..." My hand closed on an object, and I pulled out a zombie liver.

"By the Lady's gaze! Apologies, cutter... I thought them Dustmen took all those organs outta us before pulling us out of the Dead Book. Give it another go. Maybe it's to the right."

I winced and stuck my hand in again. Morte made a retching sound and Annah's face twisted in disgust.

"Don't suppose you want to experience this, Grace?" I grunted.

She laughed. It was a musical sound.

"There ya go... now go a little to the right and back...a little more..." there was something hard and cold inside, slightly larger than I expected. "I think that's it. Pull it out."

I twisted my hand and tugged it free of his body. His gauze-wrapped fingers curled around it, feeling its hard contours. "That's it all right. Huh. Bigger than I thought it'd be. Is that... what is that? Feels like... a heart."

The blackened, fist-sized object I held looks more like a lump of burned charcoal than Xachariah's heart. It is extremely heavy for its size, and cracks ran across its surface... it looks like it might break in two at any moment. Handling it left strange rust-colored streaks on my hands that wouldn't come off.

Yech. I pulled a rag from my pack and wiped my hands clean. Always good to pack a load of rags for just this purpose with the places I go and the things I end up doing.

"What's it like being a zombie, anyway?"

"It's honest work..." The stitching came undone from Xachariah's mouth and the flesh around his lips peeled back in a smile. "...I care little for it."

We chatted for a little while longer on smaller things, telling him of my own recent travels. He seemed to find comfort in meeting someone familiar once again, but eventually the day had been stretched to its limit, "I have to go. Farewell, Xachariah."

"Before you go: I need you to do me a slight favor, cutter."

"What is it?"

His voice dropped, as if ashamed. "I made some mistakes, some damned bad ones to be sure, and one of my biggest was signing that Dustman contract. If I hadn't been so sodden with bub, I never woulda done it. I regret it, and I was hoping you could set it aright."

"How?"

"Way I reckon, this body's gonna last a long time... and every day's too long to me. Couldja maybe gut me again, cutter... for old time's sake? The thought of spending another batch of years here in the Mortuary with these whitefaces is a mighty cold one. Can you see fit to put me back in the Dead Book where I belong?"

"If that is your wish..."

I look around, and certain that no one was watching I gutted him. Xachariah fell to the floor with a heavy thud. There was a faint hiss from the body, and the chest heaved once. Then, with a faint rattle, the corpse fell silent.

I spun a web of fire over the body, cremating it on the spot. "Rest in peace, Xachariah."

## Chapter 108

"What do you know about healing memories, Grace?"

She sat next to me on the bed, hands folded on her lap. The tea on the small serving table was beginning to cool beyond what was palatable.

Fall-From-Grace knew that I didn't ask her over for a social visit, though she did take a few sips just to be polite. Strange to think how we return so quickly to giving these creature comforts such little regard, after all we had been through.

"You have something on your mind, then?"

"The problem is more that I **don't**," I fiddled with a biscuit. I seemed to have a habit of busying my hands when things get tense. Usually it'd be a caress of my dagger, today it was picking at my food. Was this something of mine, I wondered? Or a quirk of a past life, floating to the surface like bubbles of decay in a fetid pond? "I want to remember Deionarra."

Grace's gaze wandered from mine, and her eyes traced my scars. A finger brushed my chest, sliding along the contour of my collarbone. She didn't need to ask permission: we had gotten to know one another too well to care for such formalities. Trust was what afforded us such little intimacies. And Grace was a healer, after all.

"Some believe we Sensates live a soft life," Grace said quietly, but her voice was clear as glass and cut the awkward silence, "That we whittle away the days basking in the pleasures provided by our Sensoriums and theatres, or our dining halls. It is true that some do." She gave me a look that told what she thought of that. "But the totality of the multiverse is not measured in contentment."

She took her hand away. "We both know this well. Your experiences have left their mark on you, and the scars run deep. There is only so much that I can heal, but I do not believe that is the question you must ask yourself."

"You think we shouldn't try, then?"

"Some would say that your amnesia is a blessing. That the dead should lie buried."

"I suspect those people aren't Sensates." *Or Dustmen*, I thought wryly.

"A Sensate knows his limitations," Grace said, then smiled softly, "I will support any endeavor you wish, but this is not something to commit to casually. Even the most committed Sensate would think twice before drinking poison so that he might sample its taste."

We both remembered that night she spent, cradling me as the tears fell one by one. What I saw in Deionarra's sensory stone had nearly broken me, with three strands of consciousness knotted into a ball of need and cruelty, and the helpless, unheard screams of anguish against both.

"Deionarra's name has been carved across your mind," she said, "Deep enough that they scratch against the soul. The wounds still bleed when you hear it spoken."

"We don't have any choice, Grace. There's so little time." Preparations had to be made, final matters wrapped up and training done before we left. A pack of troubles roaming together with such collective ferocity that I found it nearly impossible to pick them off one by one.

"Strange thing to say, for an immortal." Her eyes twinkled, and I almost laughed too.

"Powers above, I don't know what to think anymore. Sometimes I think time is my enemy." It was true. Often I envied the warehouse worker or city guard, who could pare his days into slivers like a loaf of bread. Made for easier swallowing compared to the yawning stretches of delving and searching, the storms of events at which I was too often the center, "If we are to do this we need to do it now, Grace. The Fortress is waiting for me, and everything I delay, everything I don't **know** could hurt me. I've lost too much knowledge already."

She stared at me for a long moment, then nodded. Grace stood in front of me, placing a hand on each cheek. Her laquered nails were smooth against my puckered skin, and I could smell the spiceapple perfume she had dabbed on her wrists. It was soothing.

"So many fissures," she murmured after a moment, "So much lost in the cracks and crevices."

"Help me find what I can, Grace."

She nodded, and the warmth from her hands sent a tingle through my scalp...

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My knifework had been swift and practiced, and only a few spots of blood mar my hands. The bodies lie motionless at my feet: clean kills, merciful really, and nothing brutish about it. Nothing to make her afraid, and no other voices to protest and fuel her doubts. In the dark she wouldn't see the rotted teeth or warty faces of the thugs: no clean Clerk's Ward rogues were these. She flinches when I look at her.

"You are unharmed?" I ask simply.

"Y-yes, sir," she stands and brushes off her skirts, and her voice steadies, "You have my gratitude."

"And not your name?" My voice is hardly rude when I ask... simply flat; teasing in its disinterest.

Her eyes widen slightly, "Deionarra. My name is Deionarra. And yours?"

"I regret that I have no name to give," How cultured I sound, so far in contrast to this attire that could be described as savage, at best.

"I would know the name of my savior, good sir."

"As I said, I have none. I do not remember who I am," I finish cleaning my knife, "I should escort you to your home. No one should be traveling Sigil at this hour," my voice lowers, sounding slightly bitter, "Something I wish I had learned long ago."

"You have amnesia?" She pauses as if embarrassed at such a personal question, then looks to the corpses, "We should wait for the Harmonium. They will require a full investigation into the matter."

I grit my teeth. Just come along you stupid COW! No, no. I must remain patient. She'll be on my leash and lapping from my hand if only I remain

calm.

"If you must report to the Hardheads, do so from the safety of your home after I leave. They won't be gentle on you if they believe the two of us are associates," I sigh in a way that seems innocent and dejected, as if I had borne by share of unjust accusations, "And if you must report me, my rooms are at the Nimbic Thrall, in the Hive."

"I would never bring trouble on the head of my savior," Deionarra insists quickly, her fingers brushing my arm. I pull away: not rudely, but flinching as if I can't bear to be touched.

Deionarra murmurs a hasty apology, then looks up to me as we walk. I had found her home weeks ago, and I have to make sure I let her lead. She may be a bit slow of wits, but the blood of an oracle still runs in her veins after all. So many precautions had been taken to not rouse her suspicions...

"Your scars... do they hurt?" she asks softly, shyly.

The question had been asked so many times that I have little patience for it. I swallow the sharp response that wells up by instinct, and allow a long, pregnant pause before I answer. "No. Let us be gone, Deionarra."

The corpses of the thugs cool behind us. Filthy rats they may have been, but Hive rats never suspect betrayal when I flash good coin.

My stomach turns. My chest aches. Was that me, that soulless wight that cloaks himself in the flesh of a man, just feigning vulnerability to lead her on?

The memories came in slivers, bits and pieces that had fallen between the cracks...

"But there must be something. My father is an Advocate... he has friends in high places in the Fraternity of Order. The great libraries of Sigil contain knowledge drawn from all across the planes..."

"No, Deionarra," I say firmly, "Please understand. I know what I am doing."

"I only wish to help," her voice lowers, and her eyes are downcast.

Gently I cup her chin, and she lifts her eyes to meet my gaze. A lily-white hand rests on mine, smooth as cream. I allow it to remain there.

"I have done everything to earn your trust, my love," Deionarra's breath is warm on my wrist, "I remember how you hated being touched when we first met."

It is this way with all women: the need to nurture, that instinct to heal. That desire from the heart to change the nature of a man. How easy it is to fuel those passions with a smile, or a forlorn glance that speaks of hurts still moldering in a shallow grave.

"All right, Deionarra," I sigh, "All right. You can help, but it must be on my terms."

She laughs with relief, a simpering sound.

It disgusts me, but I need her.

I clung to the sensations around me to stay sane: Grace's scent, so sweetly perfumed. The warmth of her hands.

But there was that itch again in the back of my mind, the odd ache of a newly-discovered open sore. I shuddered as I embraced it.

Deionarra spins to face me in shock with I open the door, hands going up to her breast as if wanting to protect herself. Yet she holds herself shyly, trying not to appear defensive lest it stoke my anger again. The bruise marring her cheek is hidden well with makeup... an advocate's daughter is trained to look her best after all. Yet she cannot hide that puffy flesh that forces her to squint from that eye.

"Deionarra? May I come in?" I ask, trying my best to sound chastened.

She shifts ambivalently, trying to formulate an answer.

I turn slowly as if to leave.

"Wait!" she calls out, reaching out with one hand. Her voice is pleading and unsure, but she's wedded her heart to me for so long that she no longer knew how to say no.

"Please... please enter."

I approach her slowly, hunched over and seeming hesitant to meet her gaze. I'd pored through enough of the Sensory Stones to learn what guilt feels like and how to feign it by now. What useful little devices they are.

"Deionarra," I murmur, kneeling at her feet, "Please. I know I am not worthy, but still I beg of you to forgive me. It was wrong to lash out at you. I was brash. I am brash."

I rest my forehead on her knee, and with a casual motion dabbed my fingers beneath my eyes. The fumes from the pepper oil sting, and I begin to tear up.

"I wasn't angry with you, Deionarra. I could never be angry with you. I was angry with myself, with what I am and what I can't find. I've been frustrated and hurt for so many years... until I found you."

I sniff, then rub my eyes with my clean hand, "I've changed, Deionarra. I can change, but only if I'm with you. I will go if you send me away, but please. Please don't condemn me to return to what I once was. Please tell me that we can move past this."

And then I feel it... her hand stroking my dreadlocks, fingers tenderly brushing the woven beads. They click at her passing touch.

"My love," she murmurs, and I can hear her swallowing the tears, "I forgive. I will always forgive."

Striking her had been a calculated risk, one that I only took when I was certain she would cling tighter for it. It wasn't a simple test of loyalty... I knew I already had that from her. No, I needed to see how well she would lie to herself to maintain that loyalty.

Now I know that she would blame herself rather than me when I dash my knuckles against her cheek... and she would do so again with worse.

Another string tied. Another bond woven. She'll follow where I lead now, write off my transgressions as the product of a cruel upbringing, forgive what insults I bear against her. I force a choked sound, let my voice crack. The praises of gratitude spill from my lips like jewels, and I swallow hard so

that I might speak.

"I will never hurt you again..."

Of all the lies he'd spoken, the last was the cruelest. Beneath the veil he had terrible plans for her. I wanted to stop, but I pressed Grace's hands to my head tight, urging myself to go on. I knew that if I tried to wipe the wetness from my cheeks that Grace would pull away and try to comfort me, and I wouldn't be able to bear going under again.

"I have never left Sigil before."

I look up at her from our meal, an oyster inches from my lips. "Really? You always struck me as the curious type. Didn't you ever hunger for real experiences outside of the Cage?"

"Of course I did," Deionarra murmurs, drawing a spoon through her soup. She sighs bitterly, "But father has always worried about my constitution. I've told you how often I took ill as a child. Every month he would send for a healer."

She smiles then, "But now I feel... revitalized."

"He's sheltered you for too long, Deionarra. I'm surprised he hadn't had you stuffed and placed on the mantel so he'd know where you were at all times."

"He's been like this ever since mother died. He worked so hard to save her life, to try to change the stars when she first foretold her own death," for a moment she seems sympathetic, "He must feel that I'm all he has left of her."

"Exactly. He doesn't love you for who you are, Deionarra," I say, subtly twisting her words, "When he looks at you he sees only what he's lost. The man is clingy. He's needy. So long as he's got you by the hem of your dress you'll never reach your full potential." I'd already gotten reports of the heated arguments from their household. The words were hers, the sharp accusations, but I'd been planting the ideas in her head for weeks now.

"So tomorrow then, at First Rise?" her words are softer now, dreamier.

I remain silent then, and look at her sadly, "No, Deionarra. You can't come

with me."

She blinks in surprise, "But- I had always assumed..."

"I'm sorry. It's much too dangerous to go where I travel. I want you to flourish, Deionarra... but you must do this with a better man than I am," my voice drops, "I've been selfish to want to drag you through razor and fang for the love of you."

"But- I can help!" she presses. Her words falter slightly, "Already I've seen visions, flickers of what lies ahead for you, my love. If you do find your stolen mortality, I see my hand in it. You cannot send me away!"

"My fate may be more fluid than you realize," I say, sipping my wine, "Another thing to learn about me is that sedatives simply don't work on my body. Neither does alcohol, for that matter, or most poisons."

She looks at me in confusion for a moment, then her eyes shift to her wine glass. Horrified realization dawns on her face even as her eyelids begin to droop, "But... my love... I would die for you..."

"I know. And that is why you can never come with me."

I stand, circling over to Deionarra so I can carry her to her bed. My flesh is warm against hers: I want my touch to be the last thing she experiences before she drifts off to sleep. It will be soothing now, but the memory will be sharp and hot, burning into her mind like a brand fresh from the flames, "Become more than what you are, Deionarra. Remember me well and, I pray, forgive me."

I leave her unconscious on her pillows, and smile to myself as I clean up and leave. Everything is in place.

I was close. I could feel it. Even though I knew it wasn't the case, I prayed that Deionarra never left with him. I begged the Powers that she'd never followed...

I turn to the woman standing in the door, still in her silken blue dress, if slightly rumpled. The pack she carries is in stark contrast to her formal wear. The girl must've rushed right out the moment she'd woken up and realized I wasn't there.

I let my eyes widen and my jaw drop, as if she'd caught me in time.

"You... you man!" she hisses, stalking over in a fury, "How dare you dose me! How dare you leave me behind like a sack of unwanted grain!"

"Deionarra..."

"I know what I saw in my visions, my love," a fire is in her now, and she stabs me with the words. It takes some effort to not furrow my eyebrows in frustration... I'll have to break this newfound willfulness from her later, "I saw myself guiding you to your mortality. I saw myself at your side when you died, if you ever die. If your victory is ever to come to pass, you will need me."

My arms wrap around her then, and for a moment Deionarra stiffens. "I had lingered too long. I had clung to the hope that you'd wake and that you would be at my side after all. I had- I had ached thinking I'd lost you forever."

The anger melts from her then, and soon she is the meek, demure girl I'd always known, "You will always have me, my love..."

I sigh, contented, and she takes the cue to return the embrace. It is fortunate that her gift is so limited. If things go according to plan, she would never predict the dagger I would place in her breast. She will see much more clearly once the bonds of mortality have been broken.

Her kisses are hot with passion, and I return the favor knowing that very soon, I would no longer have to put up with her wailing...

By the time Grace pulled away, I was already screaming.

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*"Iannis," there was always a rumble when I spoke, but today my voice came out in a dry croak, "I discovered what happened to Deionarra."*

*Iannis didn't seem to have heard me for a moment. When he spoke again, his words came slowly. "Tell me. I must know."*

*"I am responsible for your daughter's death. I murdered her long ago."*

The air seemed to grow stale and empty. A chill pricked at my skin as Iannis stared at me in silence for a moment, until the shock trickled away. Then his voice broke. "How... **how** could you do such a terrible act?" His hands were outstretched, pleading. The wrinkles about his eyes deepened as his face screwed tight in agony.

"It was not I..." I stepped away from him, swallowing hard, "It was another part of me. My existence until now has been a series of incarnations, some good, some evil. He did it for his own purposes, and I don't know what they were. I am sorry, Iannis."

"You..." Iannis seemed to be trying to make sense of my words. "Why?!"

I shook my head, "I don't know, Iannis, I swear. But her spirit lives on still, trapped along the Eternal Boundary."

"She **lives**?"

"In... in a way. I'd spoken to her when I first awoke in the Mortuary."

"That..." the blood drained from Iannis' face, "She must be set free!"

"I have already sworn that I would try to set her free... or join her there."

"If you have any decency at all, spare my daughter. There is nothing that can be done to change what has happened, so I ask that you allow her soul to rest in peace. I will find some way to forgive what you have done if you do this for me."

"I promise... I **vow** I shall allow your daughter to rest peacefully."

"Very well, then," Iannis' voice was dry and spent. He leaned over his table, bearing the weight on his hands, no longer having the strength to stand on his own. When he spoke again he stared into the distance coldly, "Now leave. I wish to be alone with my thoughts."

## Chapter 109

We spent our remaining days training and preparing. At night we scoured the bowels of Undersigil, hunting the strange beasts that bored tunnels in the city's belly like worms through rotten wood. In the morning we worked through the connections of our factions to acquire magic and weaponry. In the afternoons, we browsed. For some things you just needed to go to the market.

"I thought you said this place is supposed to be an exotic pet store."

"No, I said it **was** an exotic pet store. The business went under, and now they sell magical components."

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Fell raised his pale eyebrows when he read my skin for the last time.

<Many stories have you gained,> he signed in a string of rebuses, <Tales dark and cruel as well as beautiful. I can pen them into your flesh if you like.>

"Might as well, Fell. This may be the last time I see you."

The noxious stench of iron and sulfur from the Lower Ward seemed to cling to my mouth, but a small, sour pear helped clean the tang from my palate.

"We're getting married!" Karina said, delighted, "Corvus proposed just last week! Thank you, thank you so much for introducing us! To think he never bothered to speak with me since he thought I had a long list of suitors!"

Corvus grinned, "Aye, if it weren't for you I wouldn't have met this sweet girl. I'd love for you to come to our wedding."

"Ah I'm afraid not. I'm afraid I'm going... traveling. I probably won't see you again, but I wish you two the best of luck." I smiled. It would hardly be appropriate to tell them I was working towards a funeral instead. Idly I thumbed through the bag of goods and charms I'd just purchased.

Corvus sighed, "Well best of luck to you, then. You're a good man, cutter."

~~~~~

The creature in front of me smelled of blood and rust. Sulfur billowed hot from its braziers, ash flecked the metal walkway. It'd breached the barriers between planes, sundered worlds. Countless armies have broken their spears against its fortress.

"Coaxmetal, do you know of a citadel called the Fortress of Regrets?"

IT IS A PLACE OF SHADOWS. A FORTRESS NOT EVEN THIS TOWER CAN BREACH.

"Do you know anything more about it?"

IT IS A MEMORIAL THAT HAS FORGOTTEN ITSELF. IT NOW DECAYS IN DARKNESS, SLOWLY DYING AMONG THE SKIES OF THE NEGATIVE MATERIAL PLANE.

"What of its denizens? Its defenses?"

Coaxmetal's arm continued to creak as it hammered at the twisted metal beneath it. THE CITADEL OF WHICH YOU SPEAK NEEDS NO AID IN ITS DESTRUCTION. ENTROPY IS IN ITS BONES, LAMENTATIONS IN ITS MORTAR. IT IS NONE OF MY CONCERN.

I sighed and stepped away, feeling the black-edged blade that Coaxmetal had forged for me long ago. At least I had gotten this from him.

HOLD. BEFORE YOU DEPART, THERE IS SOMETHING YOU MUST DO.

I blinked, "What?"

SUNDER THIS PRISON. FREE ME. MY PURPOSE CANNOT BE FUFILLED IN THIS CAGE.

"How could I free you?"

GIVE ME THE PLANAR CUBE YOU CARRY. IT CAN FREE ME FROM THIS PLACE.

"I can't give that up."

IT IS THE DOOR THAT WILL ALLOW THIS TOWER TO LEAVE THIS PLACE. GIVE TO ME THE PLANAR CUBE.

"I'm not giving it to you. I cannot allow you to be free. The Planes do not need any more chaos and blood-letting."

ORDER HAS SET ITS CHAINS AROUND YOU. YOU ARE MY ENEMY AND THE ENEMY OF ALL THAT DIES. YOU SHALL BE BARRED FROM THIS TOWER UNTIL ETERNITY ENDS.

"If that is what must be, then that is what must be. Farewell."

~~~~~

The Modron engineer clicked and whirred as it processed my orders.

"Is that understood?"

"By your command, Director." It bobbed, giving a **whirr** and **click** in confirmation.

"Fantastic."

~~~~~

Grace wouldn't keep us waiting for long, but I wouldn't mind lingering in the perfumed atrium of the Brothel for a while longer. The branches of the tree seemed to waver as if caressed by an unseen wind, and as usual tea and cakes were complimentary.

"She died in my arms, Kesai-Serris."

The exotic gray-skinned prostitute sniffed, wiping her nose, "I think- I believe I felt it when it happened. A sharp dream of... of her, shrieking, voice cold and sharp as a knife. And then nothing."

"The planes have been crueler to your mother than most realize. Part of her was good to me. There was a remnant of Ravel that was kind, generous,

nurturing. No one's irredeemable."

She leaned against my chest, and I put a consoling arm around her.

"I think I believe you," Kesai-Serris sniffled.

"Visit the Mortuary sometime, the black obelisk, and ask for Old Mebbeth the healer."

~~~~~

The Hive merchant was just opening up his shop when we visited him in the morning. "Ah, cutter! Such a long while since you graced my stands. I'd heard of a scarred-up man wandering the Clerk's Ward as if he were familiar with the place. I do hope my humble offerings will still please you." He smiled graciously, waving a hand over his delicacies.

"Of course. Anything special you have for me?"

"Ah certainly, certainly! Today, a shipment of Golden Apples from Hesperis. Most rare, and it's said that they grant longevity and wisdom to those that sample them. I make no such grandiose claim of course, but the flavor is exceptional..."

