

Prologue

The Birth of Thomas Nardoc

The court wizard stood impatiently outside the queen's chambers. He beat his fist hard against the door again, as another thready scream wafted through the closed door and stumbled down the immense hall.

King Phomax shouted from many rooms away, "Come back and drink with me, Ivoryfist. If she dies, they will cut the child from her belly. The heir will be born, no matter how she fares." Rayph let his forehead drop against the door. His fist clenched itself and he fought for control.

"That had better be a boy you're whelping in there, woman!" Phomax yelled.

Rayph felt his aura expanding, pulling magic from the castle around him. He could easily extend his will down the hall and pop the skull of his callous disappointment of a king. Rayph drank a deep breath and calmed himself. He beat his hand against the door again. The same priestess slid the bolt free, cracking the door open enough for Rayph to see her face and nothing more.

"Let me in. I can help her with the pains. I can save her life," he pleaded. His aura pulsed with strength and the maddening urge to rip the heavy door from its hinges.

"It is forbidden by the Church. The Blood Mother would curse the child should a man be present at the birth."

The pleas of the queen rose from the birthing chair, “Stop it, please. You have to make it stop. It is killing him. It is killing my baby. Please cut him loose! Cut me open or he will die!”

Rayph growled and shot a dangerous look at the priestess. “What is the Blood Mother doing for her now?” Rayph demanded. He pressed his hand against the door and the foot of the priestess stopped it.

“Do not question the Mother of Mothers. The queen lives or dies at Her behest.” Rayph saw a flicker of dark emotion cross the priestess’s face. His aura begged for release. He opened his third eye—the eye that marked him a member of the Trimerian race. The priestess looked into it with dread and fascination.

Rayph looked through the door, through the priestess barring his passage, and across the room to the birthing chair, where the queen wrestled for her life and the life of her child. Her eyes begging, her hands grasped the arms of the chair. Her face flaxen, slashed through with horrid lines of agony, her mouth opened in a wide O, then collapsed in as she struggled to push. She fell back against the chair, gasping, begging again for the midwife to cut her open and take the child.

“She is in the hands of the Blood Mother, Rayph Ivoryfist. She is about the business of a woman. Leave her presence before you taint the child’s future.” The priestess struggled to shove the door closed, and Rayph began to let her. But at the mention of Rayph’s name, the queen’s head rolled weakly to the side. She looked longingly at the door. Rayph saw her face crumple like a sheet of parchment, and then smoothen again as the door slammed shut in his face.

“Rayph, please,” the weak and desperate queen called out, “please save me.”

Rayph released his aura. The large, ornate door exploded in a shower of splinters. They hung suspended in the air like a wooden cloud, and he moved through them. He walked around the priestess, who threw her arms up over her face in an effort to shield herself from the shrapnel. The door reformed and slammed shut behind him, the priestess dropping to her knees, uttering a prayer.

Rayph gathered his aura and laid it over the queen as he stormed across the room. Her eyes closed slowly. Her body went slack, her head lolling forward weakly. The midwife stared at her wide-eyed, her mouth dropping in despair.

Rayph looked at the queen with his third eye, seeing her life-force weak and passing. He looked to her belly, seeing the child's life-force strong and throbbing. The eyes of the queen swung to him. She blinked. "Is he dying, Rayph?"

"He is fine, your majesty. He is strong. You will be fine as well." He stepped in front of the queen and looked down at her groin. His stomach twisted and his mouth turned down in a grimace. He pulled control back over his face and looked to the midwife.

"What happened?" He shook his head. "Not important. Step aside. I'm sure you did your best."

The aura around him began to whine under the burden of the queen's pain, and Rayph pulled yet more magic from the castle. He stood over the queen and gently laid his hands upon her stomach. His aura wrapped around her, holding her in an embrace and closing deadly hands around himself. Her heart pulsed in his throat, light and pattering, beating in a syncopating rhythm that scared him.

He whispered to himself. “My oath was to whatever end. The safety of the royal family and the nation—before my own.” He clenched his hands tight and yanked her aura with his own. The pain was shocking, dropping him to his knees before the birthing chair. The skin under his robe shred as a wound gaped open and hers slowly began to close. His face quivered and he saw his wife, wings spread open wide, soaring over his head. She laughed in the air above him. His love for her filled his pain-wracked body. The image hit him so hard that he smiled through the gnawing pain. Would he see her again this year?

He pushed thoughts of his Archialore from his mind and grit his teeth. He exhaled through his teeth, spittle spraying in a fine mist. He jerked more of her aura toward himself. The wound under his robe ripped audibly and the midwife behind him gasped. The queen was reforming before his eyes, as the warm puddle of his blood began to widen in a quietly expanding pool of gore.

Rayph whimpered, his hands trembling. The queen leaned forward now, her face the pale white of porcelain it had always been, her eyes alive and wide with horror as she watched him die. She may be able to do it now. She could perhaps resume the labor, maybe bring into this world the child their nation so desperately needed. He grit his teeth, feeling as though they may chip and shatter in his mouth. The edges of his aura vibrated on the verge of losing control. One more. He could give her one more. He tugged her aura over him one more time. It fell on him like a bladed blanket, slicing his gut to ribbons. Rayph dropped back. Blood coursed between his legs, lining his back and widening the puddle around him.

The midwife grunted and stepped over him, returning to the birthing. She spoke in words that slurred and ran together. All sound began blending

together, making a myriad of no discernable sense. He could hear one sound rising and falling with his breath, which came in long draws. It rose after his inhale and lasted through to his exhale. He listened, mesmerized by the sound, trying hard to figure it out. He was getting cold, but the sound seemed more important.

He realized he was screaming.

His screams parted like grain in the wind as a new sound lifted above it. A clean cry sliced the room in two, and Rayph knew the baby survived.

"I am fine. See to him," the voice of his queen shined beautiful and clean. He always said she was the type of queen to inspire a nation to greatness, a face her nation would go to war for. He heard his robe being ripped open, and had time to worry that his queen would see him in his loincloth before the women above him gasped. The midwife licked a thread and pushed the end of it through the eye of the needle. An expression of grim determination stamped itself on her face, and she began the grisly work of saving his life.

He was speaking. Rayph listened to hear what would come out of his own mouth. "Is the child okay?"

"The child is fine, Ivoryfist. He is fine," she grunted and shook her head, whispering to herself as she sewed.

"The queen?" Rayph asked. Someone squeezed his hand and he looked to his left. There she knelt, pushing back his sweat-damp hair and smiling down at him through teary eyes.

"I am good, Rayph. I'm good. Please, Rayph, save your breath."

"There were omens," he heard said above him. He pushed the terrible, mind-numbing pain away and focused on the words being spoken.

“What omens?” That voice belonged to the king.

He looked to the midwife still sewing, her face a mask of stubbornness. She was not talking. It had to be the priestess. “He was born clinging to the cord. He held a chunk of tissue in his little fist. These are bad omens, my king. Horrible omens.”

“I will not hear your nonsense, woman. Leave me to my child. See to the woman, as is your business.”

The midwife leaned back. “He is closed, your majesty. I will not say if he will live or die, but his wound is closed,” she uttered, wiping wild strands of hair from her face. Rayph watched as she smeared his blood across her forehead and cheeks. The queen gently kissed his closed third eye.

“Thank you, Rayph. Thank you so much.” She was crying now, nearing hysterics. He began to slip into darkness. The world was closing around him. He held his head above the black, struggling to remain conscious.

“The omens say he will die young and in violence. The wizard’s presence has cursed this child. His death will be on the head of Rayph Ivoryfist,” the priestess said. The sharp crack of the queen’s hand broke across the cheek of the priestess.

“Leave this castle and never return. The door is closed to you and anyone else who would speak ill of this man!” the queen shouted.

That was hasty, Rayph tried to say. But the darkness had all but engulfed him now. The child would die young and in violence—not if Rayph could stop it. He let the black take him, his mind conjuring a picture of his wife flying in the air around him. The gentle flap of her wings brought him peace. Rayph passed out.

Liefdom

At the precise moment Thomas Nardoc drew in his first breath, a creature was born. The name for such a creature was fairy, but in recent memory, there had been no fairy like this one. He would be called many things: monster, madman, abomination, murderer, warrior, guardian. All of these were accurate to one degree or another.

He dropped out of the pale bloom of a mandrake flower, and was fully grown before he hit the ground. With a snap of his dragonfly wings, he took to the air, his nostrils deeply drinking the dark, fertile smells of the ancient wood around him. He knew instinctively this was not his home, the same way he knew his child's name was Thomas.

He knew his home lay five hundred miles to the west, and it would take him moments to arrive there if he traveled by flower. He flexed his arm and barbed prongs slid silently from his wrists. He looked down at his body as he moved, watching his gleaming exoskeleton fold and crease like a well-made, well-worn suit of armor. His pale hair dropped in his face. Whipping his head, he threw it back. He knew how big he was—massive for a fey of his kind.

Something within him ached. A yawning, black emptiness chilled his body and mind. He would have to fill it, or it would take him to diabolical places. His emptiness could devour everything inside him—make something horrible of him. He would have to fill it.

His name was Gentry Mandrake, and today would be the day he killed one of his own kind.

Gentry Mandrake flew. A throbbing world of white pulsed as he moved from mandrake bloom to mandrake bloom. He could feel his home, as he neared it in leaps that flickered in his mind. Within seconds, he pulled up and out of the flower. He passed the last few feet, quickly coming to a large tumble of rocks that formed the doorway to his city. He ducked under the rocks, slipping into a tunnel under the fallen stones. The light of the day shined before him. In it basked Liefdom, the great city of the fairies.

A parade had turned the clearing into a celebration. Mandrake wondered if they knew of his arrival. The city was embracing the fey born that day. They formed a line that wound from the ground floor up into a spiral that wrapped the city. It rose to the very tops of the trees to cross the balcony of the royal family. The trees swayed. The animals of the city crooned and yipped. Instruments sounded, and melodious voices flowed like warm currents of air, carrying almost indescribable joy. Mandrake entered the city and felt his heart swell. Tears coursed from his eyes and his smile seemed about to cut his face in half. Looking up at his city, he knew he had found home, and he loved it instantly.

His love for his home was savage, like the roar of a mother over a wounded cub, or the driving of a flag into land claimed. His love dared the world to trifle with his city, dared his enemies to try to harm it. He had enemies. This fact clawed up his back and bit down hard on the nape of his neck. His enemies, he could feel them. He carried them around with him like a scar.

Mandrake zipped up from the floor of the clearing. He could not wait within the throng. He would not. He rose to the center of the city and spun one

circuit around. Then Liefdom unfolded to him. The trees hung close, much closer together than natural. But these trees were dryads, ladies of the forest. In their arms hung the homes of the fairies, dangling like fruits that covered every branch. They clung to the trunks and crowded around the roots, tiny homes for tiny fey.

Some trees boasted nest-like homes that wrapped the branches and trunk, great homes comprised of balconies and doors that entered the very living wood. Mandrake soared to the verge of one, staring at the crowd of fey who stood pressed together on the balcony. He stopped, looking down at their beautiful faces, which seemed to hold all the love of the world. His body thrummed with joy and he dropped to the balcony to be among them. His heels clicked on the surface of the balcony. The balcony shuddered. The tree seemed to convulse in disgust. The fairies around looked up at him and gasped. The closest ones lifted into the air, sounds of terror and dismay from their throats. The ones further from him recoiled, pushing themselves back and against the trunk of the dryad. They were knocking one another down in their haste to get away. Every eye bulged wide in panic. Every face contorted in a grimace of fear.

Mandrake's prongs slid from his wrists. He spun, his eyes scanning the air behind him for the monster that had scared his people so. Hot rage shot through his veins. The scent of the mandrake bloom issued from his body, an odious musk that hung in the air like the scent of death. He hissed, throwing his arms out wide as if to embrace his enemy. The city stared at him, the sounds of screams now shredding the melodies and cords of joy. They were gasping, their faces breaking and shifting into looks of horror. Mandrake searched the city for trespassers, livid that anyone would cause this level of chaos in his city.

But for all his searching, he could find no villains, no marauders. He kicked off the balcony and spun in the air, near the point of shouting out a challenge, when a voice called out, clear and strong. He turned to face it.

“What are you, and what is your business here?” The one who spoke was luminous, in shimmering green cloak and white scarf. His face held strength and grace. His voice held his command well, as if his words were a weapon—his voice, a mighty fist. Mandrake gathered himself as the knowledge came to him that this fey was his father, the king of Liefdom, the king of all fey and the world they lived in, the realm called the Veil. Mandrake turned to see whom his father had addressed. Seeing no one behind him, the realization his father was speaking to him came hard like a slap.

Mandrake turned to his father and the king’s name, Gentry Lotus, came to him. The beautiful fey stepping up beside him was his queen, Mandrake’s mother. He could almost feel her arms around him as he hovered there. Her hair flamed a deep crimson. Her face shined a pale white. Her name was Gentry Scarlet Rose, and Mandrake loved her more than anything, or anyone, alive. He used that love to fill the emptiness inside of him, as if it were an answer to a question.

Mandrake saw a third fey step around his parents, blue-haired, wearing an expression of disgust. This fey waved a hand. Guards with beetle wings, carrying sharpened sticks like spears, lifted into the air.

They surrounded Mandrake instantly. His instinct told him only one of them posed a danger to him—only one of them held darkness behind the eyes.

“I ask you again, what are you, and what business have you in my city?” King Gentry Lotus asked.

Mandrake's musk filled the air, like a darkness he poured from him. The guards around him winced, their eyes tearing. "I am Prince Gentry Mandrake, son of Gentry Lotus and Scarlet Rose, king and queen of the Veil. I have come home to wait the day I will sit the throne as my father now does."

Mandrake's eyes scanned the dryad before him. This was the greatest tree he had ever seen. The balcony the royals stood upon was the grandest in the grove. Mandrake saw many more nobles and royals stepping out onto the balcony. He watched all of their faces twitch and spasm in loathing. They cast glances at him like slings and arrows.

Mandrake's heart tolled out like his doom. He saw no kind face here. His stomach began to shrivel and twist, his bile hardening to a lump in his belly. He trembled. Defeat dropped onto his shoulders like a weight.

Lotus spoke, but no conviction bolstered his words. "What you claim is impossible. You are no fairy. I have no son." Mandrake looked to his mother. She shook her head and turned, entering the dryad, a flock of fairies gathering around her. His eyes slid back to his father, as a black-haired fey whispered into the king's ear. Ebony Rose. That was his great uncle, Gentry Ebony Rose. He held the king's attention for a long time before releasing it covetously. Mandrake stared at him, the riot of emotions within too complex to sort.

"Drive him from the city," Lotus commanded.

"They will all die," Mandrake said, motioning to the beetle guards around him, "every one of them." He cast a warning glance at the guards, then threw his attention back at his father. "I will not be expelled from my city."

“Let us have one thing clear. This is my city, stranger, not yours.”

Mandrake felt a heavy hand clench his heart and squeeze it. He looked at his father’s face, seeing anger and disgust.

This is not the way it is supposed to be. You are supposed to love me. You are supposed to welcome me. Mother should hold me.

“Bring him into the great hall. I will ask my advisor what to do with him.”

Mandrake’s hold on his temper was slipping. “You will not order me to your hall under guard, Father. You will welcome me into the home of my family.” The musk, an assault unto itself, seemed to batter down the bravery of the guards around him.

His father opened his mouth to throw a response, but Ebony stepped in the way. “You are welcome into the house of your family, Mandrake.” He turned, whispering harshly to the king. Lotus threw up his arms and flew into the tree. Ebony outstretched his hand toward Mandrake, who followed into the great tree.

Once inside, the sheer beauty of it overtook Mandrake. A thick tunnel ran up the height of the tree, doorways opening to halls that traveled each branch. The dark reddish tint of wood made the tree seem warm and comfortable. There was love in this dwelling, love for the city and love for those housed here. He wondered if the dryad loved him, and shied away from the question, as if it were a flame eager to sear him.

Mandrake’s eye ran the expanse inside the tree. The inner wall formed a mural. The likenesses of every fey living in the dryad appeared on the mural, each noble captured perfectly and lovingly. Mandrake scanned the surface,

seeking his own face. But he could not find it. He followed his great uncle up the tree, watching the faces of his kin creep by. He stopped when he found his mother. He gasped, running the tips of his fingers gently across her cheek. The tree trembled, or shuddered, he could not tell which. A smile broke across his face, vanished, then reappeared.

“She is so lovely,” he gasped, barely allowing himself to breathe the words.

“Do not tarry. You are not a guest here.” Ebony’s voice was hard, caustic. He threw a disquieting look over his shoulder at Mandrake. A vision of violence whipped before Mandrake’s eyes. He could feel blood splatter against his face, could almost hear the echo of Ebony’s scream in the cavernous abyss within him. Mandrake could smell his musk roll out of his pores. He flashed a savage smile at Ebony. Ebony’s eyes darted away like a terrified rodent, and Mandrake promised himself he would not give them too much respect. They could do none of the things he could. They had not shown a trait worth respecting.

His heart hardened and he did nothing to stop it. *Not her. I will love her openly. She will embrace me. She has to. She is my mother.* He smiled and continued to drift up the tree. Somewhere near the top, they reached a wall blocking any further passage. They were two-thirds of the way up the tree. He waited. A way to the left opened for him, and he stepped into a large room.

A smooth, blank wall faced four thrones with balconies rising away behind them. Mandrake considered alighting on one of the thrones, but he would not antagonize his father. He stood while fairies began to fill the balconies above. Ebony faced Mandrake as nobles entered the room, whispering and

pointing. Ebony's face, unreadable, searched every curve, every niche on Mandrake's. He studied Mandrake, his lips speaking softly, silently.

The main door opened and the blue-haired fey entered. Small, almost puny, he seemed unafraid—his demeanor, active disdain. He walked close to Mandrake, his eyes stabbing out as if to gouge him. He walked a half-circle around Mandrake, his arms folded behind him, pressing his firefly wings against his back. Mandrake watched him glare with a slight smile on his face.

"Is something funny, monster?" His voice was strong and violent, like a whip cracking the air.

In the face of that wrath, Mandrake's smile retreated. He looked to his feet, seemed to find anger there, and looked back up at the fey before him. "Who are you?" Mandrake asked.

"Prince Azure Rose, son of Ebony Rose, heir to the throne of Liefdom."

Mandrake shot his finger out, his barbed prong sliding slowly in the face of his cousin. "We will see about that last part."

"Shall we now?" Azure asked. He stepped forward but his father was there to stop him.

"He is not to be angered," Ebony said. His voice was sharp and irrefutable. Azure turned, stomping to one of the lesser thrones. Azure's right wing was small and slightly curved. Flying would be impossible with a wing like that. Mandrake allowed himself a smidge of pity for his cousin.

Lotus stormed into the room, the beetle-winged guards snapping to attention. He dropped delicately into his throne. He stared at Mandrake and seemed about to speak. Then, with a flutter of cloth at the door, the queen entered.

Mandrake dropped to his knee, his head low, his heart a flurry in his chest. She stopped halfway to her throne. Mandrake kept his eyes low.

After she reached her throne, Mandrake looked up. Her face was a mask of anger. He decided his father was the cause of it. Her son had arrived, and Lotus was trying to throw him out. Scarlet Rose must be furious.

Mandrake turned his eyes to his father, who stood up.

"First, let me say, if you utter the words 'prince' or 'heir to the throne,' I will have you killed," Lotus said.

Mandrake felt as if he had been kicked. He looked to his father, his eyes searching for the joke. *Have me killed? He said he would have me killed.* Mandrake looked to his mother, her face stone, unreadable.

"You can't kill me, Father. I will not dare you to try. But these fey you have surrounded yourself with," Mandrake motioned to the guards around him, "they are for appearances. Do not, for a second, think they are more."

A cord of disgust rang out from his mother's throne. Mandrake looked softly at her, confused. She would not meet his gaze.

"We will get to the bottom of what you are," Lotus said. "Then, we will decide how to handle you." He turned his eyes to the blank wood behind Mandrake.

"Missiniah, Lady of the Great Tree and guardian of the house of Gentry, please come to me. I am in need of you."

Mandrake turned as the wood began to shift and change, the lines reforming, the grain gathering to form a face. Mandrake turned his back to his family to look up at a glorious face, an image of such delicate beauty that his chest tightened and he sweat. His eyes caressed her features, gently touching the

corners of her mouth and the long bangs that framed her face. Her lips pursed as she turned her dark eyes upon the king. Mandrake dropped to his knees again, lowering his head.

Her voice was sweet and high, cultured and fine, like the voice of a woman raised in nobility. "My King, I come to your call. I lay myself before you, ready to aid you in any way I can."

"There is a *thing* before me," the king began, "that insists we call it fairy. It claims to be a Gentry, and even calls itself my son and heir. I find it loathsome to behold, and would run it out of my city and cast it out of the Veil if it were in my power. Tell me that you see wisdom in this. Tell me I should exile it and I will."

Missiniah's eyes rolled to Mandrake and he tried to smile, but his rage and his hurt would not allow it. She gasped and recoiled, her face taking on sharp angles of disgust and derision. She looked away, gathered herself, and looked again, peeling her lips back in distaste.

Mandrake stood. He glared at this dryad, doing his best to keep his prongs sheathed in his wrist.

"What is it, Missiniah?" Azure cried out. Mandrake felt his temples ache and his belly roll. His legs turned to water and he fought to stay standing.

"It is a fairy," she proclaimed. "I have seen another of its type, many ages ago. Time has nearly forgotten her. She was abhorrent to behold, as this one is. And she was dealt with."

Mandrake didn't like the way that phrase came to the air. It had a threat nestled inside of it. His musk rose up into the air ever so slightly.

"Her name was Gentry Flytrap. Her flower was so vicious and deadly, the others of her kind despised her nearly on sight. She was huge and carried the

same exoskeleton this thing does. She, as well, stood head and shoulders over even the tallest of fairies. She was a vile thing, violent and sullen. She was deemed a monster, as this thing surely is. She was executed.”

His prongs slid from his wrists and his musk filled the room. A near panic washed over the balcony, as hushed cries fought the scent of the mandrake bloom. Azure gagged in the scent. The beetle-winged guards lowered their spears, and the queen rose and rushed from the room. Mandrake turned his attention upon Missiniah. His anger hardened his face to a visage of steel. With a tone as deadly as his body, he said, “I invite you to try.”

His body thrummed with promised action, ablaze with anticipation, while his mind stood still and coiled.

“You do not frighten me, fairy,” Missiniah said.

“How, Missiniah? How was she executed?”

“She was taken to a grove outside the city, and the fire thistle was fed to her. She ate it willingly. It slipped into her body and she slept. A peaceful death, a merciful death.”

Missiniah’s eyes swung to Mandrake. They seemed to grow larger as he stood in defiance to them. “They finally decided that any child tied to a fairy like her could only be sour and evil, a tyrant waiting to take the throne. For the sake of the city, for the sake of the Veil, and for the sake of the humans her child would one day rule, she was put to death.”

“Gentry Flytrap was a fool. She should have destroyed you all.”

Mandrake turned to face his father. “I will not be taken.”

“We already have you. Guards, gather him up and escort him from the great tree. We will take him to a—”

The deadly guard stepped forward, his spear thrust in Mandrake's face. Mandrake moved with swiftness, his hand a blur as he grabbed the spear and pulled. His fist lashed out wide, his prong slicing. Blood flew in a slow arc. The spear hit the floor. The guard stumbled backwards, his mouth moving, his eyes frantic. He fell to the ground, his throat cut to ribbons. Mandrake tossed the severed hand of the guard at his father's feet. The appendage flopped and thudded to a stop, and Lotus screamed. Azure gagged again, turning his head. The nobles on the balconies above fled. Ebony stared at the severed hand, and Mandrake looked up to the guards around him.

Three nations away, in the world of man, a child named Bretten grabbed his throat in his sleep and died. His nightmare fairy had been killed, and the dream had been so horrible that his little heart seized in his chest.

Mandrake plucked up the corner of his shirt, slowly wiping blood and tissue from his prong. "I submit that as a warning to you, Father—you and anyone else who would attempt to harm me. The child I protect is precious to me. He will not fall. Come at me again and I will destroy every one of you." His cleaned prong swung to encompass the room. "I will kill you all, and as a result, the children you protect." Mandrake turned to face the dryad, his eyes two balls of fury. He did not speak. He simply stared until she faded back into the depths of the wall. Mandrake spun. He leaned forward, throwing his body into one quick burst of speed. He crossed the room before anyone could stop him. The guards behind him turned their spears up, their faces locked in terror.

Mandrake wrapped his hand around Ebony's throat and squeezed slightly. His eyes pierced into Ebony's and he curled his lip. His emptiness grew, his darkness taking him, and it felt wonderful. He growled low in Ebony's ear.

"You are coming with me. I will not have her closing up around me and crushing me to death. Missiniah kills me, she kills you, too." He didn't recognize the voice leaving his mouth. It felt strange on his tongue, metallic and serrated.

They traveled the distance of the tree, leaving through the same door they had entered. Mandrake caught himself looking for his mother. What would she do when she heard they had tried to kill him? The thought that she knew, that she would agree, that she wanted him dead as much as the rest of them did, was too repugnant to entertain. He refused to let it bite into him. He kept his mind on Ebony until the door was behind him.

He released the fairy, who rubbed the place where his hand had been. Mandrake tried to quiet his anger, letting himself feel the cool wind on his face, and reached out for the sounds of the city. Ebony's voice pulled him back. "I have been able to grant my child an unnaturally long life."

Mandrake heard the words, but could apply no meaning or reason to them.

"He is a wizard, a powerful one. I will speak to him about you."

Mandrake heard the threat and smiled at it.

"I will not try to have you killed again, Mandrake. You have my word on that. You are far too deadly for any fey to handle. But if you ever hurt another fairy, if you harm one citizen of this city, I will send for my child and he will deal with you." Ebony felt pride at his threat; Mandrake could see it in his face.

Mandrake shook his head. "I wish no harm on anyone, Uncle. But if your child comes to deal with me, I will kill him, too."

With Trembling Hands

Vrice's eyes crept open, and he took one long, steady breath. The cough ripped through his body and his muscles seized. He felt as if his head was about to crack open, and his body jerked violently. The coughing fit stepped back, standing over him, ready to attack him again. He lifted his hands, wrapped tight with gauze, to his face. He flexed his fingers, hearing them pop and crack loudly and painfully. He sat up and gripped his head as his skull threatened to split in two. His whimpering moan of pain begged for reprieve.

The wizard swung his legs around and off his bed, his seeking feet finding the cold stone beneath him. He braced himself and stood. His frame rattled as his joints popped and his muscles stretched. They seemed to be run through with broken glass, and he winced, biting down hard on his lip to keep back the cry of agony.

The skull, where did I leave the skull? He rushed forward. His body, unable to react to his urgency, bunched up and collapsed under him, dropping him to the floor. Vrice could not hold back his scream as he crashed into a table. Books and bottles showered on top of him; glass shattered. Slick and greasy liquid splashed onto him. He bit down on his tongue so hard his mouth filled with blood.

A door opened and light flooded the room like an angry mob. Vrice held his hands up, shielding his face from the riotous light. *Spell, call up a spell.* But he could not think of one. He was helpless. He flinched away, hissing.

“You’ve made a mess of yourself, master. Let me help you.”

Kind voice, respectful voice, small, strong hands lifted him from the floor and set him back on the bed he had escaped only moments earlier. Vrice knew this could only be one person.

“Collette.” His voice whined and he hated the sound of it. “The skull—where is the skull?”

He heard a voice at the door, cutting and jeering, and he knew it instantly. “When we found you, you were clutching a skull, a dry and crumbling thing nearly cleaved in two,” said Trevonne, his favorite student. “You didn’t want us to keep it for you, did you?” She would pay for her insolent tone.

“Where is the skull?” Vrice growled. His temper brought fire to his mind. Spells began coming. He remembered them now. Dozens of ways to make her pay whipped through his mind—though he knew, in his weakened state, he could not cast them.

“I have your prize, master. I would let no harm come to it,” Trevonne drawled, her voice wet and dripping of sex. “I have many prizes for you. As always, I only wait to serve.”

Vrice grit his teeth as Collette checked his bandages. Her hands, flitting over his body, were a soft, bothersome attack. He grunted and waved her dismissal. She took a step back, and he ripped the bandages from his hands. He could feel scabs cracking as he flexed his fingers. A slight pain sliced up his palm. When he closed his fists, his hands filled with blood.

“How long have I been unconscious?”

“One incredibly long month. There was raving. There was violence. There was a lot of begging.” He shook off Trevonne’s tone of mockery and derision. They had kept him alive. For that, he would allow a little disrespect—but only a little. He ran his hand across his face. They had shaved him.

“I stink. Have you bathed me?” His question was answered with silence. He looked up and flicked his hand toward the door. With a puff from his fingers, candle flames sprouted along the wall. The magic had come easily. He smiled.

He was in his chambers. The table he had demolished was his own. His anger built in a slow, steady wave. “Who brought me here? Who entered my chambers without my leave?”

Silence.

“Leave me!” His voice held power again. His students turned a tight circle, dissolving into air and, with a light gust, blowing out the door as it slammed shut.

Vrice stood. The movement came with crippling pain, but he stayed on his feet. He ran his bleeding hands across his face. For an instant, he was back there again. *They screamed, rushing him with rusty, serrated weapons—so many of them, all brutal and insane from the torture. The steel demon hunkered near the door, watching, his claw tapping out a patient beat as he waited for Vrice to weaken.* The smell of burning blood filled his nostrils and a gag rolled up from the back of his throat. He dry-heaved, his body wracked with a new flavor of pain. *The steel demon’s slashing teeth, the sound of the creature’s undulating scream as he ripped it apart.* The memory of that scream seemed embedded in his soul. It twisted there, a wound of the mind he knew would never heal. “Please, let that memory fade.”

He opened his eyes and he was standing before a mirror, naked. His arms and torso throbbed, wrapped in bloodied bandages. His eyes stared out at him, hapless victims of the ambition that drove him, forced to see things they never should have. His hair—once black as jet—held a thick, white streak. It gave him a wild look, testament to the insanity he had witnessed, and the impossible madness he had embarked upon.

He ran his fingers through his hair. His gaze slid down his form, thin and emaciated. For one month, he had clung on the edge of death, on the precipice of insanity. Vrice looked to the bandages and they unraveled, falling to the ground. His wounds, shallow now, striped his body like the lines of a tiger. These would leave scars. Bite marks riddled his arms and legs. Vrice opened his hand toward the shelf in the corner and a bottle whipped across the room. He wrapped desperate fingers around the neck of the bottle and ripped the cork free. He drank heavily and slowly, making certain he did not spill a drop.

The wounds began to close to fresh pink flesh that would become hard scar tissue. The pain faded, disappearing like smoke on the wind. With a wave of his fingers his robe wrapped his body. The velvet and silk weight falling upon his shoulders went a long way to healing his mind. He extended his hands, staring with hard eyes. They trembled.

His voice cracked like a whip and the sound barrier dropped, sealing the hidden room of his tower. The tallest candles he could find stood in the corners, each as wide across as his hand, standing nearly to his chest. He wouldn't light them until he absolutely had to. He told himself over and over again that they

would burn long enough. Each time he said the words, he felt a little better. Each time, he beat the panic back a step.

Vrice poured out the powdered sulfur, carefully edging the walls in perfect lines. He put his back to the wall and took one deep, steadying breath. Something within him he had never been able to kill begged him not to go. This time, it would be worse. This time, things would be out of control. *What if we anger him? What if he keeps us and won't let us come back?* Vrice looked again at his trembling hands and lowered his head. All at once, it seemed too terrible. Tears rose and he beat them back.

"There is nothing more to it. The power calls to me. The gifts are too great. He will reward me with the secrets of his kind. I am his most devoted, most powerful servant." As he spoke the words, the still voice within him cringed away, leaving Vrice feeling he had lied to himself. He shook his head and pressed his back against the cold stone of the wall. He outstretched his arms up and to the sides. The shackles snaked out from the corners of the wall and snapped around his wrists and ankles. The runes glowed bright red for a moment. The chains pulled tight. Vrice closed his eyes and forced his mind upon the sulfur. It ignited with a hiss and a flare of white flame. He motioned to the candles and they lit.

Please let them burn long enough.

He spoke the words in a long, harsh volley. He could not understand the incantation, could not—no matter how he studied—grasp the intricacies of the language. But he could memorize, and he had. The words came from him in one long, unbroken stream, his mouth closing around the words tightly, as if to strangle the power out of them. With a resounding crack, the wall broke away,

flying backwards in a sudden rush that stole the breath from him. His tower gone, the world around him rushed violently backward. His hair whipped around his head; his eyes watered. He gasped, breathing malevolent air that seemed to contain the essence of evil itself. He drew in the air eagerly and spit out the next line of the incantation. If he stopped now, he could end up anywhere. The wall he had shackled himself to spun and tumbled out of control. He gripped the chains, lifting his head away from the wall as he screamed the words of the demonic language to the wind.

The skies around him darkened. Blood red lightning slashed and stabbed the sky around him. The thunder shook the wall. *Don't crumble. Don't break*, he thought, as if willing it could hold his wall together. The wind screamed in his ears as he spun, his body flopping and slamming against the wall as he flew. His voice rose above the rushing wind and, drowning in the thunder of the storm, rang out perfectly the language he did not know.

The air became an assault of grating, flying stone and he knew he had arrived. Fire burst in bellows that stole the oxygen from the air and left him gasping. He let his voice trail off. His gut fell away under him as he plummeted in a reckless freefall. He saw a face in the flying, yellow storm. Vrice closed his eyes to it. He could not bear the sight. His mind screamed, his eyes rolling up into his head to get away from the face as it pulled toward him. A great laugh slammed into him and he held his breath.

He was thrown out far, the chains stretching. Then he flopped back, his head connecting with the wall behind him in a stunning blaze of pain that rattled his teeth. The wall collided with the ground, and sulfur shot up into the sky in a

fount that collapsed onto him like a wave. He spit sulfur and spoke his words. The shackles released and he jumped to his feet.

The shackles lay open, hungry mouths he knew he must feed. Traveling to Hell had its prices and its demands: one for one, the law of replacement. If he didn't find a replacement for the world of man, he would be lost forever in the world of the demons. His master's lands teemed with victims. One was surely near. He stepped into the flying grit, searching. He had no time. He gasped for air, hating every breath he took, swallowing the flying sulfur by the mouthful. He wandered out into the storm as far as he dared, fearful he might wander too far from the wall and never find it again.

A shadow formed before him in the storm. He reached out and grabbed it. The arm was slick and skinless, bits of sulfur embedded in the red muscle. The being screamed. It kicked out and punched, fighting to get away. He had to win this battle. Vrice grappled with the being, dragging it as he struggled toward the wall. It bit down on his arm and he cursed. A spell rose to his mind, eager to be cast, and he spat the words, feeling the bone break under his grip. The being sobbed loudly, the fight taken from it. It went willingly, defeated.

He dropped it to the wall and it spread its legs, the crotch so ragged and torn that it could only be a victimized female. Vrice looked down in disgust as it waited to be raped. Vrice closed the shackles around its wrists and ankles and stepped back. With a spray of sulfur, it spun up and into the air, disappearing almost instantly.

Vrice turned to the pressing storm. He had until those candles burned out to call that wall back. With no time to waste, Vrice rushed into the storm.

His robe burst into flames as a fire exploded near him. The sting of the flying rock scouring his skin, he pressed forward, forcing his way into the storm. He could wander his way through the sulfur fields for the rest of eternity if unwelcome by his god Blythe, arch demon of the Sulfur Fields. He closed his eyes, his steps urgent, his determination a shield to weather the storm.

It felt like hours before the storm fell behind him and he entered the eye. The flying sulfur wrapped Blythe's castle like a churning shroud. The castle rose up before Vrice in all its grandeur. His blood ran cold, bile burning the back of his throat as he tried to gulp down his terror.

The structure had been built like a form dragging itself through the fields. One arm extended, reaching for its next grip, its other arm supported the weight, fingers broken and digging into the field for purchase. The empty eye sockets stared forward, the mouth open. Tongue, bloated and split, hung from the mouth, forming the balcony to the throne room. The legs had fallen away as if they had simply broken free. They lay hundreds of feet behind the castle, forming the stables for the steeds of the demons.

Vrice stared at the horror of the castle.

His desperation broke free from his sick fascination. He hurried to the main entrance. The great doors lay open like a wound peeled back from the chest, the sundered breastbone split and gaping, the stairs stained like blood.

The rumors of the castle returned to Vrice upon seeing the stain. Whispers said Blythe held court in a hollowed-out body, that the castle was the body of a god, dragging itself through the fields one inch every ten thousand years. Vrice told himself the stories were lies, but the castle still affected him. Determined, he stepped into the doors.

Almost instantly, a creature appeared before him. It grunted out its demonic speech, its mouths wide, its tongues frantic. It drooled, horribly betraying its desire to devour him. Vrice pointed to his chest. The eyes of the horror widened as the symbol of Blythe rose in a bubbling of flesh to mark Vrice a disciple. The image of a face, with no mouth and black eyes, showed itself like a brand. The creature shuffled back. Vrice entered the dark of the castle.

The floor squelched under his feet, feeling more like muscle than floor. The moist darkness squeezed him mercilessly. He reached for the wall and found it. The sticky surface came away in long, stretching cords. He moved forward, inching along, leaving the light of the fields behind.

He had gone far into the inky black before the air stirred and spun around him. A strangling, cold hand grabbed his throat. He went limp, letting the apparition rip him through the castle's winding halls.

With a wet slap, the door flapped open and the hand dragged Vrice into Blythe's throne room. The whirling fog of black with a tangible hand and arm tossed him to the ground. He rolled to his back, gasping and coughing, silently begging air into his body. As the humid air entered his lungs, he rolled to his stomach and pushed himself to his knees. He laid his forehead on the ground. The flying sulfur had ground away the soft tissue of his throat and mouth. Vrice hacked up a spray of blood and tissue. He trembled and waited.

"Look at me." The voice broke and rolled like stones, the words full and demanding.

Vrice slowly forced his eyes upward, taking in first the feet, then the robe, then the body, then the face of his god. The crumbling sulfur face of his demon god showed no mouth, and black, malignant pits where his eyes should have

been. As Blythe spoke, his face cracked with an audible pop and the mouth appeared. "You have come for more than a social call, I hope." The mouth opened in a hot smile of burning sulfur.

"I have, Your Worship. I come to you humbly with urgent news. I have succeeded where other, less powerful and less capable, servants have failed you time and again. I have the skull."

Silence stretched. Only the raging storm whispered its violence in the distance, audible through the open door of the balcony.

Vrice looked at the huge yellow throne, a massive chunk of sulfur crammed in the back of the throat of the castle. He heard a sudden moaning sound and the throne vibrated. Vrice shuddered.

The cracking of stone and the harsh crumble of breaking rocks filled the room, and Vrice knew his god was laughing. He could not look into that face while it laughed. He looked to his knees. "If you jest, I will feed you to the storm and watch as the flesh is grated from your body. I will have my demons sodomize you while I watch. I will—" Blythe shook his head. He looked in the far corner of the room and smiled.

"He says he can summon you now," Blythe said, "says he can bring you back into the world, give you another chance to win my favor. Is that what you want? To serve me, to accomplish the task I set out for you?"

After a pause, a watery groan came from the corner. Vrice turned, his eyes searching the darkness. A creature crawled slowly from the pool of darkness there. It teemed with biting flies and gnawing beetles. Its face writhing, it opened a wide mouth, stretching its hand and nodding its head.

Blythe stood slowly, stepping forward. He reached down to touch Vrice, his steaming hand stopping inches from the wizard's face. The cracks along the joints smoked and hissed. Vrice locked his jaw and braced for the touch of his god.

He then realized his mouth was lined with sulfur. He tried to spit before Blythe snapped his fingers. The sulfur in Vrice's mouth burst into flames. Vrice screamed, opening his mouth and gagging as the sulfur burned out. The fleeting fires had seemed like hours of agony.

"You will summon my son back into the world and help him redeem himself."

Vrice whimpered and nodded his head.

"Walk with me," Blythe said.

Vrice jumped to his feet, following Blythe to the balcony. The tender flesh of the mouth of the castle had ripped and shredded at the corners, where the mouth opened in a silent scream. The rounded, bloated tongue was hard to balance on.

"Do you see that sun?"

Vrice looked up for the first time, seeing the sun of Hell. It appeared to be a body thrashing as it burned.

"At one time, you could hear her screams. But thousands of years ago, she went hoarse. Her screams are nothing but silent pleas for the pain to stop. She is a goddess, or at least, she was. Now, she burns in the day. By night, she is nothing but embers. Her body replenishes by the end of the night and bursts into flames again. She has a belt of unfortunates that have angered me. They burn

alongside her in my sky. If you fail me, Vrice, I will send you up there to burn in my sky. And the world will forget you.”

The notion of the world forgetting his name terrified Vrice.

Blythe laughed. “As soon as possible, you will summon my son. Bring him back to the world of the living or you will burn in my sky. Go now and obey.”

Vrice turned and fled. He had little time. The candles were burning.

The Summoning

The light of the pallid moon turned the tower of Dragonsbane into a sliver of bone jutting from the skin of the city. Vrice stared down at the streets below his tower, and the deserted manor that lay in the path of its shadow. The very precipice of the tower’s shadow lay at the feet of War, the great fountain of the manor. Vrice let his eyes struggle with War for a little longer before he turned back to his chamber. A turgid finger of dread scratched its way up his back. He cast an eye at the skull sitting atop his heavy desk and swallowed a slow, steadying breath. He reached his hand up to wipe sweat from his brow, seeing it trembling before his eyes. Vrice cursed.

He stomped to the skull, gripping it tight, pulling the dry, brittle bone inches before his lips. “You will let me pass. I have cut a long path through the brambles of time and research and sweat for you. I have nearly broken my mind for you.” He began to shiver as he stared into the deep recesses of the sockets.

“My fair prince, you will permit me to pass.” Vrice set the skull on the finished wood carefully. He wrapped it in padded leather and gently placed it on top of the well-packed satchel. He dropped to his chair and ran his fingers through his damp hair. The bath had done him some good. But he couldn’t wash the Sulfur Fields from his brain. The images still crawled around in his mind, unwelcome pests gnawing and biting at his idle thoughts. He needed something to steady his nerves. He slowly balled his hands into tight fists, looking at them with a shrewd eye. His hands had lost weight. He had lost weight. The work was exacting a toll on him. He needed to feed his body, feed it some relaxation to hone his power, to settle his throbbing body and mind.

He could not afford sleep. He had promised his master a summoning. Gods save him if he tried to sleep before the task was complete. He splayed his fingers across the tabletop and sighed. He closed his eyes and she danced into his thoughts, her hips swaying and arms wide. He let his mind play with her. Her ghost-white skin, her black eyes, her black lips, full and eager, Trevonne slipped through his mind with a pleading look on her face and he felt his crotch roll and stiffen. His need for her became unbearable all at once. He grasped the scrying dish on the corner of his desk and dipped his finger into the viscous liquid pooled there.

The sludgy water took on a dark haze and tendrils of smoke lifted from the bowl. He waved his hands above the water, clearing the way for his searching eye. She began to take shape. The room around her bubbled and boiled before he could see the details of his library. She was studying. *Such a good girl.* Vrice could see Collette beside her, her hands pulling at the edges of her hair as she read.

Vrice licked his lips with a serpent-like flick of his tongue. Trevonne did the same. He smiled. He opened his robe slightly, watching her do the same. With one hand, he forcefully grabbed his hair, jerking it tight; the other slid into his robe and thumbed his nipple. He heard Trevonne gasp as she mimicked his action. She looked around, mortified, as she pulled her robe closed. A beautiful shade of red flushed her cheeks. He could feel her getting moist.