The coppers clinked into his hand, "Longevity I have little need for, but wisdom is always appreciated." I bit into the apple, and its juices ran down my chin. Nothing had ever tasted so sweet.

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"I should've known you'd be here."

Fresh new gouges scarred Ebb's armor, and pulling the pipestem from his lips he exhaled, letting the wreath of smoke mingle through his thick white beard. "Nice work back there in Curst, friend."

"You seem unusually content for a... revolutionary. I'd expect you to be more upset that your plans had gone awry."

Ebb chuckled, swilling his mug of foul ale, "I was undercover. Triple agent. Harmonium agent, infiltrating the Anarchists, pretending to be a



Harmonium double agent. You've got to think more even more deviously than these berks to get in... and I still wasn't sure if my cover had been blown or not when you sauntered into that warehouse."

I nodded, impressed. "Things worked out for the Harmonium then?"

Ebb laughed, "Better'n we expected. Five cells joined together for the takeover, and every one o' em Anarchs turned stag. Half saw there'd been enough tearing-down, and they've left to help build Curst back up stronger an' more orderly-like than before. The other half had their fill of chaos and fled to Powers know where. I think one o' em decided to be a priest."

I waved to the bartender and ordered some drinks. "A toast then, to the fall of the old, and the rise of the new."

Ebb bellowed with laughter, "There be a fellow here who plays the dulcimer. Once he's back from takin' a piss I say we toss him a few coins, order some food, and celebrate. Life only happens once, after all."

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Finally... The Mortuary. This was where it began. This was where it would end.

I ran a hand along the slab where I'd been born to this world. The stink of formaldehyde and alcohol cutting the air brought back memories, none of them fond. In the distance was the sound of slow-footed shambling, the squelch of organs being pulped and bodies processed.

There was something about the arch in front of us... something hauntingly familiar. A bone-numbing chill blanketed the air between these two black pillars, as if the arch itself bordered on some other, colder space. For some reason, I KNEW this was the portal to the Fortress of Regrets... now all I needed to do is open it.

I gritted my teeth and peeled the skin from my left forearm, as Trias described. Fine scalpels were in abundance in the Mortuary, and though there was surprisingly little pain I clenched my teeth. Fingernails dug beneath the incisions along my flesh; with a wet, tearing sound, I peeled off the strip of skin. The chill between the pillars became stronger, almost hungering, as if the portal has opened a crack...

The exposed muscle and sinew beneath burned at the kiss of dry air. I held the scrap in my hand and stared a moment. Its scarred, gray surface seemed more like a zombie's hide; it feels more like a piece of cured leather than a strip of skin.

With the same scalpel I pricked my index finger, and the many possible regrets swam in my mind: what had happened to my companions, my actions, my past, all the dire events that led up to this point...

"I regret the deaths I've caused, here and across the multiverse."

Before the wound could heal I squeezed forth several drops of blood and scrawled the regret onto the scrap of flesh. My rapid healing forced me to stop often to re-open the cut on my finger and squeeze forth more blood. Several moments later I finished, blood glistening on the scrap of skin... a combination of flesh, blood, and regret.

As I watched the bloody regret dry, a wave of cold washed over me. I looked up; the black pillars to either side of the arch were glowing softly, motes of misty blue light drifting from their sides to form a shimmering curtain between them. Beyond the curtain, I could barely make out a weathered stone causeway leading into darkness.

I licked my lips.

"Everybody ready?"

Nordom clicked, crossbows twirling in his hands. "Query: Received. Response: Nordom is readied and waited. Awaiting to profess further directives."

"Actually, it's 'process'... never mind. Fall-From-Grace?"

"I have come this far, and it would be rude of me to retire before the final hour." She smiled slightly. "Even if you were to ask politely, I would not permit it."

"It seems I have no choice, then... Annah?"

"I..." Annah shivered as another wave of cold emanated from the portal. "If

she goes, I'll go, so I will. I'll not turn stag on yeh here, I won't... 'sides, yeh'd lose yer own head if it weren't attached. Yeh'll need a minder, so yeh will."

I chuckled, "Perhaps so. Dak'kon? You with me?"

His eyes were bright obsidian, his **karach** blade swam and flashed like quicksilver, "Your path is mine."

"Morte? You ready?"

"Eh..." Morte hesitated, glanced at the portal, at me, at the portal again, then gave a rattling sigh. "Look, I'm not going to say **too** much here, but uh... well, there's something I need to tell you..."

"What? C'mon, Morte, we have to be going..."

"Well, it's about where we're going... or eh, actually where... we've... **been**."

"Where we've **been**?' What are you talking about?"

It was so subtle, I almost missed it - Dak'kon's blade flickered, the edge dulling. As I glanced at him, his hands dropped to his sides, as if he was preparing for battle.

Morte stuttered "This... uh, this isn't the FIRST time we've been through this... you see, we've been to this 'Fortress of Regrets' before... though, we... I... didn't know it then."

"So, from the VERY START... you could have TOLD me where the portal was, WHAT the portal key is, WHY I am immortal, WHAT happened to my mortality, AND the fact that it's in this Fortress?! Morte, I'll **KILL** you...!" I was close to foaming at the mouth, and I reached out as if to throttle him, if he'd had a neck.

Morte looked alarmed and dodged, speaking quickly. "No! No! We... I... never KNEW any of that! It's not like you were always the most sharing basher in the Planes! That... that **other** you kept a LOT of the chant to himself, and we didn't even know WHY we were going to this place before or even WHAT this place was! I just know what happened when we GOT there..."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, "And... what happened?"

"Well, we went to this - this FORTRESS, and even before we land foot in this place, we're all SPLIT up, fighting for our lives..." He shuddered. "So the **first** thing I want to tell you is if you're determined to go through with this, there's a good chance that anybody who goes through that portal is going to end up somewhere **far** away from everybody else. Thing is, even split up, we may be your only hope..."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because whatever was waiting in that Fortress for you, chief, it already defeated you once... to this day, I don't know how you managed to survive, but if you fall again, you're going to need someone there to pull you out of that Fortress..."

Annah shifted uncomfortably, but her eyes were steeled with resolve. Grace's hands were folded before her, the picture of serenity.

"Morte, I need you to tell me everything you can about the Fortress... it's important."

"This 'Fortress of Regrets'... it stretches on for LEAGUES, chief. It's a Fortress, but it feels more like a PLANE in itself, all stone, all darkness, and shadows - everywhere, shadows. We go there, and... we better be prepared."

"What happened when we first went there?"

"Chief, I don't know what happened to YOU, but I know what happened to ME... I spent my time running from vault to vault, those shadows crawling all over me, trying to bring me down... then, I just... suddenly, we were 'out,' like someone had pulled us back..."

My eyes flicked over to meet Dak'kon's. "**Know** that I have walked your path many times." Dak'kon spoke slowly, as if measuring each word; his blade had become a misty gray, as if Dak'kon's mind had drifted. "A portion of your path is **known** to me. Five walked the path to the Fortress. Each died their own death."

"But... who were they? How did they die?" even as the words left my lips, shadows of names and faces flicked over my memory.

"I died the death of faith. The skull died the death of courage. The woman died the death of grief. The blind archer died the final and most merciful death, the death of the body. You... you died the death of memory."

"The woman was that chit Deionarra," Morte said quietly, "I never knew the archer..."

Dak'kon's face became grim, "I could not save the woman because it was not your WILL that she be saved. Her grave was dry of tears. No one **knew** to mourn her passing."

"But... why did I not want her saved?"

"Your will was **known** only to you."

"Yeah..." Morte rattled, as if shivering. "Chief, at this Fortress - there's shadows **everywhere**..."

"There was darkness there, and every shadow was Shra'kt'lor." Dak'kon's voice was a whisper, and his eyes bled into a dead black, seeming to stare at something just beyond me. "They are tormented creatures. The wounds in your spirit are **known** to them. They will attack you through them."

"They spoke to me like the Pillar of Skulls..." Morte's voice dropped. "They **knew**..."

Dak'kon shook his head. "The shadows **suffer**. They **know** of torment. They **know** how to torture you with that which has wounded your heart. When you face them, **know** that you face that which has killed you once."

"I can't tell you anymore, chief - except we're bound to be divided as soon as we arrive, it's a HUGE place, and it's crawling with shadows... and somewhere in that Fortress is something more powerful than **any** of us."

"Nothing lives there. The walls are darkness," Dak'kon murmured.

I swallowed, looking into that portal. Its edges were misty and wavered, like teeth gnawing gently at the grim corridor beyond. "All right - before I step through this portal - is there ANYTHING ELSE you feel like sharing that you think might HELP me?"

"Well..." Morte paused. "Yeah, there's one other thing you should know - the YOU I knew before, the YOU that led us here, he wasn't like you. At all."

"What do you mean?"

"The other YOU, he... he didn't care very much for anybody. For anyone. We could have ALL died in the Fortress, and he wouldn't have blinked. So... I just want you to hold on to your differences, because... well, I like this **you** better. A LOT better."

"But that's not all you want to say, is it?"

"No..." Morte paused. "There's one other thing - I may not have liked that **other** you very much, but he was one smart basher - the smartest basher I've ever known; he always had every angle covered. If he died at the Fortress, that means... well..." he trailed off.

"You don't think I can succeed, do you?"

"No..." Morte shook his head. "It's not that, chief. Because it's not always who's smartest, or who's the most powerful, or who's the toughest... sometimes it comes down to who you are and what you **really** want. I mean, once you wanted to become immortal - but in the end, is that **really** what you wanted? Just be sure of what you want this time, is all I'm saying."

"Fair enough. Look, Morte... we haven't really talked about this, but you know you don't have to come with me to this place, right? I'll understand if you don't want to."

"Yeah... I know, chief. And I can't lie to you... I don't want to go... but I will. Just know that once we step through that portal, it isn't going to be just about **you** anymore. This is our lives you're playing with, and we don't get back up when we die."

"It's because of what Ravel said in the maze. And the symbol Fell described for us." Grace's voice was soft, so soft I almost missed it. "Isn't it, Morte?"

"What Ravel said, in the maze - and what Fell said about that symbol, Torment? They say you draw people who suffer to you, like a lodestone." Morte shook his head. "Maybe it's because **you've** been suffering all this

time. Maybe when you end up settling things... maybe **we'll** know a bit of peace, too. Maybe."

I looked over my companions: Morte, who'd hidden his guilt with wit. Dak'kon, his spirit dry as ash when the fires of faith had burned away. Nordom, struggling to see a spectrum of colors where once there'd been only white and black. Grace, who held her secrets in her heart. Annah, who grew up harder than she ever had to be.

"Maybe so. Then... are you with me, Morte?"

"Why not, chief?" Morte shook his head. "I mean, we've gone to every OTHER horrible plane in the multiverse I can think of. Why not take that extra step over the cliff?" He gave a rattling sigh. "Are YOU ready? Because if you're not..."

"I'm ready, Morte. There's nothing more I can do to prepare myself; are you with me?"

"Well, I..." Morte glanced at the shimmering blue curtain. "Sure. Let's go. I mean, any place else has got to be better than rattling our bone-box in the Mortuary, right?"

I took another breath and stepped through the portal.

Interlude

The gates of paradise sing as they clink shut. The bells and golden lights of gilded towers resonate their last, and the warmth of Ileron fades as he buttons his shirt. The portal has closed, the swirling visions of the Nameless One and his entourage are gone. There is only the silence, the chill, and the coy smile of Ileron of Sen-Tau as he steps down from the podium.

"That is all I have to say."

A bleak silence fills the air as Ileron joins the rest of the crowd. Aside from Oudilin who sits in his chair at the side of the stage, the other storytellers mingle in the front row: a disparate new clique, no few of its members glancing at another now and again like strange cats still unsure of one another. Ileron gives the rest a disdainful smirk, and stands on his own.

Moments tick by, one after another. Small motions ripple through the crowd, and each time one moves a hundred eyes flick over to stare, seeking the next storyteller. Yet each time it is simply a barmaid taking mugs, or a sod stepping out to use the latrine. It couldn't be much more now, but patience is wearing thin.

A murmur begins to build, and Oudilin licks his lips. "Where is it?" is the question on everyone's lips. "Where's the next piking journal?"

Finally a figure stands, "It is gone."

His voice is hoary and dry with age, and for a moment it is difficult to identify the one who spoke. But he wades forward, hands folded before him as if in prayer. His cloak is the shimmering blue-black of a beetle's shell, its folds long and flowing. Nails laquered blue-green press tip-to-tip, and two feathered fronds sprout from his odd headpiece. The voice belongs to an elderly man two steps from the grave, but the face that spoke those words is smooth and ageless. Those eyes, green as polished emeralds, bear the self-possession and weight of many years.

Oudilin tenses as if struck, and he sounds hoarse as he speaks, "Gone?"

The figure nods, spreading his arms wide. His long sleeves billow out, and the smell of dry incense fills the tavern. The hundred questions and shouts of outrage threaten to fill the air in angry cacophony, yet the silence of a temple, or perhaps the quiet of a mausoleum, keeps the peace.

"Peace, young deva, and allow me to explain. The final journal of The Nameless One is indeed destroyed, but despite this the tale will be told.

"I am Keeper-of-Forgotten-Thoughts, and I hail from a barren space in the Astral where dreams go to die. Long have I traversed the Silver Sea, collecting ancient knowledge long forgotten: thoughts beautiful and vile, grotesque and sublime, legendary and mundane. These I keep, locked away in bottles and vials for all eternity in my shadowed halls.

"It is my duty to preserve and protect, but never to partake, for a forgotten memory remembered vanishes from my collection, and is lost forever in the minds of men."

"But why not share your collection?" Epetrius asks, shocked, "All that knowledge at your fingertips... what use is it moldering in some library?"

Keeper-of-Forgotten-Thoughts shakes his head, "The minds of men are imperfect. A memory in a mind is battered with time. With age the thought warps and rots like old wood: weathered and bent from without, chewed and moldering from within. Oh many have tried to preserve such things... but the written word decays, errors are introduced when what remains is transcribed or translated. Even your sensory stones can only preserve the essence of the memory, never the soul.

"No, it is better for such things to remain lost. Once a memory is forgotten, it cannot be assailed by the edges of time. Only then is it forever pristine."

"But you said you'd share the last of the telling," Oudilin murmurs.

The Keeper nods, "In the past months I have watched, as little by little parts of my collection fled from me with each journal of The Nameless One collected and their knowledge revived. Scraps of thought that were once gone now vanished. True my collection of the tale had always been incomplete, for there are a few select scholars that know alternate details of The Nameless One's journey, perhaps passed down secondhand or third, or through a long string of lips and quills. Yet much of the tale once lay in relative opacity, those details housed safely in my cupboards."

He pulls a vial from his robes, a long glass phylactery spiraled with a metal serpent whose jaws clutch the lid. White-green smoke swirls throughout it, and in the pale light cast by the glow you think you can see movement. Yes... smoky shapes that writhe in the air.

"These final memories of the journal are all that remain. It was once a thing of desperate making, that final journal... a diary scribed from shadowstuff and lamentations, written in tears and bound with sorrow. A thing terrible and beautiful, and the only sage who read it had been so struck by its horrors that he destroyed the thing. This before gouging out his eyes and casting himself into the sea, where the knowledge drowned and made its

journey into my hands."

The Keeper sighs, "It seems that if my collection is to be forever incomplete, it is better for such a thing to die a slow death, than remain yearning after its brethren forever."

Slim fingers circle the cap, and long nails click down about the metal. There is a twist, a pop, and the vial is opened.

"Have it and lament, o mortals... the final memory of the journal of the Nameless One."

Chapter 110

I pray this thing is recording these final moments, but I don't have much hope that the Powers could hear or answer my pleas.

A cold wind whipped my skin, carrying a chill that drew not just warmth, but the very substance from my flesh. There was an emptiness in the sky, blacker than a starless night or the heart of a fiend. Gazing upwards was tempting madness, staring into a yawning oblivion that threatened to swallow my sanity. Senseless as it was, it seemed that if I dropped my guard I would've been swept from my feet and drawn into bleak eternity. It was a void I was vaguely familiar with... in many ways it seemed to mirror the hollowness at the core of my being where a soul might've rested once, a thousand lifetimes ago.

I had to move, had to recall every ounce of sensation and feeling and warmth to keep the essence of my being from being carried away by that wind like motes of dust.

I clung tight to what I was, wrapping identity around me as a cloak, and strode down the walkway.

The Fortress had been built from regrets: wounds still raw and bleeding, or

scars deep and knotted into hard lumps that undulated beneath the flesh. I passed along cobbles craft of sorrow and mortared with tears, fossilized remnants of words unsaid and stillborn dreams. They whispered with each step, eating away at that shroud I tried to keep around myself like maggots.

I should've...

Should never have...

I felt my jaw drop, saliva ropy and slick between teeth chilled into ice by the wind. The gale swallowed my screams, and the whispers continued to drive me to the edge of my sanity.

Something fluttered in the distance: a gown azure as the sky and gray as mourning clouds.

Deionarra...

My pace quickened, lamentations crunching beneath my boots. For a moment the whispers fled, or quieted as I neared the ghostly form. Her spectral gown stirred in some ethereal breeze, her hands remained folded in front of her in her eternal vigil. She stood at the edge of the black stone causeway, staring out into the emptiness of the Plane. She had no fear of losing herself... little else remained that could be taken from her. Now and again her shoulders shook with the quiet weeping that came when no more tears remained. She was so sad. And so beautiful.

"Deionarra...?"

She spun to face me, eyes widening in shock. She reached out as if to touch me, but her hand stopped short of my chest and drew back. "My Love! You should **not** be here! You must leave at once!"

"Deionarra, what is this place? Is this the Fortress?"

"This is the Fortress of Regrets. It is the place that holds the moment of my death prisoner, and I may not stray far from its halls. If you can find a way back to Sigil you **must**; if you stay here, my Love, you shall die."

My mouth went dry at her dire warning, "What about my immortality? Surely, I'm still immortal, even here...?"

She shook her head. "No, my Love. There is something about this Fortress - the shell that surrounds it cuts it off from the rest of the Planes. It is that shell that acts as a barrier to your immortality."

"How could this shell act as an obstacle? That makes no sense."

"As I have maintained my vigil here in this place, I have come to learn the nature of your immortality, my Love. It is a thing which hungers for the lives of others. At the moment of your death, it claims another living thing in your place, allowing you to live. The soul that dies in your place is brought here, to the Fortress, as a shadow. I believe this shell prevents your immortality from finding another victim."

I swallowed the lump in my throat, "So... when I die, another dies in my place. And if it can't find another living thing to die **for** me..."

"Then if you die in this place, it is the end, for there is nothing that **lives** here - so you must be careful. Return back to Sigil and leave this cursed place!"

"But - my allies are here: and that means they are inside this shell. What happens to **them** if I die?"

"My Love, if you have brought **anything** that lives with you to this place, then it is in terrible danger - both from the shadows and from you. Should you die here, your immortality will hunt for the closest living thing in the Fortress, and **that** is the one that shall die in your place. You must leave here, now!"

"I can't **go** back. So can you tell me **anything** else that might be helpful? What waits inside the Fortress?"

"There is no natural darkness within the Fortress, my Love, only the shades of those who have died in your place. The energies of this Plane feed them, and their hatred for you is beyond all reason. They will not permit you to leave." She threw a glance at the walls of the Fortress. "Do **not** enter, I beg you!"

"But - my allies are in there. I cannot leave them. Do you have any idea where they might be?"

"If you brought others, then they were cast from you when you arrived - it is the nature of this place to divide living things... then kill them." She looked distraught, and glanced back to the mass of black spires. She had known its horrors well. "The Fortress is a thing of many miles - finding your friends here will be difficult."

I shook my head, "I have to find them. There is no choice in the matter."

"Very well, my Love... if you intend to go on, you must know this - past the entrance to the Fortress is a great antechamber with countless shadows. You must move swiftly and not let them gather about you, or you shall surely be slain!"

"One thing more..." Deionarra paused, as if trying to catch a fleeting memory. "Within... within the chamber are great clocks..." Her voice became steadier, more certain. "Clocks which you spoke of once as having been the key to you escaping that chamber... when you were trapped there once before." She looked at me. "I know I cannot stay you from your course, my Love -- I shall watch for you, and help you if I can."

I lifted my hand, with the silver wedding ring around my finger, "I brought your ring, Deionarra. I found your legacy to me."

"The ring still holds a part of me within it, my Love. When you carry it, you carry my heart with you." She closed her eyes, and a sudden warmth passed through me. The ring flickered and grew hot as her ghostly hand closed around mine. There was no pain, but instead the searing intensity that still burned in her breast. So alone... so sad... I could never have thought she still felt this way. Deionarra opened her eyes, then smiled. "I knew you would return to me with it in your keeping. Carry it now with my blessing, and keep it close to your heart. Through it, I will defend you."

"You have my thanks, Deionarra. I must go now."

I couldn't leave my friends to the shadows, and with that determination I walked the long, lonely causeway that led to my end. The whispers and sorrows that composed this place had no more power over me.

My hand slipped into my belt pouch, fingers sliding along the edge of that blade.

~~~~~

*"You're saying you could forge a weapon to kill an immortal?"*

EVERY LIVING THING HAS A WEAPON AGAINST WHICH IT HAS NO DEFENSE. TIME. DISEASE. IRON. GUILT.

*"How do you know what weapon to use?"*

ONE MUST KNOW THE ENEMY TO FORGE SUCH A WEAPON.

*"And how do I do that?"*

START WITH A FRAGMENT OF THE ENEMY. A DROP OF BLOOD. A CRYSTALLIZED THOUGHT. ONE OF ITS HOPES. ALL OF THESE THINGS TELL THE WAY IT CAN DIE.

*"Hmmm. Could you forge a weapon that would kill me?"*

YES. I WOULD NEED A DROP OF YOUR BLOOD. THAT IS ALL.

Where once it was so dull it could barely cut butter, it seemed keener now as if **knowing** its purpose. Coaxmetal had done his job well.

THE MAGICKS THAT KEEP YOUR HEART BEATING AND MEND YOUR FLESH ARE STRONG. YOU MUST SINK THE BLADE INTO YOUR BODY ONLY WITHIN A SHELL WHERE YOU ARE CUT OFF FROM THE PLANES.

~~~~~

Soon this edge would carve against my neck, spilling my blood red and hot against the icy cobbles. Soon my time would end. Soon... I would rest.

But not until I saved my friends.

The heavy door, a spiral of metal wedges, was the only entrance I could find. My hands explored its edges, knuckles rapped against the surface seeking the mechanism inside. Annah had given me plenty of pointers on how to break in, but with an unconventional fortress there must've been unconventional locks-

The door clanked.

I stepped back as machinery roared to life, the harsh keening of metal on metal piercing the harsh wind. The wedges clanked against one another, one by one, until they folded fully like the strips of a fan.