Collette looked at her and she slowly shook her head. "You do not have to go to him." Trevonne released her black hair in a sudden flood as she pulled away the thong holding it back. She ruffled it vigorously, a thin smile slashing across her mouth.

"He agreed to teach us. We agreed to serve him as students. We never promised ourselves to him. He is taking advantage of you."

"Yeah," Trevonne said, her eyes bright and alive, "I know he is. But Collette," Trevonne's eyes held a need that intrigued Vrice. "I have to go. I can't say no. I need it from him." She held tears in her eyes, but would not let them spill. "He is a drug."

Collette looked worried and Vrice wrapped himself in a light hate for her. He would toss her from his school if she wasn't so damn powerful already. He knew he could never let Collette leave, knowing as much as she did. But he could not kill her until he was done with Trevonne. His serpentine eye fell on Collette and he smiled. *Soon, little apprentice, and I will send you to them. Maybe I will feed you to the son when he comes.* Vrice turned his gaze back to Trevonne, who was standing and making for the door.

"Will you put those books back for me?" Trevonne asked.

“Yes,” Collette said. “You should not go this time, Vonne. He will make you scream again.”

Trevonne spun, her hair whipping madly around her face, her smile dark and full. “Let’s hope so.”

Once in the hallway, she ran her hands across her chest and down to her waist. He heard the spell as she mumbled it, and knew she had willed all of the clothes from her body beneath the robe. She took the stairs quickly, seeming to float up the height of the tower, her bare feet pattering against the cold stone. A thin laugh passed through her like a gust of passion. Her mouth turned up in a breathtaking smile.

Vrice brushed his hand in the direction of the door, coating the portal with a spell, light as a spider’s web. He leaned back, opening his robe to fall around the chair he sat on. An excited knock broke across the door and Vrice smiled. “Enter.” He watched the scrying bowl as she jerked open her robe, exposing her breasts. She opened the door and crossed into the room, pressing herself through the light web. Vrice grinned.

Trevonne’s face crumpled and she fought to control it as her mind swelled in upheaval. He was there again, the one dark man who had soured her. The one who had taken the light from her desires and turned her into the deviant she was. Vrice did not know the details, but he knew the face, and he had summoned it to her mind.

Trevonne’s bare chest trembled as tears threatened. Her eyes stared wide as the past slammed into her. All her excitement ripped from her as the darkest moments of her life played themselves back. She deflated, her arms coming up to shield her breasts, her shoulders stooping.

Vrice rose, stepping around his desk to stand before her. He grabbed her wrists, pulling them away, exposing her chest. He grabbed her by the hair, jerking her toward him. He ran his trembling hand across her belly and around to her back and he pulled her in tight. "Can you smell him? Can you smell his sweat?" Vrice breathed in her ear.

"Please, don't," she begged.

"Do you remember his wet hands on your body?" Vrice asked. She was crying now and he pushed her down across his desk and ripped the robe from her body. "You do not belong to him any longer, Trevonne. You are mine now. I have claimed you."

Trevonne shuddered under him.

"Say it," he hissed as he entered her.

"You have claimed me. I am yours."

Vrice shuffled down the slick cobbles of Dragonsbane's streets, his bag in one arm and a drunk whore in the other. She wobbled and fell forward, and Vrice cursed, pulling her right again and pushing her along. The fumes of alcohol and vomit rose to his discerning nose. He swallowed back a gag and pressed on.

He tossed a glance over his shoulder. The swordsman still leaned under the awning of the pub from which Vrice had wrangled her. The swordsman's grace hung on him easily, billowing in the air with his every move. He looked dandy, a smug son of the nobility, the pompous type that caked this ward of the city like dry mud on the boot. But this man held death in his eyes. He watched Vrice with a greedy eye that devoured every detail.

One spell would lift her from the ground, bind her, and have her levitating, following his every step. But very few people could cast like that. In his current disguise, Vrice would call a great deal of attention to himself if he did.

“You smell funny,” the whore stated. She laughed a harsh, unpretty laugh that curled Vrice’s stomach in disgust. “What is that smell?” she asked.

“Soap,” he snapped. But he knew it was the magic. The scent of magic stained a wizard, altering forever the aroma of the body. She smelled the faint scent of cloves and brine that had clung to Vrice since he had begun casting in his preadolescence.

“Are you a baker?” she drawled. Vrice hated her. Was she trying to be sexy?

What lie should he tell? It would not matter for long. A few more steps and he would be a vague memory to these streets. But the swordsman still watched. If Vrice raised some alarm in her now, she may call out for help. The bother of it all wracked him and he grit his teeth, wishing he could dash her skull against the stones he walked. “Yes, I’m a baker. A baker who has a hankering to fuck, and no patience for talk from his whore. I will have silence or I will keep my coin.”

Too harsh.

She stopped, wresting her arm free, her face screwing up in a twist of distaste. She glanced over her shoulder at the swordsman there. His attention piqued, he laid a slow, patient hand over the handle of his rapier. She swayed there in the street, her rags waving like fingers of filth. She threw her head back in a fierce laugh and Vrice pulled magic to his aura. *She will call for him. She will*

yell for help. I will vanish myself. I should kill her as well—reduce her to cinders and embers here on this street.

She pointed her finger at the swordsman, her filthy, ragged nail accusing him of something, striking him in some way that Vrice could not see. The man's head drooped. His hand sagged from his sword. All at once, his face lost itself in a storm of emotional pain.

Vrice shook his head. This was too complicated. He would leave. He would toss her aside. Before he could do anything, however, she surged at him in a desperate wave. She wrapped her oddly strong arms around him and attacked his mouth with her own. Her tongue pushed its way past his lips and teeth and slashed wildly in his mouth. Her mouth tasted of vomit and strong ale. Her tongue seemed a dead thing she beat him with, and he felt absurd. He shoved her away and she toppled backwards, nearly dropping to the ground before righting herself. She turned back to the swordsman, laughing savagely. He turned, ripping the door open and disappearing inside. She faced Vrice again and he grabbed her forcefully, twisting her arm as he pulled her down the street.

Her words slurred her speech into a long, warbling curse of agony and wrath. But the street echoed back her pleas clinically. Vrice jerked her down the street as she struggled and fought, then brought his fist before her eyes. His hand broke out in a green flame. Her eyes opened in shock, her face making long lines of fear and distrust. Had he not held her tight, Vrice knew she would have bolted.

“See me now for what I am.” His words, little more than a whisper, cut hard, deep panic across her face. “I am a wizard of great power. I will use this power on you, to shred you to nothing but meat and bone.” She shook her head,

her eyes leaking tears. “Or reward you, for your talented hips and willing mouth.” He turned his hand once and opened his fist, displaying a ruby the size of a man’s thumb. “It all depends on you, and how eager you are to perform for me.”

He let her stare at the ruby, sensing her quick hands before they made their play for the stone, willing the ruby away before her hungry hand could bite down on the gem.

“Come with me now, and do not tarry. I tire of dragging you along. And carry this.” He forced the bag into her hands. “If you drop it, I will feed you to the forces of Hell.” Vrice chuckled as he spoke, knowing that to be the woman’s fate, no matter her behavior.

Should he wash her before he gives her to Blythe? Would he rape something so horrendous? Vrice thought he would. She will scream until her throat bleeds while he sands away her body with his searing sulfur thrusts. “I almost pity you,” Vrice sighed. She said nothing, just grunted and fought to stay on her feet, clutching the bag like a mother carrying a child.

They reached the tower and Vrice showed the structure his back. He had built it over a decade ago. He had chosen this country, this city—this exact spot—for its location, all with this night in mind. Standing there in the shadow of the tower he had built, destiny tolled in his heart, like a bell announcing a moment’s fruition. He looked at the building across from his tower. His nerves crinkled and cracked. He flexed his hands and locked a stare on the building: The Hive, the great manor house of the prince’s private army. The Prince’s Brood, they had been called, warriors Corin Nardoc had gathered to him and honed to a deadly edge by force of his own will.

They were dead now, slain almost to the man, their riches sealed in the manor for the last two decades. No power under the sun could force its way into that building. Vrice looked through the iron bars of the gate and his eye settled on War, the mighty fountain. No blade could defeat him. No wizard would best him. The statue was unstoppable and deadly beyond all reckoning. Vrice's eyes could not move from War and the nine-foot-tall mace it carried. The fifteen-foot-tall behemoth that stood within the fountain had pulverized every soul who had tried to win the manor.

But the summoning could only be performed in that house, in the place where the half demon's death had occurred. Vrice stared the hulking figure down, looking at the great helm, slitless, denoting no eyes, no ears, no face or personality. No one could reason with a thing like that. No negotiating. It knew only its purpose, and the cold-blooded pursuit of its function.

The fountain had been a blight on every house that had owned it. Vrice had spent years researching its history, following the thread of its story back through ages to the time before they kept a written log, back when the savage Raska races had worshipped it, calling it Bentagol or Delto, the Dark One or simply, The Hole. Whenever time gave up on War, it would show its helm again, popping up like history's weed, over and over again, bringing misfortune to anyone it called master.

Vrice felt small in the face of that history, minuscule in the path of something so old and powerful. The task his god had given him was to defeat it any way he could. Vrice realized the task was unfair.

He looked down at the bag in the whore's clutches and he tried to grin, tried to fill himself with pride, tried to tell himself he had already won. But he

could not feel it. He was only a man. War was ageless. Vrice looked at his hands, watching them tremble. He heard a whicker of a sound from the grounds. It could have been a laugh, could have been War sensing his fear.

Vrice forced himself forward, grabbing the bars of the iron fence and peering in the dark yard, up the cobbled path, to the thing before him. "I can beat you," Vrice said, his voice weak and breaking. "I am smarter than you."

He turned to the whore. "Bring me that bag."

"What are we doing here, wizardman? This is no place to part my fur. The tower scares me, and the fountain sees everything." Vrice had hoped she was too drunk to know her surroundings, but that hope proved false.

"You need not concern yourself with where we are, just in obeying my commands, if you want that ruby." She shuffled closer, her grip on the bag now more from fright than from care. Vrice jerked the bag open, nearly busting a seam. He pulled the wrapped skull and tossed the padded leather away. She hissed and pulled away from him. He grabbed her before she could escape. Holding the skull high over his head, he stepped toward the gate.

A word cracked from his mouth like the lash of a whip, and the gate slammed open so hard it banged the walls on either side of it. The whore cried out in dismay and tried to pull free. She dropped the bag, thrashing to escape. Vrice cursed. He crossed the keystone of the gate and heard the crunch of stone as War's feet broke free of the fountain.

He tossed the wench forward on the ground before him and ripped his belt free from his waist. *No time. I have no time for her thrashing and crying. I am a fool for not binding her sooner.* He threw the belt at her feet as a word snapped

from his lips. The belt snaked around her, growing and twisting as it wrapped her struggling form.

“Concentrate now!” he hissed. “You are losing this.” Vrice looked up as the great statue stepped out of its granite bowl and onto the cobbles of the walkway. The stones cracked and shattered under its weight, popping like eggs underfoot. It turned its eyeless gaze at Vrice. His blood ran through his veins like icy water. His entire body gyrated in fear. His bladder loosened as the monster stepped forward, its mace swinging before it. It would walk a few more steps, then it would break out in a run. The sound of the exploding stone under its feet filled every wind, every breath. The streets echoed back the horror as War began to pick up speed.

Vrice’s brain seemed to flop in his skull, his mind screaming, begging for him to flee. The woman at his feet was screaming too, but his belt had gagged her. Her muffled cries rose from his feet, pleading for escape. Vrice lowered the skull from above his head, looking at it as if it were a puzzle he could not work out.

The footfalls rumbling, the ground he stood on began to quicken as the heartless, mindless horror stomped its way up the path. *What is this thing?* Vrice’s mind asked idly in its panic, his eyes dropping to the skull. “The Prince. The master. The voice. Summon Corin’s spirit now!” he screamed, as if saying the words out loud might free him of his panic—and the voice did break through. He gripped the skull with both hands, throwing them above his head, and he filled his aura. The magic of the statue was a brutal force that swelled his aura to near bursting. He reached for the soul that resided in the skull, and found a fragment of Corin still there.

“Stop now, I command you! I, Corin Nardoc, son of Bristen, master of the Brood, command you with my authority to stop your charge and stand aside!” Vrice could feel the power of the prince rushing through his veins with every frantic slogging of his heart. Corin Nardoc had been a man of power and command. The soul of the prince squirmed under his hold like a great eel fighting to get free. Vrice held tight, feeling the skull above his head begin to flame with a black fire. War slowed his pace, dropping to a plod until he came to a reluctant stop. He stood feet from Vrice, his mace held back for one mighty swing, his head cocked sideways as if listening for a sound Vrice would not hear.

“Back to your perch, monster. I have come home. This place belongs to me. You will resume your watch.” The statue turned and lumbered back to its bowl, the stone cracking as it formed around its feet again.

Vrice lowered the skull of Corin Nardoc and slipped it back into his bag. He cast a spell and the cold urine clinging to his legs and his loincloth vanished and cleaned itself. He ran a hand across his features, fighting to steady his breath.

He looked down at the bound form of the hapless creature at his feet, fighting dumbly against the strength of the belt. Vrice waved a hand over her body, his aura bending, as a cushion of air lifted the woman and followed Vrice inside the Hive.

As Vrice crept around the fountain, the head of War slowly turned to watch him pass. His heart stopped in his chest and he looked away, locking his gaze on the porch and to the door beyond. With a wave of his hand, the lock turned in the door. It opened in a sweeping, majestic motion. Vrice peered into the darkness at the foyer beyond, his eyes seeking... what? Ghosts? Skeletons?

Minions of undead sworn to defend the house of Corin? He found nothing but spiders and immense webs stretching the walls and doorframes.

He whispered a spell, his voice timid in the hushed building. The webs pulled in tight, wrapping the spiders, squeezing them to pulp that dropped with a splat on the floor. Vrice stepped into the foyer, his eyes adjusting to the dark. Dust carpeted the floor, lying in curdled piles. Vrice whispered again, his voice afraid of disturbing the death peace of the building. The dust rolled like water, back and away from the middle of the floor, crowding around the walls and corners.

Vrice knew the layout of the house well. He turned his feet to the stairs and made for the room on the top floor, the weapons room, where Corin had drilled with his warriors, sharpening their ability to a razor's edge, the grandest room in the house, and the site of the battle that destroyed the Brood forever.

As he ascended the stairs, he passed the famed portraits. Corin had each of his men immortalized in great oil paintings that decorated the Hive. Dust coated each one of them; webs spun in the recesses of the frames obscured any recognition of whom these frames housed. But they were all here somewhere: Nicks the pugilist, Arbor of the whirling axes, Tuggy, Crow, Lips, Grit—all legends, all dead. Somewhere here amongst them all, Braid, son of Blythe, hid within the heroes of the country, the sour seed of the arch demon himself. Vrice wished he had the time to seek the frame that held that painting, to look into the eyes of the being he would call back into the world tonight, but he had no time.

The door to the practice room had been knocked from its hinges. He touched it, whispering his spell. It crumbled to nothing, falling in on itself until all that remained was a small pile of splinters. He stepped into the great room

and stared into the darkness. His mind flashed a horror at him and he flinched, his eye going to the corner of the room where stood the steel demon tapping its nail, patiently waiting as they weakened him. The tortured souls of the Brood had all attacked him at once, their ravaged souls wielding wicked, serrated blades and rushing him in a press of confusion and wrath. He had battled them all, and bested them, raining down his power until they slunk off to the corners of the room.

Then came the demon. Vrice had ripped it to pieces before slipping back to the world of man and grabbing the skull. The monster outside had come to life and Vrice had retreated back into the depths of Hell to escape it. The memory of the battle assaulted him with a whirlwind of images and sounds. Hate-scrawled faces and screams of anger and confusion, these images pushed Vrice back a step and he retreated into the hallway.

His scars from the battle seemed to open and bleed, the teeth of the demon biting into him again. He lowered his head, wishing them all away, willing his mind to clean itself, right itself, and return to its task. He beat his fists into the sides of his head and grit his teeth until the images passed, leaving him gasping in the dark.

With a command and a snap of his fingers, a flame bounced from dead torch to dead torch, lighting the room in a sudden glare. Bones and weapons littered the floor. Dust covered everything in a blanket of age, and Vrice willed himself to work.

As the hours passed, he cleaned the room meticulously, casting every particle of dust to nothingness. He sheathed all the weapons, returning them to their stands. He sorted through the bones, shoving most to the corners, but

keeping the skulls of all fifty-eight members of the Brood who had died here. He lined them in a macabre circle in the center of the room, so they could watch as he summoned Braid. Then he sought the bones of his master's son.

He could not find them until his eye cast in the back of the room. Behind barrels housing swords and arrows, curled up as if he had died fetal, lay the bones of the half demon.

Slick and black, they appeared wet and glistening to the eye. Vrice touched them gingerly, feeling the smooth texture and the cold chill of the bones. He gathered them up and carried them to the middle of the room, piling them up outside the circle of skulls. Much heavier than human bones, the bones of Braid clanged loudly when rattled together, giving off a metallic ring.

Vrice turned to his bag and the slumped, whimpering form lying near them. "My advice is to rest now, my dear," Vrice said, as he watched her struggle against the strength of the belt. "The rest of your existence will be one of pain and terror. This will be the last chance you ever have at rest." He felt a slow jab of regret for the future he was damning her to, and shoved it back to the corner in his mind where he kept his fears and doubts.

As if he had disturbed them and woken them, they marched out before him like a gathering of slaves. What if this all amounted to nothing? What if the power promised to him so long ago was never given? What if he was a slave to a wicked, ungrateful master? What would become of his life and the tower he had built? And slipping between all of these thoughts crept the fear, the rational fear that he was going too far. His eye turned on the bones. Those wretched inhuman bones, what kind of horror could house bones like that? What kind of monster

was he loosing on the world? Vrice's heart quaked at the thought of the evil this thing would wreak upon the world if he unleashed it.

Turn away from this now. Run. Flee into the country with whatever treasures you can carry. Forsake all civilization and live in the wild. Never cast again and he will not be able to find you. Keep moving and the minions of Blythe will be hopeless to ever fall upon you. They will seek but never find you. You can hide. You can save the world the fate they would bend it to. But these thoughts never found purchase in his heart. They withered and died like plants seeking to lay roots, but finding no home for them. He had come too far to turn away now. His fate was sealed with the fate of the world.

His failure would lead him to the burning sun of Hell and a total loss of renown. Blythe would wipe his many deeds from the books. His name would shrivel and die from the world of magic, and Vrice would be forgotten. Blythe would do it. Everything Vrice had worked so hard for would blow away, dead in the wind. And what if even more power lay on the other side of his service? What if Braid could teach him things, powerful and horrible things, secrets that would make Vrice the most potent wizard the world had known since the wild days of budding magic, when wizards changed the terrain of the very world around them? What if he was given that kind of power? He could not turn from that.

Vrice opened his bag and pulled out the elements of this world. He laid them out in a smaller circle inside the skulls. Water, earth, fire, air, wood, and bone, the six great elements, formed the circle that would defend the world from the workings of Vrice's spell. He could not defy them if they were not present,

barring passage of the soul Vrice would summon. He grabbed the whore and dragged her into the circle. He knelt over her before removing the gag.

“What is your name, whore?”

“H-Holly. Please wizard, please let me go. I’ll suck you off. I won’t even charge you. I’ll let you put it wherever you want to, honest I will. No charge, just please don’t hurt me.” Vrice tapped his lips with the side of his finger, shushing her.

“My name is Vrice. Holly, I’m the man who sends you to Hell. I want you to know my name, so you can curse it in the eons to come.”

“No, please, don’t hurt me...” But Vrice replaced the gag and stood up.

He ripped the robe from his body and pulled free the loincloth. He tossed it aside and, with a wave of his hands, cleansed his body of every speck of dirt and debris. He glanced over his shoulder at the bones of the half demon and grinned. “Soon, they will be your problem, won’t they?” He turned back to the elements and began his chant. His voice rang strong and the room echoed with the intensity of his chant.

Time began to stretch. He had time. He knew it would be dark for another two hours at least, but he could not find the reference for time in his experience. The ecosystem of the spell sheltered him from time. The world seemed cut off, every rule and law of the world suspended, as he fought off reality and sought to crack the place between worlds. Cracking into the shell of Hell had been no easy chore, but he had done it before. This was different. He now sought the ability to tunnel into the Sulfur Fields, a land at the very core of Hell. The elements fought and kicked against him, pushing at his body in defense of the laws they had set up.

His body was sapped of all water. Heat racked his frame, breaking him into a fever so strong that he could see the air shimmering from his skin. His bones softened. The stone around him sagged. The air was ripped from his lungs. But still, he kept chanting, for Vrice pulled his power from the very elements themselves. As they fought for more power, and twisted his body for every ounce of strength he had, he pulled power from them to fight stronger. The more powerful they became, the more powerful his will enforced over them.

The room shivered, the ground quaked and the stench of brimstone filled the air. Holly's teeth gnashed through her gag. She let out a blood-curdling scream that excited Vrice, causing him to raise his voice and redouble his efforts.

The ground cracked and shifted. Within the crack, something moved. The air wavered and simmered and a body was thrown, or kicked, into the room. The insect-coated body flopped with a bone-crunching drop into the middle of the room, and a formless cloud rushed in. The elements whined and bucked as the form became tangible and grasped Holly by the throat.

The crack snapped and began to close. Vrice forced his will harder upon the elements, and they surged in one final push that snapped his shoulder blades and fractured his skull. He lifted into the air as the pressures around him increased and his body began to depress. His skin began to wring like a sodden cloth. Vrice screamed as sweet, torturous pain shredded his body and mind. He screamed out his chant harder and louder and the crack opened again. The arm that had recently ripped Vrice through the halls of Blythe's castle now grabbed Holly by the hair and jerked her into Hell. She screamed again, a sound that stained Vrice's mind. He dropped to the floor, his bones jarred, the pain of his

shattered shoulders so intense that darkness fell over him, taking him to a place of shadows and howling elements.

Something close burrowed into Vrice's eye. He jerked and spasmed to consciousness. The motion brought bright and grinding pain, like he was between gnashing teeth. Vrice tried to open his eyes, only managing to open one. The other seemed to scratch and bite. Tiny, frantic legs kicked for purchase. The pain sliced into his eye like a small knife. He reached up, feeling something like a bud on the lip of his eyelid. He grabbed it. A living thing, no larger than a man's thumb, hung from his eye. He pulled. The gnawing intensified, the eyelid pulling away to stretch and rip up the middle. His eyelid rolled, his eye bulging. He looked at the beetle-like creature in his hand, suddenly feeling them covering his body. He squished it between his thumb and forefinger, tossing aside the shell and the gel it had become. His eye filled with blood and he winced.

They were not coating his body. Tiny mouths were not burrowing into him. He looked around him, seeing the insects dying by the thousands, their bodies covering the room in a writhing blanket of death. Vrice moved imperceptibly, and his shoulder blade wailed. Vrice sobbed and fell to the floor. He looked up at the bag lying open, now many feet away from him. Its contents had tumbled half out. Vrice could see what he needed. The bottle sat nestled in the corner of the satchel, awaiting his eager hand. He could not reach it. He pushed himself across the floor, his shoulder ripping as he shivered in pain. Chills racked his body and sweat bathed his face. He groaned as he pulled forward. Pain had stolen all but the most primal of thoughts.

He struggled to cover the distance.

When his hand closed around the bottle, he cried with relief. He ripped the cork away with his teeth, downing the liquid quickly but carefully. A prickling feeling of tiny needles ran through his body and he sighed. The torn parts of his body were mending. He swallowed faster, the liquid burning his throat as it raced through his system. With a scream of relief, his shoulder blade popped back in place, righting itself, and he rolled to his back. The pain was subsiding, his strength, returning. Vrice sat up and looked around.

In the center of the room sat a creature. It appeared vaguely human, possessing the correct limbs and proportions to be human. But its skin was a thick horror, long and flapping like cloth, hanging limp from the body. The flesh sagged so severely that the face hung from the skull like a hood. The lips, dangling half a foot from the bottom of the chin, moved and slapped as if the creature were trying to speak. Its eyes hung open, the eyelids sagging wide like holes in a mask. The thing gestured with its arm and the flap of skin hanging there swayed.

Vrice gagged, his empty stomach rolling and heaving. The creature gestured again as one solid thought punched Vrice, taking the breath from him and rocking him back. His hand covered his face, his mouth opening in a sob. "What have I done?" he whispered to himself, as the fleshy monstrosity waved its arm frantically in the direction of the door. Fear opened up like a poisonous flower. "I am damned."

The puzzle had devoured him from the outset. Could it be done? Was he the one to accomplish where every other mind had failed? Could he bring the son back, tear the fabric of reality from the world like peeling flesh from a skull? Did he have the power in him to cheat the worlds? The notion of whether he

should do it had never seriously entered the equation. Now, staring at the son of Blythe, he could not deny that his work was an abomination. What had he unleashed?

The horror motioned again, its eyes seething with hatred. Its long, flabby arm pointed at something. Vrice let his eyes shift to the objects it wanted. Bones—black bones—lay just out of the thing’s reach. Vrice slowly scooted across the floor, grabbing a large femur in his hand. *Don’t give it to him. Kill him. Destroy him while he is weak, when he is flailing, when he is dependent on you. Rip him to pieces as you did the other demon. Run to a righteous church and beg them for salvation.*

Vrice leaned closer to the half demon, stretching out his arm until the bone was within the thing’s reach. It gripped the bone, its arm dropping with the weight of it to clink to the ground. The half demon dragged it closer, pulling it up to its face. It parted the swaying lips and stuck the end of the bone into its mouth. With a sucking sound, then a crunch, the teeth of the creature broke the bone and began to chew.

Vrice gagged and pushed himself back, transfixed as the abomination devoured what was left of its corpse. When the first bone was finished, it reached frantically for a second. The lips drew up closer to the mouth. The eyeholes were nearly in place. The skin seemed darker than the ghostly white it had been. The hand gestured madly for another bone, the creature letting out a mewling, begging sound.

This is your last chance. It is growing stronger. Kill it now. Bring the magic into your aura and shred this monster where he sits. But even as the words entered his mind, he disregarded them. This was his life’s work. He would not destroy it, his

soul be damned. He was in the madness now. The abyss was open before him, and he would not turn away.

He shoved the bones closer, watching as the skin began to tighten and muscles pulled taut. When the creature had devoured all the bones, save the skull, it looked almost human.

A tall, thin, pale human could have been confused with this thing, if not for the eyes. The white irises were lined in black. The hate pouring from those eyes, nearly blinding in its intensity, shined for the world to see, a curse on everything they turned to behold. No human could hold that level of malice in his heart and remain sane. Only one other detail differentiated it from a human. A small, slightly curved horn protruded from the very top of the skull, a black horn, no more than three inches tall, and half as wide.

It ran deft fingers across its scalp, touching lightly the horn, and smiling. It devoured the last of the bone it held, leaving only the skull untouched. With the last swallow, the scalp grew hair, long and coarse. The hairline was a bad joke. Ragged and patchy, a nine-spined star formed in the hairline. The hair grew until it pooled in its lap, spilling out onto the floor. Braid slowly, methodically, plaited the hair in one long braid that reached from the center of the scalp to the bend of its knees. It stood, swaying, and reached out for Vrice.

Vrice hurried to his master's son.

"I am your master now." Braid's voice was strong and deep, filling the corners of the room, leaving no space for an echo. Vrice looked up at the thing as it wrapped its arm around his shoulders. It flexed, coiled strength tightening on Vrice's neck painfully.

“I will serve you to the best of my abilities.” Vrice hated the words. Service was an insult. Vrice served the father because of the immense power the arch demon possessed. But this being here, this thing leaning against him, was no arch demon. What right had it to command his allegiance? But looking into those white eyes, Vrice could not deny this thing was his master. He would serve it, because he had no choice.

Stylus Pea

The seething face of Lyadora rose again to the surface of the bark. She stared at Mandrake in silence.

Mandrake stepped back. His prongs slid back into his wrists and he wiped sweat-slick hair from his eyes.

“Are you quite satisfied with yourself now?”

Mandrake swiped his mouth with the back of his fist. “Never,” he gasped.

“Why must I watch you do this every day and every night? Tie the branch to my trunk, kick and punch the branch until it is a shattered mess. Repeat the next day. How long, monster? How long will this go on? What are you accomplishing?”

The branch he had lashed to the trunk of the tree had been thick and stout. He looked at it now, a gathering of splinters, and a grin crossed his face. Shredded wood chips littered the limb he stood on. “He is out there, Lya.”

“Don’t call me that. We are not friends. If you must address me by name, you will call me Lyadora.”

“He is out there, and he is waiting for me. I am not ready, but I must be.” Mandrake dusted the tattered wood off her limb and watched as the pieces drifted into the darkness below. The sun had been down for a while now. It wouldn’t be long. Mandrake could feel the excitement and anticipation in his blood, leaving him jittery. “Will you end this night as you have every other since I met you, dryad? Will you break my heart again?”

“What heart? Yes, I will sing the same litany until you are gone from here. Take this clunky stain of a home you built and leave me. I do not deserve to be tied to the likes of you. Leave Liefdom. No one wants you here.”

Mandrake looked her hard in the face, watching her countenance writhe with anger. “No, Lya. I think I will stay another night. I will not abandon you. Ask me again tomorrow. Maybe my answer will change.” He turned to enter his home.

“Off to watch them again, abomination?”

Mandrake stopped. He could not turn around and face her. He knew the words would be horrible, knew these collection of words would stab into the soft place in his heart.

“They would be appalled if they knew your cold eyes crawl them while they work. They might just stop coming out to work. She might lock herself away and never come out again.”

“Maybe, Lya. She might just do that.” He felt cold again, the nervous excitement gone. The anticipation leeches from him. She would tell them. Lyadora would tell them he watched and they would...what? They could not

work indoors. They had to ink. They would not give up their work. What would happen if they knew? He knew it would be bad. His stomach spun. His hands trembled slightly and he clenched them into fists. "Tell them if you want. Take that away from me, Lyadora." His voice, gray with apathy, crawled out of his mouth rather than flew. He kicked off the limb he stood on and went to his home.

His eyes swung to the other houses of Liefdom: the colored grasses, the tightly woven branches, the polished stones that adorned the walls, the flowers and vines growing from the roofs. Every house in Liefdom dangled from the dryads in the grove like works of art, their beauty dazzling. They had all been built out of instinct. A bird hatched knew how to build a nest, and so, too, did the fairies know how to create their living spaces. Every home held a mud roof at least three inches thick. Seeds took root there and vegetation grew, turning the houses and the city at large into a hanging garden of beauty. Beauty was built into the fabric of every fairy; the proof was in their houses.

Mandrake thought, not for the first time, that fairies needed beauty to live and grow. He turned and looked at his own house, his heart deflating. The art of his home was in its solid construction. How could they not see that? One large sphere, three feet thick, with powerful walls and a stone door. The only vegetation to grow on his roof was a thick coating of moss. It seemed to him to give the structure a hulking appearance. It was a wonder Lya didn't twist and turn and topple it to the floor of the city. Mandrake hefted his door and entered.

The cool darkness of the house felt great on his weary body. He slipped his shirt off and donned another. He slipped out into the night and landed on his roof. The city was winding down. The Tainters were putting away their dyes and

closing their easels. The Scrapers finished cleaning the reptiles of their dead skins, and were laying out the brightly colored skins on the floor of the city. The vivid roads were built from years and years of pressing the skins.

Mandrake's eye fell upon the dryad Missiniah, home of the Gentrys, his rightful home, where he should be sitting with a family who adored him. He cast a baleful eye on the tree, stopping himself before he tossed a curse on it. The vast, empty place inside him whined and howled.

Mandrake dropped to the roof and sat, pulling his legs up under him. He slid his prong free and picked at the moss he sat upon. They were emerging from their homes now, the Stylus family preparing to work. Mandrake let them set up their easels. He let them light their candles. Then he stood. He lifted off the roof of his house and flitted across the city, staying to the branches well behind the leaves. The night had come and turned everything to purples and blues. The city looked cold and calm, like the depths of a lake. Mandrake felt love for his home fall across him like a warm cloak.

He found his perch high enough that none could see him or think to look, directly across from the main balcony where the inkers would be working. The branches were tight here. And with his considerable bulk, he had to lie on the lip of the branch to get a proper look. He laid his head down on the branch, wrapping his legs around it, and he waited.

He wondered if the dryad he lay on cared, whether she even noticed him every night. He let these thoughts slide before him and drift away on the current of his mind. When the Styluses began to sing, he lifted his head.

He looked for her.

One simple, pure note issued from the mouth of each of the Stylus inkers. The chord they formed rose to fill the city. The sound so pure and delightful, Mandrake could not help but close his eyes and let it wrap around him. It seemed to call to him. If he let himself dream a bit, he could tell himself she was calling for him. Were they born knowing the note they would sing, or was it taught to them? Mandrake didn't know, and he swore he never wanted to.

Then came the butterflies. Like a floating river, they came in one mighty flood that spiraled from the top of the city into its heart and onto the balcony of the family. The ones that did not fit simply fluttered, filling the city with the whisper of wings. They laid themselves on the easels and opened their transparent wings, waiting anxiously for the inkers to begin.

This moment right here was the pinnacle of his day. He searched for her. His eyes, quick and discerning, sliced across the inkers in a snap. He found her and his eyes plunged into her. He looked into her heart, into her soul. He would have sworn he was looking into the heart of her child. He sighed.

She wore her scarf today, wrapping her head, tied into a long tail by the side of her face. Her quill gripped gently, she dipped and began. Her mouth opened slightly and Mandrake wondered what sound was coming from it. He knew she was speaking the words of the butterfly, and knew they would answer her. Was she asking about its day, about its transformation? Was she telling it about her life? Mandrake could not hear the sound of her tongue, but he could imagine it, a rolling lilt, soothing to the ear. He smiled and watched her work. She seemed happy. He felt that happiness at his core, and the hole inside him filled a bit.

When a Stylus finished, the butterfly took to flight and another took its place. The city began to fill with inked wings swathing dark across the night's sky. She seemed different tonight—her jaw set harder, her mouth tighter. Something was bothering her tonight. She kept looking up to the tree he lay in. He let his mind play at what she might be looking at. She finished the wings she was inking and stamped her foot on the ground. She shook her head, and now he knew she was mad. She lifted into the air, swimming through the flight of butterflies. He pondered that she was coming straight for him. The thought struck him dumb, helpless but to watch as she slowly closed on him. An instant before she landed on the branch he laid on, movement came back to him and he retreated on all fours, backing his way to the trunk of the tree and sitting down.

He could not tear his eyes away. She stood right there, on his branch, staring into the darkness at him. He cast a glance at his body, content that she could not see him, and he waited, his breath a solid lump in his lung, his heart deafening in his ears. The saliva in his mouth dried up, making swallowing a torture.

Her eyes peered into the black, her face screwed up and angry. Mandrake felt rivulets of terror running his body, locking him frozen in place. *Run*. He couldn't. His body wouldn't answer his plea.

"I know you're there." Her voice was music, shaded, ominous, but beautiful. "You're always here, always watching us while we ink. Why?" She crossed her arms over her chest, waiting for his response.

He opened his mouth to...what? Answer her? Talk to her? Was that even possible? Her eyes flashed hot as moonlight cut through the trees, leaving her striped and wild. Her face hard and cold, she stole his breath away. He could do

nothing but grip the branches beside him, like arms of a chair, and stare out at her. A sound croaked from his throat. It surprised him completely. He swallowed and waited for it to happen again.

“What was that?” She took a step forward and the light found different places on her body.

“I’m sorry,” he finally managed.

“You’re sorry?” Her voice seemed a shade lighter. Something rose to the surface of it, some kind of understanding. “That’s not really good enough, Gentry. I asked you why.” Her tone was gentler. Her body still cut in a stance of wrath.

“Never meant to distract you.”

Her laugh was free, light and breezy. It brought a smile to his face that blew away quickly as if it never happened. “You can’t distract me, Gentry. When I’m inking,” her eyes were far away, her head tilted, her smile radiant. “I’m—”

“Nowhere else and everywhere at once.”

She looked into the darkness, startled. Her head nodded slowly. “Yes, that is a good way to say it, Gentry.”

“No one calls me that.”

“What—? I mean, what do they call you?”

Freak. Monster. Abomination. Creature. “Other things.” He looked down at the darkness pooled around his body. He could, all at once, feel the prongs in his arms, sheathed and dangerous. “They would never call me Gentry. They would see it as a mark against the royals.”

“What would you have me call you?”

His mind was stripped of all words. He stared at her, unblinking, shocked.

“Well if you don’t want me calling you Gentry, then what should I call you?”

“You can call me whatever you wish.”

“Mandrake then.”

“Okay.” He braced himself. “What do I call you?”

She seemed to think about it for a long time before her voice fluttered, “Call me Stylus Pea.”

He closed his eyes and let the name tumble around in his mind. Pea. Stylus Pea. The feel of her name on his mouth as he whispered it was cool and refreshing.

“Why did you murder that guard?” Her voice seemed strained, almost pinched when she said the word *murder*. The question robbed him of his bliss and brought him crashing from the sky.

“I have murdered no one.” His voice was suddenly coiled and dangerous.

“One of the king’s guards, I heard you killed him.”

“I did, but it was not murder.” Mandrake shook his head, trapped again in the moment that had haunted him this past month. “They were going to kill me. I was defending my child.” The sight of blood lifting into the air returned to him and he rubbed his face, pushing it away. The weight of the dead hand in his returned and he squeezed his fingers. His musk lifted from his body, just a whiff, but enough to put him on guard.

“We heard it was murder.”

“It wasn’t.”

She took a tentative step forward, the light shifting, showing more and less of her. "Why do you watch us?" Her eyes penetrated the darkness, searching for him. He felt exposed and a bit scared.

"I need to."

"Why, Mandrake? My sisters say you are preparing to kill us all."

"I'm not," he stated.

"What is it then, fascination with butterflies? I can't imagine that is it."

"No."

"Will you tell me?"

Mandrake wrestled with a way to make her understand. Finding none, he pressed on anyway. "I'm looking for beauty."

"What?" Her face screwed up.

"I think fairies need beauty, need it like wind and love, need beauty like the animals need food and a child needs his mother." Mandrake knew these words probably made no sense to her. She lived with beauty everyday. She was an instrument of beauty. But he felt the desperate need to make her understand.

"You think butterflies are beautiful?"

"No."

She gasped.

"Well, yeah, but that is not what brings me here. That is not the kind of beauty I am looking for." Her eyes stared into the dark. She was close now, almost in the throat of the darkness herself.

"Will you tell me what you're looking at when you watch us?"

"I'm looking at the most beautiful thing I have ever seen." His voice came out husky and soft.

“Tell me, Mandrake.”

“I’m looking at you.”

Her hand came up to her throat and she stepped back. His need for her galvanized him, filling him with joy so sudden and fleeting that he thought it might lift him from the branch he sat on and toss him up into the sky. The light hit her face and she shined. She took another step backwards, almost stumbling. Her wings opened in the darkness and he thought she might just leave him there.

“My work, you mean?”

“Yes, your work. But mostly you.” He was open now, exposed and vulnerable. She could reach out and touch his beating heart if she chose to. “Do you want me to stop? Do you want me to leave you alone and never come back?” The thought chilled him and he was again aware of the hole that ran right through him.

She shook her head slowly, her fingers running along the tail made by the end of her scarf. “No, you don’t have to do that.”

“Will you tell me something?”

She looked up at him, her eyes glistening. “Anything.”

“How did you know I was watching you? Do they all know? How did you know it was me?”

She flexed her ink-stained hands, peering into the darkness. “I don’t know. I can feel your eyes on me. The others can’t. Just me.”

I love you, Pea. I have loved you since before I laid eyes on you. I think you can fill me up when nothing else can. His heart hammered his chest like a piece of steel being forged. His breath was unpredictable, stopping and rushing forth with no warning.

“Will you come out of that darkness?”

“Why?” *Don't make me show you my hideous form. Please, I can't take the gasp, the disgust in your face.*

“I want to see you, Gentry Mandrake.” She was backing up now to the very tip of the branch where the moonlight shone bright. “Please.”

He forced himself to his feet shakily. He felt sick with the motion, but could not stop now. He stepped forward lightly, walking the branch slow, dreading the look that would show on her face.

The light ran across his body like water pouring off him. He stepped into the light before her. His head down, afraid like he never thought he would be. She gasped, and he waited for her to rush away. But she stayed.

“Will you look up at me?” Her voice wavered slightly.

He lifted his eyes, his jaw tight, his body locked. He looked her in the eye. They were close, too close. He could see her chest rising and falling with each breath. He could smell the pea flower scent, warm and comforting, coming off her, playing in the wind.

“You have green eyes,” she said quietly. She smiled and turned from him. She looked unsteady on her feet. He took one step closer to her, unable to stop himself, his body craving closeness. His eye flowed past her to the balcony she came from. Many Styluses looked up at them, their faces crossed over and again with worry and other dark emotions.

“They are concerned,” she sighed.

“They think I have hurt you.”

She stepped back, her body nearly touching his. His hand floated up to the back of her hair, daring not to touch it. He could almost put his arms around her. His heart tolled out its misery as his body ran with excitement and joy.

“You wouldn’t do that, would you, Gentry?”

“I would never let anything hurt you, Stylus. Anything.”

She turned to him abruptly. She seemed startled by their closeness, but did not pull away. She looked up at his face. “I’m glad I met you tonight.” She seemed about to say something more. A sudden fright gripped him that she would, that she would say something wonderful or horrible. He could not defend himself from her. She could hurt him when few others could. She did not speak. She did not smile. She just stared at him.

“I have to go to them.”

“I know. Please tell them I mean them no harm. Please tell them I will stop watching them if they desire it.”

“I will not tell them that.”

“Why?”

“They may tell you to stop.” She turned, fluttering back to her family.

Mandrake could feel a part of him leave with her.

An Uncle’s Gift

Mandrake watched the day's parade stolidly, his expression blank, his mind at rest. He concentrated on breathing, the air nurturing his body, filling him up.

All of a sudden, darkness overcame him. He looked up as the sky became a bruise and the moons began to bleed. Burning leaves drifted from screaming dryads above him to rain to the floor of Liefdom. Mandrake looked around him. The parade was gone. The air became acrid, searing the lungs. Then he saw it.

Mandrake stared at the trees across from him. A form waded in the dark pools of shadows beyond the trees, eyes slit to furious lines. A large mouth opened, air steaming from the tongue as it lashed. Mandrake knew this image was not real.

But this could come to pass. This could be real. Mandrake felt small under the gaze of the creature, his armor weak, his prongs flimsy. He looked it in the eye, feeling no fear. He stood. Suddenly everything was stripped from him: his prongs, his armor, his spirit. His skin boiled, stinking of burning flesh. His skin was hardening, becoming rock. Fear rose up in him, half crazed and thrashing. He was transforming, becoming something else, losing his innocence. The air raged. Fire seared his lungs. His mind began to darken. The hole that ran through him screamed. There was a fiend inside him and it was crawling out.

Mandrake lifted his eyes to the creature across the city. It was laughing. Mandrake reached frantically for an image of the fairy he loved. Pea's face slowly rose to his mind with a sigh. He gripped tight to the details of her face and the vision began to fade.

He came back.

The parade had reached its end. The fairies of the city danced and sang. Mandrake watched it all, his mind going cold, his body breaking out in sweat.

“What did you see, monster?” Lyadora’s voice held her hatred like a blade. “You were whimpering. You whispered ‘no’ over and again. What did you see when you reached the depths of your mind?”

Mandrake knew he shouldn’t tell her. He knew she would only hurt him with the knowledge. But she was all he had. He needed to tell someone. “I saw a changeling.” He sighed, sorry he had spoken the moment the word rose to his lips.

Her voice was low and strangely gentle. “Leave us, Mandrake. Your place is not here. You will hurt us all if you stay. You love that inker, that Stylus girl. If you stay, you will hurt her badly. You may kill her. There is a place for you, I’m sure, but the City of Innocence is not it.” He knew the concern and her soothing voice was a ploy, a push to force him to leave. But he let that kind voice wrap around him. *Let her think I am thinking about it. Let her think I am considering leaving. She will be nice to me a little longer.*

“Mandrake. This creature you are preparing yourself to fight, is it possible that creature is you?”

Mandrake closed his eyes, feeling tears welling there. It was true; he may have to fight himself. He may have to fight for his innocence before it was through. But no, the creature was real. “No, Lya, the thing that awaits me is a real danger. It is the enemy before me. And I will destroy it.” He waited for her edged tongue, waited to hear whatever vitriol she would spew. But she said nothing. The bark behind him warped and changed and her face disappeared. Mandrake looked at his hands before covering his face and fighting back tears.

The cry of a hawk sliced through the air and Mandrake looked up. The city hushed as the hawk alighted on the roof. The fairy that rode it jumped to the royal balcony and dropped hastily to a knee.

Lotus let him kneel there before telling him to rise. Worry stained the fairy's face. His hands fidgeted, his voice wavering and breaking so badly that Mandrake could not hear the words spoken.

The bark behind him shifted and Lyadora gasped. The very tree under him trembled. All across the city, the dryads shook. His eyes swept the trees, from one to the next, as he collected their expressions of dismay. Mandrake was on his feet, his musk rising to the air. He strained to hear the conversation, but the words were garbled with the distance and the speaker's distress.

He turned, looking at Lya, his face calm, his heart rampaging in his chest. "Lya, what is it? What is happening?" Sap rolled from her eyes in anguish. He felt helpless. The sudden urge to wrap his arms around her trunk as best he could gripped him. He pushed the urge back, keeping his emotions at an arm's length. He turned his back on her and lifted into the air, flying to the balcony. The hawk looked straight into his eyes, its expression unreadable. He nodded to the noble animal and settled his gaze on the fairy speaking to his father.

At first, no one noticed he was there. But soon, the royals gasped and drew back like snarling lips on a wolf. The beetle guards rushed forward in a wave, their sticks held high and trembling in their hands. Mandrake's eyes were for his father.

"What has happened, father?" Mandrake asked. Scarlet's anger was palpable, her eyes seething at the word 'father'. Lotus simply stared at the messenger, his face showing stark terror, his lips quivering. Mandrake snapped a

look at his uncle, who seemed to ignite as if Mandrake's eyes had sparked him to life.

"My king, we must discuss this. There will be things to do. There must be preparations."

"I beg your leave, my liege. I must warn the other fey towns in the path of their rage. I must raise the alarm," the fairy messenger said. Lotus waved him off as if the motion were coming from far away, the king's eyes still windows of panic.

The messenger turned, seeing Mandrake and stopping. Mandrake looked down at the fey and took a knee, bringing his face nearer to the fey's eye level.

"Who are you?" Mandrake's voice brooked no argument.

"I-I am Dyer Coltsfoot." His eyes held fear. Mandrake would not let it stop him.

"What have you told the king?"

"That is none of your concern, monster." The powerful voice was violent on the air. Mandrake ignored it. The fey was approaching, but Mandrake could not give him notice. He grabbed Coltsfoot by the shoulders and shook him gently.

"What is going on, Dyer? What is coming this way?"

"Satyrs," the fey managed. "They are rampaging. They are wild. They are leaving destruction in their path." A hand clamped down on Mandrake's wrist. He turned to see his cousin holding him. The dark, flat green eyes under blue bangs held wrath and unspeakable hate.

“This is none of your business, you abomination! I demand you leave this balcony now, or I swear I will order these guards to attack!” Azure Rose’s face was writhing.

“Take that hand off me, cousin, or lose it.” Mandrake’s musk hit the air and all pulled back, except Azure. His face spasmed in disgust, but he would not stand down. “Release me, now!” Mandrake’s voice was a hammer that shattered his cousin’s resolve. Azure let his grip fall and he stepped back, the flat emotion replaced now by trepidation. Mandrake stood and flexed his back and arms. His prongs slid free from his wrists and he turned to his father.

“What will you do?” Mandrake asked. Lotus’s eyes fluttered to Mandrake’s face before trailing away. Ebony seemed about to say something.

“We must run,” Azure said. “We must evacuate the city. Every fairy in Liefdom must flee and find other shelter until these brutes have moved on.”

Mandrake felt ill. He looked at his cousin’s face, the sudden need to spit on him rising up like bile. “What of the ones that can’t run, can’t flee?” Mandrake said. “What of those that will not?” Mandrake turned to the crowd, now comprised of every citizen of Liefdom. “What of your animal companions? They will not leave their nests. They will not leave their hovels. They will stay and the satyrs will make sport of them, kill them and devour them, with little more than a thought. What of the dryads? A satyr is a sexual beast. Their ability to copulate with any female is well known. Their lustful hands will shift our dryads to their humanoid forms. They will be ravished.”

Mandrake turned back to his cousin, who stood abashed and wilting. “Do you have an answer, cousin? You are the heir to the throne, or so it has been said.

What about those citizens of Liefdom that cannot evacuate the city?" Azure suddenly seemed fascinated by his own feet.

"Father, what will you do?" Lotus, finally composed, turned to Ebony Rose, then stepped passed Mandrake, gently shoving him aside.

"I am the king of Liefdom and I will decide her fate." His voice was strong, his will, apparent. "We cannot save everyone, but we can save most. We will evacuate. We will retreat to the city of Riverdrop. The fairies there will welcome us with open arms."

"Not good enough!" Mandrake roared. "That is not good enough. You are the king of Liefdom and the fairies that reside here. And you are the king of all the fey of the Veil—all of them—including the dryads! It is your charge to keep this city safe. Your duty is to—"

A sharp hand cracked upside his face. Mandrake turned to see his mother glaring at him. "You will not tell my husband about his duty, you beast! I will have you driven from the city."

Mandrake touched his cheek gingerly as his heart snapped in two. He gritted his teeth and hardened his eyes. *My mother, my sweet mother, despises me.* He looked into her eyes, seeing nothing but baleful emotion. Everything seemed to take on edges, every soft surface becoming hard and unyielding. The inner abyss yawned deeper and wider. He turned back to the crowd.

"Let me fight for you." He dropped to his knees, his hand open before them. "This is what I do, maybe the only thing I am good for. I can stop them. I can defend you."

A snort of laughter came from behind him and Mandrake looked down. The voice of his mother battered down on him, leaving him feeling small and

weak. "The satyr is a great creature, a fey outweighing you by hundreds of pounds. They are hulking monsters the size of humans, and thick-limbed. They are traveling in a pack ten strong. They are brutal. They are devastating. They would eradicate you with little more than a thought. They would reach out and grasp you and crush you to pulp. You are a murderer and a monster, but your fury has its limits. To us, you are death. But to them, you are a pitiful thing. Mandrake, you cannot save us. You are worthless to this city."

He turned in on himself, wishing for loving arms to hide in, but knowing he had no such arms in his life. He lifted his eyes, tears standing bold on his face, and he looked out in the crowd. A fairy was pushing through the crowd, shoving her way to the front of the press to stand directly before him. Mandrake looked up to see Stylus Pea. Something in her eyes found the strength in him and stoked it.

Mandrake stood. He turned his back to the crowd, feeling her eyes still on him. He looked at his father, too wounded to gaze into the hate in his mother's eyes.

"I will not be going to Riverdrop. I will stay and fight for the city I love. *My* city. I will defend *my* people. All of you that wish to may run. But when you come back, you will find your homes waiting for you. You will find everything just where you left it. I will not hand over the honor of our dryads and the lives of our animals."

"When they kill you, do not look for us to mourn," his cousin said.

Mandrake turned away from their disdain. He locked eyes with Pea. "I will not let anything harm you or the city you love." Pea nodded with tears in

her eyes. He took a knee before the city, and bowed his head before lifting into the air and buzzing to his house.

When his feet touched his roof, the bark of the tree opened and the face of Lyadora rose to the surface. She was crying. "I have been so horrible to you. I have been a plague on you, calling you a monster, and telling you this was not your home. Why would you do this? Why would you fight for us?"

"Because I am a warrior, because this is my city, and because I love you all."

Mandrake stepped back, gasping, and slid his prongs home. Sweat poured from his neck and face. His fists, marked with splinters and needles of shattered wood, bled as he flexed them. He threw back his head and opened his throat in a bestial roar. The bellow rushed out into the forest, bouncing from tree to tree as if in panicked flight. He stumbled backwards and fell to the branch he stood on. Mandrake closed his eyes, hearing wings in the air.

All day the exodus grew, a steady flow of citizens moving out into the wilds around Liefdom. Many were going to Riverdrop, the royals and nobles chief among them. Most had nowhere to go. They simply flitted into the forest, fleeing Liefdom as if it were burning. The image of the slaughter that would ensue if he failed played itself over again in Mandrake's head. His twisting gut told him these fey were better off vanishing into the wood, but every fleeing citizen was a slap to his pride.

"Are you ready?" Lyadora's voice was small and weak, a fluttering fear that hit his ears.

Mandrake looked down at his hands, seeing them bruised and swollen, crisscrossed with tiny cuts and prickling with splinters. He slowly began to pick each splinter away, dropping them at his feet as he worked. "Lya," he drew a deep breath and loosed it. "You should leave, too. I know you have a human form. I know you can leave the ground. Gather your sisters and run." A flash of fear crossed Lyadora's face and she looked away.

"We can't run, Mandrake. We bound ourselves here. We laid roots here. If we leave, the ground will churn and our roots will find weak purchase when we return. To leave now would banish us from Liefdom forever."

"Then set the city to your back and never return."

"Our seeds were laid here, Mandrake, and here we must stand. Our leader Missiniah has chosen this place for us. We are honor-bound to remain." Lya's voice, shy and doe-like, nestled itself into Mandrake's heart like a child in his bosom as she spoke. "Will you abandon us? Are you not our champion?"

Mandrake turned his back from her, casting his eye to the rushing city below him, seeing his people running in fear with no faith in his ability to protect them. He ran his hand through wet, slick hair. "I will not abandon you, Lya." His eye fell on the great tree and the lone fey standing on its balcony. Mandrake forgot about his hands and the splinters there. "I am your champion."

Gentry Ebony Rose swung his gaze about and landed it directly upon Mandrake. He kicked off the balcony and lifted into the air toward Mandrake's home. Very suddenly, Mandrake felt exposed. He glanced at his surroundings for a place to hide, finding none. He watched with dread as Ebony stopped before the dome roof of Mandrake's quarters.

Ebony's wasp wings connected low to his back, granting him a hunched, devious look when he flew. With his hands folded in front of him and a wry smile etched on his face, Ebony had the look of a fey with a plan.

Mandrake turned, stepping closer to Lyadora. "Do you think he is here to try to stop me?" he whispered. Lyadora shook her head.

"I am preparing for battle, Great Uncle. If you have come to spar me, to see that I am ready, then grab a stick. If you have come to try to convince me to stop this madness, then you may go."

"Madness is your word, Mandrake, not one of my choosing. I see no madness in the endeavor you are about to embark on. There is a bit of madness in you, Mandrake. But that is not what leads you here. It is honor that drives you. Honor and anger, I would say. Wouldn't you, Lyadora?"

Mandrake heard her voice, strong and powerful, behind him. "Honor and valor are the words I choose, Great Prince."

"See, Mandrake, no madness." Ebony's smile did not flinch or waver. It seemed to float before his face, like smoke or an illusion. Mandrake found he could not look at it long.

"I have lived here for how long now, Lya?" Mandrake asked.

"Two months now, Prince Mandrake." *Prince, she called me prince.* The word wrapped around him, hugging him tight, filling him with strength. He could not control the smile that came to his lips.

"Have I had any visitors in that time, Lya?"

"You have not."

Mandrake watched as Ebony stood, still and waiting. “Why do you choose now to visit, Great Prince Ebony? Of all the times you could have set foot upon my roof, I find you here now. Suspect. Very suspect.”

Ebony’s implacable smile broadened as if he had been waiting for the question. “I am here, nephew,” Ebony sighed, “to save your life.” Mandrake pulled his venom and aimed it for Ebony, but it would not fire. “You are about to be defeated in battle. I can’t allow that.”

“How do you know he will be defeated?” A whine entered Lya’s voice, the timbre gone, the voice nearly crying.

“What will you do about your wings, nephew?”

“What about—” Mandrake’s mind showed him falling from the sky, his wings wet and unresponsive. His blood went cold. He took a step back. Lyadora shuddered under him. Ebony’s smile dug into him, a cutting instrument of cruelty. “I-I will find a way.” He staggered back as his mind showed him dropping at the feet of the satyrs. Wet wings.

Mandrake spun to face Lyadora, Ebony forgotten. “You must away, Lya. Take your sisters—all of them—and leave. I cannot protect you. I will fail. I will...” A hot lump rose to the back of his throat and he choked. “I will fall.”

“Without my help,” Ebony chimed happily.

Mandrake’s musk lifted into the air. His prongs began to slide free and he stopped them, turning to face his great uncle. The heat of his anger stained his face, as a line of sweat trickled down the back of his neck.

“Mandrake, I can help you,” Ebony said. “I have been to see my child. I have talked to him at length. I have the answer to the question.” Ebony’s smile seemed insane, a thing free of his mouth, free of his will. “I have come to help.

But we have to move now, before the entire Stylus family has fled the city. Come," he said with a wave of his arm, "the time has come for haste."

Mandrake cast a look over his shoulder, seeing concern cross Lyadora's face. He followed his uncle.

Ebony cut a path directly for the balcony of the Stylus family. Fey buzzed past Mandrake, giving him wide berth. Ebony alighted on the balcony and brushed back his hair from his eyes. He lifted his voice, strong and commanding.

"Stylus Leek, Master Inker and patron of the Stylus family, I beg parley with you. I have a task for your noble—ah, there you are. I have a task to set out for your talented hands."

Leek stormed forward, his hands curled into fists planted on his sides, his face pinched and unpleasant. His mouth worked as if struggling to hold back words. He adjusted the tiny hat perched upon his head and stopped before Ebony, his eyes stabbing into Mandrake.

"Great Prince Gentry Ebony Rose, High Counselor to the King of the Veil, it is an honor to be called upon by you." To Mandrake, the fey looked anything but honored. "Regretfully, I find myself sorely pressed. My house is in exodus. And you have brought a monster with you to boot. I cannot speak with you now."

Shame rose up from the depths within Mandrake, like a foul odor on the air. He looked at his feet, willing his musk not to rise. "This was a mistake, Great Uncle." Mandrake turned as more and more Styluses filled the balcony.

"Do you wish to hear my task?" Ebony said patiently.

"I do, but I have no time."

“Make time!” A voice sliced through the raucous city like a finely honed blade. Mandrake turned to see two nobles lowering to the balcony. Gentry Orchid landed lightly and stomped forward, pulling up a breath from Leek. Gentry Violet landed behind her. Her feet dropped down beside Mandrake’s and her thin hand slipped into his.

Mandrake jumped, pulling his hand back reflexively, but her stubborn grip prevailed. Orchid was speaking, but Mandrake could not focus on what she said. The distant words were like the call of birds in the wood, or the bustle of a stream. The hand gripping his own blotted out all sounds. His questioning face begged Violet, but she simply smiled.

She whispered, “I am Gentry Violet. That is my twin Orchid. We are your loving sisters, Mandrake.” The words fit poorly in his head. They blocked out everything, sitting jagged and heavy in his mind. “We will not let this pompous little fey deny you.” She kissed his hand so quick and light that he could not be certain it ever happened. “It is nice to finally meet you.” She turned to watch Orchid speak, her face beaming with delicious deviousness.

“You will do everything my Great Uncle asks of you, or I will tattle. Won’t I, Violet?”

Violet burst out in a sudden explosion of laughter that lifted almost violently to the ears of Mandrake. “You sure will,” she said. “You will tattle to daddy that the royal family asked Stylus Leek to do something and he flatly refused. What do you think he will do, Orchid? Tell them all so they can all hear.”

“He will take away your spiffy little hat. He will denounce you as Patron of the Stylus family, and he will do it publicly.”

“Tell him why, Orchid.”

Violet giggled. “He will do it because he dotes on his girls. He spoils us. And he does not appreciate it when we are thwarted.”

Mandrake watched Leek shrivel to nothing. The fey jerked his hat from his head and wrung it once.

“I need an inker,” Ebony said, “a gifted inker, to ink the wings of Gentry Mandrake.” A gasp sounded across the balcony. Every Stylus pulled back as if from a slap.

Leek drew himself up once more. “Never! It has never been done—can never be done. The shame. It would be an outrage. We Styluses ink the wings of the most beautiful creatures in all creation. We would never ink something so common as a fairy.” He stepped forward, looking down, his eyes burning with the passion of his indignation. “And that thing,” his finger stabbed out at Mandrake, “is not even a fairy. That thing is a monster, a murderer, and a freak.”

Mandrake’s musk entered the air and Violet held her sleeve up to her nose. He willed himself to calm down. But as his eyes slid cautiously across the assemblage, they found Pea, and he lowered his head. The look she gave him stunk of pity. He longed to slink away, to be in his dark, cold home.

“I will do it.” All the light of the world filled her bright voice. Mandrake’s eyes jerked up from the floor to fall on her. She seemed to blush, making her beauty more powerful than anything he had ever witnessed. “I will ink the wings of Prince Gentry Mandrake,” Pea said. He could not look at her long without tears rising to his eyes. The small hand gripping his tightened in a loving squeeze, and Mandrake tried his best to breathe.

“On your knees, Gentry,” Pea said. She stood, arms folded over her chest, her lips playing gently with a smile.

“My knees?” Mandrake said.

“Well, this thing is useless to us, Mandrake.” A flippant hand motioned towards her easel. “You’re a bit bigger than a butterfly.”

Ebony stepped up beside Pea and handed her a bag. “Mix this in with your inks, if you would.”

Pea weighed the bag in her slender hands. It looked heavy.

“What is it, uncle?”

“Steel,” Ebony said.

Pea pushed the bag away from her in an attempt to hand it back to Ebony. “I have heard of steel. It can bring nothing but pain, Great Prince. I would rather ink his wings without—”

“You will ink him with this powder in your pots, or I will find someone who will.” Mandrake saw Pea flinch back. A hand of anger, black and seething, reached up from inside him. The sight of her fear, even momentary fear, stuttered in his mind. He looked down at his swollen hands, curling his fingers slightly, watching them become claws. “There is a purpose in this inking beyond making him pleasing to the eye, Stylus Pea, a motive you will have to see to believe. Now get started. Our time is short. He will need an adjustment period.”

“Do not adopt a tone with her, Uncle.” Mandrake’s voice was flat and deadly. Ebony held his hands up, stepping back. His smile reappeared and Mandrake once again felt a finger of trepidation at the thought of what Ebony might have planned.

She was fumbling with her inkpots, her hands trembling, her eyes frantic. Mandrake longed to reach out and place a steadying hand on hers, but he didn't possess the nerve. "Take your time, Stylus. Do not let him rush you."

"No, I mustn't rush you. I will leave you to your work, inker." He turned to Mandrake. "Find me when you're finished here." Ebony lifted away, taking a dark cloud with him.

"Do you want me to mix this in with the inks, Mandrake? I won't do it unless you demand it."

Mandrake nodded. Pea bent to her work.

With the mixing done, she looked up at his wings for the first time and a sigh escaped her lips. Her eyes widened and she reached down to place her palm on one of the wings. His wing shuddered slightly under her hand, and she pulled it back, staring at the translucent wing.

Mandrake could not bring himself to interrupt her. He simply watched as her eyes crept up the length of his wing and back down. Her eyes held a wonder he had never seen before. *She will reach to her easel and collect her brush. She will gently brush away any dust or pollen.* Mandrake had watched her many times. He waited for the brush.

She reached up to her light purple hair, gently pulling free the scarf she wore. Thick, glorious hair washed down from her forehead, shadowing her eyes and face, casting a purple light across her forehead and cheeks. Her leaf-green eyes slid to his, gripping his heart tight, making breathing impossible. In the undeniable force of her stare, he could do naught but stare back, frightened by what she might do next. She held him suspended above the pit within. A harsh word and he would plunge into oblivion.

“Your brush,” Mandrake said, his voice barely a whisper. He motioned for the easel. She drew in a long breath and placed her hand on his wing again. Her eyes refused to let loose of him. Fear swallowed him, his cheeks flushing. His stomach rolled over, then went numb.

She shook her head. “I will not use my brush on these wings.”

They are unworthy. Mandrake felt as if he had been kicked in the chest. He looked down at the balcony beneath him, taking a shuddering breath.

“These wings,” she began, as she slowly wiped the surface of his wing with her scarf, “are the most beautiful I have ever seen.”

His head roared. His mind played the words back over and over, fighting to bring sense to them. *Did she just call me beautiful?*

“They are thick, as they would have to be to carry a fey your size. The detail I can see here is,” she gulped air, “stunning. The veins pulsing life to the tips of your wings.” A pretty flush took over her face as the wind blew her bangs in a swirl around her forehead. “There is an iridescence here that—” Her face went slack, her mouth open for a moment before she could go on. “Mandrake, there is a rainbow trapped in your wings.” She slipped a hand behind the wing as she cleaned it. Mandrake’s eyes drifted to her hand, seeing it shimmer behind the warping transparency.

She wiped each carefully before tying her hair up again. She ran a loving hand across the scarf before pulling up her quill. Her mind and eyes lost in her work, Mandrake wondered at her focus. His eyes explored the contours of her face, gliding from her lips to her chin, across both cheeks and to her forehead. His eye snagged at her forehead, following the line of her hair across her head and down past her ears. The line flowed around her neck and back again. A flare

of color outlined her face, barely noticeable, as if she had inked a frame around her face. The colors swirled, chaotic and wild.

Mandrake felt his hand moving, but could not stop it. He watched, appalled, as his fingertips brushed the line of color around her face. She smiled, never taking her eyes away from her work. "What are you doing, Gentry?"

"What is this?" his voice said, as his betraying fingers followed the line around her ears to her chin.

"That is my splash line."

"Your what?"

She sighed, glancing his way before shaking her head. "Butterflies oft times spook. Who knows really what causes it, but for no discernable reason, the wing will flinch and spray an inker with wet ink. Most of us will carefully wipe the ink from our faces and go back to work. But there are a few of us..." She giggled, turning her face into a wonderland of joy and beauty. "A few of us don't stop at all. We wipe our face quickly, with no care, and stay with our work." She shook her head. "The face stays clean with the rushed wipes, but we suffer a splash line all around the edges." She grinned. "We look like fools."

Mandrake marveled at the way each expression carried her seamlessly from wide-eyed child to beautiful woman. He wished he could watch this dance his entire life. He had never known beauty like this. He felt his darkness ebb.

"You do not look a fool, Pea." Mandrake's words were a light rain. "You could never look a fool. You are possessed by a passion. It is who you are." Pea smiled softly. Mandrake began to realize his wing was getting heavier.

"Where will you go in your exodus?"

Pea's lips turned up in a wicked curve. "Why would I leave the city?"

Mandrake felt a cold hand close around his spine. His mind flashed a horror at him and he pushed it away. "You're not leaving?" He gripped her wrist, watching her wince. He loosed her immediately.

"No, I'm not leaving here, Mandrake. Why would I? We are in no danger."

"The satyrs may get past me, and they will annihilate the city. They will..." Mandrake searched for words. But she shook her head gently and touched his face.

Her fingers were the flutter of diaphanous wings. Mandrake could not breathe. His heart stopped in his chest as her fingertips traced the line of his jaw and slid down to his throat. She placed her palm on his neck, feeling the beat of his heart. She closed her eyes, her face going slack before tightening to a magical smile. Her eyes opened slowly, locking him in place with the power of their intensity.

"They will not get through. You will stop them, Mandrake." Her eyes welled with tears and she sighed, looking deep into his eyes for a last moment before turning back to her work. "I have faith in you."

Stunned, he could do nothing but stare forward, struggling to get himself under control. His emotions warred within his body, thrashing at one another with images of her faith and of her being raped, each ruthlessly battering the other. Mandrake hung his head.

I have to stop them, no matter what. They must fall. I cannot fail. There is too much at risk. He curled his fingers again, looking for claws and talons of strength and brutality, but finding only weak appendages grasping for hope.

A world away, she set down her quill. Her hands cradled his face and turned his eyes to hers. "Stay with me, Gentry. Do not go to that place I see in you."

"Wh-what," his tongue rebelled, his thoughts flailing. "What place do you see in me?"

She frowned, creating a furrow line between her eyes. "I can't describe it. Don't want to try. I just want you here with me now. Can you do that?" Mandrake's throat swelled with emotion. He could not speak. He nodded.

She moved on to the third wing. Mandrake noticed the other two sagging leaden to the balcony. His heart thudded in his chest as he realized he could barely lift them.

She began moving slower, as if she were procrastinating finishing. What seemed hours later, she stepped back, her smiling wilting. Horror ruined the lines of her face, her hand closing on her mouth as she stared aghast at her work.

Mandrake's breath would not come. He reached out for her, but she pulled back, her dismay curling her to shame. "What is it?" He glanced at the wings she had worked so hard on, his eyes seeing an ugly, dull gray.

She shook her head. "They look horrible." Her words slammed into him with the force of a hammer strike. "They are hideous." Mandrake felt the air turn thick and noxious. He could smell his musk filling the air. She threw her wrist up before her nose and turned, flying to her home without looking back.

Mandrake fought to lift his wings, straining under the considerable weight. He could not fly, not like this. Ebony had betrayed him, had made him useless.

“Ebony!” Mandrake roared. “Flee, Ebony! For when I find you, I will rip the scream from your throat!” He kicked hard from the balcony, throwing himself into the air fiercely. He flexed his wings hard, feeling no movement from them. They pulled him from the air, dropping him to the floor. He landed with a bone-jarring thud, his face slamming the balcony floor. With a tremendous effort, he shoved himself to his knees, then stood with a grunt.

“Ebony!” he roared, his musk a stain on the air.

“Yes,” the vulpine voice drawled.

Mandrake turned, snapping his prongs from his wrists and plodding forward. “You die first. If this city is going to fall, you will die first,” Mandrake said. His wings dragged the ground behind him, whining against the hard wood. “You will beg the forgiveness of the dryads you have condemned to—”

Ebony’s serpentine smile flickered across his mouth. “Now, now, nephew, you must learn patience.” Ebony waved a chiding finger. “You must keep a tight hold on that temper of yours. You could hurt someone unjustly. Let’s take me, for instance, a well-meaning family member here to gift you with true power. And what is your riotous mind telling you to do to me?”

“The things I will do to you are numerous and ghastly.”

“Well, before you get to work on me then, I only ask that you let me finish the incantation that will aid you in your battle with the satyrs. I cannot have the city paying the price for your ill-placed temper tantrum.”

“No more games, uncle.”

“As far as I know, Mandrake, we have yet to play at all.” Ebony’s twisted smile contained cruelty and viciousness. Mandrake thought of the look on Pea’s face as she stared at her work, and his hate for Ebony swelled.

Ebony Rose walked a wide circle around Mandrake. "Step within my reach, uncle."

Ebony shook his head, a mocking frown on his face. "This, I'm afraid, will hurt." He stepped behind Mandrake and placed his hands on two of Mandrake's wings. A sudden, blinding flash of pure fire raced through his wing and up his back. The pain would tear him apart. Then it was gone. His back felt lighter, his top two wings weightless. "These, too, I'm afraid." Ebony's hand touched the final two wings, and the searing agony was back. It played itself out quickly and Mandrake felt a light strength in his wings. He flexed his back muscles, hearing a slight steel-on-steel ring in the air. Ebony sighed. "Much better."

Mandrake turned, watching a pattern of light at his feet swing with his movement. He saw Ebony as if for the first time, his smile sweet and loving. "You may now fly." He gestured with his thin hand.

Mandrake looked at his wings, steel gleaming in the light of the sun. Their surface was a broken mirror. He looked at Ebony, wonder in his eyes. "The edges become razor sharp at your will. I would advise caution in flight. The time for gaping and wide-mouthed wonder is gone, nephew. The time for adjusting to your new wings has come. Away with you."

With a steely buzz, Mandrake whizzed into the air and out of Liefdom. He pressed hard into his flight, pushing for levels of speed he had yet to experience. He leaned in, his wings a flurry. With a sudden grin, he willed them sharp and entered the limbs of a tree. He could hear the branches falling away as his wings cleanly sliced them away.

Mandrake pushed harder, lending all his strength to the will of speed, his eyes blurring all sights to a whirl of color, his ears recognizing only the roar of

wind. He peered forward, his eyes leaking tears, his mouth locked in a maniacal smile. He pushed harder, feeling his legs begin to wobble as he reached levels of speed his body could not withstand. He slowed. The world returned and he dropped to a thick branch. He covered his face, crying tears of relief.

Defending Innocence

Desperation drove him to the door of his enemy on the eve of his battle. He hardened himself to her wrath and hate. "Missiniah, great tree of Liefdom, I come seeking your wisdom. Will you treat with me?" His heart thudded loudly in his chest, bringing his vision to wavering. He flexed his hands in anticipation. Somehow, facing her was worse than facing conflict with the satyrs.

He watched as, slowly, the great doors opened to him. Mandrake glanced over his shoulder at Lyadora. She nodded and Mandrake entered. Missiniah was nearly deserted. The last of the nobles rushed about, gathering their belongings and flying for the door in haste. Mandrake's eyes went to the mural wall, seeing no faces staring back at him at all. He glided up the trunk to the visage room. It opened for him almost instantly, and Mandrake stepped within.

Her face did not rise to the surface of any wall. Mandrake looked to the center of the room, seeing no thrones, and up, seeing nothing of the balconies that had once been. The room looked desolate and forlorn, the very wood carrying a grey hue that made Missiniah seem sickly and depressed.

"Great queen of the dryads, I would not have come to you had pressing need not driven me here. I know of your distaste for me. You have let your true

feelings be known with great clarity. But battle looms ahead of me, and I need your lore to face it.”

The room sighed and Mandrake felt the place shudder slightly. “I have been a villain, my prince. I deserve no forgiveness, but for the sake of honor, must ask for it.”

Mandrake’s chest tightened, his hands trembled slightly and he braced himself for anything, unsteady in the current conversation. “What is this you speak of?” he asked. His frightened voice took on a wavering lilt that betrayed fear and doubt.

“I have wronged you. I called you an abomination and spoke of your death. I came at you with wrath and disgust in my heart, my prince, but I could not see. I was blinded by your eccentricities and your terrible size. You were a fright to behold. I could not see beyond it. I could not see your heart.”

“I know nothing of my heart. I know it to be capable of love. I know it possesses a conflagration of passion. But of my heart’s purity, I know nothing. Violence is my destiny, Missiniah; blood, my true design. I am not sure whether you saw the right of it.”

Her heart-stopping face rose from the surface of the wood before him like beauty lifting from the surface of water. Her eyes so intense, so run through with power, landed on him, and her brow furrowed. “The clarion virtue of your heart is revealed in your righteousness, in your bravery, and your sense of duty. You will fight for us, for my sisters and me, despite the rancor we have spat at you these past months. You will lay yourself before the enemy, though your chances of survival are scant.”

They think I will fail. She will send me to my death. These thoughts did little to his resolve, but brought with them a clear sense of her love for him.

“I will never forget your defense of this city. Should you fall—”

“I will not.” *I cannot. If I fail, nothing will stand between them and Pea. Nothing will stand between my home and the brutes who wish to destroy it.* “I must not.”

“The dryad’s memory is everlasting. Every dryad and tree of the world will hear of your valor,” she said. “We love you, Gentry Mandrake. Can you forgive us all for our villainy?”

“Hatred in the face of a monster is not villainy, Missiniah. And a monster is what I seem. I hold no ill will for your people. I have not come for an apology, great one. I am here for your aid. I cannot move forward without knowledge, and you are the only one that can help me, I fear.”

“I will perform any deed you wish from me. I am humbled, and at your command.” She closed her eyes and nodded.

“I cannot fight them outside our city. They will have the upper hand there. They may slip past me in the fray. There is much they could do to hinder me. They will expect some sort of defense here, and I wish to catch them unaware.”

“How can I help?”

“I need to know where they are. I need you to reach out to your kin and seek them for me, and tell me how I can find them before they arrive.”

She nodded. “I can look through the trees for them. I will find them for you.” She looked up, her gaze lifting as she peered through the wall opposite

her, to the world beyond. Her gaze shifted as she rolled from one wall to the next, her eyes ever seeking.

The moment she saw them, her visage shattered to reform in a mask of disgust. Her face contained all the worlds' horror. A shot of fear pierced Mandrake's heart. Her cry seemed to lift beyond the room, to the city, as she bawled out in dismay.

"You can see them." His heart broke out at a gallop. His nerves fired to life as he felt the pounding of a new heart, a heart that pushed bloodlust through his body. His musk rose to the air and he flexed his fists as his prongs extended.

"I can, my prince. They are nightmares. I have never seen satyrs like this. They seem possessed by a clutching darkness. They are contorted to a swelling wickedness."

"Where are they, Missiniah?"

"They are but four miles from here," she gasped. "They have made camp and set about for a meal. They are drunk on briny wine and they—" her face crumpled with emotion. They—"

"Missiniah, I must know what you see. Please do not falter."

"They have set upon a boar for slaughter for their meal. But Mandrake, they will not let the beast die. They wound it terribly, but will not dispatch it. They torture the poor animal."

Mandrake growled, his desire to be there, to move amongst them, filling him with an all-consuming thirst for battle. "How can I find them?"

"I will beg the trees' assistance. They will bend in the direction of your enemy. Follow the trees. They will lead you there."

Mandrake turned, stomping from the room. But when he reached the door, it was shut to him. Her perfect face rolled the walls like water to stop before him. Her eyes pleaded, her mouth working at words she wished to say but could not. "My prince, they are insane. They are beasts. They are terrible in their power. They are monstrous."

A surge of hate filled his heart. His need for blood screamed in his mind. "So am I," he said. She stared at him for one long moment before opening the door and unleashing Mandrake upon his enemy.

The first of the man-sized satyrs died gurgling blood that spit into the air in fine mist after speaking these words: "Gather your things, lads. We away now for Liefdom, and the soft thighs of the fey who live there." His throat exploded as Mandrake buzzed past, whose pronged fist extended to catch the satyr's Adam's apple. The hard cartilage snagged and pulled before it ripped. The wash of blood coated his legs and feet in gore. He reached the far side of the clearing, away from the frantic eyes of the satyrs, and looked upon his work, his bowels going cold, his heart stopping in his chest. Something dark howled within him. The need for more carnage rose up in his mind like burning bile.

With a dip of his shoulder and a kick of his legs, he sped into their midst again. They cried out to one another, grabbing weapons and spitting oaths. Mandrake instinctively knew who the next in command would be. He flew the circuit of the satyr's neck, letting his steel wings dive into the soft flesh. With a cry of horror, a club swung past Mandrake. The blow came so close to landing that the wake of it blew him off course. The club of the traumatized satyr

connected with Mandrake's latest victim with a bone-shattering impact that drove the dying creature to its knees.

A laugh bubbled up from within Mandrake as the power of his destruction poured out upon his enemy. He disliked the sound of his laugh, cruel and sinister, humorless and biting. It made him feel cold. He suddenly was overcome with a desire not to kill, but to cause pain. He found himself flying past an arm, cutting it off at the middle of the bicep. The limb fell away and the beast howled in pain. It dropped to the ground, holding the nub of its arm and screaming.

Mandrake stopped to stand atop a tree limb and watch the effect of his work. The clearing had broken into pandemonium. Cries of pain and fear filled the air around him. He felt the dark heart within him racing, pushing a need for more blood through his body. The darkness snapped hungry jaws at his mind. He shook his head, feeling a buzzing there that set his teeth on edge. He looked down, his body splashed with crimson gore. He ran a hand across his face and it came away covered in blood and tissue.

He felt a nearly irrepressible urge to lick the blood. Maybe he could taste the fear locked there. But some vein within him would not allow it, fighting valiantly for a hold on him. He grunted and kicked from the branch to enter the fray once more, to find more blood where it could be had.

He sliced and screams lifted into the air like heat from desert sand. The world wavered with it as a mirage, and he was an eagle soaring its updraft. He stopped in the center of the clearing, exposed and uncaring, looking down on his butchery and finding it beautiful. He gazed at the satyrs running around him

and laughed as their eyes focused on him. One by one, they saw him for the first time. Only three were left. They stared at him in shock.

“I am the guardian of Liefdom, and I sentence you to terrible death,” he said. The largest of them rushed forward and Mandrake buzzed out to meet him. As he flew past the satyr, the wash of blood that splashed him seared him. The cries of dismay that had, moments ago, brought him such joy, now brought an image he could not shake.

His mind, desperate to stop his decline into darkness, flashed the image of Pea staring down at him. Shame of his bloodlust gripped him and he stopped behind the head of one of the satyrs. He was too fast for them to track. He was an invisible opponent. They had no hope of stopping him. They were figuring this out. They screamed to leave and he decided to let them go. The nearest one spun, his arm flying wide. His club struck Mandrake in the side. The blow, imperceptible to the satyr, was a devastating smash to the fairy, knocking Gentry Mandrake into the forest to collide with a tree that broke his body.

He ricocheted from that tree into a second, feeling a hideous snap in his back. His arm shattered as he slammed the second tree, and his bones broke to shards under his skin. He dropped to land hard on a stone, feeling something snap. The pain was a riot of blades and blows that made his body seem pulverized and raw. He could not see from his left eye. His head roared when he moved it. He fought to get his feet under him before he realized he could not feel them. He lifted his head, looking at his left arm, wrung like a sodden rag. His right, he lifted to his face to see one of his prongs had snapped, the break splintered and gnarled. Lifting it made it throb painfully. He took in the sight of

his legs and sobbed in horror. His legs were tangled beneath him, knotted hanks of flesh and bone, resembling nothing of the appendages they had once been.

Crippled and dying, Mandrake looked up at the canopy of trees, fighting for air to breathe. The draughts of breath were slow and thick, like pouring a burning liquid into his chest. He spit blood and grunted.

He heard the satyrs fleeing into the woods, the opposite direction as Liefdom, and he grinned. Blood drained from the sides of his mouth. He loosed a body-shaking laugh that brought with it more pain than Mandrake thought the world was big enough to hold.

“Thomas,” he groaned. “My beautiful child, forgive me.” He felt the world tilt off kilter and his stomach rolled. The edges of the world began to lose definition as darkness came.

Before the darkness could claim him, he saw the avatar of his demise. A great white bird with a cruel, hooked beak stopped at the rock beside him. Once, then again, it flapped its wings before it screamed at Mandrake. The world faded away as the raptor snatched him up in its hungry beak and hoisted him in the air. Mandrake sagged in its mouth. The pain overwhelmed him, and he entered darkness.

Feeding the Beast

For two months, Trevonne walked past the master’s chambers. Every week, the scene worsened. Vrice simply sat, watching the hall outside his door like a crumbling gargoyle staring at unmoving landscape. When he looked at

her, she felt a stab of fear. These were not the hungry eyes she had always known. Now his eyes held a forlorn gaze that spoke of fear and a need for comfort. Trevonne shied away from those eyes, backing out of the hall and fleeing for the safety of the library.

She waited for him to summon her, waited for him to show himself in other parts of the tower. Weeks went by before the first student left. They were learning nothing from their absent master. Their loyalty was only as deep as their pursuit of knowledge and power would allow. Soon others were talking of leaving, and Trevonne and Collette decided to go talk to their master.

They approached him quietly. Trevonne felt as if she was sneaking up on him, though he had seen them coming. "Master, you have been away for too long," Trevonne began.

"Shh!" he hissed. "Quiet, you fool. You will wake it." A chill ran through Trevonne and she reached a grasping hand out for Collette. Her friend's fingers interlocked with her own and she squeezed.

Trevonne spoke in barely a whisper, her voice meek and laced with terror. "Wake what, master?"

He shook his head, looking back at his door. His hand twitched violently and Trevonne stepped back. She swallowed hard with a dry throat before continuing. "The city awaits you. You have been absent from the social call for a week now. The students as well, they ask for their master to impart his knowledge. Our tower needs—"

Vrice chopped his hand through the air, ending her words. He turned to look at her, his face cut with deep lines and shadows in the flickering light of a tired torch. "I cannot leave." His eyes darted back toward the door. "I must stay

here to protect it. I cannot leave it." Her heart jumped in her chest, then seemed to stop altogether. Trevonne saw the growth of a week's beard and the look of hunger in his eyes. She backed away. His hand shot forward, grabbing her wrist. She heard Collette whisper the beginnings of a spell, and she squeezed her friend's hand hard.

"You must retrieve for me a book, from the library, a tome. I'm sure I have it." He looked away, his frantic eyes searching before they locked back on hers. "*Beyond Our Sight*, by Roopa the Wanderer. Bring it. I must have it." Trevonne nodded, pulling away. He released her hand when she pulled, as if he had forgotten he held it.

Once they were around the corner, Trevonne turned to Collette. "We must know what is in that book," she whispered.

Collette rolled her eyes. "No," she corrected. "We must bring it to our *master*. We do not need to know about his affairs. Ours is not to question what knowledge he seeks." Trevonne reached the distance to her friend's neck and pinched her. Collette cried out and rubbed the spot.

"We are going to find out what is in that book. Maybe it will tell us what is in his chambers that we mustn't wake." Trevonne nodded to herself. "You will have to read it."

"Me? Why me?"

"You read much faster than I. You can finish the book and have it in my hands to deliver quickly. Once he has it, he may not want to let it free." Collette sputtered out a mumble, but she did not shake her head. Trevonne looked at her friend's twisting mouth and knew she would do as asked. Collette was a good

friend, a great friend, who would follow any schemes Trevonne made. Excitement flickered in her chest and she smiled.

“What is it? What is it about?” Trevonne said, hovering over Collette’s shoulder.

“It is a telling of a discovery. A wanderer tells of passing out of our world and into a place he calls the Veil. In the Veil, he meets a race called fairies, and he talks to them and learns their ways. He says that we humans all have our own fairies and that they protect us from—”

“What is the power of the book? Does it contain spells? Does it describe how he came to pass into this land?”

“Well, if you would let me finish...”

Trevonne huffed.

“No,” Collette said, slamming the book closed. “This is not a tome of power. It is a tome of knowledge. Nothing in it would tell us what is in his room, unless his fairy is trapped in there. But Vrice doesn’t know what is in this book, so he would not know of his fairy.”

Trevonne ripped the book from her friend’s arms and grabbed Collette’s wrist, pulling her in the direction of their master. “While I deliver the book, I want you to cast your inspection spell on the door. See if your magicks will tell us anything about what is in there. If it is magical, it will show up to you.”

“This is a *bad* idea, Trevonne.”

Trevonne turned to face Collette, suddenly stopping so close to her that the two wizardesses nearly slammed foreheads. “Whatever is in that room has him spooked. It is dangerous. Will we stay here in this tower, ignorant of it, until

it emerges from the door to have us all? Or will we learn as much as we can now, and then decide if we want to stay?"

Collette chewed on her lip a bit. Trevonne looked her in the eyes, seeing resolution come to her. "Good. Let's go then."

The master placated, Trevonne came back to her friend. "What was it? What did you see?"

"While you flirted with him, I was able to cast my spell. I saw his ward over the door. It is his room. No searching spell can be cast on it. He has fortified it against our prying eyes."

"Damn!" Trevonne spat. "I should have thought of that."

Two more weeks past and Vrice called her to his side. Trevonne wore her dingiest robe, hoping to turn him off with its common nature. She did not want him touching her, did not want him to make advances on her. When she presented herself to him, she stood as far away as he would let her.