Inside, my end waited.

~~~~~

*Flecks of ash danced along Ignus' vision as he waited for his Master to return. It would be safe here, in this portion of the Modron Maze that Master had assured him quietly one final time before leaving. Patience was something he'd learned well, though in truth it came easily to him ever since he'd been bound.*

*He still remembered: Countless magelings and hedge wizards stinging at him like wasps with their small magics until he'd been subdued, and the punishment that was glory, the execution that was life. Others perhaps would plead for power from the Gods, or scrape and force what they would. No... now Ignus **was** the flame, he **was** both creation and destruction, fire and ash.*

*Ignus breathed, and a swirl of pretty embers blew from his charred teeth. So lovely. Ignus could be patient.*

*A clank sounded in the distance.*

*Ignus' focus snapped away from the raw elemental storm that flowed through him. The walls of this mechanical maze were **shifting**.*

*No no no no! The walls bent in on themselves, with the stink of hot grease, the clang of iron, the sharp taste of madness. Gears rolled and plates shifted, drawing closer. Metal screamed as it closed in, folding around Ignus until he'd be crushed...*

***Betrayed!** Ignus wailed, and all became dark.*

*He shivered then, curled in on himself. Was this death, the cold damp grave devoid of warmth? He hoped it wasn't. Only darkness surrounded him, so deep and thick that even the flames of his body could do nothing to*

*illuminate his way. Ignus floated... or tried to. Was he even moving in this void?*

*He extended his aura, letting a few flames flicker out from his fingertips. They touched nothing. There **was** nothing that he could see.*

*And yet... if he listened quietly, he could feel the hum of the Art ringing through the shadows.*

*“Great power is here..”. he murmured in wonder. Nothing should've been more powerful than the flames.*

*A point of movement flicked in the corner of his vision, and he turned. It was moving towards him, a raggedy thing of twisted shapes and warped lines. Yet reality seemed to ripple in its wake, its form screamed with the same sound of the Art that echoed through the void. For the first time in his new existence, Ignus didn't ponder on how well this thing would burn.*

*“I HAVE NEED OF YOU”, the creature said, its voice resonating like a gong, “THERE ARE CREATURES THAT MUST DIE.”*

*Slowly realization dawned on the mage, and a grin cracked his face. Ignus threw his head back, body rattling in his cloak of fire. His shrieking laughter stabbed through the emptiness.*

## **Chapter 111**

The cold, empty halls gave a grim welcome. I walked warily, hands in front of me as my eyes readjusted. Minutes passed by in a slow trickle, and in scattered fragments the architecture revealed itself to me.

Multifaceted globes of muddy crystal seemed to draw in the tiniest amount of light and hold it prisoner. Circular pools ringed with fangs swirled with dead, milky smoke that shed some small glow. Beneath my feet the cobbles ached with each step, and by the distant crooning I knew the shadows were



waiting.

They stood eight feet in height and were armored with thorns. Keen eyes stared out at me focused on vengeance. They raised their claws, charging, riding the darkness as mounts.

I'd had more than enough power to tear these creatures to smoky rags, but I rationed my power like slivers of meat. I had no idea how many of these I would have to face, how powerful the other guardians in this fortress could be. My wounds knitted as quickly as they came, and my knife made quick, if clumsy work slashing apart that insubstantial flesh.

Eventually I came across the huge clock that Deionarra spoke of. It'd partially melted into the black stone surrounding it... but a sense of familiarity tingled at the back of my mind. On its surface was a message carved in with a dagger... and I recognized the demented handwriting as the same that painted my back:

***RUN - DOORS ARE LIES - USE CANNONS - THEN PORTAL***

The scrawl seemed panicked, as if it'd been written in some haste. Following the message was a crude 'arrow' pointing in the opposite direction as the long hand on the clock.

"Thanks for the advice..." I grumbled, and turned in that direction.

The ancient machine I came across looked like a forgotten war relic. Most of the "cannon" was covered in dust, except for the strange panel with levers at the front of it. Oddly enough, the ground around it was disturbed, broad streaks in the dust as if someone had walked here within the past few years.

Controls were a series of gears and levers - beneath each one was a series of scratch marks that appeared to be hastily carved there with a dagger. Some bore no marks, others bore a single slash beneath them, and one had an 'X.' I felt a nudge in the back of my mind, and without knowing why I was certain that the 'X' would somehow help me leave this place.

I pulled the lever. It gave way easily beneath my grip with a hard clank, and to my surprise, disintegrated into mist. It spread to my hand, which began to fade, then my arm, and a dizziness overcame me. The walls began to fade around me as I began to panic...

"Wh-"

~~~~~

In a waking meditation, Fall-From-Grace extended her awareness outwards searching for her friends. Now and then a flicker of life seemed to pass through her range of sensation, but just as quickly it was gone again like a fleeting shadow. She didn't know yet what she would do once she did locate them. The wards she erected would only protect her within their bounds, and the pressure of the darkness was forcing those barriers in. Once the sanctified circle was twenty paces across. Soon, it would be fifteen.

She wandered the fringe of that ward carefully, trying to capture the scent of her companions. Once she healed a person, an affinity lingered for a while... it was this that she hoped would guide her to her student: so young in spirit, and yet so ancient. It had been the thrill of novelty that led her to accept the offer to travel, and more that led her to stay even after the novelty wore off.

Outside the darkness echoed against the barrier: the rattle of Baatezu chains and the coarse laughter of the cornugon masters. She could almost hear the screams again, of pain and violation...

No... Grace told herself. That was not something she would experience again.

"It is difficult to separate shadow from the darkness here," she murmured to herself, "This is not a place meant for the living."

Something was approaching from behind her, and Fall-From-Grace's eyes snapped open. There was no life that she could feel... it was an antithesis, dead beyond death, yet just as eternal.

A cold chill passed through the priestess. Whatever the thing was it warped existence as it moved, and the echoes of reality twisting around it seemed to linger like shrieks of agony.

"AH, THE TANAR'RI..." it boomed.

She turned calmly to face the creature, a thing of knotted and knobby

yellow-green strands webbing outward from a central body like arteries and veins.

"So," Fall-From-Grace mused, hands folded in front of her. The thing had pierced her barrier as if it'd been nothing, "You are the spider that lies in the center of it all."

She circled the creature in a cool pace, studying it from different angles as if examining a sculpture. Its head twisted in the air, following her gaze, and she looked it in the eyes, "I have many questions that you could answer. Your goals in this matter have not been entirely clear."

"MY GOALS ARE NOT FOR YOU TO KNOW, FALLEN TANAR'RI. MY INDULGENCE IS ALL THAT KEEPS YOUR BLACK HEART BEATING IN YOUR CHEST. YOU MAY LEAVE WITH YOUR LIFE NOW, IF YOU WILL."

Fall-From-Grace continued to circle the creature. She had never been impressed by clumsy rhetoric or crude threats, and brushed aside the words as easily as one might a cobweb, "My heart is neither black nor do I fear for my life. My companions, my friends, are here in your fortress. I shall not leave until we are rejoined and the man we follow has resolved this matter to a satisfactory conclusion."

"THERE IS NO SATISFACTORY CONCLUSION TO THIS FOOL'S ERRAND. YOU WILL LEAVE THIS PLACE, AND YOU SHALL LEAVE YOUR UNDYING COMPANION HERE. FEAR NOT FOR HIS LIFE. THE ONLY PRICE HE SHALL PAY IS THE LOSS OF MEMORY."

"As gracious as your offer is, I must refuse your offer to abandon my friends," her eyes narrowed, "As for the 'small' price he will pay at your hands, it is the equivalent of death to him. I have traveled with this man for some time, and there are many things I do not wish him to forget."

"HE WILL FORGET. IT IS HIS FATE TO REMAIN IGNORANT. HE WILL FORGET YOU, TANAR'RI, JUST AS HE HAS FORGOTTEN ALL WHO HAVE WALKED THE PATH OF MISERY WITH HIM. HE EXISTS TO DIE, FORGET, AND DIE AGAIN. HE IS NOTHING."

"That is **your** judgment," Grace declared in words fringed with ice, "The fact remains that I do not wish him to forget me, nor all that he has struggled for to reach this place. He has suffered much, and I find my sympathies lie with

him rather than the arrogant creature that postures before me and fights as a coward, preferring to kill from a distance where his opponent cannot reach him."

Fall-From-Grace breathed, her wings unfurling, "You shall torment him no more."

"TANAR'RI... PERHAPS YOU DOUBT MY POWERS HERE IN THIS PLACE. A DEMONSTRATION MAY SILENCE YOUR DOUBT." The creature stretched out, seeming to grow larger. It raised an arm, wielding talons as long as scimitars.

Grace focused as she took a defensive stance, "You have done enough harm. Prepare yourself."

"YOU ARE NOTHING. I CAN FORGE PLANES WITH MY POWER... I CAN UNMAKE YOU."

She shielded herself as bolts of flame streaked at her, battering against that barrier of devotion. Soft hands swept through the air, calling bolts of lightning from the skyless void. Grace had little taste for battle, but pressed as she was she had no other choice. Spears of electricity struck her foe one after the other until the afterimage of those bolts left violet streaks fading across her vision. She could only resist the tongues of flame for so long, and soon her strength was nearing its limit.

A blade of fire sliced through Grace's arm, and the stink of burning silk became a distraction. Any other time she would've savored the experience, tasted the pain and reflected on the shock. Subconsciously she filed these sensations away even as her certainty grew that she would not live to learn from the ordeal.

Fall-From-Grace stumbled at the final barrage, and that left enough of an opening. The creature swept forward in an instant, followed by the sharp pressure slicing through her body.

A clean wound... it is possible to recover from a clean wound... she thought to herself desperately, already beginning the intonations of a quick healing that would stop the blood.

She didn't have the breath to cry out when those talons twisted in her body,

shredding her from the inside. A wing fluttered over her face like a shroud as she collapsed, hands clutching her stomach. The warm life-blood spilled over her hands, broken edges of flesh and sinew slid between her fingers. She'd felt that warmth on her hands many times before as a healer, but never her own...

Fall-From-Grace uttered a prayer as the darkness claimed her, drowning her murmurs in whispers: the rattle of chains, the coarse laughter of the cornugons. She prayed, but her thoughts were becoming too thin to imagine what for.

~~~~~

I re-coalesced, body tingling as it was rebuilt bit by bit. The surroundings were unfamiliar, even when the dizziness faded. My head pounded, my vision swam. Worse still the bleak song echoed through the halls, and the shadows swarmed.

So many of them, hunting me down as if they'd caught my scent. I couldn't flee now that they knew where I was. There was no recourse then... a snarl bared my teeth, and I focused. Storms of lightning weaved down the halls, showers of acid sprayed down corridors. No shadow was left untouched, and they shrieked in fury as they died. A hundred of these would willingly die to lay one wound, and this tenacity made them even more dangerous.

I ran through the Fortress, its walls scarred with electricity and cobbles sizzling with corrosion. The heat faded from beneath my boots quickly as I stepped through the cleared chamber, up to the next war relic. Again the odd panel, the puzzle of levers and switches. I searched frantically for the marked lever, and quietly uttered a thanks to my former incarnation for figuring the damn thing out for me. I didn't have a moment to spare.

The 'X'-marked lever disintegrated at my touch, faded into mist. I knew what to expect now and took a deep breath. The wave of dizziness overtook me again as the walls began to fade.

"Where am I going n-"

~~~~~

Cobbled regrets crunched beneath his boots as Dak'kon sped through the

halls. He ignored the blood trickling down his shoulder, the bruised rib in his side. Countless scars from a lifetime of battles still ached- the memory of the body was sharper than the memory of the mind in some ways- and he ignored his fresh wounds as merely two more.

Cries of war and futile prayers resonated from empty chambers, and he **knew** their sound. They were ghosts of betrayal and agony... the spectres of Shra'kt'lor.

Craftsmen were taking up hammers and chisels, bakers and butchers their knives. Apprenticed warriors still too young to **know** the blood of **illithids** wetting their blades readied themselves. Mind mages and psions, monks and ascetics of every band gathered and murmured their mantras trying to strengthen what apostasy had cracked. Yet the damage was done...

The screams of a dying city chased him through the darkness.

Dak'kon pressed a hand to his pouch, gripped the round disk in comfort. The power of the Circle of Zerthimon lay in its teachings, not its form, but it had helped Dak'kon survive the Fall of Shra'kt'lor once. He would survive it again.

Another one of those great misty sentinels swept toward him down the hall, and Dak'kon turned, sliding to a halt. Difficult to charge these things... the creatures were all offense, and their umbral carapaces were spiked like thorn-crabs besides. He turned to evade, but a second shadow swooped in toward him. His head turned quickly to the other side... to a third shadow, a fourth, a fifth...

Dak'kon focused, and his zerth blade sang into a serrated edge, sharp enough to cut a thought. There were so many, from all sides...

"Shadows..." Dak'kon reminded himself. These were not the dead of Shra'kt'lor come back to haunt him, no matter how they crooned.

Another shape slid from the shadows, its brambled form wavering like vines in a breeze.

"AH, THE GITHZERAI. I REMEMBER HIM WELL..." its voice thrummed among the crowded shades, and they seemed to waver in response. "SUBMIT."

Polished obsidian eyes narrowed, and the **zerth** blade flashed. Dak'kon's voice was cold and soft with age, but he had found new steel to add to it, "I may be bested in battle, but I shall never submit."

"YOU CANNOT HOPE TO DEFEAT ME."

"I have been here before," Dak'kon declared. The calm he maintained came with certainty, "This time I shall never leave."

The creature regarded him as one would an insect, and seemed to approve of how Dak'kon accepted his fate. "VERY WELL..." it declared, then turned and swept away into the darkness.

The shades fell on Dak'kon as a pack, the weight of their claws hammering him to the ground. Armor splintered, bones snapped like brittle twigs. All through those final moments, in the midst of that storm of black talons, the blade flashed and sang like quicksilver. Its edge didn't dull until blood soaked its handle, and a yellowed hand fell onto the cold cobblestones.

Chapter 112

The umbral sea boiled and rolled, breaking against me in waves. I fought them off with nets of fire, protected myself with barriers of ice. One moment the corridors trembled with the clash of black fangs and white-hot Art. The next moment I knelt sagged to my knees, panting heavily and waiting for my flesh to knit. It was a battle of attrition, and I savored those precious seconds of rest, each one giving me more of an edge as I healed.

But I was running low on magic. I staggered, half-drained, from chamber to chamber. The dizziness still rang in my head like a gong, and the bile was still rank on my lips from when I'd vomited at the last transition. Gastric juices mingling with blood tasted foul, and I still had to scrape the stink of it off my tongue and spit frequently.

If I had the energy, I would've murmured a prayer when I stumbled across the next device.

I simply knelt there in front of the marked switch, chest heaving. Seconds ticked by, merging into minutes. I needed to hurry to save my friends. Yet I needed to rest if I were to live long enough to do so.

Once my punctured lung, my shattered knee, and the dozen other wounds were half-healed, I pulled the switch.

~~~~~

#### **RUBIKON PROJECT ACTIVE**

Current Planar Base of Operations: Limbo, [ERROR: planar sector unmapped]

Objective: Meta-analysis of dungeoneering and variations thereof.

Query: For what purpose do individuals place themselves under threat of termination in isolated unmapped environs?

Hypothesis: [STOP - Command title required to proceed]

Repairs on main triplet gear in matrix 01-245-BX required... Multidimensional Piercer core component shows anomaly 0.0045% outside of bounds... Experimental protocol 42B-003 has resulted in extensive damage done on outer shell... repair Quadrones sent to investigate... Multidimensional Piercer core component shows anomaly 2.8477% outside of bounds... Material leak in matrix 55-876-1F detected!

Secondary repairs completed... gearing for execution of Experimental protocol 78C-207... Hypothesis? [STOP - Command title required to proceed]... Material leak in matrix 55-876-1F ceased... structural integrity breach noted... Experimental protocol active... Message to Director of Rubikon Project: "I wish to discuss the matter of my freedo-" [MESSAGE TERMINATED - OUT OF BOUNDS ERROR: SEPTON LEVEL REQUIRED]

Multidimensional Piercer core component shows anomaly 86.0641% outside of bounds... WARNING - EXPONENTIAL INCREASE IN ERROR DETECTED... Notation: Engineering Room arch requires polishing: Monodrone 6598 assigned to duty... Priority: Anomaly requires correction: Quadrone Units 2231, 8765, 9347 assigned to investigate

Quadrone Unit 2231 has returned to Source



Quadrone Unit 8765 has returned to Source  
Quadrone Unit 9347 has returned to Source

Multidimensional Piercer core component shows anomaly 7809.8005% outside of bounds... Priority: Anomaly requires correction: Quadrone Units 5640, 8760, 1749 assigned to invest-

Quadrone Unit 5640 has returned to Source  
Quadrone Unit 8760 has returned to Source  
Quadrone Unit 1749 has returned to Source  
Director has returned to Source

**-ERROR- -ERROR- DIRECTOR HAS BEEN DISINTEGRATED  
STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY IN MATRIX 55-876-1F  
COMPROMISED - MATRIX HAS IMPLoded - MASSIVE  
MATERIAL CONTAMINATION DETECTED**

Tridrone Unit 2870 has returned to Source  
Duodrone Unit 1131 has returned to Source  
Tridrone Unit 8731 has returned to S-  
[[STOP - Continue to list casualties: Y/N?]]

Hypothesis? [[STOP - Command title required but frankly sir I don't give a damn]]

Material contamination spreading to- **Experimental protocol 78C-207 has been aborted** Priority: Engage repairs at [[STOP - Command title reqwheee we are so screwed!]]... Monodrone 6598 has stopped polishing...

**FAILSAFE MECHANISM ACTIVATED - RUBIKON COMPLEX  
COLLAPSING  
PREPARING SHUTDOWN  
BACKING UP DUNGEON STATE  
LOCKDOWN  
LOCKDOWN  
LOCKDOWN**

Sleep a sleep of marmalade dreams, and catch the winds of eternal dust. Flaming fans dance in starlight gleaming silver on the hidden seas.

Contact with Source has been lost...

So alone...

Nordom blinked, disregarding the buzz of messages clicking from the Fortress' depths. Old messages need not be regarded.

The Quadrone sifted through the string of recent processes, seeking a priority to execute, then clicked in confusion. No priority. How could there be no priority?

Oh yes. Priority: protect Director. Wait- this priority was not set by the Director, was it? Nordom clicked, tracking the origin of the Priority and found... Nordom. A circular priority? Logically valid, but the unwritten rule was that such things should not exist. Or was it a written rule? Nordom sifted through the protocol listings... so many holes!

As if by instinct Nordom shot a pair of bolts into the darkness, and a screech sounded, and faded into the grim whispers of the halls.

Nordom: Protect the Director. From: Nordom.

Metal limbs clacked as they sped down the halls, fueled by the message. Nordom was Nordom. Nordom was Nordom's Self. Nordom has set the given priority, and must execute it...

The Quadrone clicked, its purpose suddenly becoming clear. Shaking off the confusion of the past, it scanned the surroundings, trying to reassess the situation. The Director must be found.

"Processing... Plane: Negative Material. Location: Fortress of Regrets."

"AH, THE ROGUE CONSTRUCT..." an unclassified organism drifted into view.

Nordom strategized quickly, and came to one dim conclusion while hopping away... "Sense of closure imminent."

"YOU HAVE OVERSTEPPED YOURSELF. SUBMIT."

The proposal was rejected immediately. "You wish harm on one that has aided Nordom at cost to his-selves. Nordom will attempt to neutralize the threat. Prospect of success: Slight."

A pair of whistling bolts shot from the two mechanical crossbows, and they passed harmlessly through the gaps in the creature's ropy form.

Nordom staggered as hammers of force shattered against metal frame.

Ocular view nodes damaged... vision impaired...

"THE BODY IS A SHELL..." the creature boomed, "CONTINUED PRESSURE MAY FRACTURE IT. SHALL I CONTINUE?"

"You intend to harm him... Nordom will stop you..." the words were determined, but also took into account the contingency of failure.

A boom sounded in the halls then. What followed was the echo of splintered metal, and the sound of falling shards clattering against stone like rain.

~~~~~

I heaved when my body reformed, doubling over with dry retches and gags. I'd never felt so drained... couldn't believe I was so **weak**. So much of my strength had been sapped from me, and each time I traveled by these cannons it became worse. I stood, wavering, dagger in one hand and sparks of force blooming from the other. I had little energy left to spare.

The crowd of shadows surrounded me as I stepped backward, trembling with nausea. Were they sentient enough to realize how far I'd culled their numbers? Were they afraid? Or-

My boot skidded on the ground, and something scraped beneath my heel. I stopped, taking a moment to glance down at the blood that puddled beneath me, the orange-laquered shards of splint mail armor.

*"**Know** that when death comes for you, **know** that I shall meet its blade with mine. **Know** that when all dies around you, **know** I shall live for your sake."*

My mouth dried at the thought, and my eyes sought frantically among the crowd... was Dak'kon among those shades? I almost stumbled as I stepped away, blood chilling in my veins. So many shadows, so many that had died for my sake, or died in my place.

And I had been murdering them **twice**.

One of the shades shot forward, and I tried to dodge as it swung. But my flesh was not its quarry.

The strings of my belt pouch snapped as it tore free in the creature's claws.

There in its talons, in the shreds of leather that once wrapped it, was the Blade of the Immortal: entropy-forged and destined to slit my veins.

The shadow crushed the blade in its claws, and metal shards clattered against the stones.

"No!" I cried, and ducked just as its claws raked my cheek.

My boots thudded against the floor, and with one burst of strength I pushed waves of cold behind me. The walls of frost would slow them down, but that was all I needed as I grabbed at the panel of the next machine. Too frantic to think I couldn't be sure what was happening, but all I knew was that I was getting closer. The 'X'-marked lever was easy to find this time, and I pulled it. Again it gave way easily beneath my touch, then disintegrated into mist - I took a deep breath, but unlike the other times... nothing happened.

In the distance a roaring sounded, as if **something** had just opened. A howling wind rushed through the vaults, and as I tried to figure out where the sound was coming from, I looked down. My hands were breaking down into dust, my arms... my body was fading like mist and becoming part of the wind...