His patched and spotty beard was not flattering at all. He looked to have aged a decade since she had seen him last. Beside him sat a pile of dirty crockery, discarded remnants of meals he had produced with his magicks. She fought against the urge to hold her sleeve to her nose. His waste, he had been vanishing, so his leavings were not around. But he had not bathed in weeks. He was glistening in dry sweat and oils. He looked as if he hadn't slept at all. He was not exhausted. He was not falling asleep here in his chair. He was still jittery and nervous.

“Master, the other students, the younger ones who have not been here as long, they are leaving one at a time.” Trevonne watched for his quick hands, trying to keep out of grasping range. She felt as if something was watching her, as if a dark presence was acquainting itself with her scent, her body, her mind. She looked toward the door and it seemed to look at her. She could not meet its gaze for long, and she felt suddenly sick. She fought back the urge to gag. She looked back at Vrice.

“Master, come away from the door for a moment’s rest.” *If I can get him away from this door, maybe I can peek inside.* She framed her voice into a soothing lull. “You look so tired, Master. Let me ease you into a bed. Collette and I will watch the door. It will not wake. And if it does, we will alert you.”

His lip quivered. His face crumpled as if he was going to cry, and Trevonne felt her heart jump frantically. *What has happened to you, Vrice? What has scared you so?* “I want to rest,” he whined. The sound of his weakness was an anathema to any desire she once held for him, and she looked away. His hand went to his forehead and he ran his fingers through his ratted hair. “But I was commanded to sit a watch.” Trevonne wondered how tired Vrice was. How much information could she pull from him if she was careful about it?

“What has commanded you to sit here, Vrice?” She stepped closer. Her nostrils drank the stench of his body odor and she pushed the feeling of being watched behind her.

“The son,” Vrice sobbed. “It has enemies, you know.” His terrified and frantic eyes met hers. He reached out to grab her. She jerked her arm back as he snagged her sleeve. “They may come for it. They will want to send it back. They will want to kill it and send it back.”

Trevonne nearly gagged in fear. She suddenly needed out, needed away, needed to grab Collette and make for the world beyond the tower. But she needed to know—could not leave without knowing—what slept beyond the door.

Trevonne crouched down to look Vrice in the eye, so close to his face she could smell his dry, stale breath. “Where, Master? Where will they send it back to?”

Vrice let her sleeve go. His eyes spoke terror and he recoiled back into the chair. His hand went to his mouth and he shook his head. “You must go, Trevonne. Go away, now.” Trevonne did not know whether he was telling her to leave him or leave the tower. She looked at him for a while longer before returning to her chambers.

Collette asked her a steady barrage of questions. Trevonne was careful with her answers. She was not going anywhere. This was getting too interesting.

Weeks had gone by with no visitors. The tower had curled up on itself, cowering to cover its tender underbelly, exposing only the dark, cold stone of its hardened skin to the world outside. Suddenly one day, everyone and everything within its walls heard a hard knock on the door of the tower. Trevonne jumped from her seat in the library, her eyes seeking Collette’s. Three hard raps it had been, and now three more. Trevonne felt Vrice slip into her mind, his mind trembling with weakness and fatigue.

“Who knocks? Who has come to this place? I cannot face them until they fight their way to my door. Intercept. Kill them all! His enemies have come for him! The worst

is happening!" His voice got high and shrill, pumping liquid fear through Trevonne's veins, infecting her limbs to lock them and bring them to trembling.

"He has orders for us?" Collette asked.

"He does. Defend the tower. The enemies of his visitor have come. But Collette, he is gibbering. He is near madness."

"He will meet us in the lobby, or rain down his destruction from on high?" Collette asked.

"He will not leave the door. He commands us to defend his tower."

Collette's face rolled, betraying a boiling sea of emotions too varied and deep to construe. The steady detonation of the rapping at the door sounded again. The booming filled the library and raced the halls. It filled the tiny spaces of the tower and echoed from every place. Every room thrummed with this knocking. Trevonne had finally had enough.

She growled, looking to her friend. "You coming?" she snapped.

"I'm with you 'til the end."

The two wizardesses tied back their sleeves. They pulled their cowls back and tied their hair in tails as they marched down the halls. Trevonne lifted her aura around her to swell to bursting with the magic in the area. But some foul presence tainted the air. It curdled in the magic around her. She looked to Collette, whose face crumpled in disgust.

"What is that?" Collette asked.

They both knew the origin of this taint. Both of them, without answering, knew the being within the master's chambers had soured the magic around them. Trevonne felt her skin crawl as her heart pumped frozen blood. She shook her head and stepped out into the main lobby. With a wave of her hand, Collette

opened the doors to the outside. A gasp of wind billowed from the gut of the tower to blow at the four men standing outside the main doors. Trevonne lifted her hands into the air, screaming out a volley of black, crackling energy that ripped the air as it rushed at her enemy. Collette deflected it away, reducing the spell to harmless, guttural rumblings.

Trevonne looked to Collette, who held her hands up disarmingly. "I know them. They are not our enemy." Trevonne growled, feeling the taint of darkness rippling through her body. That malevolent force demanded Collette pay, but Trevonne batted it away.

"They are friends of mine." A wicked stab of jealousy punctured Trevonne's gut at the thought that Collette would have other friends, but she turned away from it. Collette walked calmly to the four men outside and Trevonne followed.

Three carried swords, but one of those could cast. Nothing powerful, but he had a spice to him. The fourth was a wizard of note. Trevonne could feel his aura pulsing, and could witness the swell of energy ebbing in waves from the short staff he carried.

"Trevonne, may I introduce the Rose Boys. This is Rose," Collette indicated the lesser caster. The other two meant almost nothing to Trevonne, and she barely listened to their names, forgetting them instantly. The last carried the name Brian Rose, and Collette gave this man an awkward hug. Collette blushed prettily, and Trevonne suddenly saw her friend as beautiful and desired. Feeling uncomfortable, she turned her gaze back to the men, seeing seething hate boiling on the face of one of the sword fighters. Trevonne smirked at him and he stepped forward. Rose held him back.

“We are here on urgent business, Collette,” Brian said. “A friend of ours has gone missing.” He looked to Trevonne, his handsome face bringing bile to the back of her throat. Good boys disgusted her and she felt the presence of that horrible man again, the one who had soured her to all things bright and good. Trevonne focused on Brian, picking at the contours of his face for something to hate. “Our friend is dear to Renalt. He would see her returned, if you please.” The angry swordsman placed a hand on his rapier’s hilt. The thin sword, light and no doubt fast, teased up no feelings of fear in Trevonne at all, and she sneered at him.

“You have come to me to aid you in tracking her down?” Collette asked. “Well, Brian, any other time I would gladly give you all of my help but—”

“We know she is here, Collette. Just give her back,” Renalt stated. Collette’s face rippled with something playing at fear. *A swordsman, she fears a swordsman. There is but one swordsman to fear, Collette. I know him, and this little dandy is no Sai.*

“I swear to you, Renalt. There is no one here. We have no visitors here in the tower.” *That was a lie, Collette. He may not know it. But this one here, this Rose as he calls himself, he knows.* Trevonne laid a gaze on Rose, who shook his head slightly. *Please, you dandy fruit, please do something.* These were not her thoughts. She wished no ill will toward this man. But the taint was working within her now, and she felt her animosity growing. The need to cast seemed to pull and beg. She rolled her head on her shoulders, her fingers tingling.

“I could not track the girl, Collette. She seems to be missing from—” Brian looked over his shoulder at Renalt and shook his head. “I can’t get a bead on her.”

That means she is not on this realm anymore. He has yet to tell his friend, but she is neither dead nor in the plane of the living.

“Then what brings you here?” Collette asked.

“I tracked the man that took her,” Brian said.

Vrice, he has done something horrible. Diabolical. He has stolen a soul. What did he do with her? What did he need her for?

“I think your master has taken our friend, Collette. We want her back.”

“We will take her calmly or at sword point, Collette,” Renalt spat.

Trevonne took a step forward and Renalt pulled his thin sword. Rose stepped between them, and Collette gripped Trevonne’s shoulder.

“These are not our enemies, Vonne. Calm down, please.” Rose led Renalt away, and Brian and Collette talked. The fourth man boasted a spider tattoo on his neck. His skin was a rich black, his clothing white and cream silks. He smiled and Trevonne’s gut turned. Beautiful men had this effect on her. She flinched away from his smile, her mind going to Vrice and the filth he sat in. That image seemed so much more inviting to her, and she crossed her arms, looking away.

“Look, I don’t know anything about your friend. But I will ask my master, should he see me, about this trail he left behind and what happened to her.”

“Can I come in and look around?” he asked.

“Not a good time, Brian, I’m sorry.” Collette wrapped her answer tenderly in care and love. “You must trust me. I cannot see to this right away. But as soon as I can, I will. Is it Holly?”

“It is,” Brian said. “Renalt is fuming. He is worried and he is dangerous. Do not test him, Collette. I will defend you, but he will come at you hard should he find out what has happened.”

“We fear no mundane swordsmen, caster. You know this of us,” Trevonne said.

Brian turned his deep blue eyes on her. He carried pity in that look. A finger of fear laced up Trevonne’s spine. “He will kill you all. Of that, I have no doubt. Please, Collette, look into this. I will keep a rein on him as long as I can. But this is Holly. He is insane when it comes to her.”

“I know, Brian. I know.” She stepped close to him, too close.

Why have I never heard of this man before? Collette ran trembling fingers along the jaw of Brian Rose and Trevonne felt as if she would be sick. Collette kissed him gently and he touched her hand before he left. The four men stood outside the tower, staring at it. They spoke conservatively to themselves. Trevonne shook her head as she closed the door.

“What did he do with her, Trevonne?” Collette asked. Trevonne did not answer. The idea was too horrible to consider.

Weeks lurched by. The master stayed at his post and his students continued to leave. Trevonne knew Collette would never abandon her—and she was going nowhere until that door opened and that thing beyond it woke. The last of the students gathered their things and Trevonne and Collette met them at the door.

“There is something foul in this tower,” the grewla said. She was large, nearly six and a half feet tall, with no hair, and white skin. It was rumored this race could see the soul of a person, and could feel magic’s core. She hugged Collette and nodded to Trevonne.

Trevonne couldn't remember her name. The grewla was friends with Collette. They had talked on many occasions, but Trevonne had kept her distance. Trevonne didn't know what those large purple eyes saw when they looked at her. *Did that man from years ago sour me? He changed my desires. He changed the way I saw the world. Did his dark mind and fumbling sweating fingers sour my soul as well?* Trevonne flicked a smile across her face when the grewla looked at her. The grewla wouldn't keep eye contact for long. Trevonne wondered what that meant.

"I will not call him master anymore, for he is no longer mine. Vrice has always had a dark soul, but his power and his ability as a teacher had outweighed my uncomfortable feelings about him. Now things have taken a turn." Her exotic voice echoed through the tower's main building. Trevonne wondered if she needed to speak so damn loudly. "There is something in that room. It grows in power every day. And you two are fools for waiting to see what walks out that door." She shook her head and spit on the floor.

Trevonne shook her head, repulsed. *Was that necessary?* The grewla hugged Collette again, and turned to face Trevonne.

"Do not keep her here to sate your own curiosity," she said, pointing toward Collette. "Be a good friend to her. She will leave if you do. Pack your things. Abandon the tower. Abandon your master and lover." Something moved in her eye when she said the word lover. Was it hate? Did she hate Trevonne? This grewla was a good person. It should matter what she thought. But Trevonne couldn't make herself care. "Do not be here when that door opens."

Trevonne sneered and nodded her head. She jerked her chin in the direction of the door. "We will tell the master you said goodbye."

The grewla shook her head. "Do not mention me. If I am lucky, he will forget I ever existed." With that, she turned and went out the door.

"Do you agree with her? Should we leave?" Trevonne asked.

"I am with you as long as you want to stay." Collette crossed the distance, taking Trevonne's hands in hers. Trevonne's breath came shallow and fast. She looked into her dear friend's eyes. "I don't think he will ever teach us again. I think he will be consumed by whatever comes out of that room. But it is evil. And though we studied with him, we are not evil."

"Are you sure?" Trevonne said. The last word hitched in her stomach and echoed in her body. The world blurred as the tears came. Her shoulders sagged and her head dropped. He was with her again. Even though she knew he was dead, the dark figure was there again, whispering to her, touching her, infecting her with his advances.

Collette's arm wrapped around her and pulled her in. The scent of lavender and spice filled her nose—both good smells, both smells of her dear friend. "You are not evil, Trevonne. You are not a bad person. We will stay because we have to. We will stay because that thing is evil, and we need to know if it is an evil we should fight."

"What if I want it? What if it turns me on?" The sobs warped the words almost badly enough to reduce them to gibberish.

"It won't. I know it won't."

Trevonne buried her head in Collette's chest and tried desperately to believe her.

The word cracked across the air like a slap or a whip lash and Trevonne felt the world close in tight. The air rushed from her lungs. Her body was pressed from all sides as if someone were wringing her out. With the sensation of falling, the world around her changed. She was standing before Vrice in the kitchen. He looked haunted, as if some demonic entity fed on him, sucking out what had been powerful and deadly about him. He had cast a quick spell, summoning everyone in the tower to him. He looked around, his eyes frantic, seeking and finding nothing of what he wanted. He grabbed the food within reach. Trevonne smiled at him, feigning an arousal, seeking information. Vrice's mouth twitched. It spasmed once and flailed, limp and unsatisfying. Trevonne fought off her disgust and looked to the only other person in the room. Collette frowned at her, worry lines sketched on her face.

"Where is everyone? We have a... well, we have someone to feed. We need the staff." Vrice's anger was building as he pulled a basket of breads from the shelf above him.

"They have all gone, master."

Vrice turned. He looked at Trevonne and she watched him puzzling out what she had just said. *They have all fled. They knew what was in that room and they ran.* "Well, call them all back," he commanded. *None will come back. No decent person will set foot in this tower ever again.* Vrice rubbed a spot on his forehead.

He grabbed a platter and dropped the breads on it. He placed a flagon of ale next to it and found a hard sausage he could cut as well. His hands trembled as he cut and he nicked himself slightly. The blood seeped up and he waved a finger over it, closing the wound. Trevonne heard a growl from the dining room and his head jerked in that direction.

Trevonne and Collette looked at the door to the dining room, and then to each other. "What was that?" Collette asked. Trevonne turned to Vrice, his eyes wide and alive.

"What was that, master? What made that sound?"

"It is hungry, my apprentices. We must feed it quickly. Collette, go into town. Find me cooks and servants that will enter the tower. Pay them anything they want. Trevonne, take this to it. See if this will keep it busy for now. I think we will be at this for a while." He handed Trevonne the platter.

They all stood looking at one another. No one spoke, no one moved, all eyes firmly locked on the food on the platter. Then another growl issued from the dining room.

"I will take it to him, Vonne. Give me the platter. You go into town." Collette reached her hands out for the tray and Trevonne pulled it back, nearly spilling the ale as she did.

"Not a chance. You know the streets and vendors better than me. I will go." Her friend's eyes set on her and she felt a tug of emotion.

"Go now, bring the servants. And food, bring more food, as much as you can purchase." Vrice turned his eyes back to the shelves and he waved a hand in the direction of the hearth. The fires leapt into the air. "Food... we need more food."

Trevonne stepped into the dining room, bracing herself for anything. Was it a monster of some kind, summoned and chained? Was she going to have to throw the food at it from a distance? Was it human? Surely it could not be human. Vrice had called the thing "it."

As she walked into the room, her eyes locked on Braid and her mind stopped. Her heart stammered out an unsteady beat and her hands began to shake. *It*. That word could not have begun to prepare her for the sight of Braid—long and lean and half-starved, it looked. A stain of a tattoo stretched across its narrow chest, a flash of some nightmare, a screaming ape with horns and fangs. Its braid coiled in its lap. Its jaw was clenched. Its hands, curled to talons, tapped on the tabletop, its mouth open and waiting. Trevonne looked into that mouth and sweat broke across her lip. Her breath would not come. She could not make herself walk the distance to the table. She looked down at her tray, watching as the ale vibrated and splashed. She was trembling. Her mind rushed with thoughts of flight. The grewla was right. They should have left. They should have run. Fear clawed at her mind, biting down on her body. It seemed to be coming off the creature. Its teeth clamped closed and it reached a hand out to the tray.

Trevonne willed herself to take a step in its direction. It curled its mouth into a sneer and brought an outstretched hand down on the table in a heavy fist. Its voice was melodic when it almost whispered, “The tray, now. Set it here for me.” It slammed its fist on the table again. Trevonne jumped with each punch. Fear propelled her now in small, measured steps. Each step toward it seemed an act of madness. Trevonne kept her pace, and soon found herself standing before it. She was within striking distance. She dropped the tray on the table. The ale splashed the tray, filling it and wetting the bread. The creature paid no mind.

It grabbed a fist full of bread and stuffed the loaf into its mouth. Braid gripped the bread tightly, crushing it, stuffing it into its mouth, chewing frantically. Trevonne looked at her trembling hand and back at its mouth. The

crust of the bread flaked and cracked, sifting to its lap. Trevonne found her eyes going to that lap and she saw his manhood. Trevonne turned her back to it. It was too horrible to think of, and as she walked away, she could almost feel it inside her. She could almost feel the thrusts and her crotch began to tingle. She felt herself getting moist and she clenched her fists tight. She tried to walk slowly, but began running for the kitchen. She ran through the door and slammed it behind her. She threw herself against the back of the door. She felt a need for it. She saw herself going to it, taking her robe off before it, letting its eyes run the distance of her body. Trevonne imagined the nails clawing her skin to bloody tracks and she moaned.

She squeezed her eyes shut and saw *his* face again, the man who had soured her, the man who had perverted her forever. She hated him. She cursed him. Tears slipped down her cheeks and she wiped them away angrily.

She opened her eyes, seeing Vrice fumbling through a basket of over ripened fruit. "Vrice, what have you done?" He set the fruit down and, with a flurry of movement, flew across the room and grabbed her by the throat. His face was so close to hers that she could feel his breath grating against her as he spoke.

"I am still the master of his tower," he stated, as if saying it could make it true. "You will call me 'master'." He squeezed her throat and Trevonne fought for breath. The room filled up with his aura. She swooned as the pressure increased and she began to shake. Sudden fury flashed in her mind, white and hot.

"Kill me then, if you want to, Vrice. Kill me now." Air was getting scarce and she had to struggle for the breath to talk. "You can feed that thing by yourself." Something moved behind his eyes. Was it fear? He let her throat go

and she gasped for breath. She rubbed her neck and looked at Vrice. "What have you done?" She closed her eyes, seeing the thing in the dining room again.

"What is it?" She saw a forlorn look in his eyes and, for a second, she thought he would actually tell her, that he would answer the question she had been struggling with for months. But his eyes focused, and he took a steady breath.

"For now, it would seem, it is the master of the tower." The words came as if from another person. Vrice deflated before her eyes. He was letting go of some part of himself, going from a place of power to one of servitude. Revulsed, she pushed him away weakly. They heard a growl coming from the dining room and they both looked at the door.

"Take this to it," Vrice said, hefting the basket of over-ripened fruit. "Tell it more is coming." Trevonne grabbed the basket and Vrice opened the door. She pushed herself through it and out into the dining room. The mug was overturned, the bread reduced to crumbs and flakes of crust. She hurried over, dropping the basket to the table. Braid grabbed the basket and pulled, ripping the weaving and spilling the fruit over the table. It grabbed an apple and bit it in half. Juice dripped from the cheeks and chin. It chewed twice and swallowed, core and all. Its second bite took the stem of the apple with it. Braid grabbed a pear, biting deep into a brown, soft spot. It chewed the sickening sweet pulp, the mash of the pear juicing and squirting from its mouth. Trevonne backed up a step. It grabbed a banana and bit into it, peel and all. She turned toward the door. When she reached the door, she turned, looking at it again. It stared at her, a melon in its hand. Its eyes had been on her ass. Terror gripped her, frantically pulling at her, and she bit her lip, feeling an urge overtake her. It forced the melon up to its face and bit into the rind.

“Is Braid eating it?”

“Yes. It doesn’t seem to be enjoying it, just eating it.” Trevonne looked around the kitchen. The food supply was dwindling fast. There were some dried meats and some cooking lard. At the thought, Vrice handed her the meats. He seemed to think it over before adding the pail of lard to the platter.

“If it doesn’t want to eat that then bring it back,” he said. He looked at the lard and Trevonne looked down as well. Bits of meat and ash swirled in the greasy paste. She closed her eyes and pushed the door open.

She dropped the platter down on the table before Braid and it pressed its hand into the lard. Trevonne gagged as it pulled its hand back, holding a fist full of congealed grease. It opened its mouth and shoved it in, lips closing around each finger to suck it clean. Trevonne hurried back to the kitchen, holding back another gag.

When she reached the kitchen, she saw the servants’ door open and Collette standing beside two dirty-looking commoners wearing filthy aprons. They spoke to Vrice as Collette crossed the room.

“What is it, Vonne? What are we feeding?”

“I don’t know, Collette. It is shaped like a man, with a long, thick braid coming off its head. But it is no man.” Trevonne thought again of the open mouth waiting impatiently for food. Fear radiated from her as if to fill the room with terror. “Did you bring food?”

“Yes, an entire grocer’s cart full of vegetables and assorted meats. I was able to find a cook and an assistant willing to work for us, but not cheap. I think the assistant is a butcher.”

Trevonne looked out at the cart the vendor wheeled to the servants' door. Her eyes ran the distance of the wares before she looked back to Collette. "It will not be enough."

For hours, Trevonne carried food to the dining room. She waited and watched for signs of its slowing, but there were none. It ate ten heads of cabbage, three pumpkins, and four bushels of peppers. It finished the grocer's cart, and still reached out for more, its eyes demanding, ordering it faster.

Collette brought three slaughtered sows and, when it smelled them cooking, Braid pushed its way into the kitchen. It stalked over to the fire and grabbed up the sow in its muscled arms. Mostly raw, its body hung limp. Braid exited the room and Trevonne heard the carcass drop on the table. The cooks watched the door slam closed and they stared, their mouths hanging open. They turned to Vrice and shook their heads. They began to head for the door, and Vrice stepped in front of them. He waved his hands before their faces and muttered a chant.

He was mesmerizing them, talking in soothing tones to them. As they stood watching him, their shoulders slumped and their heads cocked to one side. They nodded as he spoke. The air crackled with a more powerful magic than she harnessed when casting this spell. This mesmerizing spell had a different flavor than the one he had taught them. She looked to Collette, who watched intently as Vrice cast. Collette would know the spell by the end. She could see a spell once and know it. Trevonne would get the specifics of it from her when this night was finished.

The cooks turned back to their jobs, their faces blank, their body stance changed. They walked like they were asleep now. Their heads slumped, their

eyes drooping. Trevonne crossed the room, going to the door. She peeked out the door into the dining room and her teeth clamped down tight to hold back the cry.

It stood over the carcass, ripping hunks of raw sow off the bones. Its nails sliced into the meat cleanly. The pink skin of the pig flapped in its mouth for a second before it gnashed with its teeth, ripping the flesh to ribbons. Trevonne stepped back into the kitchen.

"It is eating that thing raw," she said. The words came out as an accusation and they hung in the air before Vrice turned to her. There was something in his posture, something defeated and tired. Had he slept? He looked so tired. He turned toward her and his eyes searched the ground.

"I know it is. I imagined that's what it would do when it took that into the dining room." The cooks worked quietly, uninterested in the conversation.

"What is it, master?" Collette asked. Her tone was measured, betraying nothing of the fear in her face.

"What it *is*, is not important," Vrice said. He ran his fingers through his greasy hair and looked up at Trevonne. "The only thing you need know is that it is here with us now, and we must do as it commands."

"Or what?" Trevonne heard herself say. Her voice carried fear and panic and anger out onto the heated air of the kitchen. "What happens if we do not obey it? What happens then, Vrice?" She could not call him 'master' now. It seemed wrong. He was no master, not anymore. He was something else, a servant, maybe a slave. She thought of the things she had let him do to her and a finger of revulsion ran her spine.

“Do you want to know, my sweet apprentice? Do you want to know what it will do to any of us who do not do as it demands?” Vrice was scared. Trevonne could hear it in his outrage. She looked away, ashamed of ever having let him touch her body. Suddenly, she saw the body of the creature in her mind, and she shook the image away. She grabbed a wheelbarrow full of eggs and turned them toward the dining room.

The wet bones of the sow lay in a twisted pile on the floor and the table. Pieces of gristle lay on the table. Fat, congealed and quivering, stood in piles. Braid would eat that, too, she knew, and she wanted to be out of the room when it did. She wheeled the eggs to it and stepped back quickly. It grabbed one, poking its thumbnail through the shell, and sucking the yoke and slime of the egg into its mouth. It tossed the shell aside and grabbed another. Trevonne watched, fascinated by the display of gluttony. She slowly backed away as it worked at the eggs. For nearly a full minute, it punched holes in the eggs, slurping out the inside and letting it roll down its throat. Soon, the work became too much, and it tossed an entire egg in its mouth, shell and all, mashing the egg into pulp that frothed between its teeth. Trevonne’s stomach twisted and curled and she swooned. She reached the handle of the door and pulled it open, rushing out of the dining room to the safety of the kitchen.

Collette grabbed her, pulling her close for an embrace, and Trevonne began to cry. The horror of it was too great. But she felt a need for it, an urge to go to it. It was the darkest, most evil thing she had ever seen, more evil than the sour man’s children had been. And this darkness called to her. She sobbed in the shoulder of her friend, squeezing tight as she cried.

“You feel drawn to it, don’t you?” Collette whispered. Trevonne could not answer. She could only nod her head. Her face burned with shame. She felt vile and ugly. She could not think of one thing to pull her away from the edge of self-hate and disgust. “You are not evil. You have seen evil, and you have fought against it. You are troubled, my friend. Haunted. Your desires do not define you. They are there despite you.”

Trevonne held tight to the words, pulling them close.

The cooks carried out the last two sows and Trevonne heard the smacking of jaws as it consumed them. She looked through the door, into the dining room, and turned back to Vrice.

“It is not slowing. None of this is filling it up. It could eat like this forever.” Vrice nodded to himself. He shook his head and bit at his fingernails as he thought. Soon, he came to a conclusion. He called to the cooks and whispered into their ears.

Instantly, they began to undress. In seconds, they were nude, and they filed into the dining room. Vrice followed them. Trevonne and Collette did, too.

The two wizardesses clung to each other and Collette gasped. Her grip tightened as she saw the creature for the first time. The cooks walked to the side of the table and said nothing, simply waited for the eggs to be eaten. When it finished, the thing stepped back and away from the table. The female cook pushed herself onto the table and lay down. She closed her eyes and waited. The creature looked to Vrice, and something passed between the man and the beast. Then, it bit down into the tender flesh of the belly of the cook. The cook screamed, but did not move, as the creature chewed into her stomach, devouring her one mouthful at a time.

Trevonne sobbed in terror. The room felt smaller and, suddenly, she couldn't breathe. She turned to Collette and gasped. Vrice pushed past them both, entering the kitchen. Collette was crying as she grabbed Trevonne's face. They looked each other in the eyes as the screams rose to wails of pain.

"We can't leave," Collette said.

Trevonne grabbed her friend's hands and squeezed. The screams of the cook drowned out their words. "I know," Trevonne said. "But I am scared. How will we stop it?" She felt helpless, the world suddenly too big for her. Her legs weakened and she struggled to stay on her feet.

"I don't know yet, but we must. We cannot run away from this. We have to fight it." Her words were so low that Trevonne could barely hear them, though their faces were pressed together. "We can't stop them now. They are too powerful. We will have to wait for our moment."

Trevonne felt the truth of the words. They had to stay and fight. Even though she made this decision, she knew it was a moot point. If they tried to leave now, they would be hunted down anyway.

They stayed in the dining room holding each other's faces, each looking in the eyes of their friend, until the screams of the cooks died down. Trevonne looked at the table, the blank stare of the dead on the cooks' faces. Vrice pushed his way into the room and Braid looked up at the wizard.

"This is right," it said, in a voice too deep to be human. "But look for something younger."

The Azure Rose

“I must have him,” Mandrake hissed. The shadow of the thick limb of Missiniah cloaked him from head to toe in a liquid black that comforted him. Anonymity was imperative. He felt like a stranger in his city and he wanted no eye to tarry upon him. Mandrake was sure that in his flight through the city, none had seen him. His need was great tonight and only one, beyond Missiniah, would see him—one terrible fey in need of a thrashing. How Mandrake ached to give it to him. As he stood there, trembling in anger, he knew if he started that beating, he would not stop.

“What will you do with him, Mandrake? You are scaring me.” Her voice was sweet and low, carrying with it tones of love and adoration. This lilt in her voice almost hurt him to hear.

“I will give him more than he deserves,” Mandrake said.

“He has been vicious to you and has angered me. I have let them know how angry I am with them. But he is a good fey, Mandrake. Hate is not his way.”

“What do you mean, you have let them know how much they have angered you? What has happened in my absence?”

“Much and more. They spoke of your death. They toasted to your fall.” Mandrake was alarmed to find this had no effect on the cold place within him, the Gentrys’ hate of him no longer a surprise. “I ousted them from my confines.”

“Whatever could you mean?” Mandrake asked.

“The royal family no longer resides within my walls. Lotus, Scarlet, and Ebony have been thrown out.”

“Yet he remains?”

“He was strangely silent when he heard about your death. He offered no smile, no laugh.”

“And Ebony did?”

“He left when Lotus left, but I saw sorrow on his face when your death was mentioned.”

“You need not do this for me, Missinia. I know your love for me is great, but they are the king and queen of the Veil. Your pride is in being their home.”

Her expression shifted to something hard and unyielding. Mandrake knew she was beyond convincing and he let it drop. “You still house the prince?”

“I do.”

Mandrake smiled. “Then give him to me.”

He alighted on the balcony, silent as a shadowed blade. He stepped to the entryway to Azure’s room and crossed the threshold. A scent clung to the room. A subtle beauty hung to the air here. Mandrake had smelled this aroma before. The scent of the rose wafted in his direction and he sneered at its beauty. His musk made people sick. He shook his head and focused on his cousin, resting on a stack of cushions, reading something. In a flurry of movement, something charged at him.

The lizard came snarling, its needle teeth flashing. It ran the ceiling, racing for Mandrake’s head, and he spun. His hand dropped into a pocket in his cloak, shredded to tatters by his bladed wings. He tossed the cloth packet directly at Azure’s pet. It took seconds for the wolfsbane to render the lizard paralyzed and Mandrake watched the creature drop lifeless to the floor.

Azure leapt to his feet, his eyes wide, his mouth working at words of fear and dismay. "You're coming with me, little cousin," Mandrake spat. He crossed the room and Azure screamed. The sound clawed at the air around it, savaging the world with its utter despair. Azure's face warped into pure terror. Mandrake recalled the sight of the satyrs and their fear. He felt as if he had been struck in the gut and he growled. His mind went numb and the yawning abyss within him howled. The scream of Azure Rose became the screams of dying satyrs. Rage and self-loathing swelled in his body, trying to free themselves and lash out at the world around him. He snatched his cousin by the throat and pulled him into a crushing embrace. He spun him around, facing away, and clamped a powerful hand across Azure's mouth.

"No more screaming. I can't take the screaming. Do we understand one another?"

Nothing.

"Do we?"

Azure nodded.

"We are going to be fine. I am taking you out for a little flight, and then we will see what becomes of you. For now, no more screaming." He loosened his grip on Azure's mouth tentatively. Not a sound.

His other arm wrapped Azure's middle and he hoisted his cousin into the air quite easily. Azure's seemingly weightless feel surprised him. He shook the thought off and made for the balcony.

"Missiniah, close yourself. Please, great dryad, do not let him take me," Azure whined.

Mandrake sneered. "She is with me, cousin. Her love is for me. She will not stop me in my design. Now, I demand quiet." He reached the lip of the balcony and leapt into the air. Azure's body tensed. He stifled a scream with his sleeve and reached around to grab Mandrake with a weak embrace. Mandrake had a moment to dwell upon the level of fear Azure must be experiencing. This might be his first taste of flying. This might be his first experience with a freedom for which he had always longed.

And he is in the arms of a monster stealing him from his home. Mandrake tried to chide himself for the term *monster*, but he could not escape it. He pulled the cowl of 'monstrous' up around him and settled into its dark folds.

He pushed himself to higher speeds when he exploded from the tree line and out into wide fields. Just as they approached a tiny town, Azure began to thrash. He kicked and squirmed and screamed. Mandrake knew his thinking. If he could get away now, Azure would have a place to run. The fey village of Bristletop would take him in. Mandrake admired his cousin's mind, but the struggling made it hard to fly. He lifted into the air, the warm currents of the night surging below him. When he had reached a devastating height, he dropped his cousin.

Azure kicked and screamed and rolled through the air, his limbs wild, his useless wings fighting for any purchase. With none to be had, Azure plummeted toward the ground, speeding along to his death.

Mandrake buzzed after him, catching him by the foot a moment from the ground. He stopped his cousin's descent and dropped him unceremoniously to the sward. Azure screamed, crawling on all fours away from Mandrake, weeping and blubbering. Mandrake planted a boot in his cousin's back.

“Turn around,” he commanded. Azure sobbed loudly. “I said turn around!” Mandrake yelled.

Azure rolled over on his back. Mandrake opened his wings. The light of the moons splashed out across his wingspan and Azure cowered there. The reflective gleam of the wings mirrored back Azure’s cowardice. Mandrake felt a stab of pity for his vicious cousin.

“You’re coming with me. Resolve yourself to it. There is no escaping me. You are at my mercy.” And upon saying it, Mandrake knew it was true. He could do whatever he wanted with his cousin right now, could force anything upon him. The horrid sneer and angry words his cousin had spat at him seared into Mandrake’s mind. He shook his head, pushing these thoughts away. “We will fly for a long time yet. Get comfortable with it. If all goes as planned, you will need comfort in the sky.”

Azure’s face shifted to something unreadable and Mandrake shook his head. “None of that matters right now. What matters is we have a lot of ground to cover and I won’t fight you. The next time you cause me to let go of you, I will let you break upon the ground. Broken, you will make my job easier, I presume.”

“You are a monster, Gentry Mandrake. I thought you dead and was glad of it. Now I see you have thrown aside all pretense of being a fairy and have embraced the creature you are—vile, angry, and in need of a horrible death. You do not scare me, cousin.”

Mandrake nodded. The fight drained out of him and the screams of the satyrs filled his ears. “Months have gone by since my battle with those brutes. I tell myself they would have destroyed our city—”

“My city.”

“Fine then, your city—and there is truth there. But the fact that I enjoyed the killing of them has stained me. I am a monster, little cousin. You have the right of it. So don’t make me let that beast within me stretch. My intent is not to kill you, but I don’t know if your death would weigh too heavy upon me. Let me do my work upon you. Fight me no more.” Mandrake’s gut tied tight and his heart thudded loudly in his chest. He felt the beginnings of tears in his eyes and shook them off.

“Get up. We have far to go yet.” Azure turned his back to Mandrake and he lifted his cousin into the air again. They were off, and Gentry Mandrake wondered if this was a terrible mistake.

The light of the multicolored moons burst across the field of wild roses. A riot of colors, all lies, played havoc with the true colors of the flowers. Mandrake had a difficult time finding the one he was looking for. Tucked away deep in the folds of two strong bushes hid the shy bush. The brief collection of leaves and four stems carried one timid rose, folded and humble. It appeared purple in this light, but upon seeing it, Mandrake knew he had found his mark. He picked up speed. He blazed across the field, until nearly reaching the bud, when he stopped and, with one mighty heave of his arm, tossed his cousin. Azure tumbled, screaming and cursing, until he struck the bud, which opened like a hungry mouth and swallowed him whole. The bud closed around the fey and Mandrake landed on the ground before it, looking up at the bud as it bobbed and swayed. Now he could do nothing but wait. He sat near a large rock and quieted his mind.

Screams in his mind had waited for him to close his eyes and they accosted him instantly. He flinched as the cacophony of terror opened up. With great effort, he morphed the screams of the satyrs to the shrill warnings of hunting birds—the cries of raptors, the diving screeches of dozens of hawks at war. This quieted his mind and he found peace.

Long moments went by with no sign from the rose. His doubts rose up high and swayed, like an eager viper waiting to strike. What would happen to him if this attempt failed? He would have to carry Azure home. He could manage to sneak him into Liefdom. He couldn't deny his own stealth, but he would be an outlaw.

He could not return to Pea, would not see her ever again.

With thoughts of her came the image of her face, deep in concentration, hard at work inking his wings. Her look of disgust upon completing still stung him. He felt the deep, resounding pain of knowing that each time she saw him, it would remind her of her part in his defilement. Did it haunt her now? Did a part of her fall when his wings were reduced to dull grey, then steel, cold and hard? Would he be forever a source of pain and regret for her? Did she ever want to see him again? She was lost to him. Liefdom was lost to him. He could never return. He would bring Azure close enough to finish the trip alone and then he would leave. He would return to Chil and the brothers he had earned.

The sun lifted slowly into the air and with it came a bobbing of the rose. The moons had retreated and Mandrake could see the rose in its glory, blue and rich, lost in a sea of green and red. He watched as the bud opened and spit Azure to the ground.

Mandrake found he could not breathe. He stared at Azure as the fey rose on shaky legs and fought to steady himself. Mandrake's head buzzed loudly. His heart stumbled in his chest. Its unsteady rhythm brought with it a light-headedness that unsettled his nerves. Azure's face screwed up in a mask of hate and disdain and he fought his way to his feet.

He swiped his disheveled hair from his eyes and lowered a look of such bold and naked hate that Mandrake felt defensive at once.

"What was that about?" he snapped.

"Turn around," Mandrake said.

"You have not the stomach to kill me face-to-face?" Azure said.

"Turn around. Let me look at you."

"I will not make this easy on you, you foul beast. If you want to kill me—your own blood—then you can do it with my eyes on you. I wish to curse you as you strike."

Mandrake's rage boiled up inside his body and, in one horrible explosion, erupted from within him. "Now, cousin! Right now! Turn around or I will peel the skin from your body!" His musk stained the world around him. His dire need for blood raced through his system, and above it all, on the wings of hopelessness, rode hopes of love from his cousin.

Azure jumped at the outburst. He spun, turning his back, nearly falling as he moved. He trembled, weeping bitter tears. Mandrake looked at his back, seeing nothing of note.

A bird in the distance sang a note, clean and filled with love, calling for a mate with hope in its voice. Mandrake found air difficult to summon to his

lungs. He sat suddenly, and shook his head with a smile. "Open your wings," he said quietly.

"No!" Azure snapped. "I will not."

"Open your wings, cousin." Mandrake's voice was calm and soft.

Azure looked over his shoulder, alarmed at his tone. "No," Azure stated. Confusion moved through the leaves of his voice, hunting like a cat for the source of his dark cousin's tone.

"Listen, cousin. You're going to refuse for a few more minutes. I'm going to scream at you when you have pushed my patience beyond its breaking point, and you will do as I ask because you fear my wrath," Mandrake said with a sigh. "So let's cut to the part where you do as I ask without the dance of rage and fear."

Azure turned around. His arms crossed over his chest, he looked at Mandrake with puzzlement stamped across his face. "What are you about, monster?" But the word held no rancor, flailing in the face of Mandrake's calm.

Mandrake made a turning motion with his finger. "Your wings, please." At the word "please" Azure's face spasmed into real fear. He spun, his whole body trembling. Slowly, he opened his wings. The hard shell of the lightning bug's wings opened and the tender wing emerged. Mandrake's eyes widened and light grew in his chest. His smile could not be contained and he erupted into rich peels of laughter.

Azure snapped his wings closed. He turned, his fists curling, tiny and weak, his face boiling with wrath and shame. "You find my deformity amusing?"

His face was so red and contained so much rage. Such an innocent, beautiful face contorted into hate so deep he seemed consumed by it. Mandrake fought for control but could not find it. He dropped to the ground, his laughter rising like the wave of some storming sea. He fought for control. But the more he looked at Azure's face, seeing hate stamped there in the midst of shame, the more he felt his control slipping.

Azure rushed the distance. With tears in his eyes, his tiny fist struck Mandrake on the nose. The blow was so awkward and rushed that Mandrake's great, gushing laughter could not be contained. He rolled over to his back, curling up fetal, as Azure pounded on him.

Mandrake's hilarity rose to a crescendo, and he fought to his feet. He caught Azure's fists and wrapped his cousin in a great hug. He kissed Azure's forehead, and the fey roared in confusion and impotent fury. Mandrake lifted into the air, hoisting Azure about five feet from the ground, and then, with a great sigh, let loose his cousin and backed up.

Azure screamed in terror for one moment, his wings leaping out to flap frantically in a vain attempt to keep him alive. Mandrake saw his cousin wobble, then steady. His face broke in shock and he screamed as his wings, now powerful and strong, held him aloft.

Azure looked up from the ground to find Mandrake's face. He stared, unbelieving, and Mandrake laughed. "Welcome to the air, cousin."

He cursed as Azure's eyes rolled up in his head and the fey passed out. Azure plummeted toward the ground and Mandrake cursed again, catching Azure and lowering him to the grass.

He smacked Azure for a long time before the eyes fluttered open.
Mandrake smiled.

“What happened?” Azure asked, his voice groggy and timid.

“You flew.” Mandrake laughed. “Then you passed out. I caught you before you shattered your body on the ground.”

Azure sat up. He shook his head and looked at his dark cousin. “How did I fly?”

“Your wings are healed, cousin. You can fly at will.”

In the world of man, many countries away, a child named Stephen Moko, a prince of the nation of Durst, woke from a sleep where he had been cocooned in the folds of a blue flower. He looked at his legs and saw at once that the lame foot he had been born with had healed miraculously. He leapt from his bed, weeping, and ran for the first time in his life.

Azure looked at his cousin. “How?”

“I was wounded in my battle with the satyrs, nearly dead. A kite who had seen the fray picked me up. He took me to a mandrake bloom and it healed me. It has been so long since one of our kind suffered a wound that needed healing; our people had forgotten how we heal. When I emerged, my first thought was of you.”

Azure’s mouth hung open, his eyes coursing tears. “You thought of me.”

Mandrake laughed. “Well, of course.”

Azure threw himself at his cousin, wrapping him in a trembling hug and weeping. Mandrake let the fey hold him. But after a while, he pushed his cousin away.

“What does this mean for my child?” Azure asked.

“I have no idea. I assume he was born lame, but whether he has recovered overnight I cannot tell. All I know is you are healed.” Mandrake smiled. “What does your heart tell you?”

“That he is healed.”

“Then maybe it is so.”

“I have been a monster to you, Mandrake. Simply evil. Why would you do something like this for me? I was your enemy. Why heal me?”

“You’re my cousin and I love you, no matter your feelings for me.”

Azure shook his head. “Why were you gone so long? It has been months.”

“Well, your flower is the most rare bloom in all the world. Lore has it told that only one ever exists at a time. I had to find it.”

“One?”

“Yes, cousin. I am sorry for the delay, but finding one flower in all the world is tricky business.”

Azure wept, unable to speak, unable to move. Mandrake, uncomfortable with the emotional display, held tight to his tongue and waited for it all to be over.

Azure looked up and nodded.

“Well, go fly,” Mandrake said.

Azure looked frightened and shook his head. "Why abduct me in such a way? I was terrified. You ripped me from my home. You killed my dear lizard companion, Olus."

"He is not dead. I just paralyzed him. He must be back to normal by now."

"Why the deception?"

"Would you have come with me otherwise?"

"Well, I am not sure, that is, I mean, if you had told me of your intent—"

"You would have screamed for guards and tried to bat me from your chambers. You would never have come with me, cousin. Don't tell me otherwise."

Azure shook his head. "I want this to be a new beginning for us, Mandrake. I need you to know that I love you, that you are my family and the heir to the throne of the Veil. I will talk to the family. I will tell them the kind of fey you are."

A cold spot opened within Mandrake and he shook his head. "I want nothing to do with being heir to the throne. That is for you, not me. I am a killer." The words echoed in his heart and shame, black and cold, rolled from within him. "I am unworthy. Speak of that no more. My parents hate me."

"After this, they will adore you. The entire city will sing praises to you."

Mandrake turned away. "I don't want that. I can't have that. I wouldn't be able to handle it."

"I will see that you are not made uncomfortable. Come let's go home."

"Liefdom is not my home, Azure."

Azure's face hardened. "It is."

“Well, maybe, but not right now,” Mandrake said.

“You are coming home and we will embrace you.”

“I can’t. I must stay away from the City of Innocence until I have found myself again. Please, do not ask me to come home. It would kill me.”

“Fine, I will go with you,” Azure said. “We can find your soul together.”

“Where I am going, you cannot follow. You must go home or they will think you dead. My guess is they already do. The royal family will berate Missiniah for letting me take you. You must stop them from exiling her.”

Azure nodded, his face grave. “I will.”

“We must go now. Your wings may tire after a while, until you have built up some stamina. We will take it slow. I will bring you within sight of Liefdom, then leave you.”

“I will tell this story and prepare the city for your return.”

“If you must,” Mandrake said. He felt the warmth of hope upon him like the sun touching his skin in the winter cold. He turned toward Liefdom, his cousin close behind.

Changeling and Child

Vrice gripped the tome before throwing it across the room. It slammed into some bottles on his desk. They toppled to the floor, shattering. A growl grew in his chest and he let it out into the room. He dropped into his chair and flexed his hands. He ran them through his gritty hair. He looked once again at the book

and picked it up, dusting the broken glass from the pages. He set it down in front of him and cursed as he ran his hands back over the pages. He slid his eyes across the words, reading them again.

There has to be a way. Vrice had read the book cover-to-cover while sitting watch at Braid's door. He had read of the fey and the life they lived.

Braid had gripped the back of his neck, pinching Vrice in sudden pain. Instant fear and dread arrived as Braid leaned close, speaking directly into his ear. "Go now, and summon your fey," the half demon had told him. "I have a use for him. He will serve me." Then Braid had slipped off to bed.

The thought of summoning his fey was intoxicating. If Roopa could be believed, the fey would cherish him. The fey would have lived a life of servitude to him, worrying about him day and night, thinking of him every day. Maybe his fey would love him. The thought of being cherished brought with it a warm sensation that spread across his chest and settled in his stomach.

But as quickly as that feeling came, dread replaced it, settling on his shoulders like a weight. That love, would it weaken him? Would he fall into it, drowning in it? He thought of the last woman who had loved him, the way she died, the way she cursed him. He remembered the way the light left her eyes so slowly, as if her feelings for him were keeping her in the doorway of death, the first of the sacrifices he had made for Blythe. With thoughts of her, nausea came. He normally pushed these thoughts away. But this time, he let her hover around him, feeling her, smelling her. She had cursed him. But he knew, even in that moment, she loved him. Blythe said his feelings for her would weaken him, and they had. He thought of a fairy entering his life and the joy it would no doubt bring. What could Braid want with a fairy? Would he kill it to spite Vrice?

With that thought, a sudden, swift rage flashed in his chest once and was gone. He could not let the half demon kill his fey. He felt a bond with the creature, as if learning of its existence made it real. Vrice realized he had been able to feel it all along. The part of himself he accepted held the essence of the fey. A fairy would not help Braid. It would flee Braid. A sweet thought came to him then. It fell upon him like a light rain, tickling his skin. They could flee together.

He could find a way to summon his fairy, and he would take it and run. Together, they would be more powerful than apart. Maybe some great power came with being exposed to it. Maybe they would amplify each other. They could stay away from cities—shun everyone who would know them. Vrice could produce food for himself with little more than a thought. He could feed them. Water would come to him, too. He knew the spells. They could live on the road and run from everyone they saw. The followers of Blythe could not find them if they kept moving. And why would they come at all? He had summoned Braid to the world of man. No one else had been able to do that. Blythe was indebted to Vrice. He would no longer care about Vrice. He had other things on his mind now. Vrice was the least of his concerns. Whatever he had sent his son to do was the most important. He would hardly notice if Vrice slipped away.

But as the thought rattled around in his head, he knew it was a lie. He felt jumpy and nervous, as if these thoughts were dangerous, as if someone was watching him, listening to his mind.

The demon god understood power. True power was attained by never letting go of what you had, adding to yourself, never subtracting. Blythe had in his possession one of the most powerful wizards in the world. He would not let

that go. He would hunt to the end of the world before letting someone as powerful as Vrice slip away.

He was Blythe's slave forever, but he was a powerful slave. He was one of the most powerful weapons in Blythe's arsenal. With pride in that thought, he felt a need to serve his demon god, to prove he was the mightiest of Blythe's followers. He set his mind to the fey. How would he summon it?

He rose from his desk, taking the book under his arm, even though it was useless to him now. He had memorized it. It would not teach him any more of its secrets. He went to his summoning room.

The room was large, the glyph carved into the floor, powerful and glowing. The candles in the room lit as soon as he entered. A cleansing gust of air blew all dust and debris out the far, open window. These spells simply activated when he entered the room. The door shut behind him and sealed, showing no sign of itself, all creases filling, handle vanishing. Vrice had wanted to summon Braid in this room, but he knew it would not work. For that spell to have any effect, it had to be cast in the very spot of Braid's death.

Vrice went over to his podium and set down the book. It sank into the wood, becoming part of the podium. The pages turned at his will now. He looked at the room, a stronghold of his power, a beating heart for the beast of a tower. Everything grew from this core, the ground upon which he could communicate with other worlds. A feeling of dominance came to him, control and power swirling around him.

He looked down at the book and he cursed. "How do I do this?" he asked the room, and the pages of the book began to turn. They flapped wildly until they reached the very end of the book. They stopped at a wide place in the spine,

a recess where pages should have been. Vrice ran his finger the distance of the recess. Cut pages. He bent over, nearly placing his head on the book, peering at the pages. His heart began to beat loudly. There had been something here, some last pages that had been carefully cut away. It did not look like the work of a vandal. It seemed as though the binder had thought twice of his decision to include these pages. Were all copies of this book cut? Vrice cracked his knuckles and laughed a dry, humorless laugh.

He laid his palm on the pages of the book and pulled it slowly away. The words to the mending spell he had written, so many years ago, came to him swiftly, and the pages ruffled out of the spine with a dramatic rush. He looked down at the pages, now returned, and saw the summoning circle he would need to prepare. He grabbed his chalk and cord. This would be easy, not as difficult as summoning Braid had been.

The circle drawn and the charms in place, Vrice stood at the podium once again. He chanted the words from the book and his hands moved in the subtle dance detailed there. The room dimmed. A chill broke out upon the air. Some distant creature howled, a wretch trapped between worlds that wailed for any sort of deliverance. Why would summoning a fairy cause these effects? He shook his head, dismissing the thought, concentrating again on the spell.

A small but forceful wind kicked up in the center of the room. It rose in pitch and ferocity until it whistled and spat. Vrice looked up from the book and down at the wind curling around his summoning floor. It had taken the shape of a small funnel cloud, and was spinning off kilter, rattling and bending as it roared. Something emerged. The floor was splitting and something pushed up

from the crack. It looked round and blue, thin and heavy. It dropped on the floor of the room and the cloud dissipated. The crack in the floor healed itself.

Vrice looked again at the book, which said a flower would rise up from the floor, and from it, a fairy would erupt. But upon the floor lie a cold stone. It seemed crossed over with tiny vein-like cracks. Dark and blue and perfect, desolate and dismal...something had gone wrong. Had he made some error in the casting of the spell? No, he was a competent summoner. His room was built for the act. He had never made a summoning mistake before, and he had not made one now.

Vrice went back to the book. The fairy would need to hear the voice of the one it loved, so it would be able to find its way to him. He must keep up the chant. He spoke it clear and loudly.

Time crawled by. The dark of night was dying and the sun was rising. The sky turned grey and blue. Light filled the air and still, Vrice chanted. Hours went by before the blue disc of stone began to show signs of white in its middle.

The white grew from a point to a spike rising out of the stone. His chest clenched and his heart stopped. Shortly after the spot of white appeared, two others followed it. They rose from the dark blue stone and Vrice tried to piece together what he was looking at. It looked like a foot, some sort of claw. The foot itself was blue stone—lapis, the same as the disc. The claws were white, moonstone if Vrice had to guess. The foot grew to a leg, and then, another foot came.

The legs, spindly, the waist that followed, thin, almost emaciated. This did not look like a fairy. It should have a body close to that of a human. It should have wings of an insect. It should have hair the color of its flower. Vrice's mind

rebelled at the sight. This thing rising out of the floor was made of chipped stone. The legs flopped to the ground, and claws suddenly reached out and gripped the sides of the disc. The fingers were long, the claws at the ends, sharp. The hands pulled as the legs bore down and kicked slowly. Then came a chest and a head. Vrice gasped. He found the air thick and hard to breathe.

It had the head of a small dog. Its sharp teeth protruded over its bottom jaw. A sprout of stiff yellow hair jutted from the very top of its head. It stood two feet tall, composed entirely of rock. It buffeted out its bat-like wings and rose from the ground. Its moonstone eyes scanned the room, falling on Vrice at his podium. It smiled.

Vrice stepped around his podium and down the stairs to the summoning circle. He could not take his eyes from the thing. He clenched his fists, hating the way they trembled. The creature looked vile and sinister in a way that comforted him. It pumped its wings a few times before leaving them out wide, showing itself to him, displaying itself.

“You are no fairy,” Vrice said slowly, his voice low in reverence.

“You are my child,” it said, its voice gravely and rough as its skin.

“What are you?” Vrice murmured.

“I am a failed fairy. You lost your innocence and became a twisted, dark man, bent on evil power. When this happened, you twisted me. I became this.” It puffed out its chest and flapped its wings slowly, “A changeling.”

“What do I call you?” Vrice asked.

“I am Magus Lapis Lazuli, noble of the Cleft.” It curled its wings in, and took a step forward, its claws clicking loudly on the floor. “What does the world call you?”

“I am Danol sa Hapa.” Vrice felt his heart leap as he spoke the name. He shook his head, chastising himself for the moment of confusion. He had spent years fighting to forget that name. He could get thrown in prisons around the world for uttering that name—could be killed for it. Why had he spoken it so calmly? Why had he thought to call himself that? He was Vrice now. He had left that name so many years ago when he fled. “Do not call me by that name,” Vrice said. “Now the world knows me as Vrice, Master of the Tower of Dragonsbane. That other name must be forgotten. Never used.”

The changeling took two more cautious steps forward, nodding slightly. “Okay, it is forgotten.”

Vrice’s heartbeat slowed in rhythm. He found himself stepping closer. “Do you love me?” Vrice asked, hating the feel of the word on his lips.

“I am defined by you, gain purpose from you. I don’t know if it is love, but I serve you willingly and completely.”

Vrice liked the sound of that.

“I used to hate you—wanted to kill you—but it passed,” the changeling said.

Vrice stopped. The magic in the room gathered to him at the vague threat. “The transformation was painful, terribly painful. When you embraced darkness and your innocence was lost, I lost my home, my love, my family and my life. I became something else.”

“It was painful for me, too.” Vrice remembered the beatings and the torture of his childhood, the need to steal to survive. He thought of her again and regret stabbed him. He looked at the changeling and it all seemed okay. He had felt alone in those times, but he had not been. Something had been suffering with

him. With a swell of emotion, he wondered if he loved the creature, if he was capable of that anymore.

They were standing directly in front of each other now. He could reach down and touch the changeling, reach out and pull the thing closer. Being in this place felt long overdue. Belonging in this moment rebelled against a growing dread. What task would be asked of his changeling? Vrice reached down and extended his hand to the changeling and Lapis grabbed it. Vrice gave a pull and lifted Lapis toward his shoulder. The changeling swung effortlessly up and grabbed a hold of Vrice's shoulder. The two of them left the room.

In the hall on the way to his chambers, Vrice crossed paths with Trevonne. She stopped and pulled up her aura, charging the hallway with her magic. It was more powerful than Vrice remembered, and he realized his lover had become deadly.

"Vrice, what is that thing?" she asked. Lapis hissed and clicked his claws together. Vrice heard mumblings of spell preparation as Collette stepped out of a shadow behind her friend.

Of course Collette was here. The two were always together now. "It is my fey. I don't expect you to know what that—"

"That thing is not fairy," Trevonne blurted.

Vrice stopped, his mind whipping in a different direction. They had read the book. They knew about the fairies. They had done their research. He had to respect that. Anger settled in his fists and his shoulders. "It is a changeling, sweet apprentice. Have you never heard of them before?" He saw something like disgust twitch across her face when he said "sweet apprentice." She would pay for that next time he had her. "This was, at one time, my fairy."

“What happened to it?” Collette said quietly, more to herself than to Vrice.

“I happened to it,” Vrice said. The smile he smeared across his face was deeply satisfying.

Lapis giggled. The sinister quality of it made Vrice smile, like watching a child steal or kill something small and helpless. He warmed to the changeling even more. At the sound of the giggle, both women flinched. They looked at each other and took a step closer to one another.

“I am off to see Braid.”

“Master of the tower,” Trevonne said accusingly.

A searing hatred burst up into Vrice and he stepped closer to Trevonne. Collette pulled her aura up and Vrice felt the power of both students, oppressive and strong in the hallway. A finger of fear touched his mind. They were both powerful. Not as powerful as him, but powerful. How would this end? Would he be forced to kill them? Or would Braid beat him to it? He could not have disrespect from his students. Vrice stepped closer, pulling his own aura around him. The walls groaned and dust sifted down from the ceiling. He took a step forward and his students took one back. Trevonne locked eyes with him, refusing to look away. He saw her eyes begin to bulge and her nose trickled blood.

“Do not forget, sweet apprentice, whose tower this is, and how much you still have to learn.” Collette dropped to her knees, her hair flopping down to cover her face. He could push his aura further, could weaponize it and break their bones. The desire to hurt them throbbed in his veins, and then the giggle came again from atop his shoulder. Vrice snapped a look into Trevonne’s eyes

before dropping his aura and walking down the hall. He heard both students gasp for breath. Collette collapsed on the cold stones, and Trevonne dropped to her knees. He would deal with them in time. He would kill them when he had no more use for them.

Then I will be all alone—alone with it.

I will have my changeling. I will never be alone again. But that brought little comfort. What could a changeling do against a half demon? He would need his students if he was going to — Vrice stopped that line of thought. He would not think that, would not consider what desperate act he would need his students for. He would go to Braid now, and hope the half demon could not hear his thoughts.

Vrice knew his tower. He could feel what and who was in it at all times, if he concentrated. With little more than a thought, he knew where Braid was. Vrice climbed until he reached the top of the structure. On a balcony that wrapped around the topmost room, Braid stood, looking over the Hive. Its eyes were not directed on the manor. It searched beyond, to the wall that surrounded the city, and the hill beyond it. Vrice's mind teased at the hill, picking at his knowledge of what was under it. He looked away, not wanting to think on it long.

The thing under that mound brought a fear he could not control. Some books had said they never really died, that they could come back even after being dead for centuries. Vrice's hands trembled and he reached out for the banister. His hand curled around a gargoyle and he stroked its head. He looked at Braid, unwilling to break the thoughts of the half demon.

Soon, it ran its hand across its head, grabbing the braid and wrapping it around its fist. Braid turned, suddenly facing Vrice. The wind turned with him, blowing a gust directly at Vrice, chilling the wizard to his very bones. Its strength and cold made his chest tremble and his jaw chatter. He pushed it away as much as he could and faced the half demon.

It did not speak. Braid reached out fast, grabbing the changeling by the throat. Braid ripped the thing off Vrice's shoulder and pulled it close to its face. "You will not speak," it said in its deep, thick voice. "You will listen and obey." Lapis nodded, wrapping his claws around Braid's wrists. His feet dangled and flapped in the wind, reaching out for purchase. Vrice was suddenly relieved the creature had wings, as the look on Braid's face was creased with hate. He half expected Braid to throw the little creature off the tower.

"You will go to the castles of the noble families of this country. You will look for their children. Young—as young as you can find, you will steal their breath from them and lock it in these crystals." Braid held a fist up in front of Lapis's face. "You remember the rite?"

Lapis was slow to answer. It loosened up its grip to allow him to speak, but Lapis seemed deep in thought. "I know the rite. All changelings know the rite. You wish me to perform it on children? Young children?"

"You will perform it on them and you will bring back their essence. If you fail, I will destroy your child." Vrice heard the words, but didn't believe them. He looked to Braid, perplexed by what he had heard, until he looked the half demon in the eyes. Vrice found no lie there. This was no empty threat. Braid would kill him if Lapis failed. He felt his head begin to lighten. He curled his hands around the horn of the gargoyle, steadying himself. Vrice was not needed

anymore. He was not valued. One of the most powerful wizards in the world, yet he could be thrown away. Vrice thought that careless. Surely Blythe would be furious if his son destroyed his most devoted and powerful servant. But would he? Vrice felt as though he was going to be sick. He looked down at his feet and saw his vision waver. He was so tired.

“I will obey you, master of Vrice. I will do as you have commanded me. They will give up their essence. I will trap it for you.” Lapis’s words were right on, but his inflection was weak. He doubted this quest. He would question it when they were alone. What would Vrice tell his changeling then?

Braid let go of the changeling. He flapped his wings a few short times and landed back on Vrice’s shoulder. His arm wrapped around Vrice’s head, steadying himself in the blowing wind. Braid turned, entering the tower quickly. Once it was inside and the door slammed behind, the wind died down to nothing.

Lapis flapped to the head of the gargoyle. He turned to look at Vrice. In the light of the moons, Lapis’s color was black. His white eyes seemed to glow as he looked at Vrice.

“Murder children?” Lapis said. “You summoned me so you could have me murder children?”

Vrice heard the words and his mind screamed. *No, I summoned you because I am alone. I am scared and things are beyond my control. I was ordered to summon you, but I did it because I need you. I need someone.* Vrice choked these words down. He did not need to say them. Surely Lapis already knew them. Vrice simply lowered his head and looked again at his feet. They were lost in the shadows, as if he had no feet, as if he were anchored to the tower itself, as if the building worked at

swallowing him and would soon devour his entire body. He looked back at Lapis and the changeling cocked its head to one side.

“He can give me orders until the end of all time, but I will not follow them,” Lapis said. A spike of fear impaled Vrice. Lapis wouldn’t do it. Braid would be angry, and he would kill the changeling. Fear rose in him like a deafening keen, but it died down to nothing. He could not run. He was trapped. It disturbed him how quickly the resignation to death fell upon him. “He does not control me or command me.” Lapis pointed his moonstone claw at Vrice. “You do. If you want me to do this, you will have to order me to. I will do it for you, but not for him.”

Vrice felt a throb of power at the words. He was in control of something again. He could say ‘no’ and Braid could not get the thing done. If the chore was to be done, Vrice’s will would have to command it. The power made him feel slightly alive again and he held on to it tightly. Lapis flapped before Vrice, grabbing his face and looking him in the eye.

“I am yours, not his. I belong to you. If you tell me this is what you want me to do, then I will gladly do it for you. But if this is not your will, then we will run.” The words fell to Vrice’s ears like rain on a desert.

Run. Flee. They would go out into the world and live as refugees. He would not be alone. The changeling would gladly come with him. Vrice looked toward the city’s main gate longingly. He needed to run. It was a desperate desire, something he burned for, freedom from the half demon, freedom from Blythe. The word ‘freedom’ tasted sweet as he thought it. Vrice let himself smile before the whisper of power began breathing on his neck again. He had always felt it, even as a kid, and it was back to breathe out its deep desire.

He knew he would stay. The rewards had to be coming. He had done this mighty act for his demon god. Surely respect and power was within his grasp. *Stay the course, the whisper told him. A little bit longer, and you will reap power and control. He will heap rewards upon you. And in his hell, you will sit at his side.* His chest swelled with the thought. He set it all aside, the fear, the exhaustion, the rejection of his god—all of it—for the promise of power.

“Do it,” Vrice said. “Go to the houses of these children. Take the crystals and steal the essence. Bring it back to us.”

“Us?” Lapis asked.

“Yes,” Vrice said. “Bring it back to us. We both desire it. We both must have it. Bring it back to us.” Vrice could hear the conviction in his mind and he tried to embrace it. Braid’s designs were his own. He could accept that. He would force himself to want it as badly as Braid. They were both fighting for Blythe. They both had the same treasures to gain. Neither one of them could fail.

Coming Home

He watched as they packed their easels. They gathered their inks and the candles that burned gently at their feet. Slowly, the Stylus clan filed into their house, leaving one straggler still working on the butterfly before her. Mandrake took little sips of her beauty, unable to look upon her for long. He watched in horror as his feet betrayed him. Slowly, they stepped from the darkness of the balcony behind her and out in her direction. His tread was soft, hesitant, his

boots hushed on the wood beneath him. He stopped inches from her as the wind blew her scent in his direction. His heart broke out, wild and free in his chest. The shade of a smile crossed his face, a fleeting expression he had not felt in months.

Her hand stroked the thin body of the butterfly, her fingers massaging its form. She spoke to it with a whirling of her tongue that Mandrake could not understand. It warbled a response and stood to frame her face with its antenna. She giggled and Mandrake nearly cried at the beauty it contained. The eyes of the butterfly moved past her to land on him and, with a start, it leapt into the air, flapping away, frantic to escape him. A ball of lead formed in his stomach. He knew this was a mistake. He looked above him, and was about to launch himself away, when she turned around and gasped.

“Mandrake!” she said. Her delicate hand traveled to her hair to fold back a stray lock, and she stepped back. “You’re here.” Her voice trembled and he nodded.

“I will leave you to your work.” He knew the statement made no sense. She was done for the night, and he stammered, “I-I d-did not mean to disturb you.” He looked into the air. She stepped forward. She grabbed his hand and he froze. He looked down at her hand, soft and gentle, holding him fast like the grip of some titan. He felt her warmth and ached for it.

“Must you go?” she asked.

No, my love, I will stay here with you forever. I need you. I am empty. “Do you wish for me to stay?”

“Please,” she said. “I have missed you.” A shadow of a smile returned to his face and something eased within him. Some knot, tied ruthlessly tight, loosened.

“What were you saying to it?”

“Huh?” she said.

“The butterfly, what were you saying to it?”

“Oh,” she shook her head, biting down on her lip. “I can’t tell you. It was nothing. To say would sound self-serving.”

“You told it it was beautiful, didn’t you?”

She nodded.

“It was. It was stunning.” She shook her head, looking at her feet.

“It has you to thank for that.”

“Well, it’s no slaughtered satyr,” she said with a laugh.

A sudden, violent laugh burst from his chest, and burnt out almost instantly. “They are not as attractive as you might think,” he smiled.

His shadow cast at her feet and she stepped slowly around him. He turned toward her as her face searched his. The light of the moons landed upon him and she smiled. “There you are,” she sighed. “You hid within the shadows again, Gentry.”

He shook his head. “Sorry, it is safer for me there.”

Her face changed to concern. “Why would you say that, Mandrake?” Soft and tender was her gaze, and he felt himself opening to her. Tears came and he looked away, repressing them, beating them down. Their presence was foreign, unexpected. He had been unable to cry the entire time he had been away, and oh, how he longed to cry now.

"I am a creature of the shadows. I am unwanted and unexplainable."

"You are beautiful. I know what you did for Azure. We all do. The city has celebrated you. They will throw a parade for you. They will heap blessings at your feet. You are a hero here."

"I don't know if I could handle that."

"Can I see your wings, Mandrake?"

His chest pounded once in fear and he shook his head.

"I owe you an apology for the way I reacted to them when I was done with them. They say Ebony did something to them to make them different. May I see them? Please?"

Mandrake lowered his head. He braced himself for her disgust and, with the slight *shing* of steel on steel, he opened them. The light of the moons instantly reflected back upon her and she gasped. She stared in wonder, then stepped forward, reaching out to touch them.

"Be careful. They are sharp."

She pulled her hand back and shook her head in awe. "They are marvelous."

Something within him healed upon hearing the words. He looked at her and smiled. "Thank you. They are what you made them."

"Well, me and Ebony."

"Yes, you and Ebony."

Her eyes searched his face and she shook her head. "Your hair, Mandrake. And that cloak, where did you get that thing?"

Mandrake looked down at his body, his cloak waving wildly in the gentle wind. His wings had sliced it to ribbons, leaving tentacles of cloth writhing

around him. The shadows made a leviathan of him. He scowled. "I needed something when I was there. It was oft times cold."

"Where Mandrake?" Her voice was timid. She seemed worried she would scare him away. With the riot of emotions welling within him, he was scared of the same thing. "Where did you go for so long?"

"I was with the raptors."

"The hunting birds?"

"Yes, they took me in." His stomach rolled before pinching tight and he turned his face from hers.

"I'm glad," she said. He looked back at her, his eyes stopping at hers to search for judgment or disgust, but he found none. The contours of her face moved and changed with her words, shifting from trepidation to perfect comfort. And all at once he felt the dire need—the desperate urge—to kiss her, to feel her delicate lips upon his. He looked away and fought to focus on something else.

"Explain your hair, Gentry," she said with a giggle.

He smiled and looked to the shadow he cast. His hair had grown nearly as wild as he. The length down to his waist, thick and tangled, it was the hair of an animal. He began to realize it was not going to work. "I don't know. When I was with the birds, it didn't seem necessary to cut it."

"Or tend to it at all?" she chided.

He laughed. "It's just hair. I did wash it."

"Well, I hate it." He felt the sudden urge to rip his hair from his head, and he felt ugly and exposed. "Can I see to it?"

His heart stopped. "What could you mean?"

"I'll be right back. You wait here." She turned, kicking off the balcony and flying toward her home. He watched her go with dawning apprehension. She disappeared in the door and he turned, looking at the city around him. Any fey looking out their door or window could see him. He felt naked and moved to the shadow cast by a nearby tree. When she emerged from the Stylus house once more, something glimmered in her hand. She looked around the porch not seeing him. Her face fell and she stared up toward his home. He stepped out of the shadow and she turned, running to him.

She was nearly out of breath. She slapped him gently. "I thought you had flown off."

He smiled. *I would never do that, could never do that. I would stay here with you in the dark for as long as you let me.* "No, Stylus, I am still here." She proffered a pair of scissors and pointed at the porch.

"On your knees, Gentry." He nodded solemnly, and lowered himself to the balcony.

"Seems I am always on my knees before you."

With a sassy smile, she gathered him up in a sideways glance. "As you should be." He laughed. She shook her head. "I'm sorry, a prince on his knees before a lowly Stylus is a shameful thing."

"Being on your knees before beauty is never shameful."

She smiled again, but said nothing. She ran her hand through his hair. Where it snagged on her fingers, she held it up, snipping it away. She released the lock and it tore apart on the wind to blow off to places unknown. With gentle fingers, she snipped away another. Her face, so perfect, so beautiful, crossed gently in a look of concentration and he allowed himself to stare at her.

As she worked, he remained silent. Silence seemed more important than anything they could say to one another. He watched as she groomed him. The world quieted. The heart within him calmed. Something he had carried for a long time eased off his shoulders. Peace felt not so far away, not far out of his reach, and he longed for it. He looked at her body, trim and delicate. How he longed to wrap his arms around her. He closed his eyes, drawing in the scent of the pea blossom and imagining her in his arms. There was nothing but the wind in the trees, her scent, and her fingers running through his hair. Gentry Mandrake sighed.

She stopped and touched the hair on the sides of his face. He opened his eyes and she stared at him. "You look even. But in the dark here, I can't tell for sure."

He nodded. "Thank you."

"Now you look somewhat presentable. That cloak still makes a phantom of you, but other than that, you look better." He nodded. She touched his face and he closed his eyes. He longed for her lips on his.

"Gentry," she said. He opened his eyes and buried them in hers.

"Yes?"

"Are you ok?"

Tears welled up within him again and he pushed them back. "I'm not sure. Not sure I will ever be again."

"Did they hurt you?"

"The battle, I was not prepared for how—" he lowered his head, suddenly unable to look at her. "For how horrible I was."

"I know nothing of war or battle or blood. But I think it might be dangerous business. Not only in the 'you might die and never come back' way. There is that, of course. But something else resides in the folds of war. Something of a cold nature that hunts the warrior. Causing pain and killing something changes a person, I would assume. Have you been changed?"

"Yes."

"Are you naught but darkness now?"

"Sometimes it feels that way."

"How about now?" she said. "Do you feel dark and cold now?"

"With you?" He reached up, taking her hand in his. Her skin was so soft, so warm, and he longed to pull her close to him, let her heat him. "With you, I feel real." Real, what did he mean by that? It was maybe the truest thing he had ever said. Its truth radiated through him. But he didn't understand it.

"Good," she said.

"I have to go, but before I do, I want to give you something," he said. "It's just something I found in my travels." He reached within the folds of his shredded cloak and pulled out a sphere of pure white. He held it up before her eyes and her mouth opened slightly. She reached for it with trembling hands and he handed it to her. It fell almost instantly from her grip and, before it hit the floor, he snatched it from the air again.

"Oh, Mandrake, I'm sorry. I'm such a bumbling fool. I'm—"

"Here, take it."

She grabbed it with both hands. It looked huge in her grasp.

"What is it?"

“The raptors call it a pearl. We don’t get them around here. This is a freshwater pearl. It grows inside a clam from a small speck of sand. It, slowly, over the years, matures into this. It reminds me of you.”

“How so?”

He shook his head, his eyes stuck on his feet as he fought to say the words. “Growing love, slow and steady.”

She gasped. “Thank you, Mandrake. I will cherish it.”

“I must go.” He stood. She nodded, wiping a tear from her eye. “Please tell no one I am home.”

“They will want to see you, to celebrate your return.”

“I can’t handle that right now. It will take me a while to settle in again before I am ready to be seen.”

“Okay. But Mandrake, can I come see you, at night after my inking?”

Suddenly he could not breathe. He nodded. “I will come back to you soon, like I did tonight. After that, you can come up to see me. Just give me a few days.”

She nodded. Gentry Mandrake took her hand and opened it. He kissed her palm and closed her fingers around it. He turned and, with a blur of steel, he was gone.

The Coven

The severing hit Vrice with a devastating impact that rocked him to his knees. He felt as if the top of his head had exploded, and his nose started bleeding. Collette stood over him. Her words had fallen away. Vrice could not remember what she had been rambling about. He looked up at her and saw something in her eyes. Threatening and calculating, her glance touched a spot in him that recognized an enemy. But he had no time now to consider it. Something was wrong with Lapis. Vrice needed to get away. Without a word, he rose shakily to his feet and lurched off.

The tie that bound him to his changeling had been torn away. He knew it was gone, but he was still alive. Vrice felt alone and vulnerable. His echoing fear reminded him of his isolation. Had Lapis died? Had he been killed in his pursuit of Braid's jewels? The notion seemed plausible, but flawed. If Lapis had died, Vrice would be dead as well. No, something else had occurred. Some other devilry was afoot.

Lapis had left three days ago. In those three days, Vrice's mood had grown darker. Twice, he had stolen away from the tower to hunt something small and weak. Once, a crone had fallen to his designs. Blanketing her in a sheet of magical silence, he had tortured her for nearly an hour before killing her. Then came the dog he had cornered in the alley. Its mewling cries, as he beat it and kicked it to death, had brought with them a crawling need that rippled through his flesh, like a beast riding below the surface of the water. His desire to watch something in pain, to cause it pain and feel its life leave, had risen up from within him like a corpse rising to the surface of a fetid pool. Darkness, deeper and richer, more luxurious, had slipped upon him like his black silk robes, its

recent rise disturbing and frightening. He could not settle his mind around these urges, and he shook them off as weakness.

Sex had become more urgent, direr. His need to bend and break Trevonne had increased, though he had no time to explore those needs. He had, instead, been left with cravings that sent him into emotional despair. He had heard nothing from Lapis. Now, he needed to get used to the idea that the changeling might not come back.

This thought brought a bone-deep sorrow that made life nearly unlivable. When he won his chambers, he dropped to a chair and ran a trembling hand across his brow. What would he do without Lapis? What would Braid do once he found out he would not get his crystals?

He will devour you alive, as he did those cooks, as he did that maid. What was she, twelve? Her laments had stained his ears. They rang out clear in his mind again and he closed his eyes to them. He dropped into his cot, hating the way it creaked loudly. His bed had become Braid's bed, his chambers taken by his new master. His lab was his only reprieve now, makeshift chambers that boasted no comforts, save absence from all others. He rattled out a sob and fell back into desolation.

Vrice mourned his changeling and fought futilely to puzzle out how he was still alive with a dead fey. He saw flashes from his last few weeks under Braid's command. The horrors would not shake loose from his mind. They would move across the street soon, the necessities from the tower moved to the Hive as Braid took over his old residence. Everything was going so wrong. At every possible turn, he lost more and more power, falling more and more under

the thumb of the half demon. None of the riches were forthcoming, none of the power and secrets of hell or the world of man being laid bare for him.

His mind raked the dead leaves of his hopes together to burn them. For two days he locked himself away in his lab. The sickening stench of the chemicals gnawed at his gut, the cold sterile surroundings housing his dismay perfectly. On the second night, he heard something fall to the balcony outside and yelp in agony. Vrice's heart leapt to a sudden frenzy. He called spells up to his mind and stepped outside. A creature lay at his feet, broken and bent, steaming and bleeding, stinking of sour blood that singed the stone it dripped upon. It had the face of a crocodile, the skin of some porous stone, grey and lifeless. From its ass rose a long, curved tail, much like a scorpion's, and its maw hung open, betraying a forked tongue. Vrice pulled back, revolted by its appearance, before his eye landed on its straining gaze, and he saw eyes he knew.

"Lapis?" he breathed. The creature groaned weakly. Vrice reached for his changeling, but its blood hissed and he thought better of it. He cast upon the beast, lifting it from the ground and leading it inside.

Horrid gashes riddled its body. Its torso seemed shattered, with no definition to its ribs or spine. Its long, wicked wings had lost huge hunks from their webbing, now ragged skin, ripped and stretched, unable to catch wind.

"What happened to you?" *What have you become?*

The door slammed open and Braid stomped in. "Does it have my stones?" it demanded. Vrice looked up at Braid, confused.

"Something has happened to him. He looks nothing like he did. He is half again bigger, and bleeding some sort of lava." Braid crossed the room in two

strides. Its boney hand whipped across Vrice's face, shattering his nose and dropping him to the ground.

"Does the beast have my stones?" It ripped free a wicked, pitted blade and stood over Lapis. "I will cut them free of its gullet. It would have swallowed them as it acquired them."

Vrice jumped to his feet, his terror and love for the creature calling for strength. He reached for Braid's wrist, but thought better of it. He jumped upon the table, kneeling over Lapis, his hands folded, begging.

"Please, do not kill him. I will get your crystals—I give you my word—but please do not throw him away." *If he kills Lapis, he's killing me as well.* But that seemed somehow less important. "He can serve you. I can serve you. We are powerful slaves for your cause. Let me heal the beast. Then I will bring you the stones. You will have them in hours."

"One. You have one hour, then I gut this wretched beastie and watch you both die." Vrice lowered his head until his master left the room. He looked at his changeling, now some other form of creature, and felt his heart in his throat.

"Lapis, do not move. I will save you. Please don't die." He looked around the room, bereft of ideas. His mind, once so agile, so keen, now wallowed in a mire of self-doubt and loathing. His eye landed on the creature and he shook his head helplessly. "I do not know what to do, Lapis. How can I help you?" Tears ran down his face, his voice a whine, despicable to his ears.

Lapis's mouth pulled and stretched into lines of agony, the tongue lashing weakly. He was speaking. Vrice dropped his ear close to Lapis's mouth. His heart beat so loudly, he could barely hear above it when Lapis croaked, "Cold, s-so c-cold." Vrice ripped free his robe and dropped it upon Lapis's twisted body.

He pulled it around the changeling, watching as the lava-like blood hissed and screamed under the robe. The robe caught fire and Lapis sighed, his face breaking into lines of relief. In moments, the robe was a charred scrap, and Vrice looked at Lapis, daring to believe what he was seeing. The flames had stanchd his blood slightly, the wounds, barely scabbing.

Vrice looked to the flames dancing in the fireplace and, with a swipe of his hand, lifted Lapis into the air to hover over the flames.

Lapis sighed again, his hand reaching out as if to cajole the fire closer. Vrice grit his teeth and carefully eased Lapis closer. Closer and closer, Vrice moved the changeling, giving Lapis more and more relief, until he lay on the very coals, his body popping and cracking.

Hours after Lapis had healed, when he had sicked up the crystals and handed them to Braid, when they had finally locked themselves away in the laboratory, Vrice read through the mended pages of Roopa's book on the Veil. He passed the loss of the fairy's innocence and the transformation into a changeling, to the pages beyond, which spoke of a growing horror.

Should a changeling ever cast rites upon the child of another, ever steal the dying breath of a child not its own, an abomination will result. That changeling will be cursed to the form of an imp. Its soul will be scorched away from its body, which will sever the connection with its child. The imp will wander the depths of hell when it expires, for all other worlds will revile it. This abomination will know no rest. It is wholly wicked and despised by the gods.

Vrice looked up at his twisted imp and watched the thing smile its serpentine grin. The realm of evil that much closer, Vrice cast aside all hopes of any destination but the fires and fields of hell.

Lapis sat simmering over Vrice as the wizard tried to sleep. Its eyes cut to slits that glowed like the embers of a fire, its engorged nostrils exhaling tendrils of smoke. Vrice found sleep impossible under its gaze. When the sun dominated the sky, Vrice sat up, exhausted, feeling the weight of his fatigue lay upon his mind, dulling his thoughts and bringing aches to his frame.

“Master did not sleep,” Lapis purred.

“You call me master, but do I remain your master? Can you, in this form, tie yourself to my will?”

“Do you wish to forsake me, now that I have become this thing?” Lapis asked.

“No, by the gods, no. I wish you to stay with me always. I miss our bond. I mourn it constantly.”

Lapis’s shoulders slumped, his head lowering. “As do I. I consider myself your pet for as long as you will have me. And when you cast me aside, I will haunt the places you once were. I know no other life than service to you, and I wish none.”

Vrice stood. He crossed the room to lay a hand to Lapis, to attempt to embrace him, before seeing a flash of light outside the tower. It glared, high and clarion, before moving through the window and into the laboratory. It landed atop a broad table and took on the likeness of a falcon made of warm, glowing light. It marched across the table, as if in search of a place to roost, before it

opened its wings and collapsed. With a flutter of feathers and a bursting of light, it dropped and transfigured itself into a gold, filigreed sheaf of parchment. Vrice crossed the distance and looked upon the page. His breath stopped short and turned to blades in his chest. His heart stopped for one wretched moment, before kicking again to furious beating. His mind railed against what he read and he stepped back. His hand covered his mouth to black out the scream of terror longing to pour itself out upon the world.

Vrice, Master of the Tower of Dragonsbane,

I hereby summon you to attend me at my post in Nardoc. Make haste to my side.

Anything less will draw my ire.

Rayph Ivoryfist, Master of Sorcerers, High Protector of Lorinth

“The breath within this stone is that of the prince of the nation,” Braid snarled, holding the black crystal in the light before slamming it to the tabletop. “And now, Rayph Ivoryfist, the most dangerous wizard in the nation, has summoned you.” Braid stomped the distance to Vrice, snatching him up by the neck and slamming his head to the table. It ripped free its blade and shoved the tip into the soft flesh of Vrice’s throat. “I should slice your head from your shoulders. You have drawn the eye of my enemy. You are a liability!” He growled and, with a flip of his wrist, tossed Vrice to the floor. “Were I to slay you here and now, he would come looking for you. He would find this tower gutted and, in but a moment, his eye would land upon the Hive. He would crush me, even should I hide behind War.”

Braid stomped to his chair and dropped to seethe and smolder. It stared long and hard at the parchment before its hand twitched in Vrice's direction. "Crawl over here, you wretch. I can't kill you, for it would draw his eye. But I will not give you to him to interrogate." Vrice found his body would not respond. He willed it forward, but the will was weak. He begged his limbs to crawl to his master, but sheer terror fought against him. Braid roared and, from the seat, ripped Vrice up to clutch him by the neck. Braid squeezed. It tore open Vrice's robe and placed a splayed hand upon Vrice's breast. His flesh seared beneath Braid's touch for a brief second of pure agony. He dropped to the ground, sobbing in pain. Upon his chest, a mark brooded. Sinister were its etched lines, a likeness of an ape with a churning set of teeth.

"Should you betray me to him, this mark will eat your heart before you can tell him what you know. Go to him. Stand before Rayph Ivoryfist. And keep your tongue behind your teeth or know my wrath."

Vrice crawled from the room. He heard Lapis flapping behind him and, when he emerged from the room, he ran to his lab. He would ready himself, prepare his mind and courage for Rayph's level gaze. The teeth of the ape's mark bit at his chest and he sobbed in fear.

With the spit of a word and the break of a magical line, Vrice snapped out of the tower to appear in Nardoc in the royal gardens. The subtle hint of lilac and cherry blossom filled his nostrils. A thud resounded in his chest as his heart beat out one toll of warning. The scents brought him back to ten years ago, when he had last been in this place. His desire, at the time, was to open his school, his tower in Dragonsbane. He knew that, should he want to teach in Lorinth, he

would have to meet with the king, and that meant the court wizard. So, to this place he had come to press his cause.

Knowledge had been plentiful when researching the court wizard, but an assumption had led to grave error. When he found Rayph had been court wizard of the nation for ten thousand documented years, Vrice had grown bored. He knew this kind of wizard well. Great deeds littered the first thousand years of such an existence, but after time, the wizard would reach complacency and lose the hunger that whipped furiously at Vrice. Vrice feared no wizard of longevity. Most had forgotten the spells they would need to defend themselves, giving up life as a wizard for scholarly pursuits. Vrice had laughed at the notion of meeting with Rayph. Then he had witnessed the awful might of the court wizard. Never did he desire to meet that man again. His last meeting had nearly been the death of him.

Vrice remembered the firm lock of Rayph's hand around his neck. Rayph had batted aside all spells intended to do harm, as if they were naught but pesky gnats. Vrice had seen power like that only in hell. Here, right here in the gardens, the court wizard had nearly killed him. Had the king not stayed Rayph's hand, Vrice would be long dead today.

He closed his eyes, fortifying his mind. He kicked off the ground, floating in the direction of the castle. Death would be quick. Rayph was not a man of torture or prolonged agony. Vrice saw another lifting from a different spot in the garden, and he looked behind him, seeing many wizards pop into existence behind him. This summons was a meeting, a coven of the powerful wizards of Lorinth. Vrice's chest lifted and he smiled. *He doesn't know it was me.*

He turned back to the balcony, his eyes locking directly with the flaming eyes of Rayph Ivoryfist. Rayph snatched him up by the cloak as soon as Vrice landed on the porch, dragging him back and tossing him against the stone wall. His head struck the stone violently and Vrice bit his tongue. Rayph pulled him forward to slam his back again.

“If I find that this was you, Vrice, I swear I will eat your still-beating heart,” Rayph snarled. The third eye in his forehead opened, the pupil focusing as it bore into Vrice. He could feel Rayph in his mind. Vrice brought up his mundane defenses, a shell of fear and a reeling mind that he used to shield himself from prying eyes. He knew spells that could keep them out, but casting one of these would draw Rayph’s suspicions. Vrice ran through his mind a current of exaggerated fear and uncontrolled thinking.