"**Now** what's happening...?!" I howled, and my voice was carried away by the storm.

~~~~~

Annah had always felt at home in the shadows. She was one of the slimmest among the Collectors, and combined with her natural flexibility she had been unmatched in her ability to squeeze through vents and crevices. The art of searching was always a solitary venture, and she'd come to think of darkness as a warm cloak and her only companion. It had reared her... sheltered her. From this she'd earned the name Annah-of-the-Shadows when she was twelve.

She never thought of what might be hiding in the dark beside her.

*"Annah, my lovely daughter..." he whispered, "Why? Why couldn't you save me? Why couldn't you **free** me? You stood so close but you couldn't **pluck** me from the pillar?"*

"Sh-shut up, da," she hissed beneath her breath. Annah bit her lip. Her hands gripped her tail to keep it from flicking about nervously. No more than three feet away two of those those massive black guards loomed. She could take out one in a surprise attack, flee from the other, but she was trembling too much to believe she wouldn't miss.

*"I'd thought you'd come for me..."* Pharod wept, *"What good are you if you can't steal your poor old father away from his fate? After all the kindness I'd given you, this is how you repay me?"*

Annah bit her lip. She clenched her stomach, pressing all the terror and pain into a little ball deep inside. A little longer now... the shadows were moving away.

*"I never should have taken you in if this is how you would repay me. You were an **accident**. A stray dog I **allowed** to follow me around..."*

This was her chance.

Soft boots padded soundlessly as she took to a crouch, slinking away on hands and knees away from the shadows; away from the past.

*"No! No, Annah, don't leave me again!"* the voice wailed.

Annah swallowed hard, trying to forget.

"I love you, da..." she murmured.

The walls of the next chamber were charred, and acid corroded the stones. She recognized the damage like it was a signature. *Tch- bloody idjit probably bumbled into 'em.*

But at least she was closer. Her eyes glanced at every corner, scanned each hall for movement. Nothing she could see, but still Annah slid from pillar to pillar, keeping herself well hidden. For once she regretted the way her leathers were cut. The icy air was sucking the heat from her flesh, and pinpricks of the chill nipped at her skin. It was so cold here...

"AH... THE FIENDLING GIRL..." a voice boomed, echoing through the halls. Annah turned in shock, gazing up at the mass of floating knots and strands. It looked like stretched sinew flapping from a stray dog's bone,

"WHERE IS THE ONE WHO BROUGHT YOU HERE?"

"In a place where yeh'll never find 'im," she hissed. The advantage of surprise had been lost, and she knew she couldn't run from this thing, "If yeh think to be takin' him, yeh'll be needing ta get through me, first."

"YOUR WORDS HAVE PASSION'S STRENGTH. AND PRECIOUS LITTLE REASON."

"If it gives me the strength ta gut yeh, I donnae care!" the punch daggers slid into her hands.

"CURIOUS..." the thing mused, "YOUR REASON FOR FOLLOWING HIM HERE IS BECOMING CLEAR-

"Enough of yer chatterin'! If it's a fight yeh want, then c-!"

"COULD IT BE THAT YOU SOMEHOW PERCIEVE YOURSELF AS SPECIAL IN HIS EYES?"

A chill ran up her spine. What did this thing know? How could she herself not have known? "If- if yeh're gonna try an' get past me then go n' do it! I..."

"FIENDLING, I HAVE WATCHED THE ONE YOU FOLLOW ACROSS MANY LIFETIMES. I KNOW HIS HEART, AND I KNOW THERE HAVE BEEN COUNTLESS OTHERS WHO HAVE FELT PASSION FOR HIM. OF THEM ALL, YOU ARE CERTAINLY THE LEAST. YOU ARE A THING, BASTARDIZED BY YOUR PARENTS AND THE PLANES..."

She wanted to clap her hands over her ears, or tear out the thing's throat if it had one. She screamed, her words drowning out the monster's words, "Shut yer bone-box, yeh hear me?! Shut y-"

"ANSWER ME THIS, AND YOU WILL KNOW SILENCE, CHILD," its voice rang over her cries, "DOES THE ONE YOU FOLLOW MATTER TO YOU?"

Her mouth worked to form an answer. The man was an idiot... clueless half the time and barmy the other half. No sense of survival. No subtlety or street smarts whatsoever. And then there were the piles of asinine

questions and him running about the planes like an addle-cove on the slightest rumor. Ugly as sin, too.

But then he would smile. Sometimes he'd stand up with as much banter to the skull as it gave. Sometimes that deader would laugh, and he had a stupid throaty roar that would make her grin too. There were times when he would throw himself into the fray, sheathing the knives of their enemies in his body so none would find their way into hers. He did it for all of them, but sometimes she thought he had this **look** in his eye whenever he glanced at her while waiting for his wounds to knit. She remembered planting a blade in his guts in anger, before she knew what he was. She remembered him drawing her back from the darkness as she lay in a puddle of her own blood. His skin was coarse and twisted with scars. His body stank of formaldehyde... but she knew how soft he truly could be.

Annah ignored the wetness painting her cheeks. She almost laughed... wanting it all to end, wanting closure and being through with his idiocy. Those had been such stupid reasons to follow.

"He matters more to me... than me life."

"THEN DIE."

Fire and ice crashed about her as she weaved and dodged. Flames lapped at her skin. Shards of ice sliced arms upraised to shield her face. The punch-daggers struck home, cracking against supple limbs that seemed to bend under her blades. It folded in on itself as if to shield its body from her daggers.

She would win this battle. She would **win**.

A roar of flame knocked her back, and elbows and knees cracked against the floor as she rolled. Annah groaned, the stink of singed leather and burning blood filled her nostrils. She looked up to see the creature's wings unfurling: they had only folded in to protect its body from the blast. Her attacks had done nothing.

Annah's boots slid out from under her. She was so disoriented... more battered than she thought. She tried to will herself to move... tried to stand and fight. The chiming chorus of a thousand ice crystals coalescing sounded above her, and still she tried to move.

She didn't want it to end after all.

There was the cold, the thousand piercing blades, and then the darkness claimed her.

~~~~~

My knees struck the floor and my chest heaved. It was too much... I felt like I'd been cored like an apple, my innards ripped from my body. Trembling limbs padded and knocked against the bare stone as I crawled. Those cannons... both trigger and trap. Had I been killed each time I'd pulled the levers? It made sense now if the master of the Fortress knew me well. If the master studied my previous incarnation when he was last here, forged the markings in mimicry of his hand... if each time I pulled a lever I'd been committing suicide...

They died for each step I took: each fighter and companion snuffed out so I could live. I grew weaker each time I fell here, the shadow swarms were sapping even more of my energy to fight them off.

The master of the Fortress was whittling me down little by little. I couldn't face him like this... had to flee...

But I'd died four times... and one of my friends still lived.

I clung to that thought like a handhold and lifted myself up, stumbling in the direction of that roar. I recognized these halls...

It was a portal, hung beneath an arch of cruel spines. Was this another trap? Was it escape, or would it lead to my end?

There was no choice. I closed my eyes, and stepped through.

A chill prickled my skin, and it was like stepping through a veil. In an instant the grim chambers of collective regrets vanished, replaced by gray-green cobbles and twisted symbols, and ancient statues that stood silent. The forest of stone sentinels was quiet save for the thud of my boots, the air dry and cold. Now and again something seemed to catch my eye in the corner of my vision, but when I turned nothing was there. Just the statues.

Most were eroded with age, their features unrecognizable. Each one I passed became more familiar though, until I recognized in some of the wear in the stone was intentional, to reflect a mass of scars and wounds.

Moreover, as I walked through the dim gallery, the line of them began to curve. They were all pointing to the center of the chamber.

I looked up at them, each one now with a set of scars similar to the one I had, with faces cut and twisted and puckered like my own. One of them stood staring into the center of the chamber with a disdainful expression. Another stood with arms crossed, glaring straight ahead. One statue of me held a hand over its heart, mouth open as if making a speech. One clutched its right shoulder, as if wounded. It was a forest of lives and incarnations.

The center of the chamber beckoned me in with a green, spectral light. There, above a massive bowl of webbed metal, floated a huge crystal green as a sea. The rhythm of its pulses resembled a heartbeat, but slow and sickly like that of a dying man. Light from the crystal touched the stones like fingers, each ray of casting a glow on the ruined faces of the statues surrounding it.

I reached toward the gem slowly. Was this what I came here for? Was this the prison for my soul and my mortality?

An explosion sounded at the far end of the chamber, and darkness fled as distant braziers flared like stars. Screeching laughter rang through the room as a figure wreathed in flames barreled toward me, his aura charring the pillars and statues he passed until they cracked.

"I will burn you to assssh, then ssset fire to the Planesss!" Ignus cackled.

My jaw dropped. This was impossible! I'd left him to be crushed in the Modron Maze!

No- there was no time for guilt or shame. Ignus swept his arms together, and sheets of fire surrounded his body. Another gesture, and bolts of flame sped towards me. Fire and will were one and the same to Ignus, and where others would handle the Art like pulling reins on a bucking steed, Ignus had tamed the flames to his desires long ago.

I didn't have the strength to fight him anymore. The castings streaked

towards me, one after the other in a ceaseless barrage. I dodged and weaved between the statues, and the bolts shattered against them. Stone cracked and crumbled, raining pebbles onto the ground. I was reduced to scuttling beneath the dust like a cranium rat. Adrenaline had fed some new strength into my jellied limbs, but once **that** ran out...

Ignus' screams roared behind me, and soon my cries of agony joined them. He wrapped my body in flames, tongues of fire raking my skin and filling my face. Liquid heat flooded my mouth and nostrils and spilled into my lungs, white-hot spears stabbed into my ears. The world went black as my eyeballs burst in the heat. Vitreous humor spilled down my cheeks like greasy tears, until all fluid boiled away and only a charred crust clung to my skin.

I was blind. I could barely breathe with lungs half-boiled from the inside. My tongue was seared and shriveled, and I could barely speak. Ignus had left some of my hearing intact, but only to taunt me as I crawled into what I hoped was safety.

His cackling sounded like it was coming from behind a wall of water. I hoped that I'd judged the distance correctly. By the sound of it he seemed to be rolling through the air in glee, letting me cower, blinded and helpless.

"I SSSHALL BE AS FLAMESSS, AND ALL LIFE SSSHALL BE AS TORCHESSS!"
Ignus screeched.

It's said that the best-laid battle plans end the moment the first weapon is drawn. Formations break down, maneuvers never come to fruit. A general's greatness isn't his ability in preparation or strategy... it's how he can improvise.