Other wizards landed upon the ramparts, great spell casters from around the nation. Most were court wizards to noble lords. A smattering was other teachers like him, though none of his power. Vrice saw them alighting on the balcony behind Rayph and burned with indignation at being shamed before them. Rayph released Vrice and stepped back. Vrice adjusted his robe and ran a trembling hand through his hair.

“You have called together the Coven of Lorinth, I see. Have you done this in order to kill me outright before my peers?” Vrice said. He bit back his fear, stifling it, subduing it. His eyes roved the casters behind him until he found a grewla glaring back at him.

He can see my aura! Vrice thought. He ripped up his first defense to color himself in a different light, a faint whispering in the back of his mind. Vrice pulled a quick shield over his chest like a breastplate, covering the half demon’s

mark. Demon magic was a palpable force, a taint on the air that all wizards of power could feel. Vrice would have to keep this hidden as well.

Rayph was talking. He was responding to whatever Vrice had said. Vrice could not remember what he had said.

He had made some flippant remark, asked some question about why Rayph had called them. Rayph now stood staring, his center eye blazing a faint yellowish hue. Looking at it made Vrice nauseous and he turned away. He focused on the wizards around him, all of whom stood gaping at him.

“Well?” Rayph asked. Vrice cursed. He called up to mind his defensive spells and readied himself for the brunt of Rayph’s assault.

“I have nothing to say.” He turned away from the master wizard and stepped out amongst his peers. “Well, many of the names I have come to know in the last ten years stand before me now.” Vrice stopped close to the grewla and smiled up at him. “Many names that carry with them stories, great and marvelous to hear. Stories are but stories, and I’ve heard little of deeds of merit.”

The faces around him scowled and Vrice grinned.

“When I wish for the dog to speak, I will kick it,” Rayph said. “For now, I have called you all together for good cause. I am in need of your aid and I expect it given.”

“I am at your disposal, Master Wizard. Will you be in need of my students?” The voice, little more than a hiss, issued forth from the darkened cowl of a black and purple robe covered in golden embroidered runes. Vrice couldn’t divine anything from the voice, or the face, so covered in shadow. When Vrice looked to the hands, he could see none.

“For now, no. But come the next few weeks, we may be at war. If that comes to pass, I will call on you all to bring your students to my command.”

War. The word held a tight grip on Vrice. Braid would bring war upon the world. He knew Rayph would not see that future. Vrice kept his tongue, despite the urge to ask with whom Rayph thought they would be warring.

“Come with me, all of you. The castle was attacked two days ago. I need you to see what resulted.” They moved into the castle proper and to a wide hall. The walls, lavishly decorated, held little grandeur. The rugs that usually adorned them had been pulled up and, in mourning, replaced with deep black rugs, ordained with grey knots and tassels. Then Vrice knew why he had been called upon. Rayph was investigating the death of the prince. It should have been an accident. None should know of the boy’s murder. They were to believe the boy smothered in his sleep.

They entered a wing of the castle where a thrumming power set Vrice’s teeth on edge. As if a fog had descended here, a magically imbued tint to the air made the place oppressive and vital. The paint swirled on the walls, the carpet moved beneath their feet. Magic so charged the area that the building came alive, a breathing entity set upon some dark device. It tugged at Vrice, nagging for purchase on his thoughts and emotions. The chant he recited, deep within his head, began to play out upon the air. Everyone stopped. Rayph looked around. He slowly pulled back his cowl, loosing long, full locks of auburn hair. His eyes scanned the hall before landing upon the coven.

“Who casts?” His seething eyes went to Vrice, begging for a reason to shred him to bits. Rayph stepped forward, the grewla swinging its gaze to land upon Vrice. “Who casts in my castle?” Rayph growled.

"I thought this was my husband's castle?" A clear, beautiful voice rang out and Rayph spun. The grewla looked to the queen striding down the hall. She looked haunted, her eyes sunken and darkened, her hair pulled around her face to wisps and tangles. Her hand flexed and unflexed, as if fighting to grasp some fleeting object. Her cheeks were stained with dry tears, her lips chewed to tatters.

Rayph dropped to a knee, as did the rest of the coven. Vrice lowered himself to his knee, feeling the ape mark biting deep into his breast. Braid could tell he was kneeling to someone else. The ape's teeth broke the skin, and Rayph rose before the queen as Vrice jumped to his feet.

"Of course this is your husband's castle, my queen. I simply meant to say—"

She waved her hand dismissively. "I care not for your prattling, Wizard. I want no excuses from you. I want results." Rayph hung his head and Vrice kept a rein on his smile. "Is this your gathering of experts?" Her eye raked across the faces of the coven, landing hard on Vrice. He held her gaze and he thought she saw something in him. Her eyebrow lifted and her lips pulled tight into a thin press. Vrice looked away.

"This is the nation's coven. These are the great wizards of Lorinth. They will aid me in bringing back the prince."

Vrice's head shot through with fear, his mind batting at the confusion and improbability of what he heard. *Bringing back the prince. Will you try to resurrect the boy? Is that how mad you are, Rayph? Have you finally lost your mind? No one has attempted that in the current age.*

"Do not fail me, Rayph." Her face broke in sudden tears. Rayph reached a tender hand forward and she brushed it aside. "Do not fail him."

Rayph said nothing. He spoke no oaths or made any vows for his success. He simply nodded at her as she passed them. Her eye played a bit with Vrice's face again before she disappeared into the bowels of the castle.

"Whoever is casting, know this. I will do unspeakable things to you should your magicks interfere with the spell in progress in these halls."

"I recognize the spell, Master," a dark-skinned woman said. Her shaved head glistened with scented oil. Her nose piercing, linked to her ear with a thin chain, glimmered with tiny jewels, and suddenly reminded Vrice of the crystals Lapis had filled for Braid.

The demon mark bit down into him with a hideous fervor, the meat gnashing in its mouth. Blood trailed down his chest and he grimaced. The dark-skinned mage was speaking, but Vrice, through his pain, could not hope to pay attention. He kept up his chant and fought off the desperate need to howl in pain. Rayph looked up at Vrice. The image of the jewels left his mind and the ape stopped its devouring.

Vrice looked to the wizards around him, waiting for anyone to say anything. What had he missed? What vital words had been spoken about the chant everyone could hear drifting down the hall? Was he found out? Or did some miracle save his detection? Vrice could not say, but everyone began moving down the hall again.

They reached an ornate door and Rayph opened it quietly. He entered carefully. When Vrice entered the room, a sudden and terrifying power swelled, too great for him to fathom. He saw a dark room with heavy drapes holding back the light from the tall windows. The marble floor churned like a tempest. The walls swayed in and out as if the room breathed.

“Come,” Rayph said, “fall in around the crib.” The coven made their way to the center of the room, where a large, beautiful cradle stood. Vrice closed the circle around the babe’s bed and gasped as he stared down at the one within it.

The child’s face was purple and swelled. Its arms and legs kicked wildly, but with horrible slowness. Vrice stared down at the boy’s unreal suffering.

“What has transpired here?” the grewla asked. He looked down at the lad, his face broken in lines of worry. Vrice looked around the cradle, seeing horror and fascination. He fought the sudden urge to laugh wildly. He clamped a hand down over his mouth and turned away.

Lapis had done this. Somehow, the changeling had killed this boy, and here he was, living his last moments in slow motion. Time suspended nearly completely, this child had been smothering for days. Now, Vrice was here to advise on the boy’s condition.

They will discover me. They will find me out and tear me limb from limb. No, they won’t. The mark will kill me first. There is no escaping this place. This is how I die. With that thought came a modicum of peace, the end of it all, the playing out of the game. *Then I go to him. I go to Blythe to live... what sort of existence?* Vrice turned his attention back to the coven.

“Something attacked the Prince,” Rayph said. He walked to the window and threw the curtain wide in a flourish. The balcony beyond was nearly destroyed. A hole had burned in the center of the floor. The banister, reduced to rubble, seemed about to tumble to the courtyard beyond. Rayph beckoned them to the door. Huge pieces of stone had been ripped free of the balcony. “Three gargoyles were here. In the early hours of the morning, they fought to protect Thomas. During the fight, I was called to this room. When I entered, a thing

hovered over the prince, a devil I cannot name. I saw it throw something into its mouth and race for the balcony. My bolt was too slow. It was nearly dead when it glided from the balcony and out into the city.

“I believed the gargoyles battered it to a point beyond flying. I saw the condition of the prince and decided saving his life was of more import than following the culprit. I cast a time lapse spell that has slowed his suffocation.” Vrice looked at the stone floor that had been burned away. Lapis had bled there considerably. He had fought three gargoyles, stolen the breath, and survived the wrath of Rayph Ivoryfist. Vrice’s pride in the changeling soared to the limits of the room.

He turned right into the snarling face of a grewla. “What are you so proud of, Vrice?” Rayph was still talking to the others near the balcony. The grewla’s look of disdain played riot on his face.

“I am, of course, proud of Rayph’s handiwork and lightning fast wit, that he was able to save the boy,” Vrice said. Fear bubbled up around him as if to drown him. He chanted silently to shield it.

“You hold no pride in your black heart for anything anyone else has accomplished. I know what you are, you vile man. I know of your devices. Your school is a blight on this nation. I know not what Rayph was thinking when he gave you your deed and your teaching privilege. I find it suspect.”

Vrice suddenly remembered why he was feared around the world, why his enemies did not ply their plots against him. The power in his core throbbed and he curled his fists. “I find *your* power suspect. Your school, how many students does it boast? Few, I would wager. I would pit my apprentices against your own. I would pit the power of my tower against yours.” Vrice stepped in,

grabbing the thick chain that wrapped the grewla's neck, and pulling his broad face close. "And I would rend you to bits should you ever desire to press me. Consider it an open invitation. But study up before you come. Teach yourself the fringe magicks most wizards fear to learn, for I am versed in all of it."

"And I wrote most of it," Rayph said. He laid his hand on Vrice's shoulder and squeezed. "Let loose his chain."

Vrice released it with a snarl.

"We will talk in length on the matter at hand. I want to hear everyone's thoughts on the prince's condition, what you think of the beast that destroyed three gargoyles of the most elite clan of sentinels. And, first and foremost, I want to hear who you believe has sent this horror upon us."

"There is more, Master Wizard," a timid little man said from beneath the cowl of a faded brown robe. "The youngest boy of my master's household died two days ago. He smothered to death in his crib."

Horror dawned on Rayph's face.

"My master lost a daughter to the same demon," another said.

"Aye, and mine."

Fear rose and boiled within Vrice as Rayph's eyes traveled the room to gather up the four wizards whose homes were attacked. Vrice needed to go. Too many were here to hide from, too many here to see through his deceit. He prayed to Blythe for the strength to fight it all back. In the back of his mind, he kept up the chant that hid his fear and darkness. He kept chanting and chanting. He kept praying and praying.

Wilting

Mandrake could hear a distant, sweet voice calling his name. It was urgent, like the persistent pleading of one's conscience, or a voice begging for mercy. He longed to answer, but he lay dying, and knew he was beyond it. The voice was on its own, as was the city, as was Thomas, his sweet child. The specter of darkness had finally caught him. In the face of its horror, he could do naught but twist and wait for death.

The visage that haunted him was a fierce creature spawned from hell. Long and angular was its snout, creased and tough like a crocodile. The nostrils burned with noxious smoke, as if its rotting heart was on fire and its breath was a plague. Its pumice skin showed the callousness that reigned in this beast's mind. Eyes, little more than slits of red fire, seethed as they stared down at Mandrake. He shifted under the gaze. This thing had changed. Other times, his enemy had appeared a changeling. Now, this creature was like nothing he had ever seen before. He knew he couldn't fight it.

It had sucked Mandrake's breath from his chest, leaving him gasping for any air with which to scream. None came. He had forgotten how to breathe. He stared, transfixed, as the creature spun, wreathed in smoke, and vanished. Mandrake sat now in a half place, the stretching darkness between death and life. He could not move, could not speak, could only wait for the procrastinating death to swoop down and snatch him up.

Mandrake watched as hell descended upon him. Pea's face warped and pulled into distress that intensified to crippling fear. She gasped within a cloud

of rank smoke. Azure's wings rotted from his body in mid-flight, and he plummeted to the sward, cursing Mandrake for his gift of flight. Thomas purpled. His breath stopped short as he died slowly. Missiniah burned like a brand, her canopy and branches raging in a conflagration that crept down her trunk. Her body warped from tree to half womanly form and back. Her skin blackened. Her face ripped into gashes of agony. Mandrake could help none of them.

The voice, loud and urgent now, called for aid. No longer beckoning him, but sending up alarm for others. Mandrake listened to it all with growing apathy. It was Lyadora, her voice filled with such hopelessness as to call down the gods. Mandrake listened as if to a hawk diving on a sparrow. The world had no color anymore. Death and sorrow, pain and screams, were all grey to him now, his hopes and love darkening to grey as well. The darkness ebbed, bringing slanting shafts of hazy light inside his home in garish blues and reds. A shadow moved around him. Mandrake knew the demon would come to finish him. The inside of its jaws would be Mandrake's last sensations. He realized he did not want to die. Thomas would be no more. With that knowledge, a marrow-deep sadness ran Mandrake through with helpless love for the one he had been born to protect.

The face that greeted him was not the creature of nightmares. It was Azure. *He has come to save me.* The flitting notion brought with it little hope. He watched as Azure's face broke with worry and fright. Azure lowered his ear to Mandrake's chest. With a scant listen, he burst into motion. He gripped Mandrake's ankles and began to jerk them toward the door. Nothing came of it.

Azure was too weak to bear the weight. He came back to Mandrake's face, his eyes wide.

"We will get you out of here. You hold on. By the gods, Mandrake, don't die, not now." Frantic voices spoke outside. Soon, something large slithered into his home. It rose up before him, a blunt face, yellow and white, glistening with oils and covered in tiny scales. Its forked tongue licked once, then again. The head shook. It drifted away and something latched onto Mandrake's feet. Muscles shifted around his ankles. Then he was taken up to the knees. Slowly, inch-by-inch, the beast swallowed him until he rested within its mouth to his shoulders. It eased him from his home. Light, sudden and violent, ripped at his vision, shooting spikes of agony through his head. He was spit back up, and many arms gripped him and lifted him away. Hope came to rest within him. Then came darkness and nothing.

White enveloped him completely and he let it wrap tight coils around his body and head. Breathing was impossible, but unnecessary. He let the force of the bloom work its way into his body. His strength gathering, he was spat forth. He raged, roaring as he leapt into the air above his bloom. The muscles of his neck flexed with the primal scream, his prongs extended, his exoskeleton glistening with white discharge. The forest around him trembled. Birds took to the air. Crawling things scurried. He hovered slowly, turning to the world around him. Before him cowered the royal family: the king, the queen, the twins, Ebony, and Azure. They froze, looking at him as if he were beyond reason. Their fear radiated towards him and he relaxed, letting his rage slowly ebb.

Once he calmed, they surged at him in one fluttering wave. His instinct to defend himself wailed. But against this press, he refused to wade in. They grabbed him up in a tight embrace of many arms, flapping wings, tears and laughter. A range of emotions welled up within Mandrake, riding a wave of confusion and hope. They all hovered in the air, holding one another, before they began to turn away slowly. The last arms to release him were those of his mother. She held him, trembling and sobbing. Her words came in tones too muffled for his ears to divine meaning. He let her hold him, emotions firing wildly in his head like the sky lashed with the storm's lightning.

She looked up at him, her face streaming tears. "Unforgivable. My actions, my words, horrible and vicious. I hate myself for them. You are so dear, so wonderful, and I, your own mother, could not see it. Oh, do you hate me terribly, Mandrake?"

"The love I bear for you is limitless, mother. Yours are the arms I long for most." He slowly wrapped his mother in a loving embrace, bracing himself for sudden wrath.

"And you will have them until the day you die. My love is for you, my merciful, healing son." He kissed his mother's forehead and turned to his father, whose cheeks glistened with tears.

"You have been wronged by every single one of us," Lotus said.

"Daddy, that is not true," Orchid spat. She crossed her arms and fluttered to her brother, her twin close behind. "We loved you from the start, Violet and I. Didn't we, Mandrake?"

Scarlet released her son and Mandrake reached his arms out for the hug of his two darling sisters. “Indeed you did, dear sisters. Though why remains a mystery.”

Violet looked up at him with a crooked smile. “We love troublemakers, Mandrake, and no troublemakers rival you.” The family shared a laugh before Ebony nodded and motioned for Liefdom.

“Come now, loved ones, let us away for the sacred home and seek counsel from Missiniah for what ailment has befallen the Veil’s first son.”

Mandrake sat on the floor in the middle of the Visage Room, staring at his hands. He flexed his fingers into talons and let himself go through it one more time. Something had attacked his child. Missiniah didn’t believe him, but that did not change the fact. A wasting death awaited Mandrake. His might would flounder. His power to protect Thomas would ebb from him. A sickness had his child in its voracious grasp. It would feed on the boy until it devoured him completely. Mandrake opened his hands again, watching as the fingers splayed, before curling them once more into tightened fists.

Tears played out from all in the room. His sisters sat between the thrones, gripping tight to each other and crying. His cousin stared at him, his eyes haunted, his mouth working as if he fought to swallow something hard and bitter. His father’s head hung. His mother wept openly. Mandrake looked away from them all to the dryad’s perfect face.

“What are my options?” Mandrake asked. The crying paused as the room struggled with his words. They would raise objections soon, but he cared not for their thoughts on the matter. His question was for Missiniah.

“What do you mean ‘options,’ Mandrake?” Missiniaah asked.

“How do I stop it?”

“You can’t stop it, nephew. The stars are set. They cannot be changed.”

Mandrake’s prong ripped out of his wrist as he pointed at his great uncle.

“I was not talking to you.”

The room silenced. Scarlet gasped.

“Missiniaah, how do I save Thomas?”

“Who is Thomas?” Lotus asked. A wisp of anger colored his voice.

Mandrake would not rise to it.

“Thomas Nardoc, my child, how do I save his life?”

Every mouth gasped.

Ebony turned his eye toward Mandrake. “How do you know your child’s name?” he asked. Every face asked the same question.

“Thomas was known to me when I was born. His name was the first I heard.”

“The gods long ago cut knowledge of our child away from us, Mandrake. It is forbidden for you to know these things,” Lotus said, his voice rising in indignation.

Mandrake’s musk started rising to the air, and he grimaced, fighting to keep it down. “I strive not to defy the gods, but this was known to me upon my birth. His name is Thomas Nardoc. He is the prince and heir of Lorinth. He resides in that direction,” he pointed to the far wall of the Visage Room, “though I know not the distance.”

“Silence, boy! You speak blasphemy!” Lotus hissed.

“How is my own knowledge blasphemy? This is not something I went seeking. This is learning I was born with, as I knew your names, my city, and how to build my house.”

“The mind rebels at this,” Ebony said. “No fairy born of the Veil knows this much about their child.”

“Why not?” Mandrake asked.

“The gods deny us this knowledge to keep us away from our children. Our life force renders them ageless. When we stand before them, they are made immortal,” Ebony said, his face haunted by some unspoken wisdom.

“You went to your child,” Mandrake said.

“My child summoned me. He was cursed for his actions.”

“What befell him?”

“He has become timeless, destined to watch all he loves billow away like sand in the wind. You must not go to your child, Mandrake. It is an abomination.”

“What would you have me do?” Mandrake asked. “Sit idly while Thomas dies?”

“Do not speak that name in these halls!” Lotus spat. “It is a curse upon the gods!”

Mandrake’s musk lifted into the air and he growled. The fey in the room shuddered and Mandrake stood. “I will not sit by while my child dies. This, I will not abide. Not when I have it within me to stop it.”

“How do you know you can stop it, Mandrake?” Orchid asked.

“I don’t, but I won’t let it happen without a fight. I do not believe he has fallen ill. I believe he was attacked, and I would fight against it.” When he spoke

of fighting the monster, his blood ran cold. *How does one kill a thing of such evil? How does one prevail over that?* Mandrake turned for the door.

Lotus fluttered before him. "I forbid it, Gentry Mandrake. You are to stay within the confines of this city and live your last days out in peace. You will not rail against the will of the gods. These laws were made for a reason."

Mandrake looked at the little fairy and his fists flexed once. He fought to keep his prongs in his wrists. But slowly, they inched from their sheaths.

Mandrake turned to his mother. He went to her and knelt at her feet.

Her tender hand graced his cheek, brushing it with a whisper of a tickle. "Mother, what would you have me do? I would turn away from the righteous fury of my father and the jaded wisdom of my great uncle. I come to you, a vessel of love. Guide me in this."

Her face creased in dark emotion, a subtle ripple of fear raced across her countenance. She looked him deep into his eyes until he was sure she plumbed his very soul. "You were born a weapon, Mandrake. A creature of violence and wrath unbound. You are much more than that, to be sure, but warfare pumps your veins. Do not go quietly."

"Scarlet, what are you saying?" Gentry Lotus gasped.

"I love you and would see you live. You were born a creature of rage. You were born to kill."

"Scarlet, no." The dismay in Lotus's voice rose to a shrill note.

"Do not struggle against who you are, my son. Fight, scream, and decimate all that would harm your child. It is why you were born. It is your destiny. Go forth from here and bring war upon your enemies."

"Scarlet!" Lotus screamed.

“He is my son, Lotus. I will not lose him! If he can fight it, and we know he can, then he must.”

Mandrake turned to Missiniaah. She nodded. He turned his eye upon Azure, who smiled, nodding. “I’m going with you,” he said. Mandrake fought back tears.

“You will be doing no such thing, Azure Rose,” Ebony stated.

“Father, you cannot stop me. Be reasonable and don’t try.” Azure turned to his cousin. “Look, I cannot fight with you. I know not what I will do exactly, but I feel you need me for this.”

“You’re welcome to join me. I would appreciate the company.”

“We are going, too!” the twins chimed.

“You most certainly will not!” Lotus demanded.

“I’m sorry, dear sisters, but Azure and no one else.”

They nodded.

“How do I get to the world of man?” Mandrake asked Ebony Rose. “You have been there before. You go often. How do I get out of the Veil?”

“I will not be accomplice to your plots, nephew. Take my son and find your own way. I will be no aid to you.”

“I will find a way.” Mandrake turned to Missiniaah. He bowed his head and she smiled. He turned to his mother, kissing her hand as she held it to his face. He looked to his cousin, who rose from his throne, and off they flew for the world of man.

The Storyteller

The mist made a mystery of the grounds of the Hive. The top spires, lost in the muted light of the Dragonsbane streets, stood dead and apathetic. The crabgrass and thorny weeds gleamed slick and wet. The behemoth of War stood his ground in the fountain, his mace braced between his hands, his broad helmet bowed. Within the great manor, nothing stirred. No rat scurried in the rafters or in the walls. No spider stretched spun silk within the window frames. Braid had blessed the house, and everything within had died. Life spurned it now. Standing outside in the darkness of the porch, Trevonne felt her blood thickening. Her flesh itched, her scalp crawling. The place had become nearly unbearable during daylight hours, and in the cold embrace of night, it was a horror.

Night made a mausoleum of the home of the Brood. Trevonne could feel the building's unrest. Too many had died within it. The manor stood, shocked and dazed, bewildered by what had been done to it, driven nearly mad by the darkness that yawned within its walls. Trevonne could almost hear the place moan. She looked over to Collette and smiled again.

Collette leaned against the pillar near the stairs, looking out over the yard of the manor, biting her nails and cursing. She did not need to be here. Trevonne had watch tonight. Collette should be resting in her chambers and preparing for another day in the tower. But here she stood, keeping watch with her friend. Trevonne wondered if fear of the tower had driven Collette here. She squashed this idea almost immediately. She needed it to be friendship—not the desperate need for safety—that brought Collette to her side tonight.

They had not spoken for hours. They had nothing left to say. Braid's plan was taking root. They knew it not, but witnessed the fruits of its labor daily. Lack of knowledge hindered any measured action. They plied their tongues to draw Vrice's venomous plots from him, but his mouth was bolted shut. He was too scared to speak, too frightened of what he had brought forth. If they did not find a way into the mind of their master, they would remain helpless to stop it all.

Trevonne heard a scuff of a boot. She looked up the walkway to the street, where an average man stood, his head bent low, his wide-brim hat pulled down over his face. Was this Rayph? She turned, catching Collette's attention and staring at the man stopped outside the gates of the Hive. This could be him. Vrice had sent them out here with instructions to watch for a man attempting to gain entry into the Hive. His name would be Rayph Ivoryfist and he was dangerous. He told them to make haste, to warn the tower of the man's presence. Trevonne watched, fascinated, as the man lifted his hat to wipe a hand across his shaved pate. He replaced the hat and stepped to the gate.

Trevonne grabbed Collette, bringing the words of her spell to her mind, before Collette shook her head and broke Trevonne's concentration. "Don't, don't go to master. He is here. He has come. Maybe we should talk to him. We might pry information from him, judge whether he is a potential ally." The gate squealed in agony as it opened, the scream sent to echo down the streets. Trevonne looked to the window of the laboratory for any sign of Vrice's attention.

"Let us watch," Collette said. Tremors of fear radiated up Trevonne's spine as the man stepped over the threshold of the yard and onto the path. They heard the cracking report of the golem's heels breaking free as War roused from

his fountain. His neck cracked and he tossed his helmet side-to-side. His stone hands flexed, cracking and breaking, as he shouldered his weapon. Trevonne's heart broke out in panicked flight. Her teeth set firm and tight, her body locked up as the massive monster stepped onto the path to bar passage. She gripped tight to Collette, who clung to her in return, as the beast swung its mace twice across the path. Its step thundered the ground. The man pulled his hat free again and looked up with a beaming smile.

"Son," he said in a slight voice. The mist muffled the sound, making it more personal, more humble. The voice itself broke in emotion. The behemoth stopped its treads. Its head tilted to one side and it dropped to its knee. It carefully set the mace to the ground and reached arms out for an embrace.

"Father, you have come to me after all these eons. The stars have changed in the sky since last I beheld you." The gravelly voice of the golem broke Trevonne's heart, so drenched with emotion it was.

"I have come, son. Come to see my boy and ask his favor in a task." The man picked up a stone from the ground and worked at scraping away a white tear of bird feces that dripped across War's helmet. The man's voice was so soft, little more than a sigh. But Trevonne could hear every syllable, clear and strong.

"Ask for favor, father, and it will be given." The voice of the statue trembled. In the face of the love locked within it, Trevonne choked with emotion.

"First, I must make introduction, War. I must introduce you to my friends. This is Trevonne and Collette. They will be helping me in my pursuits." Trevonne's grip on Collette tightened, nearly bruising her friend. She gritted her teeth and pulled further back into the shadows.

“He knows we are here,” Collette hissed. Trevonne wrapped arms around her friend, whispering in her ear. “War called that man ‘father.’ He must be the sculptor that carved it. He is ancient. He is archaic.”

The man peered around War’s bulk, peeking at Trevonne.

“He must be hundreds of thousands of years old. He must—”

“I know him,” Trevonne said. Her grip on Collette loosened as his face broke in a smile. “I have seen this man before. He was there. He told us stories.” Trevonne caught herself leaving the shadowy porch to meet him. Collette hissed in anger, begging reason, but followed when Trevonne stepped out into the hazy light.

Trevonne felt she would blow away from the world, as if its grip on her had weakened to nothing and she floated from the ground. War turned his head to look upon her.

The man nodded, beckoning with his hand. “Trevonne Quellestere, it has been long, hard years since last I laid eye on you. I see you have gotten yourself into a spot of trouble again,” he said kindly.

“I don’t recall your name, but I remember your face.”

“Often those who see it can’t forget it. Alas, my name usually slips the tongue. I am Simon Bard, and I am here to help.”

A surge of relief washed over Trevonne and she saw guarded hope resting on her friend’s face. “How can you help us?” Collette asked. Her shrewd eyes worked at the mysteries of Simon’s face. Trevonne, as well, worked at those details, lines of care and worry etched there, but also a great deal of mirth and enjoyment. *To us, this is life and death. But to him, he is at some sort of game. Can he be*

trusted? Trevonne didn't know that he could. But if he could help in any way, they had better let him.

"Father, what favor do you ask of me?" War said. Though his voice was gravely and harsh, it carried the timbre of a child eager to please.

"I will come back to you if things go well. I will have a wizard with me, a powerful man by the name of Ivoryfist. I will lead him here to invade this manor. When I come, I ask that you let him enter unscathed."

War gasped. "Father, ages ago you gave me my purpose. 'Guard the master of your house against attack or theft. Stand your post until the end comes.' Now you would ask me to betray your command, defy the reason I was carved? To what end?"

"The survival of this city, this nation. The saving of the souls of the people here. They will be captured as slaves. Hell will belch forth an army and all will be devastation and death. We are a scant hope, but hope nonetheless. Will you do it, War? Will you obey your father?"

"Of course. Your command is my will. If you ask me to betray my owner, I would for you, and only you."

Simon grabbed War's massive head with both arms and kissed the helmet. "You make me proud, son."

"Father, what will the others say?"

"What others?"

"My brothers and sister, when they hear I abandoned my purpose, what will they say of me?"

"They will know I visited you, and they will envy you."

"Father, why do you never come to us?"

Something passed Simon's face and he shook his head. He opened his mouth to speak, but shut it again without a word. Finally, he retorted, "I am very busy with my travels, War. But I will come to see you next time I am in town. You have my word on that." Trevonne thought a lie rested there. War nodded and Simon kissed him again.

"I must away now, son. The world needs my stories, and this next one I tell will be dire."

War nodded. Simon led Trevonne and Collette away. They left the manor yard and stepped lively down the street. If Vrice looked out his window now, he would see them abandoning their post. He would see them walking with this man whom he might recognize. If that happened, their lives would be forfeit. Trevonne would not know until the moment Vrice destroyed them. She would not think on that. This was the only chance they had for aid. They could not turn away from it.

Simon led them to an inn and Collette's face brightened. "You have been here before," Simon stated. Collette nodded. She cast a spell upon herself and her hair sprung up around her face to frame it beautifully. Her lips reddened. Her face took on a brighter quality. She looked suddenly ravishing and Trevonne felt a hard ball of lead rest in her gut. *Why did she need to do that? Why ready herself like this?* Trevonne thought it cheap, though she knew the assessment unfair. Collette had every right to be beautiful. But the sight of it seemed wrong, as if Collette was intruding on Trevonne's territory.

The pub held none of the chill from outside. The cheer in here could not be denied. Trevonne smiled, taking in the spectacle of dancing and drinking.

Serving wenches sat in laps, slapping hands. Songs and laughter radiated from the room. It burst with warmth and the smell of roasting meats and spiced foods. Trevonne felt suddenly ravenous.

She had not been in a pub like this one in many years. They did not call to her anymore. She sought out criminal, back-alley brothels where whores rutted with brutes and dark deeds were plotted or committed, places where she could find anonymous sex bent over a table with dark strangers in a shadowed corner. She could feel the horrible thrusts and the claw marks on her back. She could hear her clothing rip and the curses and threats as the chosen man pumped into her and laughed. Though she would not admit a place such as that to her peers, she craved one of them now. Shame burned across her face like a brand, forcing her gaze to the floor.

They reached the center of the room before someone drew a blade. Trevonne pulled her magicks up around her. Her aura rose above her like a viper ready to strike. She lifted her gaze to see Renalt staring at her. Collette spun, grabbing Trevonne's hand and staring her in the face. "Do not. He is not our enemy."

"He has drawn his sword on me," Trevonne said.

"Renalt, store your weapon. There will be no quarrel in the face of the Bard," Rose spat. His trim body shifted before Renalt, his hand resting on the swordsman's wrist. Spider and Brian appeared as if from a wisp of smoke. Simon crossed his arms over his chest and smiled. "Gentlemen, ladies, the time has come for you to know the face and plots of your enemy. Will you tear each other apart before you see his visage, or will you lay your ill-placed rage aside and hear reason?"

“We certainly want no fight with Collette, or any she would call friend,” Brian said. Collette blushed prettily and Trevonne rolled her eyes.

“Why have you called me here?” a hard voice asked. All eyes turned to take in a mountain of a man, donning brown leathers studded with steel caps. On his back, he carried a large axe, notched and wicked looking. He towered over everyone in the bar, his brown hair disheveled but clean. His face wore a stitched scar that twisted it in a perpetual scowl. From his left shoulder hung a cornsilk doll. Trevonne had never seen any one object so out of place in her life.

“Oddy, I was hoping you would come.”

“Never have I forsaken a meeting called by you. Though many times in the past, I found myself wishing I had.” Oddy looked around the room, which had gone quiet. Trevonne looked to Simon, who smiled.

“We are interrupting the night’s festivities, and we have so much to talk about.” Simon turned to Rose. “Do you have a place where we can all sit, partake in refreshment, and speak of dark deeds?”

“You know I do,” Rose said.

Simon nodded. “Good, then let us find ourselves there. I have a story to tell that will bring an enemy to light.”

“The church already has too many enemies, Simon,” Oddy spat. He shook his head and looked toward the door. “If you are about to get me into more of your troubles, I would leave this place and find my bed. The children rouse early.”

“Do you no longer seek to protect the young? Are you about the business of hiding from the enemies of your church? Have you learned the ways of cowardice since moving to Dragonsbane?”

“You will not bring my blood to boil with your nonsense, Simon. My pride cannot be injured.”

Simon huffed his shoulders, slumping. “For the sake of the young ones of this town and this nation, Oddy, will you please come with us?”

Oddy chewed on this question. He nodded and shrugged. “If it be Boxhead’s will, I will lift my axe for you, Simon. But be this another of your foolish errands, I will leave this place with no itching of guilt.”

“Fine. Now Rose, can we find a place to talk?”

Rose led them on. A gathering of fear roosted upon Trevonne’s back like some dark raven of ill boding.

The Will of Braid

“The silhouette of the greying gorilla filled the window of her chambers, in the fortress she commanded, in the Drine city of Lash. She gasped in horror at its gore-covered coat. Blythe had finally come to her, and her heart seized in terror.

“Months earlier she had summoned Blythe to her, attempting to free him in the body of a simple man. But Blythe’s soul would not fit. The spirit of the demon god had been set to roam. Once it found a body that would hold it, murder and maiming had been its one goal. But now it was dying and it came for its true purpose. With one great bound, it ripped the warlord up in its grasp and threw her down upon her bed. It opened her legs so violently that her femur

snapped. In less than a breath, it entered her and, with violent thrusts, ripped her body as her screams lifted to rattle the world.

“Her followers rushed into the room to come to her aid. Upon seeing the beast, they knew their master, and dropped to their knees in supplicating prayers as Blythe ravished his most devoted slave. Horrible hours crawled by as he pumped mercilessly into her until his seed was finally spent. He stumbled back to drop dead to the floor. His son conceived, Blythe’s soul departed the world of man for his domain in hell. The world then faced the will of the half demon Braid.”

Collette was crying. She sat holding Brian’s hand, the horror of the story too much for her to grasp. Trevonne felt cold, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. She tried not to imagine herself as the woman a demon-possessed gorilla raped. She forced the image from her mind, focusing instead the faces of those who listened. The tale appalled and fascinated the Rose boys. Oddy sat quietly. His grim face, held in discipline, betrayed none of his thoughts. He seemed a nightmare unto himself, Trevonne compelled to stare at him.

“Who is Blythe?” Renalt asked.

“He is a demon that rules a domain of hell. He is also Vrice’s god. The wizard has dedicated his life to the wishes of Blythe, and has flourished for it.”

“Does he have Holly?”

“Vrice?”

“Yes.”

“No, Vrice no longer has Holly.” Trevonne watched Simon’s face settle upon true sorrow. She watched as Simon waited, reluctant to explain more. But Trevonne had already puzzled it out.

“The pregnancy drove the woman insane, a howling shade of the warlord she had been. Her body could not hold the half demon within her. Her back snapped. Her ribs shattered. Her staff tied her, by chain and cord, to the bed she screamed and thrashed in. She begged for death that was denied to her. On the day of his birth, Braid ate his way from the womb, devouring his mother’s flesh and freeing himself. He was gently exiled from Drine, the reigning king wanting nothing to do with him. He settled in the city of Manglador in the nation of Jamoid.

“At the age of four, he began to talk. It came all at once—his vocabulary fully formed, his mind sharp and cruel. He named himself Rachaheptet. None now alive remember the cyclopean hordes the humans banished when they settled the lands now known as Leeth. But they were savage cannibals. In their language, *rachaheptet* meant gnawer, the moniker given to children who denied the breast of their mother for raw meat.

“Braid commanded his servants to, one by one, take their lives as he watched. Once all were dead and he had fed upon their remains, he left his home and his belongings to wander the world in search of his father’s will.

“Soon, a wasting fever fell upon him. He suffered terribly as his father burned his mind. In this delirium, he sketched out the plans for his father’s gate, a passage capable of transporting a demon army from hell into the world of man. He was commanded to build the gate, and he bent his mind to it.”

“Is that his goal now?” Trevonne asked. “He is possessed with dark design. His mind is always working, always churning, and there seems within him a desire inspired by fear.”

"This creature is here? Here in the city of Dragonsbane?" Oddy asked. His alarm radiated through the room, galvanizing the Rose boys to piqued attention.

"Yes, warrior, why do you think you have been called here? To listen to a story of fancy?" Trevonne spat. "This thing is real. I reside the tower it walks. I suffer to fulfill its demands. I," *Long for its embrace.* "Must face it each day and toil under its gaze."

Oddy lowered a look upon Trevonne that chilled her blood. She turned away from him and back to Simon, who waited patiently for everyone's returned attention.

"This is a foe we must all bring to bear against in the end," Simon said when the room quieted.

"My charge is to defend the children of the orphanage. My loyalty, to my god and his church. I have no intention of making war against a half demon," Oddy grabbed his axe and made to leave.

"Even one who has ravaged children, whose actions torture a living boy, innocent still in the ways of the world, one but a few months of age?" Simon said. "Your actions could save a child, and save the world and its children against an army of demons."

Oddy locked Simon in a glare. "I will not place the children of my orphanage in danger." Simon held up his hands as if warding off the rancor of the holy warrior. "Is there more?"

"There had better be more," Renalt spat. "I would hear what became of Holly before I allow you to leave this room." Rose looked to his friend with disapproving eye but held his tongue.

"Holly will be avenged when you bring Vrice to his death," Simon said.

“Avenged?” Renalt leapt to his feet, his sword coming to his hand so fast, the action of drawing it seemed never to have happened. He sprang forward at Trevonne before Rose tripped Renalt, bringing him to the floor. Renalt rolled to his feet as Trevonne fought to summon a spell, but fear gripped her mind and none would rise. Rose ripped free his sword, and Spider as well. The room broke instantly into mayhem as Rose and Spider moved to defend Trevonne.

Terror finally relented and Trevonne stood, summoning forth her aura before Collette jumped before her. “Let them subdue him. He is in pain. He is not himself.”

“He tried to kill me. I have done nothing to him!” Trevonne said.

“You are known to be lovers with Vrice.”

“Yes, I was, but he would not care if I were killed. He does not love me.”

“Renalt is not himself. He is a good man, driven crazy by his love. Have mercy, Trevonne.”

Renalt’s brilliance with a sword could not be denied. Together, Spider and Rose posed no match for him. Trevonne kept her magicks up. She would not destroy this man if she was not forced to, but she would not suffer his attack. Renalt’s tears, as he threw himself against his friends, touched Trevonne. Pity rose up within her. Renalt kicked Rose to the ground and Spider retreated in the face of this onslaught. Renalt was moments away from defeating the ebony swordsman before Oddy stood.

Oddy gripped Renalt by the back of the shirt and hoisted him from his feet. He lifted him in the air with one hand before slamming him against a wall once, then twice. Renalt screamed in fury, and Oddy slammed him to the floor. He dropped a boot on his back and roared.

“This nonsense will stop! I have heard of the valor of the Rose Boys. You lot are known for honor and greatness. Get yourself together, man.” He picked Renalt up and, with little more than a gesture, tossed the man across the room to clatter to a heap.

Renalt rose, his tears and sobs filling the room with grief and pain. Trevonne was relieved to feel sorrow at his loss. Vrice had destroyed this man’s love, had ripped her from his arms. Trevonne did not know exactly what had become of the woman, but knew it was bad. Rose grabbed Renalt up in a fierce embrace and led him to a couch. He held his friend, whispering to him.

“Braid knew upon drawing up his plans that they were not complete. A vital piece of the gate was absent, but he went about his construction anyway. He found stones from places of horror, churches of evil gods long abandoned and decimated, vile places the world had shunned. He took stones from altars of human sacrifice, took the foundation stones of prisons. As he gathered these stones, he looked for the most corrupt ground he could find. He needed a terrain dark enough to nurture the gate. He tried building his gate upon battlefields, upon desecrated ground, upon every horrible spot he could find, with little success. After years of trial, he had found a ground fertile for demonic footing. But the gate still didn’t work. Darkness coalesced under the threshold, but no portal opened. He kept at his work.

“He carved hollow places within the gate and stuffed sacrifices into the holes. The gate bubbled a bit, but still did not open. He grasped more tender sacrifices. He placed the young and helpless in these hollows and the gate opened for a brief span of time.”

Oddy growled, shaking his head. His hand flexed upon his axe handle and he lifted the weapon to bring it down once in wrath. The butt of the axe slammed the floor and he snarled. "And why wasn't the church made aware of his treachery then? Why were the lives of those children not worth the telling of the tale?"

Simon shook his head, sorrow raking across his face. "I was otherwise occupied through wars of vital import. People were dying in other places around the world. The lives of five children, when weighed against whole civilizations, could not be prioritized."

"The life of one child cannot be weighed."

"So the church believes, and I respect that. I did what I could. Now may I tell my story?"

Oddy growled but said nothing further.

"How do you know all this, Simon?" Collette asked. Trevonne could not know the answer, but she had taken it on faith that all she had heard was true. Simon had come to her once before. His tale had been of use on that day. She just assumed he knew of what he spoke.

"Simon knows all that has happened and is happening. It is his curse. He makes what difference he can, but often his stories fall upon deaf ears."

"And often he chooses his tale wrong, and to the wrong people," Oddy snapped.

Simon's face rippled with self-loathing. "The lives of the children opened the gate, but could not sustain it. Their lives were too fleeting. Braid devised another way. He would use the essence of a child, and his gate would be a success."

“Essence? I have often heard the word used, but its meaning is vague and subjective,” Trevonne said.

“On the contrary, its meaning is specific. The essence of man is his seed, the essence of woman, her menses. The essence of a child is its breath. It uses its breath to summon help, food, and any aid it requires. The breath of a child is its only defense. Braid needed to capture the breath of five children.

“Before he could accomplish this, he was killed. The mercenary group he tied himself to was destroyed—to the man—in the manor known as the Hive. He was sent back to hell a failure.”

“What happened to Holly?” Renalt sobbed. “How does she fit into this?”

“Vrice, when he summoned Braid into this world, needed a sacrifice to take Braid’s place in hell. His eye fell upon Holly. He sent her to the eternal torment of Blythe’s hell. She is beyond you now. You have my sympathies.”

Renalt collapsed in grief. Trevonne felt the sickening strength of her lover’s debauchery. Vile beyond comprehension, Trevonne realized Vrice needed to die. The memory of this woman, Holly, demanded vengeance. She stood, making her way across the room to Renalt’s side. She knelt before him and took his hand. He looked up at her and she gazed into his eyes.

“I vow to you, upon my life and my power, that I will aid you in bringing him to his end. I will do whatever it takes to destroy this man that has stolen from you.” *I need to do it. I need to avenge this woman. I have given him too much, let him get away with too many horrors.* “I am with you until she is avenged.”

She looked back at Collette. Resolve formed on the face of her friend. “I, as well. These fiends must be stopped. For Holly’s sake, and for the sake of the children, and the world at large, I am with you.”