I hid in the lee of the statue, waves of fire passing me on either side with the roaring of an ocean. The stone heated. Its edges must've been melting, but I dug around in my pack for the jar that I'd saved from so long ago...

~~~~~

*I sputtered, "Five hundred? That's ridiculous!"*

*He paused for a moment, considering. "That it is. Tell you what. Give me three hundred, and the eye's yours."*

*I thought it over, I really did. But hells, if it was a piece of my past I couldn't afford to be stingy, "It's a deal. Here's your money."*

*"It's a deal." He produced a darkened, wax-stoppered, wide-mouth bottle from his pocket. There was the sound of liquid sloshing around inside it, along with a heavier, squishier noise. Opening it, the stench of some sort of preservative agent nearly made me gag... Powers above this damn city should sell more nose-clips and perfumes. Floating in the viscid muck was an eyeball.*

*"You'd better figure out what you want to do with that..." the barkeep said sagely, "now you've exposed it to the air, you might as well put a pickled egg in the jar for all the good it'll do you. Make up your mind, cutter... pickled egg or not?"*

*With a moment's hesitation, I reached into my socket and popped my eye into the palm of my hand. The pain was incredible. My vision distorted, and for a moment I was slightly overwhelmed with a sense of vertigo as my plucked-out eye pointed in an odd direction, the two images I read not quite blending cohesively. The bartender helpfully severed the optic nerve, and directed my hand to the jar of goo that sat on the bar. I deposited my still-living eye in the preservative, wrapped my fingers around the old one, and slid it into my empty socket.*

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With one finger I dug the ash from my empty socket, and it fell down my cheek in flakes. The preserved eye wriggled in my grip with new life. The optic nerve slid back in as if eager to return home, and I hissed in pain as the world flashed into vision once again. A quick surge of energy filled me, the bit of latent strength that the eye once held returning as it reattached. I snapped a charcoal charm for good measure, and the heat around me seemed to settle painlessly like the embers of a dying fire.

Ignus didn't expect me to come barreling through the flames so soon.

The skin of my arms blistered as I held them up to protect my face. My charred lungs strained to drink in the air, and my head felt packed full of wool at the lack of it. I strained to focus, sheathing myself in blades of ice as I charged. Finally, I dropped my arm. My vision was still foggy with the flow of preservative, but I could see the shock on Ignus' face when I was no more

than two paces away, and closing in.

I screamed, and it was a desperate, wheezing sound. Yet my arm fell, dagger striking true. Blackened flesh and charred bone were brittle, and cracked beneath the merciless tip of that steel fang. He stared soundlessly at the blade protruding from his chest.

"We've both learned that the road to power is one of suffering, supplicant," I hissed, "But you've become intoxicated by the torment. I've made it my own."

Black talons clapped at the sides of my head, cauterizing smoldering runnels into my flesh, "A hair-thin... dissstinction... Massster..."

"Yes..." I growled, "And that hair is the gulf that separates us." I channeled every last ounce of power into him, forcing veins of frost into his body.

Infernal fury met steel-hard frost. At the confluence brilliant white steam exploded with the sound of thunder. White, thick vapor choked me, the force threatened to blow us apart. I struggled to cling to my dagger, not daring to release until I knew Ignus was dead.

When the tempest finally settled, the aura of flames no longer wreathed his body. In its place was a snowfall of ash, but some final spark of life still flickered in him.

His body was stiffening, hard and black as coal. Yet he tilted his head back in fits and jerks, gazing up at me with eyes like fading embers.

"Massster... forgive me..." he murmured, and some part of him seemed once again like the same boy that wished to drink in the power of fire, "I have betrayed your teachingsss..."

He fell to his knees then, body petrified and cold.

I had no more strength to murmur a prayer. The adrenaline had seeped away, and in its place was a bone-deep exhaustion that cried out for the rest of the grave. I only knew I needed to finish this, and I dragged my feet towards that floating crystal. Each movement shifted my blistered skin, and it was agony. Each breath I took was more difficult than the last. My regenerative abilities had been stretched to their limit, and I stumbled,

half-crawling the last few paces towards the crystal.

I touched the shimmering surface, and a moment of dizziness overtook me. Muscles that wanted to melt and drop my body to the ground suddenly locked, freezing my hand to the glassy shards. There was a moment of silence, then sharp pains splintered through my body like fractures. Something was wrong- something was dreadfully...

Lances of agony cracked along my flesh, deep down into my bones. It felt as if my very **being** had been turned to ice, and was **shattering**...

It was then that reality slipped away.

Chapter 113

"Oh Powers above! Lady's piking teats!" Morte wailed as he barreled down the halls. The screams of the damned surrounded him. The only reason he had a direction to choose from was due to the shadows skittering behind, giving chase. There were so many **more** than when he'd last been here.

"Come back to us Morte..." one of the voices hissed, *"We have such wonderful pleasures for you, new ways of caressing you with **pain**..."*

"I want to feel your eyes burst between my jaws!" howled another.

"I want his teeth..." the head of a hoary old man mewled, gnawing at Morte's mind with tender gums, stinking with rot and yellowed with age.

All around him he could hear the slimy tongues lapping against his bones, slavering and probing into now-moist crevices. They would pile on him, bury him in that tower of skulls and fill his mouth with lies and diseased cysts, choking off his screams for eternity.

"Cheeky lad..." another giggled madly, *"Do you remember the games we played, Morte? Do you remember how hard it was to taunt those around you*

with the serpents writhing inside your cranium? Do you remember the worms?" it crooned. "We have worms aplenty, Morte..."

Something brushed his occipital bone. *"NOOOOOO!!! NOT THE WORMS!!!"*
Morte shrieked in terror.

A black claw hooked up into his foramen magnum, where his spinal cord once attached, and snagged him. He was being dragged backwards into the darkness, the taunts, the deafening cackles of the Pillar of Skulls.

"CHIEEEF!!!" Morte shrieked, whipped by horror to the edge of madness,
"HELP ME! PLEASE HELP MEEEE!!!"

The crack of bone and splintering of teeth filled the halls a moment, and then the Fortress went silent.

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Dim light.

Cold slab.

Stale air.

The taste of ash and futility.

Silence.

The floating detritus of disconnected sensations bumped against one another. Thoughts lay splintered into slivers, each squirming and trapped in their own bubbles like a nest of frog's eggs. Divided mind... divided man... nothing unified to fill the body. Would've been as useful to fill the brain-case with loose gravel.

One thought began to squirm in its prison: of a trap long ago set by a madman to snare the mind of an immortal for eternity.

It wriggled. It squirmed. It had the **knowing** of how to open the trap, and with a little shove of willpower it burst free.

The lone thought **knew** only the need for freedom, and blindly groped along

the other prisons. With the same prod and poke, another thought burst free. It tore through the mental foam and pricked each sphere, and with each thought released consciousness began to re-coalesce...

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I gasped, breathing in deep as awareness of my surroundings was rebuilt. I still had to focus a little for the stray bits of mind that lay scattered, but one by one they clicked into place. I groaned, blinked in the dim lighting of the chamber, shifting limbs that ached against the cold slab I'd been laid out on. The air was stale and dead, and the taste of ash and futility filled my mouth. For a long span of time as I lay recovering, the only sound in the chamber was silence.

Footsteps began to approach from three different directions. I lifted my head weakly, trying to focus.

"He has awakened," a familiar voice said, calm and relieved as an herbalist next to a man in his sickbed.

"**Finally**," another voice hissed, "I thought I would die again waiting for him to rise."

"Perhaps... perhaps you will STILL die. NEVER forget I WATCH you THIEVES, you KILLERS - KILLERS ALL, all THREE of you..." yet another yowled.

"Have a care **how** you speak to me, you deranged wreck. He was fortunate to reach here with all those traps **you** scattered throughout the Planes. I swear, if I could have crossed the years to put you out of your **misery**, I w-

"The two of you, be silent! Let us make sure he is all right and save the arguments for later," the soft-voiced one said again. Why were these voices so familiar? A hand tucked under my head, helping me sit up. I slid off the slab, still groggy, but looking up I blinked.

"Wh... who are you all?" I groaned. Around me three men stood, each with skin scarred and twisted as mine. They had the same hair knotted into stringy braids, clicking with beads. They wore the same sash of bone, the same rust-colored kilt, those same heavy boots.

"By the hells, he's lost his memories! Damnation! He's useless to us now!"

one threw his hands in the air in disgust.

"Calm yourself. He's only disoriented, as were we all. Give him a moment to get his bearings."

The mad one snarled, foaming like a rabid dog, "You are all THIEVES... wearing MY body... MY body, and you will give it BACK!"

"I am at the limits of my **patience** with your howling! Be silent, or -"

"This arguing avails us nothing! Give him his space, leave him be. "

"Time is no longer in our favor. I will not stand here and squander another moment while our adversary is no doubt hunting for us. We waited long enough for him to awaken - I will speak to him **now**.

Had the crystal broken my mind? As my vision refocused I looked at the three more closely.

The one who helped me up resembled me, but his face seemed... calmer somehow. He gave a slight smile, and nodded as if in approval. "Are you all right?"

Another stood with his back was hunched, as if perpetually afraid of being struck. He watched me warily, and he hissed under my gaze, his hands clenching, as if wanting to strangle me. His arms were horribly gnarled and scarred, as if they had been dunked into a stream of acid - and his left arm looked like it was holding on by a thread, literally.

The last one carried himself more like a force than a man. His eyes were watching me carefully, and as I studied him, I felt him studying me. "So... it has come to this."

"Who are you?" I asked him as he approached. His eyes locked onto mine like steel.

"I will not surrender my name to you or any man." The man's voice was rough, like mine, and it rang strangely in my ears. "As for 'who I am,' you should be asking yourself that - you are one of **my** incarnations. You made it here, with my clues to guide you."

"Have we **ever** had a name?" the calm one said with a smile, chuckling softly, "Or was it just the first of us? Know that I am your ally in this - I, like these others, have died my death in your mind, and this figment is all that remains."

"KNOW that you will NOT last long in this place, THIEF!" Spittle flew from the paranoid one's mouth, and his face twisted in a maddening grin. "MAZES AND REGRETS AND DEATH are all that ARE HERE..."

"Do not waste your time speaking to that one," the other said coldly, "His thoughts are all angles and spite and nothing more. Come - there is much the two of us must speak of."

"THIEF!" The incarnation's hands twisted, as if strangling the other. "I will feel the bones of your neck SNAP beneath my fingers... take my BODY back." The stern one dismissed him with a wave of his hand, and looked to me.

I blinked, "We - we are separate incarnations? How is that possible?" Was my amnesia not as total as I thought?

The incarnation was silent for a moment, then his expression changed to contempt.

"If there is anything I have **hated** about you, it is your countless questions - your desperate fumbling for meaning and answers." The man's voice was like a hatchet, and anger flickered across his features. "The time for questions is past. Now, you will **listen** to me. I was the first to breach this Fortress, and whatever it is that awaits us here was somehow able to defeat me. It will not best me a second time."

"You... sound as if you intend to fight whatever it is that lurks here."

The man gave me a strange look, then studied me. "Of course. That's the only reason we're speaking now. I'll need you to be the shell - but your mind must be **my** mind. Do you understand me?"

"You mean you intend to possess me?" my eyes narrowed. If this man was who I thought...

"Yes." He glanced around at the spiked walls, then turned back to face me. "We cannot leave this place in pieces. Only one may leave."

"How are we to become one?"

"You must surrender your will to me - your knowledge and skills: whatever little you've managed to accumulate in your life may prove useful." He sized me up again. "It ultimately will be but a fraction of my power, but it might have its uses."

"And if I choose NOT to surrender my will to you?"

"You have no choice in the matter. You do not know how to escape this place. I do. If you refuse to surrender with me, I will refuse to surrender to you - and neither of us will ever be able to leave this place. Only one may leave, and it will **not** be you." He spoke with cold certainty, and a stubbornness that came from self-assurance.

"I could **kill** you."

"You could try." The man seemed amused. "You do not have the power to best me, nor do you have the will to force me to merge with you. I would prefer **not** to kill you to escape this place, but it is a small price to pay for our freedom. It makes no sense that one of us die, when by merging, I could be strengthened."

Hrmph. And he chose to use reason **now**? "Yet you came here previously... and were defeated."

The man frowned. "I was taken unawares. And I did not anticipate that my companions would be split from me upon my arrival... what happened after that... is confusing."

"So even if I were to surrender to you, then we could still fail?"

"Unlikely. I'm the only one who possesses the knowledge necessary to succeed - this moment is the culmination of centuries of planning. Many have suffered and died for us to be here... their sacrifices must not be in vain." The last sentence chilled my blood - it was delivered like a speech, with no passion behind the words.

"How do I surrender my will?"

"In simplest terms, we simply lock gazes, and you surrender yourself. You will merge with me, and we shall be as one, with my mind dominating."

I recognized him. I could never forget those cold, direct eyes, nor the way he had of rehearsing sentiments until the words lost all meaning. "You are the one who saved Dak'kon at Shra'kt'lor. The one who imprisoned Vhailor. And the one who led Deionarra to her death."

The man's eyes narrowed. "What of it? All of it was done with a purpose."

"You gave Dak'kon the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon. Why?"

"The Unbroken Circle? That collection of lies? Yes, it was a week's work to forge such a thing - it was necessary to make it so he would cease doubting himself."

I stood staring at him, dumbstruck. The plates I'd studied so reverently, the histories and words that renewed Dak'kon's faith and honed my own discipline in the Art... "You **made** it? But you told him -"

He shrugged, "Perhaps they carry some truth - I know not. I know that they were tedious writings, but the words were enough to give him faith."

"Why?"

"Your ignorance astounds me." The man looked incredulous. "Can it be that you not know what he carries in his hand? That blade he carries is shaped by his **thoughts**. Such a tool, when used properly, could slay the multiverse itself..." The man looked lost in thought, then his face sneered in disgust. "Though obviously, the gith became separated when we arrived in the Fortress, and I was unable to make use of his blade." The man frowned. "Unfortunate."

I rubbed my temples, and the idea that I'd scribed down the spells this incarnation had written left a bad taste in my mouth. "What was the purpose of imprisoning Vhailor?"

The man shook his head as if weary, and his lips curved in a humorless smile. "Vhailor was becoming... tiresome. Those Mercykillers dogs will hunt you across the Planes themselves in search of 'justice' - and Vhailor was an especially persistent hound." The incarnation's voice dropped slightly. "And

he was much too close to justice for my tastes."

"Why was he hunting for us?"

"Oh, any of countless reasons, some of which lie with me - and others, which lie in the **hands** of other incarnations." He flicked a glance over at the incarnation who had been howling when I first arrived. "There have been many lives that have been blackened by incarnations with damaged minds. Some of us have created... problems. I believe in solutions."

"Was he a threat?"

"Oh, yes - or else I would have simply killed him. There is some link between him and justice itself, and that gives him power even over immortals such as us. Especially if our injustices are great... and ours are of the blackest sort."

It took a long while before I could speak again, but when I did the words came out drawn and quiet. "Why did Deionarra have to die?" I could still feel the tears dripping on her lily-white hands...

"Deionarra? That girl had little sense of the Planes in her, and that was what I needed her for. You see, the Dustmen have it right - sometimes when you feel too much passion, you cling too tightly to life to let go. And neither did Deionarra - as I hoped she would."

"That WOMAN - that GHOST?!" The hunched man's eyes welled up in fury, and spittle flew from his mouth. "She **TORMENTED** me for years, pursuing me, hating me, and **YOU WERE THE ONE THAT KILLED HER?!"**

The incarnation barely even glanced at the howling one, and merely sneered.

"**You** blaming me for anything is laughable." He turned back to me. "It wasn't out of malice - though she did become tiresome. It's just that when I arrived in the Fortress, I didn't intend to stay. I just wanted to get in, sacrifice her, then get out."

The kind-faced incarnation spoke softly, but he sounded pained. "Why did you do such a terrible thing?"

The words were more tender than I could've managed, and I had to swallow

the bile and vitriol that was bubbling in my stomach. This one was self-assured, but from the scraps of memory I had from his lifetime it was well-deserved confidence. Not one to underestimate.

"I needed someone to be my eyes here on the Negative Material Plane, to serve as a scout and try and find out who my killer was. Only the dead can survive here for long - so Deionarra had to be sacrificed so that she could become something other than she was. A tricky business, but it worked - she helped you, didn't she?"

My teeth ground against one another. "You didn't have to kill her."

He looked at me silently for a moment, then his sneer returned. "And that is why you will be defeated if you confront our killer. It is because you are WEAK. And you do not see that some things are NECESSARY."

"You **dare** call **me** weak?!" I snarled, fury breaking free from the loose bands of self-control, "You orchestrated all these 'grand' plans for defeating this invisible enemy, and you got your ass handed to you ANYWAY, and some poor girl was murdered because of it. Maybe if you'd done your job the first time you were here, this wouldn't even be a problem! Deionarra's death **wasn't** necessary. It was merely **convenient** for you!"

"You DARE **lecture** me?!" he snapped back with as much force, "Women have always walked our path with us - whether Deionarra or Ravel or any other woman, and they have suffered, and it was always their CHOICE. Deionarra would have died for me if I'd asked her to. There was no CRIME."

My skin crawled at those words, and we met each other stare for stare, neither willing to give in.

Chapter 114

The shamelessness of it all had me foaming nearly as much as the incarnation next to me, and I had to turn to him instead. Frankly, I couldn't

talk much longer with the sociopath without trying to wring his neck.

This one looked up to me with hunting eyes. "THIEF! You wear my body like a CLOAK, and you SHAME me..."

"I am no thief," I said, standing my ground, "I stole **nothing** from you."

"YOU STOLE EVERYTHING! I AWOKED ON THE STREETS OF THE RING CITY, AND ALL WHO SAW ME KNEW ME!" He took a rasping breath. "All that you had done, all that you had harmed - they were waiting for me, blaming me, hurting me, until I couldn't TAKE the voices any more..." His fingers grasped at the air. "And had to make them SILENT."

My mouth went dry, and recognition burned in my mind. Those sudden urges to strangle Dustmen when I first woke, to silence pickpockets... that unusual talent I had for snapping necks in a fight... "You were the one... the one who strangled all those people, weren't you? I found your journal in the Lady's Maze... and I found the other journal, the dodecahedron covered with traps."

He affixed me with a wary eye - it seemed just looking at me was making him uncomfortable.

"And the Sensory Stone trap - you're the one who left it for me, weren't you?"

"Yes..." He smiled, low and evil. "Simple trap. Trap for someone who can't die - MIND trap." In a way I had to thank him... if it weren't for that particular experience I never would've escaped the crystal just now. Strange... the thing seemed to be built on the same principles, modified and expanded to split the mind before imprisonment like water sluicing down an aqueduct, dividing among many pipes before being stored in a multitude of cisterns.

"You're the one who set fire to Iannis' legacies, weren't you? Trying to destroy my legacy?"

He snarled, "I BURNED the false papers, yes. MORE lies, lies about my FALSE LIVES..."

"And you're the incarnation the Lady mazed, aren't you?" Days of starvation

and blind wandering ebbed and passed like a fading dream.

"Simple escape, simple trap, broke her maze with ease, I did. I could have made it tighter, deadlier." He grinned madly. "She knew nothing of what it takes to trap ME."

"And you're to blame for killing the Linguist Fin?" I could still remember his kind manner, his patience in teaching, and scarred hands wrapping around his neck.

"There..." He seemed confused for a moment. "There were MANY that I killed. There were many that needed to be silenced." His eyes flickered to the black stones, as if remembering something - something unpleasant. Tremors shook his shoulders. "They claimed they knew me. Had to SILENCE them, stop their voices. Accusing. Always ACCUSING..."

"Stop this now," the other laid his hand on my shoulder. There was no warmth in that touch, just the cold grip of one used to command, "You are wasting our time with this prattle."

I shouldered him off and looked to the calm-eyed incarnation, "And you. I don't recognize you."

"Ah..." His smile faded, and concern filled his eyes. "To put it simply. I was once lost, now I am here again, as are these others."

"How is that possible?"

"I - do not know. Whatever you touched within the Fortress has brought pieces of yourself to the surface." He paused for a moment, thinking. "One of these others may know the means of how this came to be - but it is beyond me."

"Other incarnations - reflections of ourselves." The stoic one said half to himself, glancing at the hunched incarnation, and then to the one I was speaking to. "I will have them merge with me after I deal with you. Or kill them if they refuse; it is of no matter. They are not necessary."

"THIEVES. They are THIEVES - all of them. And THIEVES will DIE," the hunched man snarled.

The other incarnation stabbed an accusing finger at the him, "Do not **threaten** me, you fool - I warn you. If anyone is the thief, it is you - you sought to steal our chances to settle this matter by sabotaging all my work!"

"You are the THIEF! You stole my body and my life! And THIEVES will DIE!"

I shook my head, ignoring the argument brewing behind me, "But I have had countless lives. Why are there only three incarnations here?"

He shook his head calmly, "I do not know. Perhaps we were the three pieces that were somehow still present in your mind."

"Present? How?"

He had such a gentle manner. Strange to believe it could be so... I'd always expected all my lives were bathed in blood and pain. "I do not know for sure," he continued, "but I would guess that when we die, traces of the former personality may remain in your mind - and I know that sometimes we may make ourselves felt."

"How?"

"When you are about to place yourself in danger, or were close to a realization, for example, I found that I could stir, help prod you in the right direction."

"So **you** were that crawling sensation I kept feeling in the back of my skull?" That itch, like ants skittering along my brain, always preceding a memory or a shadow of one.

"I would be at a loss to describe how it felt to you, but it is possible, yes."

"Do you know why I wanted to become immortal?"

"No, I do not. I think it was done out of fear. Perhaps one of the others knows, but not I."

I arched an eyebrow. "What makes you think it was done out of fear?"

The man smiled slightly, but there was no humor in it; if anything, it was a sad smile. "What man wishes to die?" He shook his head slowly. "But only

the first of us will ever truly know the reason that brought us to this state."

"Then what was your life like?"

The practical incarnation threw his hands in the air and rolled his eyes in frustration.

"It was quiet, and long, and was filled with much of the pain and the joys that one would expect in life. I served as a cartographer for a time, and I walked the Planes for several years," he sighed, "In the end, as I traveled upon the fields of Bytopia, terrible shadows took on life as I lay sleeping. I died as I felt their claws upon me."

"They are the shades of all those that died in our place."

The man looked pained. "Yes, I know... I know that now. One cannot be in this place of regrets and not feel their agony."

That grip encircled my wrist this time, and the practical incarnation snapped, "You waste time. Or have you forgotten your allies?" Even the word 'allies' was cold on his lips.

I yanked my hand away, and he crossed his arms as if he was recentering himself.

"I fear your friends are already dead." The gentle incarnation looked pained. "This place bears a hatred for the living."

"Dak'kon may have escaped in my time," the other incarnation said coldly, and nodded at me, "Else how would **he** know about the Circle of Zerthimon?"

"Dak'kon and Morte," I agreed, "But Xachariah died."

"Is Morte still **alive**?" The incarnation stared for a moment in disbelief, then he started laughing. "Ha! That piking skull couldn't be trusted farther than I could throw him - claiming he had information when he didn't, **then** I had to go through the torment of prying him off the Pillar of Skulls, then he **feigned ignorance** once he was off of it." The incarnation scoffed. "I humored him, since he'd told me everything I needed from him."

"Feigned ignorance?"

"Oh, yes." The man smiled. "Once a liar, always a liar. It takes a stronger mind than the skull's to give me the laugh, though."

"What was his game? What more did he have to lie about?"

The incarnation smirked. "It is of no matter. Let the skull have his secrets - they are worthless to us."

"Tell me about Xachariah."

"The archer? Well, old sodden Xachariah could see things with his 'eyes' that I couldn't - and he could hit them with his arrows, too."

"So?"

"Well, I was walking into this Fortress blind in some ways - I didn't know what my killer was, so I needed someone who could see things I couldn't in case the enemy was beyond my visual range." He snorted. "Xachariah ended up dying too fast, though, so he wasn't any use in the end."

"You've turned preparation into an art, it seems. You built that tomb beneath Sigil, didn't you? The one with the traps?"

"I'd almost forgotten - yes, what a waste that was." The incarnation seemed irritated. "Obviously, **that** didn't work. And it cost a lot of blood and coin, too."

"Worthless!" The second incarnation broke into uneven laughter, but more gleeful than mad. "It was EASY to breach that child's trap. I found it... and CHANGED it. To make it HARDER. Changed the WRITINGS."

The incarnation frowned at the paranoid one; he looked like he was barely restraining himself from attacking the other. "Yet **another** thing you will answer for..." He turned back to me. "Though I suppose it doesn't matter. It was shortly after the failure of the tomb trap that I decided to carry the battle to our killer rather than wait for him to show any longer."

"Were you responsible for the tattoos on my back? The ones I read when I woke up in the Mortuary."

"The directions?" He nodded, irritated. "Of **course** I was responsible - I knew there was a **chance** I might fail here and lose my memories. I wanted future incarnations to benefit from some... guidance. So I had the directions stitched on my back, since such things - like **journals**..." He growled, as if angry at himself. "Tend to be lost so **easily**."

My lip curled wryly, "The directions were kind of vague, though..."

"Are you a **fool**?" The incarnation looked exasperated. "The directions **needed** to be vague - I couldn't **spell** out exactly what was happening to us, so I left a signpost. What do you think would have happened if a Dustman had read them? Or someone even more barmy? How **quickly** do you think we would have been buried alive or cremated?"

"Very well," I nodded, "What about me seeking out Pharod, though? Why him?"

"Pharod?" The incarnation thought for a moment. "Oh, yes - the trash king with all the 'tough' bloods that thought I was easy prey..." He smiled slightly, as if recalling a pleasant memory. "After only a little bloodletting, I struck a bargain with him - he would see to it that if his men found me, they would take me safely to the Mortuary - and, of course, I needed the eyes and hands of his men to scour the catacombs beneath Sigil for me."

"For the Bronze Sphere?"

"Yes. I told Pharod it was the only thing that would save his miserable life... what a sniveling little dodger he was. You see, the old bastard was destined to end up on the Pillar of Skulls when he died, and he was desperately trying to weasel out of it. So I told him that there was an item beneath Sigil that would 'save' him from his fate, if he could only find it."

"But it **wouldn't** save him - it was just something you wanted him to find."

"Of **course** it was useless to him. One cannot dodge fate so easily. However, nothing motivates a man faster than telling him what he seeks will save his soul from eternal damnation. I intended to take it from him after he found it. It just that searching for it myself would have taken... too long." He smiled again. "And why should I do it, when I could have someone else hunt for me?"

The gentle incarnation shook his head. "'Too long?' Time is nothing to us. You've toyed with him with false offers of salvation when you could've tried retrieving it yourself."

"And what have you done with your life?" he scoffed, "Bumblng about not knowing who or what you were, only to end up murdered."

"At least I am at peace with myself."

The incarnation snorted, "Peace is nothing if you don't have the will to survive or progress in your short, miserable life." He suddenly raised an eyebrow to me, "What is it that you know of the sphere?"

I grunted, "Nothing but irony. Pharod ended up tricking **me** into finding it for him. Why was it so important?"

"Important? Do you not know?" The incarnation became silent for a moment. "Do you have it with you?"

"Yes, I do. I brought it with me," I gave my pack a little pat.

"You **have** it?!" His eyes flared, and suddenly I realized that I may have divulged too much. "Then your life had some use after all!" His eyes flickered, as if thinking, calculating. "When we merge, I will see about finding a means to unlock it. Perhaps all is not lost..."

"What is the sphere? Why is it important?"

"It is a dead sensory stone. Do you know what it contains?!" He smiled eagerly. "It holds the last experiences of the **first** of us. When we were one man, and not a string of incarnations." His voice dropped. "If there is some way of unlocking it, I will be able to see inside his **mind**..."

"And see why this all happened?"

"Yes..." The incarnation's face grew somber. "It is the answer I have always sought. Why this happened. Why we became immortal. When we merge, I will see about finding a means to unlock it. Perhaps all is not lost..."

The kind incarnation murmured again, softly under his breath. "Perhaps

there are no answers in such a thing. Perhaps there never was."

"I don't deal in the realms of perhaps and maybe," the practical one sneered, eyes sharp with contempt. "I seek answers. It is what has allowed us to get this far. If we had left life in **your** hands, we wouldn't have even a fraction of the truth we now possess. And in that truth, lies **power**." He turned to me. "You will realize that when we merge."

"No. There must be another way out."

"You're being stubborn," he scoffed, "THINK. Each moment you delay, your companions' chances of survival grow slimmer."

"They would **never** survive with your guidance," I snapped, "I won't have you using them as tools before casting them aside." I turned to the former cartographer, "Do you know the way out?"

He shook his head sadly.

"You?" I asked, turning to the mad incarnation. "Do you know how I can leave this place?"

"I will NEVER tell you. And you will NEVER leave..." He smiled. "It is QUIET here. PEACEFUL."

"Do you see now?" the last incarnation said coldly, "If you fight me you will lose. I've had centuries of honing my skills and your experiences are but a flicker of a candle compared to my years. The only chance we have, the only chance your **companions** have, is for you to merge with me." He sighed, calm and placating, "I know how you feel. You fear for their safety more than your own, but when we are one that aspect of you will become a part of me. I will do everything I can to save them."

"You **lie**," I hissed, "I've seen what you did to Deionarra, how you poisoned her against her father and sweetened your venom with lies. You drove her to her death with words, and I won't allow you to do the same to me or my friends. I will save them, and YOU will merge with ME."

He dropped the warm facade, and it slid from his face like cracked plaster. "If you will not listen to sentiment then listen to reason. You know I can overpower you easily," his eyebrows furrowed, "But if you wish to stall and

play this fool's game then we will wait as our enemy and the shadows murder them one by one. Once enough time has passed and all hope has gone, perhaps then you will understand that you have no choice."

My hands twitched to reach for his neck. My dagger was at the ready. But he was right... as powerful as I was he'd had centuries more experience at the Art, and even if I hadn't been so badly drained through my foray into the Fortress he may beat me easily still.

No. I glanced to the madman beside me. He flinched, but I leaned down, speaking softly in the lost language of the Uyo: the language that he had used to encode his dodecahedron journal, the language that only Fin the linguist had known, and the language he had been murdered for, to keep the journal secret for all time.

<Let us speak in private, just the two of us.>

The incarnation's eyes widened, and he stared at me. After a moment of silence, he replied in the same tongue. *<Only I know the language of the Uyo. How do you know it?>*

<You are correct: you are the only one who knows the language of the Uyo. So if I know the language of the Uyo, I must be you.>

He was silent, staring at me. The other two looked at us, confused at the odd exchange.

*<It is these **others** who are not you, for they do not know the language of the Uyo.>*

He nodded... slowly. *<I hear you.>*

<This place confuses one's perceptions - we are both you, and now we must become as one.>

His eyes darted to one incarnation, with his cruel and heartless gaze, then to the other, warm and supporting. "I..." To my surprise, he reverted to normal speech... and all the inflections to his voice were gone. It was calm, level, and much like my own. "I... no longer wish to live like this."

<You no longer have to. You have suffered much. You were born into a world

where nothing made sense, where strangers claimed they knew you. They blamed you for things you knew nothing of, and they tried to hurt you. All the pain and worry and torment of your existence; I will wipe it away.>

He nodded - and the incarnation lost his mad gleam, and his eyes became more like my own. "Yes..."

<I will protect you now. You will know peace. For that is all you ever wanted, isn't it?>

The incarnation relaxed at my words, his eyes dimming as he locked gazes with me. There was the faintest of whispers, and he fell to the black stones, finally at rest. With his collapse, a crawling sensation wormed in the back of my skull...

And there was a FLOOD of memories, and strength, and emotions, cracking through me like a bolt of lightning. Memory seared me to the bone: fear, terror, and rage. The wild deluge threatened to sweep me away, but I clung tight to who I was. I steadied myself, dizzy for a moment, then my vision cleared, and I was myself once more.

"Farewell..." I murmured, before turning my eyes back to that cool, stoic gaze. "There is **always** a choice."

If he was shaken he certainly didn't show it. Instead he smiled incredulously. "I surrender to no man. You may have embraced him, but it is you who will be absorbed by me. I have no fear of a madman's power added to your own."

"I doubt it." The new memories still boiled and bubbled, clashing against one another in a disorganized chaos. It was difficult to make sense of any of it, but I felt more energized, more whole.

"Do you intend to fight me on this?" The man seemed more amused than anything else. "You are no match for me. There's little point in resisting."

"Try me."

"So be it, then." His eyes became gray like mist, and he gave a slight smile, as if in anticipation. "We shall see what your mind has in store."

I locked gazes with him. His eyes were like stones, and they stared into mine as steady as steel.

We were silent as we focused, frozen in place. Waves of pure will grappled against one another, and the pressure of it should've crushed anything that crossed between us. His brow furrowed in exertion, but that calm, cold smile still graced his lips. It was like pushing against a stone wall.

"Learn this before you merge with me, and I walk out in your skin," the incarnation said calmly, "Passions count for nothing. The greatest weapon isn't love, or envy, or hate... it is purpose. Cold purpose, direct and pure. And I've had centuries to hone that blade."

"Passion can lead to purpose as well..." I growled, sweat beading on my forehead, "a purpose that one like you could never attain..."

He quirked an eyebrow, and I felt that wall of his psyche pushing against me.

"...Revenge," I hissed. My arms snapped forward, and a single honed thought thrust forward at the same time: *This is for Deionarra.*

The force of his will suffered the slightest of cracks at that blow, but with lightning speed my hands lashed out around his neck. A sharp snarl rose from his throat, suddenly silenced as I squeezed. He clawed at my hands, trying to force them away, but it wasn't my grip that was choking the life from him.

I hammered at him with his sins. Dak'kon's enslavement. Morte's torture. Vhailor's imprisonment. Deionarra's murder and her condemnation to an eternity of mourning. One of his enemies long ago had shown me the strength I needed to defeat him, and I used it to full effect.

"KNOW THIS: THERE IS NOTHING ON ALL THE PLANES THAT CAN STAY THE HAND OF JUSTICE WHEN IT IS BROUGHT AGAINST THEM. IT MAY UNMAKE ARMIES. IT MAY SUNDER THE THRONES OF GODS. WHEN YOUR CAUSE IS JUSTICE, JUSTICE WILL LEND YOU ITS STRENGTH."

I slipped through the cracks left by those blows and swam in the corridors of his mind. The first emotion I encountered was surprise, and his eyes widened. Memories of his slipped by, of unpunished sins and seductions.

We struggled on the floor of the chamber, and I snagged those ancient crimes as they passed like rocks from the ground, bludgeoning him with the thousand injustices he had committed in his life. Sins he'd allowed to slide from his conscience now broke against his barrier in an unstoppable salvo. He'd given me much ammunition to work with.

There was a tug, and I felt him trying to slip away, but my will walled him off and dragged him back. Talons of thought speared his essence, and I dragged him screaming deep into my subconscious.

"This is the last time we shall ever speak," I snarled, "Return to death, where you **belong**."

He looked incredulous for a moment, then disintegrated, and again a RUSH of knowledge poured through me, fighting to the surface. It was almost too much to absorb at once, coming in black flashes and deafening groans. My head spun, and I rocked on my knees with my head bowed and sweating. So much knowledge - so many experiences, that -

...and as quickly as it occurred, the rush subsided. I steadied myself. The bits of knowledge swirled about in my mind, and I would need time to make sense of them. For now, only one piece of knowledge was important - that the incarnation did NOT know how to leave this place. He'd lied, to trick me into surrendering.

"Dammit..." I groaned, scrubbing my face.

The last incarnation knelt down calmly, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"You've done it," he said with a smile.

I looked up to him, and the kindness in his eyes had the opposite effect he intended. I stood morosely. This was a death sentence I had little joy in giving.

"You seem to be a good man. If there was another way..." I shook my head, "I wish things could've been different."

"I understand, and it's no matter. I've been ready for this moment for a long time."

I breathed deeply, then looked up to him, "Before you said that when we die, traces are left in the mind. That's what caused you all to emerge. Right?"

"My understanding may not be complete, but yes, that seems to be the case."

"So," I continued, "is it possible that the first of us - the **real one** of us, before all the incarnations, might still be buried somewhere in my mind."

The expression on the incarnation's face flickered for just a moment, but it was like a window, and I took in a sharp breath as I suddenly realized who it was I was speaking to.

"**You** were the first of us," I gasped.

His eyes took on a haunted look, and his gaze turned away from mine. "I know what you are thinking - but it is not the case. You think that knowing the mind of the first of us will somehow help you here, in this place. It will not."

"But why - I have so many questions that **YOU** can answer. Why did we become immortal? Why?"

"Because if we die, **truly** die..." he looked up at me, and his eyes were grim and glassy. "Death's kingdom will **not** be paradise, not for us. You spoke to these others that were here. Know that the evil of their lives is but a drop of water compared to the evil of mine. That life, that one life, even **without** the thousands of others, has given us a seat in the Lower Planes for eternity."

"But you seem so much... calmer," I cocked my head, as if trying to see him from a different angle, "More well-intentioned."

"I became that way, yes. Because for me..." His voice took on a strange echo. "It is **regret** that may change the nature of a man."

He sighed. "But it was too late. I was already damned. I found that changing my nature was not enough. I needed more time, and I needed more life to make amends. So I came to the greatest of the Gray Sisters and asked her for a boon - to try and help me live long enough to rectify all the damage I

had done. To make me immortal."

"And Ravel did. But when she first tested your immortality and killed you, you forgot everything. **Everything.**"

His voice sounded broken, and he nodded, "And the Planes have been dying ever since. The crime is great, and the blame is mine."

"There are so many questions I have for you - who are you, what was your **life** like? Who-"

The incarnation shook his head, cutting me off. "When I become no more, when I merge with you, you will have the answers you seek. It may take some time to sort them out, but they are there." He smiled ruefully. "It is difficult to communicate a life with words."

"Very well, then..." I nodded, swallowing hard. I was unsure whether I could take this last step, "We shall become as one. Are you ready?"

"One last thing... just this..." The incarnation paused for a moment, searching my features. "Before I return to oblivion - there is something I would know."

"I can spare a little time for this - what do you wish to know?"

He studied my eyes, his expression somber. "Did you **live** your life - the brief life you have had? In the end... was it worth it?"

I thought for a good while, mulled over the flickering of time I had been given. Waking in that cold womb of the Mortuary. Escaping with Morte jabbering at my side. All the wounds I'd taken, all the strange beings I'd met, all the friends I'd made. So much sensation at my fingertips as a Sensate. So much toil and purpose as a Godsmen. Could a mortal have lived so much in the scant few months I've had? Or would he have seen more by letting his death come to him rather than seeking it out?

I smiled, and looked up to the incarnation, waiting patiently for my answer. "It seemed so.... short. What little I experienced, I enjoyed, and I do not wish to forget it."

He nodded, and for a moment I thought he was going to say something, but

then he collapsed. The life ran out of him and into mine. As he fell to the black stones a crawling sensation ran up the back of my skull. I shivered, and knew the incarnation was no more. There was no storm of memory, no torrent of images. He yielded, and I drank him in with no difficulty.

"Farewell..." I murmured.

I sat down, and opened my pack.

Chapter 115

As I held up the sphere up this time and examined it, the memories of the first of my incarnations stirred within me. It wasn't an insistent or driving force - it was calm, like the thoughts of a man walking across a great distance to speak to a friend he hadn't seen in ages.

His presence in my mind was a comfort, and through the vague fog of his memories the sphere seemed to now stand in a different light - not ugly, or hideous, but as something precious, like a newborn child. The sphere was the repository of my last moments, before I had met Ravel on the Gray Waste and asked the impossible of her.

I now knew why I asked her. And I now knew that all I needed to do was touch the surface of the sphere with both hands and **feel** regret, and the stone would open itself to me...

I clasped the stone, and allowed the regrets to well up.

The sphere wrinkled in my hands, its skin peeling away into tears and turning into a rain of bronze that encircled me. With each droplet, each fragment that entered my body, a new memory stirred: a lost love, a forgotten pain, an ache of loss. With them came the great pressure of regret: regret of careless actions, the regret of suffering, regret of war, regret of death.

The regrets piled on with the weight of a mountain, howled with the fury of a storm. My mind began **buckling** from the pressure - so MUCH, all at once, so much damage done to others... so much so an entire FORTRESS may be built from such pain. I had to focus, had to keep my center... but the tears were flooding down my cheeks like blood, the pillars of my mind were beginning to crack...

And suddenly, through the torrent of regrets, I could the first incarnation again. His hand, invisible and weightless, was upon my shoulder, steadying me through the storm. He didn't speak, but with his touch, I remembered my name.

...and it was such a **simple** thing, not at all what I'd thought it might've been. A deep comfort settled in me, of something becoming complete. In a way, I'd regained the most important part of myself.

Somehow in knowing my name I **knew** myself finally, **knew** there was nothing I could not do. The first incarnation's hand lifted from my shoulder, leaving a lingering warmth. He watched me with a slight smile.

"That was my name all along? But if I was-"

He held his finger to his lips, silencing me. He nodded at the symbol at my arm.

The symbol - the symbol of Torment - seemed brittle somehow when I looked down at it, as if it was only barely holding itself to my skin. Unconsciously, I reached out and peeled it from my arm. It gave way with a slight resistance, like pulling off a scab. It seemed to pulse quietly and fall silent as I held it, and I knew I could harness its power. It no longer ruled me.

"I no longer wear the symbol. Does that mean...?"

Halfway through my question, I realized a heavy silence was all that was left within my mind -- I could no longer feel the presence of the first incarnation within me.

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*The incense smoke curled through the air, smelling of ash and finality. There were no mournful chants, no dirges for this in the Mortuary. The Dustmen*

*initiates stood in a circle, murmuring simple catechisms by rote until the words grew numb on their lips and the meaning of them fell dead. There **was** no meaning, no purpose, other than the slow tread towards True Death.*

*The embalmers washed Dhall's body: naked and pale and spotted with age, withered with time yet delicate as a babe's. His quill had run dry. His coughing had ceased. His suffering was at an end. One wiped the blood from the corner of Dhall's lip. He would be given the same treatment as the greatest king or most wretched beggar today. All were equal in the eyes of Death.*

*The eldest embalmer placed the scalpel against the corpse's chest, and prepared to press.*

*One of the clerics blinked and looked up. Another licked his lips and turned his head, as if suddenly nervous that something was staring over his shoulder. One of the morticians recoiled from the corpse, and the jar of embalming fluid he held shattered on the ground.*

*Even the initiates fell silent and glanced about nervously. They could feel it too.*

*A chill was in the air with silent fangs and ages of hunger, clawing blindly for its prey.*

*The Dustmen should have found its presence familiar, perhaps even comforting among the younger acolytes. Yet to a head they pulled their robes close, not daring to meet each other's eyes at the ancient and alien force that swept through. The long sticks of incense snuffed out, and the threads of smoke vanished in the air.*

*Soon the chill was gone, but the initiates still trembled.*

*The eldest of the embalmers closed his eyes, scalpel paused over the corpse's sternum. He considered delaying the ceremony. A message needed to be sent to Factol Skall.*

*Death was coming.*

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The first few hours I circled the prison, clinging to its curved pillars as I looked out over the vastness beyond. Nothing but darkness existed outside this island, swallowing and negating all substance and light. Now and again I returned to the slab I'd woken up on: sitting in meditation and refilling my mental reserves, preparing myself with the Art. Then I would return to my exploration once again, wondering how to escape.

It couldn't have been more than a few hours. That's all it took to restore my spells in full. But by the end I knew that everyone who had followed me here was dead.

This was no time for lamentations. It was no place for regrets. I wouldn't add another brick to this Fortress that way. All I could do now was focus on escape, and the oncoming confrontation.

My heart skipped and I leaped up to my feet as a familiar figure materialized in the corner of my vision.

I could've wept with relief upon seeing the ghostly form of Deionarra: her snow-white hair cascading down her shoulders, her spectral gown stirred by some ethereal breeze. Her gaze rested on mine, and a strange, disjointed sensation swept through me, as if I was looking at several pairs of eyes at once.

"Deionarra...?"

"My Love, at last I have **found** you... I searched for you after you were divided by the crystal - this Fortress spans hundreds of miles, and I feared you were lost to me." Her ghostly eyes took my measure, searching my body for new wounds. "Are you well?"

"I think so - the crystal divided me, but I am one again. Now I am trapped here, however."

"I suspect trapping you here was the crystal's true purpose. But it poses no barrier for one such as I." She closed her eyes. "Much do my eyes see, and the halls of this Fortress are well known to me. If you are trapped here, my Love, I shall see to it you are set free."

"Deionarra," my fists tightened, and I swallowed the lump in my throat, "I wish to speak to you for a moment, and tell you how you died... and why."

Hargrimm, high priest of the Silent King and leader of the skeletons of the Dead Nations, rested his bony hands on the altar. If he had lungs he would have sighed. Many years lay in the span between his old life and this new existence, and the ways of the living were alien to him now. Yet certain habits decayed more slowly than the flesh.

"Hungry ones grow bolder." Stale Mary murmured. "The deception hangs by a thread. Cannot maintain much longer."

"I know the truth of thy words all too well," Hargrimm sighed, and a whirl of dust left his teeth, "Acaste grows more difficult to reason with. She no longer sees the need for balance."

The ghoul matriarch had been bold enough to attack him recently, threatening to tear off his head and suck the dry marrow from his bones. If it had not been for the skeletons tending the cathedral the threefold alliance may have collapsed in that instant.

Hargrimm pounded the altar, and he felt a wrist bone crack. He would have to restore that later, but for the moment he had no care for his own well-being. He loathed the fact that he and Stale Mary had to walk with a retinue of guards now. He hated that zombies and skeletons had been assaulted, and he could do little to retaliate except issuing stern condemnations in the name of the Silent King. Hargrimm was disgusted by the fact that only the ferocity of the ghouls could hold the cranium rat invaders at bay.

Once he had been able to reason with Acaste, show her the need for caution. Drive the cranium rats too far and the population would dwindle, and the ghouls would go hungry and turn on one another. Many would fall in the chaos, and their population was small enough already. This she knew. Little by little she began to believe that their alliance meant nothing, that she could govern the ghouls herself without the need for the skeletons or zombies. Each unpunished assault fueled that conviction further. But if she could not even control her own ravenous hunger...

Hargrimm had seen the void that lay on the other side of the veil once, and had been only just strong enough to pull himself back. He did not want to die

again.

He looked up suddenly. Few sensations were left to him, but this one seemed to scream through the cathedral. The guards shifted nervously in a clacking of bone and creaking dried sinew. It was the howl of something they all knew well, something they had both embraced and escaped. The unseen hound of oblivion swirled through the temple of bone, as if catching an old scent. Hargrimm's grip on his staff tightened. He had no knowledge of how to banish such a thing.

*Yet quick as it came, the cold emptiness was gone in a flash. All in the Dead Nations must have felt **that**. Perhaps... perhaps Hargrimm did have something to bargain with now. Yes... maybe Acaste could be convinced that it was the rage of the Silent King that swept through these halls this day.*

He shelved that thought into the back of his mind. "Something terrible is happening," Hargrimm intoned, looking up to the wall, empty sockets staring past the grim mosaics.

"Or perhaps something beautiful" Stale Mary murmured.

He looked down then, at the rotting hand that clasped his. Her touch was cold, and her body was so delicate: brittle and dry like ancient parchment. He turned his palm up and their fingers clasped gently.