“I sympathize with your loss, but cannot place it above the welfare of my orphanage. I will not aid you in your vengeance. But this plot will endanger the children of the world. You have my axe. What is our move?”

“Braid possesses the crystals that contain the breath of the children.”

Oddy sighed and lowered his head.

“They are hidden somewhere within the tower. An ally comes to our side. We need the crystals. We need this ally in order to make our fight. We wait. Collette and Trevonne will try to find the crystals. We will prepare ourselves and wait for our moment.”

The City of Raptors

Mandrake cursed as he alighted on the branch and tossed a glance over his shoulder at his cousin. Azure coming had been a good idea in theory, but reality was quickly breaking that theory down into large, cumbersome facts. He flew too slow. He had almost no stamina and he was afraid of nearly everything. Azure slowly fell to the same branch as Mandrake, sweating profusely and dropping to his stomach to grasp the branch with both arms. His breath billowed out of him in gusts. His limbs trembled. “I must rest. I cannot go on.”

Mandrake dropped to a knee and clamped his hand across Azure’s mouth. “Silence, cousin, you will bring them down upon us.”

Azure froze, his eyes riddled with fear and apprehension. Mandrake released his cousin’s mouth.

“Who? Who will fall upon us?” Azure’s whisper was barely a breath, but Mandrake grabbed his mouth, silencing him again. He shook his head vehemently and looked out over the landscape.

Behind them, the Killing Fields were barren, nothing but grass and weeds, with the occasional wild flower or lone stalk of wild wheat. Above, death circled, reeling in the sky, staring down at everything—hunting birds on the wing, twirling and wheeling, silent as their shadows that swooped the ground. A small track of land lay in front of them before a wild forest. Thick and tangled, it closed off all vision of what lay beyond. He had enemies here, those who never liked him, who thought his presence a blemish on the land. What would they think of his tiny cousin? He was no hunter or warrior; he was a visitor. Azure was a fey, nothing more, and fey were of little use here. He was a guest of Mandrake’s, but that would do little to mark his worth.

Mandrake felt the eyes of the murder upon him and he let them stare. The forest was alive with their black eyes and oily wings. Dark beasts they were, jealous guards of their territory. They granted passage to few. Mandrake wondered if he still numbered among that group.

Azure sat up and tossed sweat-wet locks back from his eyes. “Where are we headed now?” he asked.

“Does the word ‘silence’ mean nothing to you, cousin?” Mandrake snapped. Azure lowered his head. “They are looking at us, deciding if they will allow us passage. If they decide not to, then we are likely dead. You must show respect.”

“We are princes of the Veil. They are to show us respect,” Azure breathed.

Mandrake tossed a withering stare upon him. "That kind of thinking will get you killed. They owe us nothing. Your title means nothing to them. They are—"

In a burst of motion from the forest, hundreds of birds took to wing all at once. The murder rose like a black wave to break upon the Killing Fields. They appeared as a cloud of oily smoke that drifted in the air around the slight tree Mandrake stood upon.

"Stand up, you fool. Keep your head down," Mandrake commanded. The air around them filled with croaks and caws of chaos. Mandrake squared his shoulders and stared ahead.

Tretch alighted on a fat, dead branch before Mandrake.

"Bladewing, you have returned." His dry, broken voice was a crack upon the air. "When you left, I was made to believe you would not be back for long years, if at all. But now I find you at my border. Can you explain yourself?"

Tretch's wet, black eyes stayed locked on Mandrake, a good sign, a sign of respect. Mandrake focused his on Tretch alone, ignoring the murder in the air around him. "I come seeking the wisdom of my father. Does he rest within? Is he about court?"

"The king has left us. He has been gone for many days, hunting and patrolling his domain. He has become restless since your departure. It is plain to all that your absence causes him great pain."

Tretch was speaking on the condition of the king. This was unfamiliar ground. Never did any within the court discuss the king's mood with an outsider. Mandrake nodded solemnly, bowing his head.

“I surely meant no harm to my father. I simply needed to go to my love. My heart still rests in Liefdom.”

“The city that cast you out.”

“He was not cast out,” Azure said.

Mandrake cursed. He spun to Azure, glaring at him.

Tretch screamed and lifted into the air. His murder ripped the air with caws and screeching. Mandrake grabbed Azure by the neck. “Do you realize what you have done? Keep your mouth shut! You just offended a powerful creature. We will be lucky to survive this!” Mandrake shouted over the terror in the air. “If you speak again, I will feed you to them.” Mandrake’s heart stammered frantically. His mind raced as he tried to find a way to turn back his fortunes.

Tretch dropped to the branch again, his razor-sharp beak open and screaming. Mandrake threw open his wings, letting them gleam off the afternoon sun. He loosed his prongs and hissed. The murder alighted to the tree, making the branches sag. Hundreds of eyes and gaping beaks everywhere Mandrake looked, furious crows closed around him. Azure, behind him, bawled in fear. Mandrake roared and stepped forward, his face closing to a grimace upon Tretch.

“My guest has offended you, and I will answer for him. Send your champions and I will face them.”

Tretch stared at Mandrake, then turned and stuttered out a call to his murder. They shook their heads and buffeted their wings, but Tretch’s call battered them back. One by one, they lifted into the air to drift around the tree again.

“Will you have me fight to prove your honor, Tretch? I will do it. Would you clip me? If that is your charge, then I will pay it.”

“Your guest knows not his place. His life is forfeit.”

“I can allow no harm to come to him.” Mandrake felt his musk heavy in the air and it strengthened him. “If you would take his life, then come and find my blades. Short of that, accept my apologies. With my solemn word, it will not happen again.”

Tretch snapped shut his beak, bobbing his head menacingly before he spoke again. “What brings you home, Bladewing?”

“I seek audience with my father. I seek the wisdom of the Raptors.”

“I will permit you passage. Control your guest. I will not abide insult to my king.”

“You have my word. It will not happen again.”

But it would happen again.

Mandrake made his way through the trees, bobbing through the low-hanging branches and the thick press of vines and brambles that rose like a wall to protect the city. As he moved, he could see the intimidating glances of the city’s residents. The outside ring, once past the border-protecting crows and ravens, was filled with fat vultures, hunched and suspicious, regurgitating their meals, snapping the half-digested food up in their hungry mouths and crunching the bones. Their red eyes looked hungrily upon Azure. Mandrake wondered what he had been thinking when he agreed to bring his cousin along.

They moved through the eagles and, as they did, Mandrake kept an eye out for Vonor. He would find out Mandrake was back, and as soon as he did, he would make his move again. His constant conniving and ear-bending would

plea to Chil that Mandrake be made into an example. Now that Mandrake had brought his weaker cousin, Chil might listen to those pleas. Vonor held none of the honor of his kind, and harbored a legendary hate for Mandrake. They passed the eagles and the hawks, making their way to the seat of power, where they could wait for the king.

Past the owls, the trees fell abruptly away, as did the ground, for an impressive drop. A granite cliff, towering over a long, wide river, held the nests of the royalty. Mandrake hovered over the drop to the river, turning to face the cliff, and waited humbly for audience.

Below, the wrens, herons, and ibis jerked food from the waters, glutting themselves on the tender fish that raced by in fear. Azure turned to Mandrake, his eyes weary, his face stretched in terror. He looked exhausted, about to fall from the sky.

“Can we not go rest on the forest floor until the king arrives? I grow tired of flight. I am not used to flying yet, cousin.”

Mandrake turned to snap at his cousin, but his heart filled with pity. “I’m sorry, Azure. It must be like this. We are guests in this place. Should we make ourselves comfortable, it would be a sign of disrespect to the king. You must stay here in the air, where he can see you when he returns. I believe you can do it, cousin. Just set your mind to it. And do not pity yourself.”

Nests dotted the cliff surface. The grand nest of the king dominated the cliff, boasting many levels, each large and comfortable. Many consorts roosted there, waiting for their king, tending his young. Mandrake knew many of their names. They looked out at him with a variety of expressions, some pleased to once again lay eye to him, but many seething at his presence. Fear rippled over

him. If leaving had caused pain to the king, Mandrake was very possibly no longer welcome here. He might be set upon when the king returned. Could he bring himself to fight Chil? Could he allow things to go that far? Was there any way to stop it? Much depended on the mood of his father. Mandrake looked to his cousin, wondering if he had led him to his death.

A majestic screech ripped the air. Toward the forest line, on the cliff's top, perched Vonor, staring out at Mandrake with hungry eyes. He cursed as the giant eagle lifted into the air to stop before him, flapping his wings and hovering. "It has returned, and it brought with it a meal for me." His head swiveled to Azure. "A peace offering, how thoughtful." Vonor moved before Azure to scream in the face of the fey. Azure seemed to reside in a land of exhaustion where fear could no longer find purchase. He looked up at Vonor, eyes filled with misery, and looked away.

"He is about to fall from the very air. Let me snatch him up and carry him to my nest to allow him rest," Vonor laughed.

"Lay a talon upon him, Vonor. I beg of you. I need very little provocation to end this matter between us. How will your beak fair against my steel, do you think?" Mandrake said. He locked his eyes upon the massive gaze of the eagle and sneered.

"You truly think I fear you, don't you? You think terror holds back my claw?"

"I think if you attack the adopted son of the king, he will eat your beating heart. I think he will scatter your bones across the Killing Fields for the ants and centipedes to strip the pesky tendons that remain after your bones are picked clean of meat. But I would stay his talon with a plea, that I myself be allowed to

rend you to bits and feed on your heart. I fear you not. Your kind may hold you in highest regard, but I know you for what you are, Vonor."

"And what is that?" the golden eagle snapped.

"A coward and a villain. You hold no allegiance to this city or its king. You hunt for glory, and would overthrow your ruler if given half the chance. Fear of his legion and his might hold you at bay. You are a base creature unworthy even of a good death."

Vonor screamed before turning and flapping away. Mandrake watched him go in wrath and hate.

The point of sundown neared as the first speck appeared on the horizon. Mandrake watched as the mark grew and, when he was sure, he turned to his cousin. Azure hung, nearly dead, in the air. He looked as if he would drop from the sky at any moment. The herons would snap him out of the river and devour him instantly.

"Hold yourself up but a little longer, cousin. I see the king and his entourage in the sky growing closer. You will rest soon." *Or die, if my leaving has raised his ire too high.* If death came, it would be quick and painless. Chil was not a creature of cruelty. But Mandrake did not expect death.

The king screeched into the city, lifting his voice in a high scream that raced the air beyond the river to echo back from the distant hills. He landed in his nest, dropping his meal. The falcon guards that served as escort spiraled in the air. One by one they slipped passed Mandrake, each lowering a gaze upon him that brought a tendril of fear rising up from his heart. They turned, each going to a nest that clung in the V pattern that embraced the king's home. Chil dropped his catches in his other nests and his family began to feed on his

offerings. He paid no mind to Mandrake or Azure. His mind was for his meal. Chil devoured, his black beak red with gore. From his nest hung many trinkets and trophies, dripping from his home as a warning to his enemies. His young cawed and squeaked, hopping around their father and snapping hungry jaws at his food. His head bobbed in their direction as a warning, but his heart was not in it. He soon ripped shreds of meat from his meal and tossed them to his children.

“Bladewing has come home,” he said. A great cacophony of screeches, screams of approval and disdain, rose from all over the city. Mandrake looked up to the cliff top, lined with both brothers and sisters he counted as allies, and with dark souls he knew loathed him, as he did them. “He has brought with him one that threatens to drop from the sky. Has my son forgotten our code against weakness?”

“I would ask my father to look upon this one again, for I judge him not as weak, or I would not have brought him with me to this place. My respect for the great City of Raptors is too grand. This one beside me possesses the great heart of a harpy eagle. He is my equal, though his frame is weak. This is the fey I told you so much about, the one I knew as enemy, who changed his heart, admitting he was wrong after I healed him. He has not the pride and arrogance of some in the Veil, even some in this very city.” Mandrake looked up to see a scowling Vonor. “My father misjudges his guest.”

“Let him come forward then and I will weigh him,” Chil said. He snapped at his young, chasing them from his nest as Mandrake and Azure made for the nest. Azure swayed in the air and Mandrake cursed.

When they reached the nests, Azure dropped to the netting, curling up fetal and sobbing. His wings trembled, his body wracked in tremors. Chil looked up at Mandrake with disapproving eyes. Mandrake shook his head, fighting to think of what to say to save his cousin's life.

"Is this what you bring to my city, Mandrake?"

"When you know him as I do, you will be honored he is here," Mandrake said. He bowed to the king of the raptors, keeping his head low until addressed.

"Why have you come home so soon? They have not driven you out, unless you bring this one as prisoner. Have you come to answer the question between you and Vonor? Have you come to breathe life back into a grieving father? What has brought you before me on this day, Mandrake?"

"I am dying," Mandrake said.

Silence. He waited for any response.

"Tell me what has happened to you, son."

"While lying in my home one night, my enemy visited."

"We have spoken of him often. You finally faced him. Did he find you wanting?"

"He was not there exactly. My home is too small for his form. He appeared in spirit and he attacked me. I believe he directed the true attack at my child." Mandrake shook his head, his mind a riot of emotions. Now standing before Chil, in the place he felt most comfortable, he realized the true gravity of the words he spoke. He was making his war in the waning days of his life. He had no time to tarry. A great need for haste gripped him and he looked to Azure, knowing they would have to rest before they could continue.

"This beast came at your boy?"

“He did, father. But he looked different than I have seen him in the past. He was more sinister and despicable. He was a vile creature, demonic and hated.”

“How has he harmed you?”

“He stole my breath from me and I slowly suffocated.”

“It does not take but a moment to suffocate. How have you survived this?”

“My family found me and healed me in the way of the fey. But I do not know why it took so long. Time slowed and my torture was being drawn out.”

“Curious. So you have come home for a warrior’s death? I’m not sure Vonor could give you one, but you can settle a disturbance I am having with the bear clan. Maybe they can give a death worthy of you.”

“Apologies, my king, but death is not what I seek. I have come for your wisdom and lore.” Mandrake knew his next words would bring fury to Chil’s breast and he braced himself. “I seek the world of man. I mean to travel to my child.”

With no outburst forthcoming, Mandrake looked up at his king, confusion brimming.

Chil looked out at the fields beyond the river, his keen eye seeking something there, something that would soothe him, Mandrake thought. “Why do you not seek your enemy in the world of the Veil? Surely this is where he resides.”

“My journey may yet take me to him, but he is not the one I seek. My mind is set on finding my child. He is the one, I fear, in danger of death. He is the one who needs my aid.”

“Your child does not need you in order to find his death, Mandrake. He is about that task all by himself. Humans die, Mandrake. It is part of their nature.”

“Have you looked at me, father? Have you seen what I am? Look to my cousin, and then again place your eye on the one before you. How much of a difference do you see?” Anger bubbled in his chest and he threw fuel upon it. “I am a beast of war, born for dark purpose. The gods created me to kill. I am meant to bring wrath and blood to the world.”

“You are a creature of love, Mandrake,” Chil said calmly.

Something within him steamed at the word, as if it were unwelcome on his ear. His musk on the air, Chil beat his wings once in its cloud. “You despise my words, but they are true. You came to me a killer. I saw what you did to those satyrs. But that is not your true nature.”

“How would you know my nature, Chil?”

Chil lowered a gaze upon Mandrake that served only to fire his mind and boil his blood. “Do not get familiar with me, fey. I am not your flower king, what do they call him? Lotus? I am not to be bullied by the likes of a fairy. I allow none to speak to me like this and live.”

Mandrake stared into the kite’s eyes, then lowered his gaze.

“Gather your wits about you and seek a gentler tone, or meet my wrath.”

Mandrake could not bottle his anger any more. His prongs unsheathed themselves. Chil hopped forward, buffeting Mandrake with his wing and knocking the fey to the nettling. He hopped again and his talon closed around Mandrake’s throat, pinning him to the nest. Chil squeezed. Mandrake fought for breath, none coming. He wheezed, grabbing at the talon and pulling with all his

considerable might. Chil tightened his grip and Mandrake purpled, his face swelling as his body begged for air.

“You forget your place, Bladewing. My heart swells with love for you, but you will show me respect in my court, or I will snap your puny neck and feed you to my young. Are we understood?”

Mandrake had no breath for an answer. He could only nod and pray for mercy. Chil hopped back, folding his wings and sitting to roost once again.

“Now that that unpleasantness is behind us, we can continue. You have come to me for something, and my blessing is beyond your grasp. So, beg of me a favor, and I will consider it.”

“I know not how to continue. Knowledge of the passage between worlds has been withheld from me. I must gain the lore to travel to the land of man. How do I proceed in my journey? How do I find him?”

Chil watched Mandrake until he found what he looked for in the fey’s face and nodded. “There are many ways into the world of the humans. I will consider and talk to my elders on the best method for you and your companion.” To Chil’s credit, he did not roll his eyes when referring to Azure. “Go now, to your nest, and find rest. Allow your cousin to sleep and gain his strength. I will see you on the morn. I will answer your question then. Are you hungry? Can I give you some meat?”

“I am hungry, my king, but I can hunt for myself. I would ask not for your hospitality.”

Chil nodded, pleased by the retort. Mandrake hoisted his cousin up in his arms and made for his nest.

At daybreak, Mandrake sat, watching the light filter through the greenery outside his rough-hewn cave. Carving out this cave from the side of the cliff had taken him weeks of bone-numbing work. Through it all, he had kept intact the small shrub that served as a door for his home. The whimsical light threw color around as if for sport, dancing beautifully across the macabre spectacle that was his back wall. Hanging from gut cord dangled all manner of trophies and symbols. A raccoon fist swayed in the light breeze, dried and curled and desperate. A series of bear claws, signifying the war the raptors had waged against the brute nation of the bear, hung clattering against the left edge. Feathers marked the deaths of his brothers in battle. The jawbone of a panther framed the wall, casting a grim snarl at Mandrake, and he wondered what it all meant.

Was there something to be said about him here? Something about the kind of being he was? Or the kind of person Thomas would become? He had hunted and killed and fought and mourned as a warrior. Yet he had not become a changeling. The battles he had fought had sullied his hands, but they had not formed into claws. Was it possible to take life and remain innocent, or was he damning Thomas to darkness? Mandrake toyed with these musings and others as he waited for his cousin to wake up. When Azure did crawl from the leather strung bed in the corner, Mandrake shook himself from this darkness and made way to Chil and the continuing of his quest.

When Mandrake arrived at the nest, he found its layers filled with all manner of owls and ravens. They stared down on him as a jury, their countenance stern, their eyes steel. Chil and Tretch clung beside them. Mandrake suddenly couldn't swallow. His throat dried and a bead of sweat ran down the

middle of his back. Azure landed in the nest beside Mandrake, his head low, his hands folded before him.

“Bladewing has come here in search of our wisdom. He wishes to bring war upon the world of man for the sake of his child. I have visited with my elders as represented here, with my captain,” Chil motioned to the falcon on his right, “and my dearest friend,” pointing to Tretch on his left. “We have decided this is a battle Bladewing cannot win. To go to the world of man is an assault in itself. It is madness to go there in search of an enemy greater than yourself when you will be weakened by that world in the going. I cannot abide this choice, and offer another in its stead.” Mandrake longed to interrupt, but knew he could not. “I will allow Bladewing to fight to the death to preserve his honor and pose a fitting end to this world.”

Mandrake lowered his head. He fought for words to say, but they were denied to him by his love for Chil and the land in which he stood.

Azure felt no such restraint.

“That is not good enough,” Azure said. He stepped forward, ducking away from Mandrake’s reaching grasp and striding before the assembly. The collective screamed. The city screeched in indignation, and Azure waited for their outrage to play itself out before he continued.

“I am Gentry Azure Rose, Prince of the Veil. This holds no meaning for you. You are a race of physical power and violent might. I know little or nothing about that world. But I know about justice as we dole it out back home, and I know a bit about character, as I am a student of it. And I know something about the one ideal you prize more than any other—more than strength, or power, or violence. I know about freedom.”

Mandrake gripped Azure's shoulder, but he shrugged him away with a snarl. He held a fire Mandrake had never witnessed before. He stepped back and pulled tight rein on his fear.

"When there has been a great wrong, the action demands justice. The two bring balance to the world once again. A wrong deed has been committed, an atrocity that has thrown our world off-balance. A child was assaulted—nearly murdered. A child, like the ones I see flitting around here, a child as dear to Mandrake as those you bring food to after a hunt. What would be the wrath laid upon me if I were to try to harm one of these? Our world is teetering. It no longer makes sense. It must be put right again or it will spin off into chaos. Justice is needed here. And it will be enforced. You do not have it within your power to deny it. You are mighty, but not that mighty."

A chord rang out within Mandrake. His cousin's words resounded strong and full, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Of character, I am a decent judge. This gift, given by my father, I have worked a lifetime to hone. I made a grievous error in judgment of Mandrake once. I will not make it again—and I will not allow this company to make it either. You have all seen what this fey does. I look upon the far wall of his home, here in this great city, and I see the fruits of his time here. I do not understand it, but I bear witness to it. I bear witness to his spirit when he stands in defiance. I have bore the brunt of that spirit. He is beyond anything that can be asked of him.

"We have heard the description of his enemy. We know what he faces. Who among you would stand before me and tell me you truly believe him incapable of defeating it? Stand before me so I may call you a fool!"

Razor sharp beaks opened to snap closed in outrage. Many buffeted their wings, but no voice lifted in opposition. None stepped forward. Mandrake's heart filled with his cousin's love and confidence and he felt invincible.

"You were all born of freedom. It is the air that carries you when you pump your wings and take to flight. It is in your scream and your need to hunt. How will you now stand in defiance of Mandrake's freedom to fight, his freedom to live, and his freedom to die the death of his choosing? I was denied the freedom of flight for many years of my life. I know the constraint of the ground. And I know the freedom of flying. It is against your very nature to stand in our way. And if you would try, I would curse you to loss of wing and loss of life."

Azure turned and, with those words, stepped back to his cousin's side. He folded his hands before him and lowered his head. Naught but the wind spoke until Chil opened his beak.

"For standing in defiance of me in my court, and damning me with the words of a curse, your life is mine to take." Mandrake was a breath away from stepping in and pulling his prongs in defense, when Chil spoke again. "For your words and obvious wisdom beyond your years and mine, I salute you and recognize you as a power to be rivaled by my own talons. I count you as a warrior and grant you your life back."

Chil turned his eye to Mandrake. "You surround yourself with mighty company indeed. I will not stand in your way any further. The chiding of your prince has found purchase in my heart. The world of man, we pass through upon the air, but it is travel we cannot take you on, save two of our kind. The raven and the crow are spirit guides to the dead animals in the world of man. They carry the souls of those they feed upon to the realms beyond. If you wish to

travel to the world of man, it will be on Tretch's back, and the back of one of his kind. I grant blessing to this act."

Chil looked Mandrake in the eye and opened his wings wide. "I wish I could take you there myself, Bladewing. Your home awaits you when your travels are done. Go now to your path of blood, and walk it proudly. I give you my blessing in your travels."

Mandrake's heart soared. He grabbed Azure up in a crushing embrace. "I knew you would come in handy."

Nardoc

Tretch alighted on the exact tree Mandrake had pointed to. He stepped off the crow's back and dropped to a knee. "I felt nothing. No change, no passing over a border. It staggers the mind to think we are truly here." Mandrake looked beyond these gardens at the colossal castle before him. No fey built structures that extreme.

"This is definitely the realm of man. Do you not feel it weighing heavily upon you?"

Mandrake did feel different. The world felt thicker, everything denser than it had been in the Veil. The wind was harsher, the heat of the sun, a little hotter, the world more vibrant and garish. The crow picked at his feathers before turning to Mandrake.

"I talked to the owls before I left the city. They told me tales of fairies that have, in the past, come to this world, and the abilities they had upon reaching it,"

Tretch said. "You can make yourself invisible to most men and women of this world. The animals will see you. The wizards, and some of the holy men, can see you. Children often times can see you, but the average man or woman will look right past you when in this invisible form.

"You can make yourself larger. Your heart will grow to the size of a human heart, and your body will grow proportionally. For most fairies, it will make them about human size, a little smaller maybe. But for you, Mandrake, there is no telling how big you will get. When you approach your child, be wary. Your presence will charm their life. They will not age and die like a normal man or woman."

"My child is still a babe. Will he mature at the same rate?" Mandrake asked.

"That is unknown. You are a Gentry. Your child is royalty. Remember, royals are protected. Your child will be guarded well."

Mandrake nodded.

"Thank you, Tretch. How can we get a hold of you when we wish to go back?" Azure said. Tretch answered and Mandrake realized he had not thought of going back. He had not thought of home since they left, save the few times Pea had come to mind. Would his path lead him back to Liefdom? His father's words came back to him and he decided he didn't want to think about it. They left Tretch to nibble at his feathers.

Mandrake and Azure flew off toward the sweeping grandeur of the castle, comprised of grey, weathered stone and ravenous ivy. Statues and gargoyles rested in every niche. Balconies spanned from many levels. Dozens of large, stained windows blazed brilliant colors. Towers lifted to gigantic heights.

Mandrake felt minuscule and weak in the face of its might. He flew to the wall to peer over at the city.

The filth and stench of the sprawling city sickened him. Refuse and swill ran the streets. The people looked worn and rotted. Everything looked tired and brown. Mandrake saw a child swinging a rat by the tail, slamming its head on the cobbled streets, and he turned to Azure, who looked about to be ill.

“Why do they live like this?” Azure asked.

“Most who find themselves in situations like this have no other choice, cousin. Come, the streets of Nardoc are not for us. Our business lies behind us, with the castle and its men.” He turned to the castle, and the balconies and windows that littered its surface. His eye fell upon an upper-most balcony with a black flag furled beneath it. “That window, that balcony, right there.” A thrill pulsed through his body and he gripped Azure’s arm. “He is in that room right there.” Mandrake closed his eyes and willed himself to be invisible. He lifted into the air, unsure if Azure was following.

The world had taken on a strange, trembling quality since his eye had fallen to the room. He could not be sure of his surroundings. Wind rushed by him, but he could not feel it. Noises were outside, but he heard none of them. Azure was a distant thought in his head, but that drifted away as the world honed itself to one simple edge—one irresistible urge. The dire need to stand before his child slowly pulled him to the balcony. He touched down near the charred hole in the floor. The railing looked crumbled and badly broken. The door had been locked. Mandrake willed himself to a greater size and his head rivaled the doorframe. He grabbed the handle of the door and twisted sharply.

The metal whined and snapped the door's lock, cracking in two. Mandrake gently pushed the doors apart, entering a room draped in shadow.

A human slept on a small cot near the decorative crib in the center of the room. She was barely a woman, dressed in simple garb, a servant of some kind. The crib sheets rustled slightly and Mandrake's heart stopped. He clenched hands to fists, sweat coating his skin. He ducked his way into the room. His barbed shadow, twisted by the waning sun, reached to the crib. He crept slowly, ignoring the sleeping woman murmuring beside it. Once at the child's bed, he reached a long, thin hand to the draperies. He eased back the curtain and held his breath to behold his child.

Thomas churned in the bed below, his hands clawing at his pudgy neck, his eyes bulging. His face was an angry weal of purple, his body contorting and twisting in the throes of death. Mandrake hissed. He ripped the draperies aside, staring down at the dying boy. His head roared in rage and sorrow as he beheld the horror.

The woman started, drawing back, looking at the curtains rip away. Her gaze traveled right through Mandrake, her unseeing eyes reaching the open doors of the balcony before she screamed for the guards.

The door burst open and four men rushed in, intent on bringing harm to the child, Mandrake assumed. They stepped into the room, lowering their spears and staring frantic in every corner. They looked right through him and he growled.

With a pounding of his wings, he flew into the first guard, leading with his elbow and slamming him to the wall. His head cracked the wall and the soldier dropped lifeless to the ground. The man beside him stared horrorstruck

as Mandrake backhanded him. The devastating impact shattered the jaw and tossed the soldier back to clatter against the far wall. Mandrake's prongs extended as he lashed out in a sweep of the next guard's ankle, ripping him from his feet and dropping him to the ground. Mandrake grabbed him by the chest plate and ripped him from the floor. His rage filled his roar and the human in his hands screamed in terror. Mandrake lifted the man above his head, nearly brushing the ceiling of the room, before slamming him to the ground, unconscious. Mandrake turned to the last guard, who stared before him, making absurd jabs at Mandrake, nowhere near striking his target.

His eyes wide and staring, the human was helpless as Mandrake grabbed his spear and, with a quick elbow shot, snapped the blade from the shaft. The guard yelped and Mandrake snatched him up. He grabbed him close, wrapping his powerful, slender arms around the man's neck. He hissed as he looked up. Someone in rioting robes rushed forward from the hall beyond. Mandrake squeezed the guard in his arms, who reached out for the robed figure.

The robed one lifted his hands in the air and began speaking a language Mandrake did not know. "He can't help you, swine," Mandrake spat in the ear of the man he held. "He can't see me." The soldier passed out and Mandrake tossed him aside. He opened his arms, his prongs extended and fists tightened. He hissed, pulling his wings up and ready as the man stormed up the hall.

Azure was talking, but Mandrake could not be reached. This one wished to hurt his child. Mandrake stepped forward when two massive spears of ice came streaking from his enemy's hands. Mandrake twisted away, but the first impaled his thigh, the second, his upper left wing. The pain was hideous; the bone-numbing cold dragged him to his knee. Mandrake looked up as the spell

caster stomped his foot and the floor rippled. The wave broke across Mandrake, throwing him to his back. He fought to get to his elbow as the third onslaught struck him. The devastating blaze of light, wretched and powerful, slammed his head back to crack against the floor, bleeding. He tried to pump his wings, but they would only rattle against the floor and slice up the rugs. He fought to lift his head again, but it weighed more than the rest of the world. He clenched his fist and waited. The wizard knelt before him now. Mandrake reached up with a pronged fist the wizard caught. This one's strength was something of legend. The prong began to bend painfully as the man wrenched it back.

Mandrake moaned as the spell caster fought to snap his prong. His musk, heavy upon the air, brought the man's eyes to tearing, but that seemed the only attack that could worm its way through to this monstrous opponent. Mandrake fought to focus on a fluttering before his eyes. He stared, his enemy fighting to focus on the same motion. Azure hung in the air above Mandrake's face.

"Grant us mercy, mighty spell caster," Azure squeaked. "We are not your enemy. We have come to help."

The wizard grabbed Mandrake by the face and slammed the back of his head against the floor. Agony shot through his body and darkness descended on his blackened wings.

Mandrake came to in a room, dark and cold. A table sat in the center of the room, a chair beside it. Void of windows, and sporting but one door, a single sputtering candle lit the drab room.

"Azure?" Mandrake hissed. "Are you there?" He heard a shuffle across the room and Mandrake pushed closer. His thigh and wing throbbed painfully

as he moved. He grimaced as he reached the far end of the room and peered into a small cage suspended from the low-set ceiling. Within sat Azure, cross-legged, his hands bound in tiny irons, his mouth gagged.

“Come here,” Mandrake commanded, and Azure stood. Mandrake slid his prong into the bars, slicing the gag away with ease. “Where are we? How did he get us here?”

“We are in what he called a cell. It is a cage for criminals. They think us villains, Mandrake. I wonder what gave them that impression.”

“We are captured by our enemy, Azure. They are lucky to be alive.”

“What makes you think that? What gave you that impression before you began pounding those men to the ground? Was it the fact that they saw the prince in danger from an invisible threat and threw themselves in harms way to protect him? Or that they were posted right outside his door to watch over him in the first place?” Azure crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. “You have acted a fool, cousin. If we lose our lives for it, then you have just thrown us away on a rash act.”

Mandrake shook his head and sat the floor. “I was sure they wished him harm. They were all armed and stomping toward him. And did you see him, Azure? Were you watching him die? They have him trapped in the throes of smothering. They must be torturing him. They must be.”

“Did you see this enemy you speak of, cousin? This foul beast that attacked you before you wilted? Was he in that room with you?”

“You know he was not.”

“Then is it possible they are trying to help and you misunderstood their intentions?”

Mandrake's head hurt and he ran his hand across his face, the weight of his confusion falling on his shoulders. A lead ball rolled in his gut and he turned to Azure. "What do I do? I can't see reason when I think of him. They all seem foes to me. I'm sure Thomas has some allies here in this world. How will I know them from his enemies?"

"You can't see this world rationally while Thomas lies dying. You will have to trust my judgment. It is why I desired to come along with you. You are prone to outburst and deadly recourse. I am here to inject a little sense into your plans. Trust me to find your enemies, Mandrake. Until I do, protect me and let me examine this world."

A tumbling sound came from the door, a rolling and sliding. Mandrake looked to Azure, his musk lifting around him. "Do not attack, cousin. Let me talk to him first."

The door swung open and Mandrake saw the spell caster standing outside the room. Mandrake's heart beat out a threatening rhythm and he growled. The man stared back, no emotion on his shrewd face, just dark eyes and a solid mask of power and control. Mandrake's heart jumped as he realized this man was beyond him. A tingling of fear came to him and he lowered his eyes.

Beside the wizard stood a lithe creature, beautiful and delicate, with flowing blonde hair and dark green eyes. The roots of her hair seemed tinted green and behind her left ear hung a cherry blossom. She wore two narrow-bladed swords on her hips and a linen robe. Her eyes widened as she beheld Mandrake. She immediately held her breath and dropped to her knees. Her head bowed low.

"My prince, to see you in such a state brings me misery. I will see to your immediate release." Mandrake nodded, uncomfortable with the genuflection. He looked to the wizard, seeing shock and puzzlement.

"Rayph, you have to let them out. They cannot be your enemy. It is just not possible. They are fairies; they are good to their core. If they were sour, they would not appear in this form, Rayph. For me, for the love you hold in your heart, please, you must set them free."

Rayph waved a hand across the doorframe with no visible effect. He bowed his head low to Mandrake, crossing his arms before him.

"It seems I have incarcerated a prince. I must beg his pardon. I simply did not know you for what you are. Nor would I have recognized you as royalty, had I known. My name is Rayph Ivoryfist. This beside me is Sisalyyon Tet-Tear. You are in my personal dungeon in the castle of Phomax Nardoc, in the city of Nardoc, in the country of Lorinth."

"Free my cousin," Mandrake demanded.

A second wave of the hand brought the hinges of the cage squeaking and the bonds that held Azure opened. Azure lifted into the air to rest upon the table beside Mandrake. Sisalyyon looked up from her knees, her eyes widening yet again.

"Gentry Azure Rose, it is such an honor to kneel before you. Long live your noble father. Long live your rule."

"Sisalyyon, how is it that you know of our culture and our ruling family?"

"I am fey, your highness, or at least half fey. My mother was a dryad. My father was a human warrior. I was raised in the Veil, a cherry tree, and count myself among your subjects. The honor of kneeling before you and your

renowned cousin is beyond my reckoning. Rayph, this is Gentry Mandrake, son of my king. He is the first warrior fairy to be born in thousands of years. He is the protector of my kind, a champion of my people. You need fear nothing from him.”

Rayph nodded. He stepped before Mandrake and smiled, though a bit of doubt tucked away in the folds of that smile. “By what spark of chance do I find you and your cousin in the chambers of my prince, attacking my guards?” The man’s tone was non-confrontational. His pose relaxed, he seemed generally curious. With the bluntness in his question, a refusal to ply gilded words, Mandrake realized he liked this man.

“My child has been attacked. I came to see him, and find and destroy his assailant.”

“Thomas is your child?!” Sisalyyon asked, her voice dripping with shock.

“He is.”

“Rayph, this is a valuable ally. There is much to discuss. You have been given a boon from the gods, my friend. This is Thomas’s greatest defender.”

The Library

“What was it?” Azure asked.

“I’m not sure,” Rayph said. “It was nothing remotely human. But I searched my tomes of demonology for its likeness or description, and found nothing nearing its appearance. It was about three feet tall, with large wings and

the head of a dragon. It steamed and popped. Its tail was large and curled. Other than that, I can't say I caught many details. It had an aura of a vile sort, something from the dregs of evil. But in all my years, I never came across anything like it before."

Mandrake looked out the window of the sitting room at the rumbling city beyond the castle grounds. Rayph had been talking about Thomas now for hours. The spell he had cast slowed the smothering process considerably, but had not stopped it. Thomas was still dying. In a scant few days, it would all be over. Sisalyyon sat quiet in contemplation, her fingers nervously drumming on her knee as her jaw bunched and clenched.

Azure's questions were constant. He sought every detail he could wrench from Rayph. It was all swirling in Mandrake's head, a twisting cloud of confusion and hopelessness.

"I could spend the next five years in the city's library and still not find the answers I seek," Rayph said.

Azure's face lit up with sudden inspiration. "Maybe your library will not give up its secrets, but ours might."

"Azure, that's brilliant!" Sisalyyon said. "That is absolutely what we must do."

"What is this you speak of?" Rayph said.

The beginnings of hope touched Mandrake's heart. He knew not what his cousin meant, but he had long ago stopped doubting Azure.

Azure, Rayph, and Mandrake stood upon Sisalyyon's hill in the palace gardens as the half dryad untied her robe and let it fall away. Her naked body

was perfect in every way—toned, soft, and supple. Gazing upon her was perfection. Mandrake thought of Pea’s beauty, which warmed him.

She stepped to the center of her hill and extended her hand to Azure. He nodded gravely and came to rest on her palm. She hugged him tight to her bosom, and her skin slowly began to darken. Her hair grew wild and free, lifting into the air as if by a breeze. Her face stretched, becoming rough and dark, blending with her neck and chest to form a trunk. Her legs grew together. Her feet elongated and dug into the ground. Her hair stretched and thickened to branches and its tips bloomed cherry blossoms.

Rayph turned to Mandrake with awe upon his face. “No matter how many times I see that happen, it still takes my breath away.” Mandrake turned his head to hide his scowl. Sisalyyon was taking on a half form. Her face was nearly human again. Her arms were flesh but her hair and legs and abdomen were still cherry tree. She extended her hand to Mandrake and he buzzed forward.

She cradled him gently in her hands, pulling him within the swell of her breasts, and he closed his eyes. He breathed her in, the scent of cherry blossom filling his nostrils, coursing through his body, charging him with a desperate love for her. She hardened around him and her flesh became as wood. In moments, she opened and he flew away to gaze out upon the Veil.

The garden around him was not the trim, ordered park of the palace. Tangles and wild growth filled it. It thrummed with life, free of the designs of man. Its primal power comforted Mandrake.

In place of the castle stood a gathering of seven nests covered in drying blood and bones. They were huge, much larger than any he had seen for a bird—

even one so big as Vonor. Mandrake had to wonder what kind of monstrosity lived in those. A scream broke free upon the air. From one of the nests lifted the head of an enormous eagle. It stared up at the sky before its lion paws gripped the side of the nest and pulled up its lion body.

Mandrake stared at the beast until Azure whispered to him, "It is a mark of royalty. This beast is the gryphon, drawn to the site of any royal home. It is the sign of the kings of man." Mandrake nodded as the mighty creature laid its eyes upon him. Its thin tongue stretched from its beak, hunger in its eyes. Mandrake slid his prongs free of his wrists. It turned its head, disregarding the two fey. With a flex of its leg and a pump of its wings, it lifted into the air, screaming again. In a half-dozen beats of its wings, it stretched across the horizon. Rayph appeared behind them, casting his growth spell back on himself, restoring his size. He looked around him, silently gathering up the surroundings as he acclimated to the Veil.

"We had better move on," he said. "Time is short."

As Mandrake moved into the city, the constant dragging of the world of man had lifted. Shacks of domesticated satyrs sat at random intervals through the city. These satyrs were eating, drinking, and dancing around their homes. They were not the riotous breed he had fought. Most satyrs were peaceful and charmed. Among them danced nymphs, teasing them and pleasing them in turn. This relationship was a source of strength for humans. It defined their relations to each other. Though the sight of his old enemy stung Mandrake with anger, he knew to rein in that feeling.

They moved through the death fields, where banshees wailed out their mourning for the fallen humans they loved, washing out the bloody clothing of

those who died violently. They passed all the haunts of the fey who gathered around their human counterparts, until they reached the corresponding place where, in the city of Nardoc, the humans housed their library.

Here laid a foundation of white marble shot through with black. A sweeping staircase led to a forest of columns and pillars, huge in scope. They were not ordered in neat rows that held up a ceiling. These pillars held up nests at random intervals, like a chaotic, stone forest.

Slowly, they climbed the stairs and entered this hallowed ground. The pillars held etched script Mandrake could not read. Large claw marks scarred their surface, as if a great cat had sharpened its claws upon them. A sudden whooping cry and a scream sounded, and Mandrake looked up to see owls nested in the topmost points of the columns.

The musk of a huge beast hung about the place. Fur gathered in clumps on the floor. Behind many pillars sat bones, stripped clean of all meat and tendon. These bones were from all sorts of creatures—fey and humanoid—some larger than any human Mandrake had ever seen, some bearing the third eye socket of a Trimerian. Three platforms stood within the macabre spectacle.

Mandrake cast an eye upon Rayph, seeing a gnawing fear under tight control, and he grimaced. He turned to Azure. “Where have you brought us, cousin?”

“I have brought you into the lair of a library of sphinxes. We will get our answers here, or this site will be the end of our journey. You are no match for these creatures, cousin. Do not let your temper lead you. It will be the death of us.” Mandrake bit down on his fear and waited for the library to arrive.

He heard a low growl, a mewling cry, and a bray, as something moved beyond the pillars. Just out of sight, great beasts poured with liquid grace. They moved through the jumble of pillars to come out in a broad clearing. Another sound, some indescribable screeching, lifted into the air. The first of the sphinxes stepped into the muted light. The head of an eagle swept the three of them, eyes blazing with hunger and dark desire. It wore a halo of yellow light and had the body of a lion. It stalked upon one of the platforms, crouching to scream before settling itself and lying down. Soon another, bearing a woman's face, stepped regally to the next platform. It sneered at Rayph before settling in its spot. The last sphinx brayed, a riotous sound that chilled Mandrake's blood, as it leapt forward into the middle of the room. Slowly, it circled them. They stepped together, back-to-back, staring at the beast. A crown of fire sat upon the head of a grey ram, its horns, black and glistening. Its eyes were pits of misery and despair, wrath apparent in its gaze. Mandrake's musk rose to the air. Fear wrapped talons around him and squeezed. He stared at the beast. This was not the death he had long seen in his future. He pulled away from the creature and into Rayph's back. Azure stared forward. If he felt any fear, he held it in check with perfection. He looked the monster in the eyes with complete peace.

"Criso, you will take your seat. They have yet to forfeit their lives. When they do, their bones will crunch with your powerful jaws," the woman-headed sphinx stated. "Until then, take your place among us, brother." Criso climbed the platform, settling in his place, and stretching to flash black claws.

"You have entered the lair of the library. Your lives, you place at the feet of knowledge. The lore of the world lies before you, but you must earn it before you can grasp it. I am Andro, guardian of the lore of the world. Beside me," she

motioned to the eagle sphinx, “sits Herico, guardian of the lore of the heavens. On my other side, Criso, guardian of the lore of the hells. Our mastery of our domains is complete, and there is no escape for you. Unless you can answer our riddle, you will be our meals. We will suck the marrow from your bo—”

“Ask your riddle, Andro, you scare none of us,” Rayph said.

“I scare Gentry Mandrake. I smell his musk on the air, and know the fear on his face.” Gentry caught himself before asking how they knew his name.

“Mandrake is the master of his fear. You will not best him with terror. This is a warrior. Fear is his life,” Rayph said. “I challenge you to best me in wits. Ask your riddle and be done with it. Our need is great and we have no time for games.”

Andro looked to Criso and he nodded. In a deep baritone, he spoke. “What is it that you cannot feel that hurts the most?” He snapped shut his snout and gripped the platform with his claws. Mandrake tried to focus on the words, but they made no sense. He closed his eyes, running the riddle through his head again and again, nothing coming to mind save the fear of death.