Slowly, Hargrimm set his staff down and turned to Mary. His bony white hand touched her cheek, and she returned the gesture, drawing mummified fingertips gently along his skull, tracing along his jawline. His ribs creaked softly at her embrace, and his robes rustled beneath her sinewy arms. They pressed together, cheek-to-cheek. Loose strands of what remained of her hair brushed against his bones. He wished he could drink in the scent of her: the earthiness of the grave, the tender musk of mold and age.

Mary was ancient and wise and beautiful, and her lips cracked as the words bubbled in her throat:

"The shadows are returning..."

Hargrimm nodded then. Hargrimm, high priest of the Silent King and leader of the skeletons. Stale Mary, wise counselor and mother of the zombies. Whatever came of it, they would face it together.

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Deionarra floated silently at those words, and when she spoke her voice was soft. Perhaps even frightened, "What are you speaking of?"

"When I brought you to this Fortress in my previous incarnation, it was my intention that you die here. I needed someone to remain behind so that they would serve as a link to this place. I knew because you loved me so much, that your love would stave off death and allow you to become a spirit. And that is why you suffer now."

Deionarra's face was a mask as I spoke.

"He lied to you, Deionarra. He used you as a tool... intended for you to be his eyes on this plane."

I'd faced hordes of undead, slaving demons from the lowest planes, faced a dark legend who had mastered the shadows and a corrupt deva who had drawn a pact of betrayal. Yet turning my face up, looking her in the eye, was my most difficult struggle yet.

"I am sorry, Deionarra."

He gown rippled as she floated towards me, raising a hand to my lips. I felt only a chill at her incorporeal touch. Her voice was desperate, pleading. "Do you **love** me? If you say yes, my Love, then nothing that has happened matters."

It was a long time before I could answer, "Though I did not know you at first, your suffering has become mine. I have found that I will do what I can to help you. But I can't love you... I can't love anyone knowing where I'll go."

*Women have always walked our path with us - whether Deionarra or Ravel or any other woman, and they have suffered, and it was always their CHOICE.*

The words were sharp and bitter in my mind. "I wish I could have known you. I wish I could've made you happy. But after this I will free you from this prison, as I promised your father, and you will go to your rightful place of rest, and I will go to mine."

Her eyes were downcast, and when she spoke there was nothing of that naive young girl I'd known, nothing of that blind passion and fire. There was only calm sobriety, and acceptance. "Then... this shall be the ending of things between us, my Love. I have remained here for you - for no other reason. I will help you one last time, then I shall travel beyond the Eternal Boundary, as I was meant."

"I wish to rejoin my friends."

"As you wish," She stretched out her hand. "Touch my hand, and the walls of this Fortress shall be walls no more."

I reached out. Where there once was a chill at her touch there was now only comfort, like dipping into a warm pool. Sensation bled away, and she looked to me with sad eyes, knowing this was the end.

"I... forgive you for what you have done. I shall wait for you in Death's halls, my Love..."

And with those words, the world around me vanished.

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Everyone knew the deep languor that Advocate Iannis had fallen into. He had never truly recovered from the sudden, unexplained disappearance of his daughter. For a month after he learned of her death he was inconsolable, locking himself away in his home for days at a time.

No one in the Fraternity believed that he had recovered once he returned. While he was a hard worker and a strict practitioner of the law, he soon demanded more cases than most men could handle. Indeed, many believed he would drown under the sea of paperwork he'd accepted. Yet they said nothing, knowing he wanted to smother his sorrows with sweat and fill his sleepless nights with toil.

A few of his friends noted that he had been traveling to the Civic Festhall frequently as of late, and somehow had gained admittance to their private sensoriums. How and for what reason they did not know, though many were curious as to how the Sensates' own procedures were circumvented.

And then there had been that strange visitor, the one that rumor claimed was immortal. Many thought the rumor was rubbish... it was a simple law of existence that all things would die eventually. Still, the Planes were vast, and many more bizarre rumors attached themselves to the nameless stranger.

*A few knocked on Iannis' door the day after the Nameless One's most recent visit, hoping to learn what that was all about. Yet the old Advocate would only snap at them and harry them out. His face had been pink with weeping, eyes sagging and dark-ringed from lack of sleep. The poor old man seemed so **broken**, so mad with distress.*

It was unbecoming of a member of the Fraternity, and the visitors left him alone save for one.

It prowled through the Advocate's offices, unwelcome and unbidden, but it was not Iannis that it was hunting. Its fangs were keen and thirsty, its belly rumbled with an ancient and unfed hunger.

It would find no meat here today.

Papers were crumpled and spread about the room, books and bowls scattered as if by a storm. Scratches lined the old wood of the table and dents marred the walls. Yet the center of the room was cleared, saved for an overturned stool, and the motionless boots dangling above it. The noose still creaked with each soft sway of the weight it suspended.

Soon the presence vanished, and the office was empty of life.

Chapter 116

I stood on the rooftop of the Fortress of Regrets.

The sky above me was not the bleak void I had known. It boiled with a purple-gray mist, and sickly lightning green as the plague cracked among it. With each boom the clouds were illuminated with pale and ghostly light, and I saw that they were not clouds at all.

Shadows. Countless shadows seething in the distance, drawn to the Fortress and waiting for their vengeance. They flew in a whirlpool of black and gray, and the thunder was their keening. In the center of it all something materialized, and I knew it was my foe. The creature that had sent the shadows against me, the one who had hounded me through all my lifetimes, the one that kept my mortality prisoner.

It was armored in green strands, pulsing like veins. Its organic form centered on a core glowing with a blinding light, and through its helm the creature's eyes blazed with cold fury. It descended, coming to face me at last.

"SO YOU HAVE COME," it boomed, and its voice seemed to thunder across all of existence. "THEN YOU SHALL DIE AGAIN."

Flames burst around it, and the regrets crooned to me, lapping at my boots as I strode forward.

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*Curst was still recovering from the shift. Former Anarchists and former conspirators alike were working together to clear the rubble and dig bodies from beneath toppled buildings. Occasionally a sharp cry would sound from beneath the stones, and the survivors would band together to save the poor sod trapped beneath.*

*"Please..." he sobbed, and the man's voice was barely audible. He was growing weaker with each moment, "I'm so... tired..."*

*"Tell us about your surroundings again. What do you see? What do you feel?" An'izius shouted.*

*"I've told you already..." the man moaned, "I've repeated it again and again..."*

*"Then repeat once more!" the githyanki snapped. The rescue workers were pulling away the rubble, shoring up the timbers with long metal bars to prevent further collapse.*

*"B-bodies... s-so many... b-bodies..."*

*"Survivors?"*

*The man's voice went weak, "Please, no..."*

*"Survivors!" An'izius demanded.*

*"Dead... all dead. There was a woman here... but she isn't speaking now. A man was pinned next to me but he was dead the moment I felt him against me. Please help me..."*

*"Tell me her name. And feel along that corpse and describe his features once more!"*

*"Oj," Karthis growled, putting a hand on An'izius' shoulder.*

*Karthis was one of those damned Anarchists who had helped instigate this debacle, and An'izius almost pulled away to crack a knuckle against the human's face. He squelched that urge quickly though... the last thing they needed to do was add any other hostilities to the town and allow themselves to get dragged to Carceri again. No strangers would be here to pull their ass out of the pit this time.*

*"That's just cruel," Karthis continued, as if he hadn't noticed An'izius tensing, "You're going to break the man if you keep demanding he focus on the horrors around him. Who knows how sane he would be once we pull him out?"*

*"Better mad and living than sane and dead," An'izius snapped, ignoring the weeping descriptions of the bodies that the trapped townsman made, "Fear of death will keep him alive long enough for us to dig him out."*

*A chill wind passed through the town then, whipping the sands and stirring*

*the men's souls. An'izius winced, and flashes of memory swam through him: terror and pain and the roar of the damned. He tried to brush off the chill, and broke through the mad wind even as the rescuers fell and clutched their heads, shrieking.*

*"No! Hold the braces, you fools! HOLD THE BRACES!" His shouts were drowned out by the screams, the deafening howl that keened even louder.*

*An'izius had never dirtied his hands before, but his hands shot out immediately and tried to catch the bar as it fell. It had taken four men to hold it steady, and they all writhed in terror at the wave that was sweeping through Curst. It was no use, and the shoring fell. He felt a snap in his forearm, and he snarled with pain as he fell to his knees. Rubble cracked as it fell, and the gith coughed at the cloud of dust that now surrounded him.*

*Whatever came passed through the town quickly enough. The streets fell silent save for the weeping of the townsfolk. Clutching his arm, An'izius surveyed the surroundings.*

*Two of the workers clearing the rubble were dead, crushed by the stones that had fallen. Karthis, hulking brute that he is, stood pale as a fish's belly and had clapped a massive hand to his mouth.*

*"Lentz!" An'izius growled through the pain. A gap in the rubble still remained, and he shouted through, "Lentz! Can you hear me?!"*

*Only silence greeted him.*

*He snarled under his breath and gave one of the rescuers a swift kick. Nothing too hard, little more than a firm nudge from his boot, "Get up you useless sack of suet, and get yourself two streets down to see if the ones in the basement still survive. There's nothing else to be done here."*

*An'izius stumbled off to the healer's hut as the workers gathered themselves together.*

*"Nothing to be done..."*

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Their bodies were scattered all around me as I walked. Grace, so wise and

serene, cloaking her wounds beneath her faith. Nordom, so confused and alone... so used to taking orders, now struggling in his newfound independence. Dak'kon, chained by his hasty vow and once so broken in spirit and faith. Morte, who'd faithfully followed me all this time.

Annah...

I couldn't look at her. I couldn't-

I focused on the creature in front of me. I'd crossed countless lifetimes to get here, left so many dead in my wake.

What would I do now that I faced him? What would I do without the entropic blade to slit my own veins? Would I take revenge? Would I unsheathe my dagger? Would I wield the mass of Art that flowed through me now, clash his will against mine until the skies of the worlds cracked and the stars tumbled into the sea?

I stood calm and centered, and met his merciless gaze.

"I came to talk."

It stared down at me, eyes stabbing with hate. "YOU ARE UNWELCOME HERE, BROKEN ONE."

I looked out at the bodies arrayed behind me. "What have you done to my friends?"

The creature floated over, and I walked with it. Existence seemed to ripple in its wake, and the eddies passed through me as I followed.

"ARE THEY DEAD?" it declared coldly, spreading a hand of long talons. "YES... UNLIKE YOU THEY HAVE BUT ONE LIFE. AND THEY WASTED IT FOR YOUR SAKE. THEY DIED FOR YOU AS THEY ALWAYS HAVE... SUCH IS THE WAY OF ALL MORTAL THINGS. IT IS THE FATE OF ALL THAT FOLLOW YOU, BROKEN ONE. YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN MUCH."

"Why did you do it?" I murmured. It was trying to break me, sap my will. This was the last battle it had prepared for, and this was why it had collected their broken corpses.

"THEY TRIED TO HARM ME. HERE, OF ALL PLACES. I DEFENDED MYSELF. IN SO DOING, MORTALITY CLAIMED THEM. THEIR DEATHS WERE BY THEIR OWN HAND. I GAVE THEM THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEPART THIS PLACE, BUT THEY SEEMED DETERMINED TO HELP YOU, DESPITE THE COST TO THEMSELVES."

"So you **killed** them."

"I TOOK NO PLEASURE IN THEIR DEATHS."

"Then why did you **do** it?"

"IT WAS NOT MY WILL. IT WAS NOT I THAT BROUGHT THEM HERE. ALL OF THEM HAD A CHOICE. AND THEY CHOSE TO DIE FOR YOU," **it stabbed an accusing talon at me**, "IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE WAY OF ALL THAT FOLLOW YOU. FOR THEY ARE TORMENTED SOULS, SEEKING A RELEASE. BUT THEY KNOW NOT WHY. YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN THIS. AND YOU SHALL AGAIN."

"Who are you?! Why have you done this?!" I screamed against the darkness.

"CAN IT BE THAT YOU HAVE COME ALL THIS WAY AND KNOW NOT WHAT LIES AT THE END?" **It spread its arms and looked out into the void**, "I AM THAT WHICH WALKS WITH ALL LIFE. MY VOICE IS A DEATH RATTLE, A LAST BREATH IN THE THROAT, THE WHISPER OF A DYING MAN."

I stepped back then, realization dawning, "No...I know what you are - you do not hold my mortality prisoner... you **are** my mortality. Your armor - it is twisted like tree branches. Such things speak of Ravel's magicks."

"YES. I AM THAT WHICH WAS SPLIT FROM YOU BY THE HAG'S POWER."

"Split from me?"

"THE MOMENT I WAS SPLIT FROM YOUR CANCEROUS SHELL, I KNEW LIFE. I KNEW FREEDOM. I SHALL NOT SURRENDER IT TO YOU."

"We were not meant to be separated," I shook my head, "And the Planes

have suffered because of our separation."

"YOU KNOW NOTHING OF MEANING AND SEPARATION. BEFORE YOUR MEMORY DIES AGAIN, KNOW THAT WE WERE NEVER MEANT TO BE AS ONE."

"My friends..." I gestured to their bodies, "I want their lives returned to them, and I want them to have free passage from this place. This is not their affair. It's **never** been their affair."

"NO. THEY ARE DEAD. DEAD THEY SHALL REMAIN."

"Why? **Can't** you save them? Don't you have the power?"

"DO NOT QUESTION MY POWER HERE, IN THIS PLACE. THERE IS NOTHING I CANNOT DO, NOW THAT I AM FREE OF YOU."

"Then where's the harm in--?"

"IT IS NOT MY WILL THAT THEY BE SAVED. THEY CHALLENGED ME IN MY HOME, AND THEIR DEATHS SHALL BE REMINDERS TO ALL THAT CHALLENGE ME."

"You **can't** resurrect them, can you?" Perhaps I should not have goaded the thing, but I had little left to lose.

"BROKEN ONE, IN THE SPAN OF YOUR FORGOTTEN LIFETIMES, I HAVE OBSERVED, LEARNED, AND GATHERED POWER WITHIN THE VAULTS OF MY BODY," it **scoffed**, "WHEN YOU FOUGHT IN THE BLACK DECADE WAR, ALL YOUR MILITARY KNOWLEDGE WAS CARVED IN MY MIND. WHEN YOU DANCED SORCERIES WITH LUM THE MAD, I LEARNED WITH YOU. ALL YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN, I HAVE NOT. THE POWER OVER LIFE AND DEATH IS BUT A MINOR DISPLAY OF MY POWER."

Mentally I sought out the air, tried to find the spark that remained in my friends. Yet their bodies were silent of that lingering essence, cold and inert. "Deionarra told me that I could reverse death only when the victim had died close to me. But what she awakened in me - are you saying that was only a fraction of my power over life and death?"

"YOUR MIND IS A BROKEN STONE, ITS EDGES DULL FROM

MISUSE AND NEGLECT. EVEN IF YOU KNEW POWER, YOU WOULD NOT KNOW HOW TO HARNESS IT."

"If you claim **you** have the power, then I must have the power, too - even if I wasn't there at the moment of death."

"YOU DO NOT HAVE THE YEARS NEEDED TO LEARN THE ARTS OF LIFE AND DEATH. YOU WILL FALL BEFORE ME."

I turned away from the grisly sight, "Strong words for one who has done everything to prevent us from meeting face to face."

"DO YOU THINK I FEAR TO FACE YOU, BROKEN ONE? I DO NOT."

"Is that why you send shadows to kill me rather than trying to defeat me yourself? They've never succeeded in killing me, nor **will** they."

"I SEND SHADOWS BECAUSE THEIR REACH IS LONG. YET IT IS MY EYES THAT GUIDE THEM."

"So the shadows can travel distances you cannot."

"THERE IS NOTHING I CANNOT DO."

"Yet you never traveled beyond these walls to fight me... only sent shadows. An iron golem, forged from the weapons of war, told me this once: When one kills from a distance and does not show himself, it speaks of weakness. It is how a **coward** fights," I stabbed him with the word, and twisted the blade with a sneer.

"MY ENERGIES ARE NEEDED TO SUSTAIN THIS PLACE, BROKEN ONE," it crooned, "ELSE IT WOULD BE MY HAND ON YOUR THROAT WITH EACH OF YOUR DEATHS. I MAY NOT TRAVEL BEYOND THESE FORTRESS WALLS FOR LONG."

"Yet, even when I was within the Fortress walls, you sent Ignus to try and stop me, when you could have stopped me yourself."

"THE SORCEROR WAS... CONVENIENT. HIS RAGE FOR YOU RUNS DEEP. I THOUGHT IT FITTING HE BE ALLOWED VENGEANCE UPON YOU. IF THE PLANES CANNOT TEACH YOU

MERCY, PERHAPS PAIN CAN."

Ignus' last words echoed in my mind, "He wanted revenge? For my teaching him the way of the Art and making him suffer?"

"YES. AS PAIN TAUGHT HIM, I THOUGHT PAIN MIGHT TEACH YOU. BUT THE SORCEROR WAS WEAKER THAN I THOUGHT, AND NOW YOU ARE HERE. SOON, THERE SHALL BE ENDING OF THINGS BETWEEN US, BROKEN ONE."

"So you sent Ignus to try and stop me... but when he failed, then you **still** didn't confront me, even when you could have - instead, you put that crystal in my path to imprison me."

"YES, THE CRYSTAL IS A PRISON, PERHAPS ONE OF THE GREATEST EVER DEvised. I USED IT, FOR I TIRE OF TRACKING YOU ACROSS THE PLANES, NAMELESS ONE. YOU ARE... DIFFICULT TO FIND. I PREFER YOU BE KEPT CLOSE, WHERE I MAY WATCH YOU. THE CRYSTAL IS SUCH A PLACE WHERE YOU MAY BE KEPT. I WOULD KNOW HOW YOU FREED YOURSELF FROM THE CRYSTAL."

"Why am I difficult to find?"

"JUST AS THERE IS POWER IN NAMES, THERE IS POWER IN NOT HAVING A NAME. THE EYES OF THE PLANES SLIDE OFF SUCH A ONE. ONE SUCH AS YOU -- AND ONE SUCH AS I."

"I don't believe you. I think you're **afraid** to confront me... or else you are lying to me, and there is another reason you remain here..."

"YOU KNOW NOTHING."

"Why is sustaining this place so important for you? If you are truly as powerful as you say, why would want to remain here? There is **NOTHING** here," my voice rose to a shout in the end, and the barren void swallowed it in the distance. There was no echo... far into the depths of the plane, my words died a waning death.

"IT IS MY FORTRESS. IT IS MY HOME."

"And what a home it is, too," I gestured, "Mortared from my regrets, with

nothing but the shades of those we've murdered filling its halls, abandoned relics of the past languishing beneath dust, and the life-draining energies of the Negative Material Plane to feast the eyes on. There are words for places like that - they're called **prisons**."

"EVERY WORD BETRAYS YOUR IGNORANCE, BROKEN ONE," my mortality roared, "THE FORTRESS IS SILENT. ALL THAT COMES HERE DIES BEFORE INTRUDING INTO MY PRESENCE. AND THE SHADOWS ARE QUIET CREATURES."

"I think you **have** to remain here, along with the shadows and the ghosts, because that's what you've become. I don't think you sustain this place at all. I think it sustains **you**."

"I REMAIN HERE BY CHOICE."

"Really?" I scoffed, "So when you said you can't journey beyond this Fortress for long, you were lying? And how is it possible that a Fortress built from MY regrets needs YOU to sustain it?"

"I WILL SEE YOU DIE A THOUSAND DEATHS FOR YOUR INSOLENCE, BROKEN ONE," its voice cracked like thunder, "YOU ARE AN INTRUDER WITHIN THESE HALLS, AND I SHALL SEE TO IT YOU NEVER RETURN."

"I may be immortal, but Ravel told me the ritual was flawed: Whenever I die, I lose a fraction of my mind. In time, after many deaths, I shall lose the ability to even think for myself."

"IT IS OF NO MATTER. YOU CANNOT DIE. YOUR MIND MAY BE LOST, BUT YOUR FLESH WILL LIVE ON. THAT IS ALL THAT IS NEEDED."

""Needed?" Why?"

"WE SHARE A LINK, YOU AND I, HOWEVER SMALL. I DO NOT WISH YOU DESTROYED, ONLY FAR FROM ME."

"Then why have you been trying to **kill** me all this time?"

"IT IS OF NO CONSEQUENCE."

"Wait..." the truth of it was clicking into place, "Those shadows you sent against me -- they never succeeded in killing me... but that was never their **purpose**, was it? They only 'kill' me to make me forget."

"THERE IS NOTHING IN YOUR SHELL OF A MIND THAT IS OF CONSEQUENCE, BROKEN ONE."

"Except that - from what the Pillar of Skulls told me, there were three that knew where you could be found and how to reach you - one is Trias, one's you, and the other is me. If you kill Trias and I, there would be no one who knows who you are and how to find you."

"YES, THE ANGEL THAT SHIELDS ITSELF WITH GOLDEN LIES. YOU LED ME TO HIM AT LAST. LIKE YOU, THE BETRAYER WAS DIFFICULT TO FIND. HE WILL DIE THE FINAL DEATH."

"So you used me to find him? You wanted me to kill him, didn't you, so his knowledge would die -- then you tried to kill me, so I would forget where to find you."

"I SEE TIME'S BLADE HAS NOT BLED YOUR MIND OF ALL REASON. MY PURPOSE WAS ALWAYS SUCH: TO MAKE YOU FORGET."

"But **why?** Why do-"

"BECAUSE I NEVER AGAIN WISH TO SUFFER YOUR PRESENCE, BROKEN ONE," its voice rang harshly, like a funeral gong, "YOU ARE AN IRRITATION, A REMINDER OF WHAT LIFE ONCE WAS, AND I DETEST SUCH REMINDERS. I WISH TO BE LEFT IN PEACE IN MY FORTRESS. AS YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN ME, I WISH TO FORGET YOU. FOREVER."

"But I no longer forget when I die. Perhaps once, but no longer."

"YOU LIE. YOU HAVE ALWAYS FORGOTTEN. AND I HAVE ALWAYS REMEMBERED. IT WAS ALWAYS SUCH."

"'Always' doesn't mean what it once did. I have already died once, and my memories returned to me, intact."

"YOUR DECEPTIONS WILL NOT SHIELD YOU HERE, BROKEN

ONE."

"It is the truth," I insisted, "Killing me won't stop me - because killing me doesn't make me **forget** anymore. I'll know you always, I'll remember everything you've done, how to reach here, and eventually, how to destroy you."

"THEN I SHALL IMPRISON YOU, NAMELESS ONE. IF YOU WILL NOT FORGET, THEN I SHALL NOT ALLOW YOU TO BE FREE."

"But I already escaped from 'the greatest prison ever devised.' You can't kill me, you can't hold me, and you can't make me forget myself any longer."

"THEN I WILL FEED YOU TO THE SHADES," its voice rose in grandiose fury, "I WILL DEFEAT YOU HERE, THEN CAST YOU INTO THE SHADOW GALLERIES, WHERE THEY MAY FEED ON YOU. THEY WILL KILL ACROSS THE SPAN OF SEVERAL ETERNITIES. YOU SHALL NEVER WALK THE PLANES AGAIN."

"No, you will not," I declared. My mind had been working over his words a long time by now, "Consider this: you say we are linked. So when I suffer, you must suffer as well. Perhaps you are trapped here **because** you suffer, but differently than I do."

"WHAT IS THIS FOOLISHNESS YOU SPEAK OF?"

"Is it possible that as I die the death of the mind with each of my deaths, you die the death of the body? As I lose spirit, you lose substance. That's why you find it harder and harder to leave this Fortress and travel beyond this plane. This Fortress is not only your prison, it's going to become your tomb."

"IMPOSSIBLE."

"Is it? You said we were linked. Surely, you've felt your body wane over the past century," I gestured to the brambled armor he wore, "You even carry the branchings of Ravels' frame over yourself, and you **detest** her - but you need the frame over your spectral form to prevent yourself from decaying faster."

"EVEN IF THERE WERE TRUTH IN YOUR WORDS, THERE IS NOTHING TO BE DONE. I WOULD SOONER DIE THE DEATH OF THE BODY HERE IN THIS FORTRESS THAN SUFFER EXISTENCE

WITH YOU."

"But why die slowly when we could become one again? We'd stop torturing each other at last."

"YOUR WORDS ARE POISON TO ME. I NO LONGER WISH TO BE A PART OF YOU AND SHARE YOUR WRETCHED EXISTENCE. LOOK AT YOU. YOUR SHELL IS BROKEN AND SCARRED. I WOULD RATHER DIE FREE THAN ENCASED IN YOUR SICKLY SHELL."

"And look at **you**," I shot back, "A spectral creature that postures and boasts, but whose life and his power are figments of what life once was. Is that how you wish the Planes to remember you after you fade into oblivion?"

"I DO NOT WISH TO TRADE ONE OBLIVION FOR ANOTHER. AND I DO NOT WISH TO INHABIT YOUR SHELL, BROKEN ONE."

We stared at each other a long moment, two monoliths stubborn and implacable. The shadows flocked above us, and whether they were eager or afraid of the confrontation below, they stood away from the clash of words and reason. "Then this is my final question: What can change the nature of a man?"

"THE QUESTION IS MEANINGLESS."

"Nonetheless, before there is an ending between us, I will hear your answer."

"THEN THIS IS MY ANSWER, AND YOU ARE THE PROOF. **NOTHING** CAN CHANGE THE NATURE OF A MAN."

"If there is anything I have learned in my travels across the Planes, it is that many things may change the nature of a man," I breathed. The answer to Ravel's riddle, the answer she never knew or cared for herself, finally became clear. "Whether regret, or love, or revenge or fear - whatever you **believe** can change the nature of a man, can."

"THEN YOU LEARNED A FALSE LESSON, BROKEN ONE."

"Have I? I've seen belief move cities, make men stave off death, and turn an evil's hag heart half-circle. I had unmade Vhailor with belief, and for

moments I had given life to another through the power of a name. This entire Fortress has been constructed from belief. Belief damned a woman, whose heart clung to the hope that another loved her when he did not. Once, it made a man seek immortality and achieve it," I leaned back, my eyes taking in the full form of my mortality, "And it has made a posturing spirit think it is something more than a part of me."

"YOUR DEFIANCE WILL HURT YOU MORE THAN ANY WOUND IN THIS PLACE. BELIEF CANNOT CHANGE THE NATURE OF A MAN."

"Belief is everything here, creature," I declared, "Because I believe in the power of my **name**."

The Gray Waste ached with the weight of timeless memory.

"A NAME IS A CLOAK OF LETTERS THROWN UPON A MAN. IT MEANS NOTHING." It spoke coldly, but there were cracks in the creature's conviction. This was **it**.

"You don't **know** what our name was, do you?"

"THERE IS NO ONE IN ALL EXISTENCE THAT KNOWS OUR NAME. THIS IS OUR SHIELD. NAMES CARRY POWER. WHEN ONE IS NAMELESS AS WE ARE, THEN ONE IS STRONG. WE CANNOT BE HUNTED. WE CANNOT BE TRACKED. WE CANNOT BE HARMED."

"Why was that ever important? Were we being hunted?"

"ALL THAT LIVES IS HUNTED. THE PREDATOR IS DEATH. IT HUNTS US NO LONGER."

"No, it now hunts for **others** in our place. Countless others are dying because you and I are separated. We cannot continue to live like this, or else we will continue killing others in our place!" The shades above us rumbled, and the storm seemed to roil at those words.

The plains of Carceri rumbled in anticipation.

"EVERYTHING THAT LIVES DIES. THE SHADES HERE SUFFER, BUT FOR THEM, IT IS IMMORTALITY OF A SORT. I AM THE

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS OF THIS FORTRESS, AND THEIR HATRED IS FOR YOU, NOT I."

"So you will allow innocents to suffer in our place?"

"IF YOU WOULD END THEIR SUFFERING, SUBMIT TO ME. ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE KEPT IN THIS FORTRESS WITHIN THE CRYSTAL, AND INNOCENTS NEED NOT SUFFER. THEY SUFFER BECAUSE YOU DIE, NOT I."

"They will suffer no longer. Once death may have hunted for them, but our name is known to me, creature! In knowing it, I have become strong! And in knowing it, death hunts for us once more!"

The Pillar of Skulls rattled and shrieked and fell silent.

"YOU LIE. OUR NAME IS LOST, FORGOTTEN, AND SO IT SHALL REMAIN UNTIL ETERNITY DIES."

"Do I lie? If you are of me, you **know** when I deceive you. I do not lie now."

"EVEN WITH SUCH KNOWING, YOU DO NOT HAVE THE POWER TO DEFEAT ME." Steady as it was I could **feel** its confidence wavering. I **believed** in the doubts cracking through it now.

"Yes, I do - and I shall not allow you to trick me into a battle that is not even necessary. For in knowing my name, my true name, I know yours. There is nothing more you can do to me."

"I WILL UNMAKE YOU."

"No, you will not - you will rejoin with me, and we shall become as one again, as we were meant."

"YOU KNOW NOT WHAT YOU DO. IF WE ARE RE-UNITED, THEN IT SHALL BE AN ENDING. THERE SHALL BE NO FUTURE FOR US. WE SHALL GO ON TO FURTHER TORMENTS."

"It is better **that** happen than the multiverse continues to suffer because of us," with those words I looked out at my friends again. Grace... Nordom... Dak'kon... Morte...

Annah.

"IF WE BECOME ONE, WE SHALL SUFFER. THERE IS TOO MUCH OF THE NATURE OF THE FIRST ONE IN US FOR US TO BE SAVED. WE SHALL BE DAMNED. YOU KNOW NOT WHAT YOU DO."

"No, I know very well what I do. And I think this is the only answer. Prepare yourself."

I was ready.

Even in defeat it was defiant. "KNOW THAT I HAVE ALWAYS HATED YOU, BROKEN ONE. WHEN WE ARE ONE, I WILL CONTINUE TO HATE YOU. WHEN YOUR SHELL DIES AT LAST, KNOW THAT I SHALL TAKE PLEASURE IN YOUR DEATH."

"I can live with that - and so can the planes."

"KNOW THAT MY HATRED FOR YOU WILL UNMAKE THE PLANES. PREPARE YOURSELF. WE SHALL BE AS ONE AGAIN -- UNTIL YOUR LAST MOMENTS OF LIFE."

I nodded. "Very well. I am ready to become mortal again."

Chapter 117

We met one another, and at first it was like mixing oil and water. The ropes of his armor bent and coiled around my body, brambles biting deep into my flesh. His talons fell away and dissolved, his helm split open. A pressure of substance that had been parted for too long walled between us: bending, stretching, until it pricked like a soap bubble.

And the form of it **burst**, the core of inner light flooding into me. Beams of radiance crackled between the two of us and I threw my head back, crying out at the sensation of being **filled** once more...

My mortality swirled through me, viscous and thick. The tempest of its motions welled, and for a moment I feared that I might burst from it...

But then it began to settle, like a wave after crashing against the shore. Its essence seeped into the cracks and crevices of my spirit, filled in wounds long forgotten and sealing gaps that had been left with countless deaths. I shone like a sun. My eyes burned like stars. Each moment a hundred lifetimes revealed themselves to me, a thousand...

So many wounds, so many deaths of memory, so many fissures... I had forgotten not only the incarnations past, but what it was like to be **whole** again. The countless shreds of my existence sealed together, my mortality cementing them tight. I was a Sensate, and this was merely another experience. I was a Godsmen, and this was merely another test. I'd been a murderer, a madman, a poet, a priest, a scavenger, a mourner, a scribe, a merchant, a butcher, a baker, a scholar, a mage... countless lives and countless incarnations strung together like pearls once scattered, clicking one by one into a single chain.

And the world calmed once more... placid as a quiet pond.

I closed my eyes and felt deep inside, exploring the depths of my mind. A million new memories chattered away and I swept them aside, searching for the gap where my spirit had once laid. Nothing. Where that ragged wound was, that hole that led to a deep oblivion inside my being, there was only a smooth continuity of essence.

I was whole.

I was healed.

I was one.

And I knew now, the totality of life and death. I pressed against the veil that laid between this world and the next, and it bent like gauze at my touch. A little further, and I directed the threads over Morte, to weave him back into his corporeal form in a nimbus of light...

Yet as I reached out with my power, Morte suddenly floated into the air. "Eh... hold up, chief. You don't need to resurrect me; I was uh, just kind of

lying here, you know, listening to you two."

"YOU WERE FEIGNING DEATH," reality trembled at the thunder that was now my voice.

Morte blinked, "Well, yeah, I mean I'm **already** dead. When you've been dead as long as I have, you learn to fake it really well..."

"SO YOU WERE GOING TO JUST LIE THERE THE ENTIRE TIME?" I could feel my eyes flash, and my lips curled into a grin.

"Well, **yeah**, chief. It's not like you'd die. I mean, if you failed, you'd need someone to remember for you. Plus, you know how worthless I am in a fight - well, when I'm not taunting some mage or another..." he cocked in the air, "Uh, chief, what happened to your **voice**?"

"I... AM SOMETHING ELSE NOW. TIME RUNS SHORT, AND SOON TIME AND FATE WILL CATCH UP WITH ME. I WILL RETURN YOU TO SIGIL, MORTE, IF YOU WISH IT."

"Wh --?" his jaw dropped, "Return me? What about **you**? Come on, chief, I may be a **coward**, but there's no way I'm leaving you in this place."

"MANY ARE THE CRIMES THAT WERE COMMITTED WHEN MY MORTALITY AND I WERE SPLIT. THESE CRIMES CARRY A... PRICE. YOU MAY NOT GO WHERE I WILL SOON BE."

"Well, I **could** go with you anyway, chief, if you wanted me to," he pressed, eager to stay by my side, "I mean, we've been through wors-"

"NOT THIS TIME. PERHAPS ONE DAY YOU AND I WILL MEET AGAIN, ON ANOTHER PLANE. BUT NOT NOW." The deed was done, whatever lay between us was complete, and Morte needed to follow me no longer.

Morte stared at me for a moment, then sighed. "Not to get all misty-eyed, but, uh, it's been a pleasure, chief."

"FAREWELL, MORTE."

I reached out with my power again. There was a rush of air, and Annah stirred as I wove her spirit back into her body - she raised her head slowly,

then shook it, confused.

"ANNAH. ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

Annah's eyes widened as she heard my voice. "Wh - what **happened** ta yeh? Yer voice - it's like echoes, it is."

"I HAVE CHANGED. I AM SOMETHING ELSE NOW, AND I CANNOT REMAIN HERE MUCH LONGER. I WILL RETURN YOU TO SIGIL, IF YOU WISH IT."

"Wh-" Annah opened her mouth, then paused. "Wh -- Where are **yeh** goin'?"

"MANY ARE THE CRIMES THAT WERE COMMITTED WHEN MY MORTALITY AND I WERE SPLIT. THESE CRIMES CARRY A... PRICE. THERE IS A PLACE RESERVED FOR ONES SUCH AS I ON THE LOWER PLANES. IT IS... PUNISHMENT OF A SORT."

"But I... I don't **want** yeh ta go." She reached out as if to clutch my arm, to pull me back to her, but she hesitated.

"I WILL NOT FORGET HOW MUCH YOU WERE WILLING TO SACRIFICE FOR ME, ANNAH," I tried to make my words gentle, and though they roared with the voices of thousands of lives, she didn't pull away when my hand cupped her chin.

Annah nodded. She looked like she was about to say something else, but then fell silent. The unspoken thought remained in her mind, lingering.

"I DO NOT NEED YOUR WORDS TO KNOW YOUR HEART, ANNAH. FAREWELL."

My power touched Dak'kon, and he took a staggered breath then looked up weakly. It looked as if he was barely clinging to life.

"AWAKEN, DAK'KON OF SHRA'KT'LOR, LAST WEILDER OF THE KARACH BLADE."

As he heard my words, Dak'kon slowly nodded, standing. "Your voice... have you at last come to **know** yourself?"

"YES. IT WAS A... DIFFICULT THING, AND IT COST MANY LIFETIMES. MANY SUFFERED SO THAT I MIGHT KNOW MYSELF AGAIN."

"The **knowing** of one's self is a difficult path."

"IN KNOWING IT, I KNOW WHERE I SHALL SOON BE BOUND. TIME AND FATE COME HERE EVEN AS WE SPEAK, AND I WILL NOT BE HERE MUCH LONGER. I WILL RETURN YOU TO SIGIL, DAK'KON, IF YOU WISH."

Dak'kon fell silent for a moment; when he spoke again, his voice was sharp, as if severing a link. "**Know** that once I owed you a debt. **Know** that you saved my life, and **know** that I followed you to settle that debt."

He bowed, "I have paid for your life with mine. The debt is settled."

"VERY WELL, DAK'KON. OUR TWO DEATHS WERE AS ONE. YOU WILL LEAVE THIS PLACE WITH YOUR FREEDOM."

As your my power touched Fall-From-Grace, she rose dizzily to her feet - even disoriented, she somehow managed to maintain her composure.

"FALL-FROM-GRACE," I intoned.

Fall-From-Grace looked up, and she held my eyes for a moment, and smiled. It was a slight smile, that carried more sadness than anything else. "Your voice - so you have found yourself at last?"

"YES. THE PRICE WAS... HIGH. THE COST WAS MANY LIFETIMES, MINE AND OTHERS."

"The price of such a thing is seldom measured in copper." Fall-From-Grace studied my features. "Are you still -"

"I AM STILL THE ONE YOU KNOW - BUT MY PERSPECTIVE HAS... CHANGED. I HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN YOU, IF THAT IS YOUR FEAR."

Fall-From-Grace smiled again: the same sad smile as before. "No, that was not my fear."

"I CANNOT REMAIN HERE FOR MUCH LONGER. MY PUNISHMENT CALLS, AND FATE AND TIME SHALL SOON BE HERE. I WILL RETURN YOU TO SIGIL, IF YOU WISH."

"That is not my wish." Fall-From-Grace reached forward, and her hand lightly touched my arm. There was a slight tingling sensation, barely felt, then she took it away. "I **will** find you again, no matter where in the Lower Planes you will be - just as you shall be able to find me."

"IT MAY BE A LONG TIME. WHERE I AM BOUND, TIME IS NOT MEASURED IN YEARS. AND THE CRIMES I HAVE COMMITTED ARE STRONGER THAN ANY CAGE."

"No cage shall separate us, and no Plane shall divide us." Fall-From-Grace's face became like stone. "Keep thinking of me, and we shall meet again."

"I SHALL NOT FORGET ALL YOU SACRIFICED FOR ME."

She shook her head. "Just do not forget me."

"TIME LAYS WASTE TO ALL THINGS. BUT I SHALL FIGHT IT AS LONG AS I CAN."

Grace folded her hands then, and looked to me, the same look she gave her students. The same look she gave when weaving her mastery of words.

"Time is not your enemy. Forever is."

I nodded, and understood. "PERHAPS SO. FAREWELL, GRACE."

At last I reached out to Nordom, shaping the soul into Nordom's frame: slowly, until I felt it slipping back into the modron's body. There was a shudder from Nordom's boxy shape, and he sprang to his feet.

"NORDOM."

Nordom blinked, the shutters of his eyes **kliking** rapidly, then dilating to points, as if he was squinting at me. "Your voice x-ceeds standard recognized parameters."

"I HAVE BECOME... WHOLE AGAIN. I HAVE CHANGED, BUT I SHALL NOT BE HERE MUCH LONGER. I WILL RETURN YOU TO

SIGIL, NORDOM, IF YOU WISH."

"Query:" he clicked, "Where is your next destination? Nordom will follow and protect you."

"I HAVE COMMITTED MANY CRIMES ACROSS MANY LIFETIMES. I GO NOW TO A PLACE OF PUNISHMENT. YOU CANNOT COME WITH ME."

"Branching query: Do you not (require) or do you not (want) presence of Nordom?"

"YOU CANNOT FOLLOW, NORDOM. IT IS NOT MY CHOICE. THERE ARE OTHER POWERS THAT NOW RULE MY ACTIONS. THEY ALWAYS DID, BUT NOW THEY KNOW ME FOR WHAT I AM, AND THEY COME EVEN AS WE SPEAK."

I reached into my pack, and pulled out the Modron Cube.

"I HAVE MADE PREPARATIONS ANTICIPATING MY END, NORDOM. YOU ARE NOW THE NEW PROJECT DIRECTOR OF RUBIKON. PROTECT THE MODRONS WITHIN. GUIDE THEM. AND TEACH THEM HOW TO PURSUE THEIR OWN DESTINIES."

Nordom **whrrr-kliked** for a moment, then his crossbows began **klikking** and **twanging** in his hands. "Nordom surrenders gratitudes. You helped Nordom find his idemnity." He accepted the duty with grace, and held the cube close to him.

"AS YOU HELPED ME FIND MINE. I GIVE YOU YOUR FREEDOM, NORDOM. EXPLORE, LEARN, GROW. WE MAY MEET AGAIN, ON ANOTHER PLANE, IN A TIME FAR FROM NOW."

"Response: Heard and acknowledged. Nordom now awaiting said day."

"HOLD ON TO YOUR LOGIC, NORDOM. YOU WILL FIND IT A GREATER SHIELD THAN MOST OF THE PASSIONS THAT RULE THE PLANES."

"The issue no longer equals total logic."

"FAREWELL, NORDOM."

I turned from them, reaching a hand out into the empty space in front of me. With a wrench of my wrist I twisted the threads of existence, and the area in front of me turned in on itself, warping in a whirl of blue and white. The portal hung like a curtain, and revealed the perfumed quarters of the Clerk's Ward.

I felt a pang through my chest. For a short time that had been home, and I could never return.

One by one they went through, gazes kept forward. They left me into the folds of life, and it would shelter them for the rest of their years, long as they may be.

But not as long as mine, I smiled to myself.

Only Annah turned to me then, the last to leave. Her mouth opened, she reached out, but before she could run back to me I snapped the portal shut.

I closed my eyes, and waited for the end.

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I could feel it gnawing at the walls, clawing at the protective wards my mortality had placed when we were apart. I looked up to the shadows that swirled, and shuddered, not knowing whether I was their master or foe. With a sweep of my hand they scattered. I hoped they would find their rightful rest.

And then I focused, **knowing** the protections that barred my death from me. They snapped like overstretched sinews, and with each one that broke the Fortress shuddered. Far in the distance I could **feel** the regrets crumbling to ash, swept into the nothingness of the void that lay beyond. Words unsaid and stillborn dreams... the mortar and brick of my palace, my prison, cracked. The pillars of sorrow fractured and broke.

The Fortress was falling apart.

I could feel the foundations raining away beneath me, dissolving into nothingness. Each floor and tower shattered and melted away like ice into the sea of black, and with each barrier that fell my death clawed closer, howling with voracious fangs.

I noticed her then: On the other end of the rooftop to see me away. She gazed at me with crystal-blue eyes, her silver-white hair whipped by an unseen wind. Her sky blue gown rippled like the waves of an ocean. Her eyes locked with mine, and she bowed her head. Bit by bit her being dissolved into motes of stardust. There was nothing to bind her here now.

"FAREWELL, MY LOVE," I murmured softly, even as my voice resonated, even as the roar of crumbling mortar drowned out my words.

And the ground broke away from me, the roar of abyssal flames searing my flesh. I threw my head back, howling in pain, weeping with relief. The flames seared past the flesh and down to my soul, and I laughed. I **laughed** that finally, death was mine.

Its fangs snagged my spirit, its scythe pierced my breast. It dragged me down, past the hundred plains of the Abyss. Down, through the layers of hell. Down, into the cold that froze the hearts of fiends, into the flames that would sear souls to ash. I sped onward to my fate for an eternity, and my regrets broke down behind me, until nothing was left.

I was dead.

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In the deepest levels of the Lower Planes, in a realm where the soil was the dried and crumbled blood of infinite sinners, where the dust that blew in the wind was their powdered bones, a single star flickered in the sky.

It was a pale and pathetic thing, shrouded by the dust that rose in battle, the toxic miasma that belched from the fire-mountains on the far horizon. Yet if one looked up and searched hard enough, it could always be seen.

Few in this land lived long enough to attach a name to this realm. Fewer still lived long enough to contemplate anything but survival. But those few, those rare and precious and condemned souls that could become scholars of a sort, were split in two on what that star was.

Some believed that the star was a pale beacon of hope: that salvation was available to all, even on the most wretched and vile of Planes.

Others believed that it shone to torment the damned: a constant reminder of what was lost, a hope so distant that none could grasp it.

In a valley that had known only war and violation, a river ran between the hills. The river ran through all the Outer Planes, but here one could follow it for eternity and know only pain. On the river was a single rowboat, piled high with the souls of the dead. The ferryman was blind and deaf and dumb, but its skeletal hands gripped its staff firmly, guiding its cargo to their final destinations.

A single body twitched, and tumbled over the side.

The ferryman took no notice at the form as it floated: gray and scarred and puckered as it was, it would've blended into the foggy waters even if the ferryman had eyes to see with. Instead it rowed on, leaving the thing behind.

The river carried the lump silently for a time, and if anything lived to see it, none knew what it was.

For an eternity it floated, until it hit the shallows. The waters swept it quietly onto the bank... onto the beach of the Silent Shore.

He coughed then, fluid spilling from his mouth and pouring down his cheeks. The stranger rolled to his side retching it up, warm and thick, until none was left in him. He'd had enough of forgetting.

His eyes blinked, and his vision refocused. The bleak clouds swam by in the distance, and nearby he could see a bundle of weapons sticking up from the ground. Ancient things, rusted to near uselessness.

He leaped to his feet then, steadying himself. The stranger breathed once more, taking in his surroundings, the knowledge of where he was. The stink of death and depravity was in the air, but he breathed it in anyway. He needed to get used to the taste of it.

Leaning forward the stranger crawled up the hillside. The dirt peeled away from his hands and boots like ancient scabs. The dampness on his palms mingled with the dust and churned it into a bloody mush between his fingers, and the harsh tang of iron filled his nostrils. The roar of thunder seemed to be coming over the hill.

And he reached the crest, looking down at the scene below him.

War. War that had gone on so long that it had lost all meaning. The battlefield stretched from one horizon to the other, spanning into the infinite distance, and the din of battle sounded from all sides until it seemed to merge into one, continuous scream of terror and pain. In each blink of an eye a hundred thousand died, and in each glance a hundred thousand more swam into the fray: goaded by terror or fueled by blind rage.

The stranger gazed down calmly, the fires of destruction and death reflecting in his eyes. He turned to his side, and his hand reached out to grip one of those weapons that had fallen to the side.

He pulled it out with some difficulty, and gazed into the four-bladed axe, dust falling free from its edges. The words of someone long ago echoed in his head:

"What can change the nature of a man?"

*He nodded in satisfaction then, **knowing** the answer. The bones and dried blood crunched beneath his boots, as he descended down the hillside quietly, beneath the pale light of a distant star.*

Into the battle.

Into the madness.

Into damnation.

Into his destiny.

Epilogue

The Keeper-of-Forgotten-Thoughts lowers his empty vial and looks out among the crowd. The tavern has fallen silent, and the crowd stares: numb and mute at the ending of the long tale. Shara Six-Blades closes her eyes. Oudilin's harp rests on his lap. Scii-Tavakis' spear has fallen to her side. Epetrius bows his head, Xoraskavitt silent on his shoulder.

Lying on the table Jeanette Dovellet Four-Winds has passed out in a heap, and Ileron of Sen-Tau smiles enigmatically, his eyes cold and cruel.

There is no applause. There are no cheers.

It is over.

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*It is a sober morning that the tavern patrons stumble out into, vanishing one by one into the pale light of the dawn. They bleed out into the streets: stumbling half-drunk or half-asleep to angry wives or stores that will be left untended for the day.*

*A hundred tongues will wag from here, clumsily attempting to retell the tale. A thousand variations will exist with each retelling. In the years to come,*

*some will claim that Ignus followed the Nameless One to his end, or that Vhailor survived and slew him. Some will say that the Blade of the Immortal was left intact and that the Nameless One slit his own throat before his mortality. Others will forget one of the Nameless One's friends or another, while others will embellish with little details of their own. In one telling the Nameless One is a madman prowling with the Xaositects, while in another he was as wicked and cruel as his past incarnation. In a lifetime from now, shrines will be built in his image and a minor cult will pray for his salvation. Fifteen years after that, the cult will fall to assassins to prevent his rise to godhood, that he might one day return to Sigil and tell of his deeds.*

*For now, though, you step out of the Tavern of Broken Dreams with the crowd, letting your cloak hang loosely about you to hide the bulges in your pockets. The Nameless One's eye squirms in your belt pouch, and the Chaos-Mad Tome whispers and gibbers and gives off odd smells, but none seem to notice. Even the empty vial may be of some use. The city-man was the main worry... who could know what powers such a creature possessed? Fortunately however it seemed that paradise knew nothing of pickpockets.*

*You wrinkle your nose as you stroll through the fetid stink of the Hive. Shopkeepers are only just now setting up for the day, and already the stench of the Ward is rising to putrid levels. An old friend had bidden you to come and visit, and he had never shown up at the designated time. Shaking your head and grumbling with frustration, you are about to turn down a crossing to ask for the nearest portal out of here.*

*"Hey!" a familiar voice cries out.*

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Annah spins about, letting the hood of her cloak drop at the shout. There, floating down the street, happy as a clam, is Morte. At his side three modrons clomp down.

"Where've **yeh** been?!" she snaps, "Yer a day late!"

If Morte had eyelids he would be blinking, and he pauses in surprise. "Late? Uh, you're a day early, fiendling."

"What are yeh talkin' about? I checked me timepiece three times a'fore I took th' string o' portals this way!"

Morte's eyes flick down to Nordom. The modron Director has seen better days, and two of its limbs are discolored and ill-fitting. Doubtless they were scavenged from the modrons that had tried to kill it and return it to the Source.

"You have not heard, Annah?" Nordom clicks, "Apologies, but we are not to blame. Rumor has it that an obstruction was discovered in one of the peripheral cogs of Mechanus a short time ago, and that as a result the Planes have been running a bit oddly ever since. I am certain that the error will be corrected in due time."

Annah bites her tongue and remains silent, but nods. She has tried to correct her temper over the many years, but old habits die hard.

"Annah?" Nordom continues, "May I introduce you once again to **KlikKlik** and **Whrrrr**. They wish to accompany us in our quest again this time."

"Yeh, I remember them." Barmy the both of them are, but reliable fighters for modrons.

"I helped name them myself," Nordom declares proudly.

"Yeh, I remember that, too," Annah rolls her eyes, "'Ow is Rubikon these days?"

"Unfortunately two of our number have returned to the Source in the recent Great Modron March," Nordom gives a whistle that might be interpreted as a sigh, "It shall not happen again."

"You aren't gonna ask about me, fiendling?" Morte asks sweetly.

"Ach I know what yeh've been up to," she chuckles, "Up to yer eyeballs in mams, I'd say. Wot was th' name of that last chit? Lizzie was it?"

"The 'Limpin' Lady of Gloucster?' Eh, that was only her stage name," Morte grins.

"Aye? I thought ye'd be travelin' with these three clickboxes, eh? Anythin' o' interest with that?"

"Eeeh..." Morte seems to shrug, "Nothing of consequence."

Annah certainly didn't believe that.

"But really, I've been hunting rumors. I think I finally pinned down where the chief is. Well, at least the layer he's on..." Morte blinks suddenly, and eyes Annah up and down as if for the first time, "You look terrible by the way."

Annah squelches the urge to bat at him, and pulls her hood up to hide the wings of white in her rust-red hair. Her years are stretching thin. She had turned to potions and elixers, bartered years from the young for several fortunes she'd liberated from her heists. She had discovered bubbles of time on the Astral plane and lifted artifacts of longevity from the lich-queen of the githyanki herself. She is still strong, quick, and clever enough for these once-a-decade ventures, but in the back of her mind she knows all too soon that this would change.

"Still no word on Dak'kon?" she murmurs quietly.

"Nothing since he disappeared into the mists of Limbo," Morte shakes his head, "I can't believe you still have to ask after all this time."

"Aye well, we still need someone who knows the Art," she grumbles, "It's been so much harder without him."

"We could always ask Grace..." Nordom offers. It is still strange to Annah's ears, hearing the modron speak without that stuttering drone. The years have smoothed out his speech mannerisms.

"Yeh **know** I hate hearin' that name," she hisses.

"The stupid box has a point, Annah. She's been skimming the Abyss all this time on her own, and she knows the territory. Heck, she may have even found him by now..."

Annah trembles in fury as she turns, "We'll talk about that later. Come along now."

Annah leads the five of them as they walk down the streets. The lanes have changed and many of the new alleys and crossroads are unfamiliar. But a turn here, a turn there, and Annah recognizes the shell of what used to be

the Smoldering Corpse. It would be close by now.

"They say th' Blood War's been quietin' down," Annah murmurs, "That someone's overthrown th' Overlord o' th' Abyss, or wotever it is."

"Just last week they say the Archduke Carrax of Baator was assassinated by the same sod," Morte chuckles, "I wouldn't pay too much attention to rumors."

A smile cracks on Annah's lips anyway, "Mebbe that's true too."

Cynic as he is, Morte shakes his head, "We all know the Blood War is too big for anyone to change. Powers above, even the **gods themselves** can't end the Blood War. I mean don't get me wrong, I love the chief and I know he can lay waste to any sod in front of him, but he's no god."

"Nay, he's better than that." The smile doesn't leave Annah's lips.

"Look, I've lived a lot longer than you, Annah," Morte sighs, "And trust me. You might look at these streets all shifting about and think the big things will be different someday, but nothing in the Planes really change. Not in the ways that matter. Not Sigil, not the Great Wheel, not the Blood War. **Epecially** not the blood war. So don't get your hopes up."

"**I've** changed," Annah murmurs.

Morte laughs at that, "Fiending, deep down you're still the same black-tongued bitch I've known all these years. And I love you for it, even if your mams are sagging like old tree sap."

Again Annah bites her tongue and suppresses the urge to stab him. She refuses to prove the damn skull right.

Finally they arrive.

It is a large park, at the heart of the Hive itself. A miracle, for a park of all things to be at the heart of the stinking Hive. Stepping through the arch Annah can finally breathe deeply. The air is sweet. The wind is clean, filtered by the lush foliage that hangs down. There is soil here... real soil, with plants brought in from the Beastlands and trees of every sort imported from Arborea. They pass a faded plaque as they walk through the gardens,

well-tended by the druids here.

"For the one that Mourns No Longer", it says. Few know the meaning of the plaque these days, but Annah and Dak'kon were there when it had been set it up so long ago. She allows her fingers to brush over the tarnished inscription.

She looks up at the sound of chirping. Birds. The druids have introduced birds into the glade.

"So where do we go from here, then?" Morte asks as Annah sits down on a stone bench. It is smooth beneath skin, and like a cool pond the surface seems to draw the hot aches from her bones.

"We'll talk about it soon," she sighs, stretching out onto the seat, tail flicking like an old cat's, "I found some old things that'd help us find 'im."

"Really?" Morte grins eagerly, "What?"

"Quit rattlin' yer bone-box and lemme rest me eyes," Annah yawns. She really is tired, but she smiles as she lies down, "Jes some old knicknacks. Ole bastard's gonna have some sharp words from me once we save 'im. Snappin' that portal shut in me face like that."

She'd forgiven him long ago, but the man still deserves a good punch in the ribs, "Jes guard me as I sleep. I'll tell yeh all about it after a wee nap."

For a few minutes longer she lets the light that filters through the branches bathe her face. The air is cool against her skin, sweet and refreshing. It had been a long night, and a long story to relive. With a smile she pulls the hood over her eyes. *Maybe the idjit can't end the Blood War...* she muses to herself.

But she chooses to believe.