Rayph laughed. The three sphinxes looked at him with searing eyes and he nodded. “It makes sense to me why you would ask this. Possessing all the knowledge in the world would lend itself to a plague of this emotion. I can answer your riddle, library. Apathy is the thing you cannot feel that hurts the most. And it must fill your hearts to brim with its chill.”

Criso threw back his head, braying in rage, but Andro simply laughed.

“Long it has been since a mind has unraveled our riddles. We find ourselves in exceptional company. You may plumb our knowledge and find your answers. What is your first question?”

“My prince was visited by a beast. It looked like a demon. It attacked him. When it left his side, he could no longer breathe. He lies now smothering, near the point of death.”

“Surely he has died by now,” Criso said.

“No, I have cast a time warp upon him. He has four more days of this torture before his life expires. This is the cause of our haste.”

“He was visited by his changeling. He is dead. There is no saving him,” Andro said.

“I am his fairy. He is but a baby, and possesses no changeling. His innocence is in my keeping. Your assumptions are incorrect,” Mandrake said.

“Then it was the changeling of another, most likely a wizard,” Andro said.

“In the time before the gods, a changeling was meant to take the life of its child when the child turned sour, thus keeping the purity of the races,” Herico said.

“This changeling has committed an atrocity in stealing the breath of a child not its own. Performing the rite on an innocent is a soul-burning offense. It is no longer a changeling,” Criso said. “It has become an imp.”

“What is an imp and how do I defeat it?” Mandrake asked.

“An imp is a demonic being of power. Its blood is lava, its skin, igneous rock. It possesses the maw and head of a dragon, and a scorpion’s tail. It breathes fire, and its strength is legendary. There are few ways to kill it, and none that you possess,” Criso spat.

“What do you mean by ‘soul-burning offense’?” Azure said.

"Its soul has burned away. It is a damned creature, and will be shunned by all realms at its death, save hell. This beast is a demon now in all ways, save birth."

"Why? Why has this been done to our prince?" Rayph asked.

"The breath of an innocent is a powerful component for spells and magic. Many horrible deeds can be accomplished by the wizard who commanded his changeling to this action."

"How do we restore the prince?" Mandrake asked.

"It has never been done," Andro replied.

"Is it possible?" Mandrake asked.

"The vessel that holds the breath must be broken in the presence of the child. It will be a crystal or a vial of some sort. Shatter it in the child's presence and the boy will breathe again. But first, you must find the wizard."

"How do we do that?" Rayph asked.

"Only one will know of the wizard's whereabouts, and that is the queen of the changelings. She will know which of her subjects has been lost to her."

"Where do we find her?" Mandrake asked.

"She will be in the Crag, the city of the changelings. But for you to get there is impossible."

"Why?" Mandrake asked. "If it can be done, I will do it." A swell of power rushed through him and he flexed his fists.

"To get to her city, you will have to find a way past the King of the Night Hunters. He will not let you pass."

"Where can I find him?"

“His lair resides in the mountain’s bend, where the mountain of Tengeres, running north and south, meets the mountain of Cangar, running east and west. There you will see his cave,” Andro said. “Go now. You have exhausted our good will. Stay, and you will find our appetites too much for our hospitality.”

Invulnerable

“I can’t fight it. It would be the death of me and, more importantly, Thomas. This task I have come here to do is impossible.”

“Then we will fight it together,” Rayph said.

“If you tried, it would pass over into the Veil, where you would be weaker. You don’t know the ways of that world. It could take advantage, and I would still not be able to help you.”

“Why? Why can’t you fight it? I am a wizard. There are few things I cannot do. I do not fight or think like a warrior. If you are to make this fight, then why won’t you?”

“It is not a matter of *won’t*. The will to meet the enemy of Thomas Nardoc has not left me. I do not fear this thing. I fear the inevitable outcome, that which cannot be avoided.”

“Explain it to me as simply as you can. I may be able to help you with it,” Rayph said.

“When I close with this monster, I will be unable to attack it. My wings would melt the moment I make contact with its blood. One belch of its breath

would sear me to a crisp. It is a foe I cannot stand before." Mandrake shook his head. "Maybe Chil was right. Maybe it was folly for me to come here and hope I could make a difference."

"Come with me. Gather the others. I have something to show you," Rayph said.

Mandrake, Sisalyyon, Azure, and Rayph stood in a dank, dungeon-like room near the bottom of the castle. This place stood devoid of all décor, a shabby room filled with raw materials for making weapons. Stacks of lumber, cut in all manner of sizes, lined the walls. Steel and other ingots of metal sat in crates. Four large forges stood at intervals near the center of the room. Between them stood five anvils. Four of them were of a normal size, big and sturdy for the crafting of armor, weapons and shields. In the center of the room stood a hulking anvil, massive in girth and charred black. Gazing upon it chilled Mandrake's blood. For a minute, he could not swallow.

"What is that for?" Azure said, pointing to the mammoth anvil. "It looks diabolical."

"I assure you it is not," a large man said, striding into the room. He stood naked to the waist, thick beyond anything Mandrake had seen before, and covered in sweat. Smearred with soot, he seemed created for dark purpose. Mandrake didn't like him. "That is the anvil we use for crafting our siege machines. The metal fittings for their construction are immense, and often will not fit upon the regular size anvils. It is the greatest of its kind in the whole of the kingdom, and has stood in this room longer than Rayph has been wizard of this castle."

Mandrake nodded and Rayph flashed a queer smile. "And if I am right, we will be in need of it this day."

"What chore do you have for me, Rayph? How may I help you?"

"Please come with me, Lotha." He motioned for the smith to join him in quiet counsel and the two moved off together. They spoke for a few moments before Lotha pulled away as if he had been smacked.

"It cannot be done," he said.

Rayph whispered at him. Lotha looked back at Mandrake. He cast an eye at the fey, and Mandrake felt blood drain from his face. He braced himself for the reveal of Rayph's mind. The smith turned away, waving a dismissive hand, and bellowed.

"I will do it only if he is informed and asks me to. This is not a command I will obey from you alone. I must hear it from his mouth before I agree to it."

"But it can be done?" Rayph asked. "You could perform the task?"

"Of course I can. I am the royal smith. There is nothing involving metal that I cannot craft. It just disgusts me to think of it." He walked away and Mandrake braced himself. He looked at Azure, panic naked on his cousin's face.

Rayph proffered a bag he had with him and he pulled from its contents a gathering of herbs and salves. With great care, he combined them all into a paste and coated his hand with the mixture. He cast a smattering of spells over his fist and smiled. He stretched his fingers, flexing his fist, and walked to the closest forge. He reached into the smelting pot and grabbed a fist full of molten metal. Mandrake hissed and braced for Rayph's scream, but it was not forthcoming. The wizard let the metal run through his fingers before smiling back at Mandrake.

“Yes, I will do it,” Mandrake said.

Rayph locked his gaze on Mandrake, the two speaking silently to one another as the others spoke.

Azure gasped. “Do what exactly?”

“Do you know what it entails?” Rayph asked.

Sisalyyon shook her head. “You mean you will smear this mixture on your body to ensure you would not burn in the fighting? There is no danger in that, no reason for the smith to grow angry and resistant.”

“Do you know how badly it would hurt? Do you understand what you are agreeing to?” Rayph said.

“You mean to forge steel to my exoskeleton and make me impervious to heat of all kinds.” Fear seized Mandrake as he spoke. The words, now out in the air, paralyzed him. The horror of what he would tolerate left him unable to move or breathe.

“No – absolutely not. I cannot allow that,” Azure said. “It would be a stain on you forever. Could it be taken off?”

“I do not believe so. No,” Rayph said.

“You would be shunned by our people. Steel is a plague upon the fey. It is a loathed element. If you do this, you will be an eyesore to everyone in Liefdom.”

Rage course through Mandrake’s body and he spun on Azure, screaming, “Then I will not go back to Liefdom! I will move on, or go to Chil, or venture out to find a new life for myself. This is what I must do to save my child! There is no more important imperative than that. It is the beginning and the end of me, Azure.”

“What about Pea?”

Mandrake shook his head. “If her feelings for me are true, then she will see past it. But I am not sure what those feelings are at all. She is fascinated with me, but... I cannot turn away from this fight for her. This is my path. If you cannot accept it, then turn away from me now. I will not ask you to stay.”

Sisalyyon walked to Mandrake quietly and took his face in her hands. “I will help you any way I can. But this is a mistake. I can feel it in my bones. I can sense it in the air. Darkness will result from this.” She kissed Mandrake’s cheek and looked to Rayph. “How do I help?”

“I will need you to gather the herbs for me. In your world, and with your contacts, we can do it faster. I will give you a list.”

Azure turned to Mandrake, after searching for something within himself and finding it. “I’m with you, cousin, until the end. I believe it to be a mistake as well, but I will not leave you, not now, not ever.”

“Then we will get started,” Rayph said. “We will need many more smiths and restraints. I will need to mix some salves, and you will need to prepare yourself, Mandrake.”

“For what, Rayph?”

“A soul-shattering amount of pain.” said Rayph gravely.

The chains snapped taut as the first of the steel poured upon his exoskeleton. He jerked his arms as the searing pain radiated through his chest. The salves protected his skin from melting and bubbling, but could not save him from the intense pain. His exoskeleton warped and rolled. Mandrake howled as

they splashed a bucket of water over the steel, cooling it and hardening it instantly.

Lotha lifted the hammer and looked down into Mandrake's eyes with a deep, chilling pity. The hammer fell and Mandrake screamed in agony. Every bone in Mandrake's body shuddered. The meat of his muscle thrummed painfully and his exoskeleton trembled. The horrid impact ran riot through his body. His organs quivered as the next hammer blow landed.

Mandrake gnashed at the bit in his mouth. He ripped at his chains, jerking them and thrashing to move away from the merciless hammer. But they had secured him tight. He found no escape, and a low wail came from within his body, so mournful as to stain his own ears. All hope shattered in his hands as the pain climbed with every hit. After the first blow landed, Mandrake was sure no pain could rival it. But with each successive hit, his agony increased. The world faded away, becoming blackness. He cried in relief, as he thought he was passing out. But he soon realized he was attempting to push away reality. His mind was fighting to block it all. But in that darkness, he could not drive out the ruthless pounding.

Azure's voice met him there in the dark, over the sound of the hammering, over the sound of the screams. He wept openly, and his words were garbled. But Mandrake was not alone. He gripped every muffled, warbling sound his cousin said. The hammering stopped. Mandrake attempted to curl up fetal and deny life, but his bonds held him fast. He whimpered at the passing of the torture and let himself rest.

Azure's voice cut through the darkness and the agony. "I'm sorry, cousin." The searing pain of burning metal touched upon his hip. "It's not over."

The hammering of his hip was bone-grinding agony, fighting to pulverize his joints. His hips screamed and he howled. Each blow of the relentless hammering landed in predictable rhythm. He could feel the pause between each impact enough to anticipate the next. Every respite between was a waiting torture.

The demon with the dragon's head reared up above him, smiling down at him, with nostrils eking noxious smoke and red eyes seething in hate. It was enormous and Mandrake knew he couldn't defeat it. Its skin, its muscle, its claws were too imposing. He cowered before it, demoralized and terrified.

The sound of his cousin's voice reached out for him again and he held tight to it. The hammering stopped and Mandrake wept bitter tears before the next searing pain greeted him, this time rolling around his groin.

"Stylus Pea," Azure said. "Stylus Pea," he repeated. Her face rose up, blocking out the darkness of the undefeatable beast. She looked down at him with love and pity. "Stylus Pea," he heard again. Mandrake clung to her face as the first impact landed on his groin and he screamed in agony.

Mang

After nearly a day of travel through white mandrake blooms, one after another, Gentry Mandrake hovered at the bend of the mountains. His heart pounded out a slow, almost ruthless beat, as he witnessed the spectacle of the landscape. Every tree had been cleared of foliage. Every sign of the scant

vegetation had been scoured away. The desolate tableau seemed haunted and barren. Before him gaped the largest, blackest maw he had ever seen.

The tear in the mountain was a jagged mouth, ragged around its edges, almost possessing teeth, and waiting to devour any that ventured near it. The dryads had warned against it, telling him it was no place for a fairy. He had wished to run them all through with his prong. Every one of them had spent the first few minutes fawning over him, talking of what a blessing and honor it was to be in his presence, and he had bit his tongue, swallowing the acrid words that came to his mind. The sight of their perfection brought to him a scathing anger.

The forging had soured him. He felt it in every thought that scraped across his mind. Innocence was draining away from him as blood from a wound. Mandrake knew he should care. The raw possibility of shifting into a changeling should scare him. But it didn't.

His eyes lifted from the trees he stood in to the vicious cave, and he knew he should pull away. He would lose more of himself if he went in there. Should he pass the Night Hunters, he would be in the Crag. The City of the Lost would open before him, and he would gaze upon the damned. What would that do to him?

Hideous screams began building behind him. He landed on a branch and turned, looking into the forest, bereft of light in the face of the dying sun.

Closer and closer seeped the screaming horror and Mandrake braced himself for it. He gripped the branch until the black smog-like gathering slammed the air around him. Hundreds—no, thousands—of bitter, snarling bats, rushed past him, slapping at the air with twisted, inky wings. They screamed as they passed in one mammoth cloud. Mandrake dropped down, gripping the

branch. He closed his eyes and fought not to scream in the tumult of the cloud. He sensed them weighing him, judging him, as they sped by.

As the last of them passed, he looked up to see the squirming leviathan swim through the air and plunge into the mouth of the cave. Mandrake's spine turned to ice as the bats disappeared into the gaping maw before him. The forest behind him stood quiet as the dead before slowly stirring to life again.

Mandrake stared at the cave, attempting to will himself forward, but he could not. He thought of his love for Thomas, now a weak pulse, easily getting lost in the churning of his mind. He thought of Pea and his love of her, wishing for it to give him strength in this place of darkness. But he found that emotion wanting. He thought of his duty, his purpose for being, but he no longer understood his life. After the horrid agony he had suffered, nothing made sense. Something was using him and he grew bitter in its hand.

He held rancor in his heart for this place and everything it represented. He despised every rock, every twisted tree. The Night Hunters were a plague on the land. The Crag promised wrath and blood. Everything about this place dripped of darkness and evil, and he scorned it all. As hate pushed him forward, he felt a dark heart within him, and embraced its first pounding.

He pushed his way into the black, leaving the world of light behind. The cave belched forward the sour smell of droppings and death. A briny stench, like urine, filled the air, and Mandrake breathed it in in disgust. The throat of the cave was huge. Mandrake forced his way down it, flying slowly into its churning gut. Light retreated completely, leaving him languishing in the black. The walls closed around him. Darkness became a liquid he would drown in.

He gasped for air, heard shuffling around him, and knew the bats were watching. His trespassing would anger them. Flapping followed. He fought to swallow as he realized the ceiling above and behind him was alive with stalking Night Hunters.

Fear was a ravenous creature dedicated to his downfall. An innocent thought began beating at his resolve, whispering to flee for his life: what must he look like to these hunters? Dragonfly wings hovering in the dark, he would look like a huge meal to those who devoured insects. Mandrake could not breathe. He bit back on the scream that threatened to run from him frantically.

His wing scraped against the side of the cave, sparking painfully, casting the cave in a fleeting, brilliant light. Thousands of fur-covered beings with snarling teeth surrounded him and he cringed back.

He briefly pushed his way back toward the middle of the cave, before a high, whining voice screamed, "There and no further!"

Mandrake stopped. The voice, little more than a wheeze, echoed from distant walls. He must be hovering now in a vast cavern. He listened. The silence, loud and oppressive, brought his ears to ringing.

He heard flapping to his right and his eye turned there, seeking some movement, finding nothing but black. A flapping lifted ahead of him and shuffled past him. From two more places, two more creatures rushed by him. A raking of claws passed his face and he realized he was under attack. When the next one slammed into him, he twisted in its leathery grasp and sliced deeply. The bat screamed and blood filled the air. The air around him opened up in a riot of screeches and squeaks. Claws and wings suddenly swarmed him. He spun, bloodying his attackers. They were dragging him down. Rage and fear rolled up

within him to break out on the world around him. His scream held enough wrath to drive them away and he bellowed.

“I have come in search of the King of the Night Hunters. I will kill to gain an audience with him. Send your army before me and watch them all die!” A spray of blood rose off his wings in a fine mist that struck the side of his face, touching his lips. He tasted the blood and his hate soared to new proportions. He suddenly wanted a fight, needed more blood. His bones throbbed, his skin stretching. He winced and growled.

“Who has come before me? Why should I grant an audience to such an interloper? You are unwelcome here, fey.” The loud voice radiated from the walls, a screech that filled the world with breaking glass and steel-on-steel. The raking sound chilled Mandrake’s blood.

“I am Gentry Mandrake, Prince of Liefdom. I demand—”

“You demand?!” the voice screamed. The ceiling erupted with cries and squeals. Flapping wings entered. Mandrake let his musk fill the air, sliding free his prongs. “You make no demands of me. I will send my cloud to descend upon you and rip you to savory bits. You sound delicious to me, stranger. I will dine on your blood.”

Diplomacy, Azure had warned that Mandrake would need diplomacy to win passage into the Crag. Azure had begged to come along, had pleaded with Mandrake to take him for this very purpose. Mandrake sneered and tried to imagine what his cousin would do.

This was no weak king like Liefdom boasted, no drunkard like he had found in Nardoc. This was a fierce commander of a deadly force. He deserved to be respected.

“Please forgive my unfortunate choice of words. I forgot my place. May I ask whom I address?”

“I am Mang, King of the Night Hunters, Drinker of the Blood of Thousands, Taster of the Fowl, Commander of the Armies of the Dark, Guardian of the Gate of the Lost. This is my home. This is my throne, and you are trespassing.”

“I beg your forgiveness for my trespassing. Dire need drives my action. I have a favor to beg.”

“I would hear it before I send you away,” Mang said.

“I desire passage to the city you protect. I need to find a way into the City of the Lost.” Screams entered the air, so fierce that Mandrake winced and covered his ears.

“The prince of Liefdom has wasted my time. He has come seeking the impossible, insulting me and my post. I will not be merciful.”

“Then I will have to kill to find my way beyond,” Mandrake spat. “Fine, bring your legions. I will find their blood.”

A sound that might have been laughter filled the air. “You are insolent and insane. Your threat, though daft, brings us honor in its respect. Where did a fairy learn such honor?”

“I learned the ways of war by the guiding hand of Chil, King of the Raptors.”

The crowd around him broke out into pandemonium. Wings filled the air to bursting. Outrage surged against him. The fear of his imminent demise gripped him with steel talons and he embraced it.

After his cloud found their perches again, Mang's voice dripped with hate. "How do you know that name?"

"King Chil is a father to me. I am known in that clan as Bladewing, and honored as one of their most ferocious warriors. My quest has been blessed by his wing."

Mang screamed in outrage. "I must honor the pact of peace. Tentative is the treaty between your raptor kin and my people. Uneasy are the terms of our peace. I will not bring us back to war. You, I will allow passage to you. If you survive and return to your king, tell him I was a boon to you. Tell him I honored the peace."

Mandrake smiled and silently thanked his father.

The City of the Lost

An escort led Mandrake deeper into the beastly dark, toward the gate of the City of the Lost. He needed to double back, to challenge Mang and cut him from the sky. Anger seethed within his chest, tightening his skin. He touched his face, feeling thick features and a warped chin line.

A sensation of dread gripped him, slowly trickling through his body. Was he changing? Was he becoming a changeling? He thought of the forging of his skin and those who had tied him down to the anvil. He growled as his body stretched, his bones throbbing. He pushed these thoughts from his mind and

concentrated on the flapping wings in the dark. When they stopped, he stopped. The cavern issued the fetid stench of decay and filth.

“You now hover over the gate to the City of the Lost. Go in peace, and make your war.” The bat screeched as it flapped off into the darkness, back the way it came. Mandrake lowered himself until he felt water touching his ankles and he stopped. Now at the precipice, he did not know if he could go on. He was not supposed to be here—was not to see the lives of the Lost. Their ways would sour his heart. Their pain would color his mind. Had he come all this way by some misstep? Lotus’s words came back to him and he shook his head. Thoughts of his father brought a rage he could use. His face became hot and tender.

Mandrake lowered into the water. In the Veil, he need not sleep, need not eat, and need not breathe. He entered the water and stopped, staring in surprise. Ahead in the murky pool, he saw light. Mandrake cautiously moved toward it.

Large clumps of misshapen rock sat at the bottom of the pond, dark shapes coated with scum and weeds that sat at odd intervals. He moved through them, keeping his prongs extended. He looked back—wide eyes peered through the rocks. Mandrake had a moment’s fear, replaced by a warrior’s rage, as the stones around him began to move, snatching him up with clawed hands and pulling him away. Fighting beneath the water was nearly impossible, but the vicious swipes he could manage colored the water red. A hand clamped over his head and the world went to darkness. He struggled, but with many foes clutching him, was soon overwhelmed.

He was helpless until they tossed him hard to the ground and stomped on him. He flexed his wings and rose like a shot, his wings throwing sour water in a

fine spray. Many eyes stared at him. None spoke, though a pleading noise came as if from far away.

“A fairy has appeared in my court.”

The voice seemed male, but with a changeling, Mandrake couldn't be sure. It originated from his left. But as it spoke, it drifted before him.

“This has never happened that any can remember. You're deep into the change. Have you come seeking your new home before you sour completely?”

“I will not become one of you. I am Gentry Mandrake, Prince of the Veil. I come on dire business and will not leave until I possess what I need.”

“What do you seek, Mandrake?” It was now on his right, though he saw no movement from the gleaming eyes before him. “What has brought you to the City of the Lost?”

“I will have audience with the queen.”

“Queens.”

That made no sense, but Mandrake would not argue. “Yes, I need her lore. I will force her to tell me what I need to know, if necessary.” A choir of laughs floated in the air around Mandrake. He turned, staring into hundreds of eyes.

“Who is in command here? Step forward and be seen,” Mandrake said.

Mandrake turned behind him, eyes drawing nearer. A flint-covered beast rolled from the darkness. Gaunt in frame, it possessed a cobra's head and bat-like wings. Its slit eyes gleamed in the half-light.

“I am Pilfer Flint. I am the king of the thieves. Long have we of the Pilfer clan waited for an event that would tip the scales and bring our rebellion. I believe you may serve.” The room around him began to churn. Oaths were spoken. An excitement charged the air. Flint reached out to flip Mandrake's

armor with his claw. The steel gave off a slight ring. "You are a warrior, yes?" Flint asked.

Dread balled up tight in his gut. "I am."

"Good, we need a champion. I will promise you an audience with the queens if you will fight for me and kill who I tell you to kill."

Mandrake sneered at the cobra head. "Whom do you want me to kill?" He clenched his fists. His face throbbed as his bones shifted painfully.

Flint took him to a break in the tunnel, where the small room they stood in looked out over a sprawling vista within a huge cavern.

The spectacle below chilled Mandrake's bones. Above, a pinprick of light shone down on thousands of stone-coated creatures, languishing in despair within a desolate landscape. In the center of the room, a motley pile of stones, all shapes and types, eked half-formed changelings, still morphing. Vicious looking caretakers snapped them up and dragged them off for unknown purposes.

In the back of the chamber, an arena had been carved from the living stone. Within hunkered large, brutal changelings, thick in limb and horrid in visage. With a riotous snarling and snapping, the furious creatures lashed at one another. The far left showed huge pillars with alcoves carved from them. Blazing eyes, plotting and waiting, peered from within the holes. Above gaped a stone maw. Changelings stuck to the surrounding ceiling, staring down with vacant eyes. Mandrake's bones throbbed and he winced in pain.

The changeling beside him laughed like snapping stone. "It will not be long for you."

Mandrake spun. "Come again?"

Flint sneered. "This is what you need to know. The queens live through a maze of corridors above." He pointed to the huge hole in the ceiling. "They reside up there with the Magus clan, the rulers of the Crag. Today, they shall be overthrown. They possess the Brute clan," he pointed at the arena and the snarling cries within. "They are the protectors. They boast a leader we have no answer for, Brute Quartz. His skin is quartz, his face that of an orangutan. He is a force we cannot beat. That's where you come in. When you have him killed, we will move."

"Who are you?" Mandrake asked.

"Do you really care?" Flint asked. Mandrake had to admit he didn't.

"Your politics and your city hold no meaning to me. I need an audience with the queen of this place. If you can get me there, then I will fight for you. But if you can't—if you promise me this and do not come through—then I will turn my wrath on you, and you will find it unpleasant." Mandrake's musk lifted into the air. He suddenly needed blood on his wings.

"Can those wings of yours cut through stone?" Flint asked. His people gathered behind him, their claws snapping closed, their teeth grinding.

"We will see. Watch for me lifting into the air. When I fly to the hole up top, you meet me there," Mandrake spat.

"If Quartz is dead."

"He will be," Mandrake said with grim confidence. He lifted from his place beside the Pilfer clan and flew to the arena.

Out over the city, he noticed a fetid stench that soured in his gut. By the time he reached the arena and landed beside a carving of some brutish warrior, he realized it was his own musk. Something had befouled it. Some change within

him changed his flower's scent into a rotted mockery of his true musk. Mandrake knew he was damned, and might be coming back to live here soon.

If he killed the wrong man today, joined the wrong cause, then enemies might be waiting for him. Mandrake looked out over the seats, seeing horrible visages of nearly demonic virtue. He searched about, seeking the one he had come for, and not finding him.

I will not be able to challenge their leader. Some inner knowledge told him that systems like this did not allow outsiders to vie for power. *I will have to draw him out. There is but one way for that.* Mandrake cursed and left his perch. He flew to the nearest changeling, a hyena face snarling as the battle at the arena's floor raged on. He ducked under the snarling mouth to meet the throat and his wings struck the stone. It sparked off his wing before blood, hot and wet, splashed across his flank. He stopped before the gasping hyena and spun in a tight circle, shredding its throat to ribbons. Blood coated Mandrake's entire body. He raced on as the hyena turned to stone and toppled, cracking in half as it struck the ground.

Timothy Gar gripped his throat as he stumbled through the streets of Trislok. The blood on his knuckles was not dry yet from the beating he had given his son. He felt a thousand blades slicing into his throat, though no blood appeared. He gasped and fell to the ground, his life utterly spent.

Mandrake was slicing through a second throat, the blood coursing across his body, as he realized he was here, in this place, to fight this battle. Other dire needs had driven him here, but in this moment of destiny, he was doing what he

had been born for. Killing the satyrs, crossing over into the world of man, facing Mang, defying Lotus—the gods had designed him for these acts. He took comfort in that as his second victim dropped to the ground.

Candice Lash stood before her king with his daughter on her knees. She held the scourge she was known for in her right hand, smirking as she ripped it across the young girl's back again. The king fought to surge from his throne, but he was held tight. Candice pulled her scourge back for another strike when a sudden pain crossed her throat and she fell to the ground, dead.

They were rushing forward now to meet him, thrashing limbs and snapping claws. Maws clamped down, clicking to bite at him. Too many hectic foes surrounded him, slashing at him—all twice his size, all coated in stone. Mandrake navigated the enemies in chaotic patterns and could not plot a course. He growled, letting his body pick its path, as he concentrated on slicing. The world became blood and screams, splashes of red and chips of stone.

His blood burned as if from a fever. He roared as he chopped into them, enjoying the carnage, reveling in the wanton death.

The mayhem Mandrake fostered spanned out across the world of man. Vicious and violent people were suddenly down. Victims found their aggressors grip body parts with no wounds, falling to the ground, screaming to sudden deaths.

A bellow rattled around him, the arms and claws pulling away. The blood settled and all noise, save one cracking stone, abandoned the Crag. Mandrake spun in a circle, wiping blood from his eyes. Below him lay sliced and cracked statues of the dead, maybe fifteen fallen changelings. Terrified faces drew back. Mandrake followed turning eyes to see a massive, snarling changeling, coated in quartz, with the face of an orangutan. It bared its teeth and snorted, beating its thick trunk and stomping its clawed foot.

Blood dripped from Mandrake's steel-coated skin. He pointed his prongs at Quartz and grinned.

"Who are you?" Quartz hid it well, but Mandrake heard fear in the question. It brought out his blood-thirst, allowing nothing but violent recourse. He snarled away the answer, and rushed headlong into Quartz.

He soared for the Brute's body and, just before impact, turned toward the neck. He pulled his arms in and grinned before Quartz snapped a claw around him. Quartz squeezed, forcing the breath from Mandrake and stealing his roar. Quartz threw him, meeting him with a knee, slamming him against the wall for a bone-jarring impact that filled Mandrake's head with a roar and dropped him from the air.

Mandrake rolled on the ground, looking up as Quartz brought his foot down in one savage stomp. Mandrake tried to lift up, but the claw caught him first. He slammed to the ground, his head ringing loudly. He spit blood and gripped the stone beneath him, fighting to pull himself away. A second impact hit him. His face slammed the ground so hard he was nearly unconscious.

Mandrake rolled over, watching as the foot climbed into the air a third time. He cried out and flapped his wings, praying for response. He lifted from

the ground slightly and turned his wing, angling it up as the foot stomped again. The wing blade drove into the clawed foot with ease and Quartz screamed in agony.

Mandrake shook his head, fighting to clear it, and lifted into the air again. He rode the air close to Quartz, slicing the leg from foot to thigh as he lifted from the ground and kicked off Quartz's flank. Quartz tried to grab him as he soared away, but his hand closed an instant too late. Mandrake twisted in the air, pushing back toward the beast and reaching the back of his neck. He drove his blade deep into Quartz's neck, feeling the bone of the spine slice clean. Quartz screamed as his massive body betrayed him. It collapsed beneath him, and he turned his gaze up to Mandrake.

"Your chieftain is wounded," Mandrake yelled. "Who will take his place?" The eyes of the Brutes sparked to sudden darkness. As Mandrake lifted into the air to join the Pilfer clan, the rebellion broke loose with a rattling scream. The Brutes fought over the honor of finishing off their commander.

Changelings crawled from holes all over the city. The roof was suddenly a honeycomb of tunnels and doors that spilled vicious fey. They had been waiting, biding their time for the spark that would throw the city into chaos. They bashed and clawed one another, ripping their neighbors apart. Mandrake could not help but think of Liefdom, with its purity and innocence, and wonder at the fact that he could overthrow it with little effort. He let his mind play with the idea, turning it over in his head, listening to the screams of the fey he had lived beside. The temperature of his skin soared. He doubled over in pain as his ribs broke and splintered in his chest. His chest swelled and he bellowed in agony.

He met Flint in the air below the gaping maw that led to the queens. “You are far advanced in the change. When you are done, you will be a Brute. I hope to find you as an ally when I sit the throne.”

“I will not change.” Mandrake’s voice was different, deeper, more hollow, and he cursed.

“Well, let’s not sit here. I have four queens to kill.”

Mandrake slid his prong free and it stopped an inch from Flint’s neck. “What’s that?”

“After you’re done talking to them, of course,” he said with a laugh. They entered the mouth in the ceiling and plunged into darkness instantly. The black was as thick as stone.

“I can’t see you. I can’t see anything,” Mandrake said.

“Get around it. Nothing can be done. There is no wood for fire. There is no magic in these hands, nothing to aid us in seeing. You will have to follow the sound of my wings. Shut up now. We are in the thick of it.”

The walls were pulling in close. Mandrake listened as well as he could, but the wings were subtle, and the fey was trying to be quiet. The turns were abrupt and unpredictable, the tunnels spanning on for what seemed miles. A small group of changelings soon joined them. They used a crude speech and Mandrake wondered if the tricky Pilfer clan had written its own language.

He grit his teeth and cursed. Would they betray him if they could? He thought they feared him. They had surely watched as he fought Quartz—they would not have missed it. But these conniving fey were not warriors. Mandrake knew his ground was shifting.

They came to a wide cavern, exposed to another pinprick of light in the ceiling. Here, bedlam had broken loose. Pilfers fought Brutes openly, outnumbering the Brute clan four-to-one. The fighting was intense, with Brutes making many impressive stands. But they were on the defense, cornered all over the room. The cavern would soon belong to the Pilfer clan.

They found a series of statues lined in a semi-circle around a pit that Flint dropped into. The pit held a tunnel they entered, met by Brute warriors. Flint stood aside and motioned to Mandrake.

He rushed forward, instinct taking over him. They fought in tight quarters against a faster foe. In seconds, Mandrake hovered over their bodies.

Flint gripped the doors and threw them wide. They entered a well-lit hall, where a thinner, more dangerous breed of changelings fought. The crowd behind Mandrake rushed forward and began to die as spells were thrown. Mandrake wondered at the deaths of villains around the world as the Crag sorted out its problem. These creatures fought despite the danger it presented to their children. Mandrake shook his head in disgust and flew to the back of the room.

A collection of thrones stood there. Upon them sat the same changeling four times. Their expression changed from each face. Two were bent in horror and fear, while one seemed bored, and the other wept openly. The bored queen looked at Flint.

“Your day has arrived. The time you warned of is here. Is it everything you thought it would be?” Her skin was a light green color, swirled with cream.

“Queen Aventurine, it is, of course, an honor to stand before you again. I reminded you, when last we spoke, of our children’s kinship and my desire to reign with you, did I not?”

“Yes, son, you did,” one of the terrified queens said. “And now I remind you of that same bond as you come to overthrow my rule. Can we not rule together, as you once proposed?”

“I will remind you of your answer to me,” Flint said. His face turned up in glee. He turned his back to expose cracks and fissures where lashes had scarred him.

The queens, as one, turned their heads.

Mandrake laid a hand on Flint’s shoulder. “I will be heard,” he said. He needed to get out of here. Things were advancing too fast. He needed to be away as soon as possible.

“Yes, okay, of course. Mother, will you hear this man out? I may find leniency in my stone heart, should you answer his question.” Flint said.

The queens turned their eyes on Mandrake, their faces screwing up. “What is it?” they sneered.

“It is a catalyst, a spark to throw your world in disorder. It is the hand that destroyed your most vicious pet. And I will feed you to him if you do not answer his question.” The queens turned to Mandrake in horror.

“There was a changeling sent to the world of man recently.”

“How recently?”

“I know not. Some time after, he lost his soul.”

The faces changed, the queens taking on a different aspect, one of cautious fear. One said, “We will not betray an imp for you. He will do far worse to us than you ever could.”

“What is the name of his child?” Mandrake asked.

“No,” three of them said in unison.

Mandrake was a shot of fury as he sped past Flint and flew across the arms of the thrones. In a passing swoop, he sliced away five hands. The queens screamed and gushed blood.

“I will take you apart, inch by inch.” His heart broke out in a frantic rhythm as his chest expanded and a crust began to form on his skin. It was not stone, but soon would be. He cried out in pain and the queens flinched. “What will it be? Which of you loses her wings?”

Flint laughed a light chuckle. “I would tell him. He is nasty, and changing fast.”

“The child of Lapis was known as Vrice. His real name is Danol sa Hapa. I know little else,” she whimpered and Mandrake turned to Flint.

“I have no further use for any of you,” Mandrake spat.

Flint smiled. “I will save a place by my side for when you return.” Mandrake turned and sped off. He was not sure how long it would take him to navigate the tunnels, and he needed to be back with Thomas. He sped from the room as the queens cried out in pain and Flint’s laugh rose above the carnage.

Desecrated Ground

Trevonne stood at the library window, staring down at the streets, with her heart in her throat and tears coursing her face. She fought back the urge to vomit as she struggled with her panic. Collette sat with her head down on the table, crying quietly. The library was vacant of prying ears, but still the two

women refused to speak their minds. Anything could be an agent for their masters. They looked to each other, lost and hopeless.

The city guard stomped outside in their perpetual patrol. They were rounding up strong men and women, with broad backs and solid trunks, pulling them away from their jobs and their homes, escorting them to the Hive. These powerful citizens of Dragonsbane were forced to their knees before Braid. It blessed every one of them.

“It’s building a work force,” Trevonne murmured. Collette sobbed. Trevonne wanted to say more. *They will be too strong for us soon, if they are not already. We need those crystals now. We need to make this fight if we are still going to.* But she didn’t know if they would. The Rose boys and one holy warrior were nothing in the face of the entire city guard.

Trevonne still couldn’t figure out how they had done that. Vrice had visited the mayor of the city for dinner. They had spoken in depth about the city and the direction Vrice wanted it to go. Somehow, within the span of that meal, Vrice had bewitched the mayor. The mayor and the heads of the guard had met with Braid in the Hive and sealed a pact. Braid now commanded the standing garrison of the city. A shudder radiated through Trevonne and she lowered her head.

Her head felt somehow thickened. She could not concentrate. She needed to sit. She opened her robe casually and nearly gagged in horror. Her hand touched her stomach, her palm trembling. Her hand slid up her torso to her breast and pinched her nipple. *He is calling me to him. He has not wanted me in over a month—has had no desire beyond Braid’s goals....* Maybe Braid was calling her.

Maybe Braid wanted her body. Vrice would hand her over readily. Trevonne grew moist at the thought of it and she sobbed.

Collette looked up and shook her head. "Not now. Not with all of this. You can't go to him now." Trevonne knew Vrice was watching. She knew he could hear everything she said, could see everything she did.

"If master wants me, then he will have me." Trevonne felt ill saying the words and Collette looked up in surprise. "I am his to command. I hope he can see me now." Collette's eyes widened. She stared, nodding. Trevonne left, headed for Vrice.

Her body ached to go to the master's chambers. Braid had long been set there, had long ago taken over the grandest chambers in the tower. If she was called there, then she would be its toy. Her body ached to be bent by its dark will. It would bite her, beat her. It would pull her hair and claw her body to shreds. It sounded horrible to her, but her body was responding.

She prayed to no one in particular. "Cleanse me of these thoughts. Let me desire light and abhor the darkness." But she needed to be presented to Braid—wanted it sorely. She cursed and followed Vrice's direction. At the turn to the dining hall, she stopped and jumped into an alcove. She pressed her back to the corner, holding her breath, waiting for the reason for her stealth. Braid stomped by, chewing something, its eyes shadowed in darkness. She longed to step out of her corner and rip her robe off, let its horrible eyes crawl her body. As she watched it go, Trevonne realized she was hiding from Braid. Vrice wanted her to himself.

She entered the lab and Vrice met her at the door. He grabbed her and cradled her face in his hands. He kissed her lightly on the mouth and took her

hand in his. Vrice had never kissed her before. Bile rose up to the back of her throat and she swallowed it down with a grimace. His hand, so gentle, so loving, disgusted her. She wished to be somewhere else.

He turned to her, his eyes wet in the corners. "I need you, Trevonne. Come to me now." He let his robe drop to the floor and she beheld his emaciated body. She gasped. He looked robbed of his health and vigor, as if Braid had been sipping at his vitality. Vrice had always been pale, but now his skin was nearly translucent. His ribs stood out in bold contrast to his body. His muscle, once defined, was mashed to sagging folds.

He slowly removed her robe. She fought against the urge to flinch away. This was no master of magic—no powerful man of shadow and death. This was a used rag, a battered weakling too sniveling to stand for himself. Trevonne told herself he still commanded power, but she choked down more bile.

He guided her to his bed and laid her down. Slowly, he climbed atop her and gently eased into her body. She was almost completely dry, and his member, though only half hard, still barely fit. He winced as he forced his way in. She let him touch her and caress her, as her flesh crawled and she gagged. He kissed her neck and ran his fingers gently through her hair.

Soon she realized he was making love to her and she nearly vomited on him. She braced herself for a declaration of love, but it was not forthcoming. He needed compassion. He was scared and needed comfort. Repulsive.

"It was not in his room," Trevonne whispered. They were out of the tower, away from the Hive. But still, they dare not speak above a whisper.

"Where was it?" Collette asked.

“I asked him,” Trevonne said. “He was guarded about it, but he answered. There was some kind of trouble in its home. It was called away. The thing was furious.”

They had both seen the changes that had come to the imp. When in its presence, they felt a taint in the air, a desolate loss and despair. Collette had come to the truth of it. Children were dead and, in stealing their lives, the creature had been damned. Now it was gone again and they wondered at its next mission.

Trevonne and Collette entered the Hive quietly as the laborers milled in the foyer, churning in dazed silence. Their limbs hung limp, their mouths agape. Braid appeared at the top of the stairs and motioned with its hand. The assembled workers lined up without a word. Trevonne’s blood went cold at the mechanical way they moved—all as one piece, as if they shared a mind. Vrice began handing out torches to every third one. He lit them with a spell and nodded to Braid.

The half demon grabbed a massive frame on the wall, hefting it from its spot and tossing it to crack on the floor. In its place gaped a large, ragged tear in the wall, eager to devour them all. Braid grabbed an old rope, hanging from the ceiling within, and swung out to descend into the darkness.

The laborers followed and Trevonne braced herself. When she reached the rope, she spoke a word and dropped into the hole, magic lowering her to the ground easily. She heard Collette grunt and looked up to see her friend climbing down. When she reached the bottom, Trevonne threw her a questioning look.

“No idea what we will find down here. Didn’t know if I should waste a spell going down.” Trevonne cursed and continued.

They walked in an earthen tunnel that shot straight forward. “What direction are we headed?” Trevonne asked.

“North, I think, maybe a little west,” Collette said. “We are under the sewers, under the bowels of the city. This tunnel shows no sign of crude construction.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are no scrape marks, no signs of tool marks, just smooth surfaces. I think magic dug this out.”

Trevonne nodded. They walked a bit before the line stopped. She strained to look ahead. The large workers before her blocked her sight almost completely and she huffed. “I can’t see anything. There is no telling what is ahead of us.”

“The namesake,” a voice croaked behind them. Both Trevonne and Collette jumped. They spun to find Vrice standing behind him. Had they said anything that might give them away? Had they misspoke? Was he biding his time? Trevonne’s gut tightened and she bit back on her fear. She could not speak.

“What do you mean, master?” Collette managed.

“The city’s namesake is where we are.”

“City’s namesake... you mean Dragonsbane?” Collette said.

The line had moved ahead considerably. They stood not far from a door of sorts, the consistency of leather. Two, maybe three feet thick, it appeared peeled back more than opened.

Trevonne was missing something obvious, but fear was clouding her judgment. She entered the door and found herself in the gut of darkness. She heard a crumbling sound, a far-flung sifting. Workers milled around her.

Braid coughed. The hacking bray, altogether inhuman, continued until a pale, muted light appeared. Trevonne pushed forward through the lethargic press. She reached her hand out in the darkness and found Collette's hand doing the same. They clung to one another as Braid began to vomit up light.

Its body wracked until it doubled over, then lifted off the ground. The more it thrashed, the higher it lifted, until its throat bulged and it passed a ball of light that hovered thirty feet above them.

They stood within a great chamber. A ridge lined the ceiling, stretching from one side of the room to the other. It could have been rock, but Trevonne shuddered as she realized it looked like a spine. Tree roots ripped through the roof in many places, like gnarled hair reaching for the ground. The ground was gray as ash, the soil sluggish and silty.

"Where are we?" Trevonne asked.

"Belvenlen," Vrice said. "The second to fall."

"Second what?" Collette asked.

"Second dragon. How did you think Dragonsbane got its name? The two hills outside of town are the graves of two dragons that came here forty thousand years ago, searching." His voice was sapped of all the awe Trevonne thought should be there. She could barely breathe with the immensity of their surroundings.

"Searching for what?" Collette asked.

"No one knows," Vrice said. He walked away.

The two students looked to each other. Their faces opened up in despair as they realized that no ground more desecrated than this existed. Braid had found the site for his gate's construction.

“The materials are all here,” Vrice said. “The blocks of stone, here.” He motioned to a pile of black stones, each larger than two men, each thousands of pounds. They were cut in all manners of forms. Spiked and jagged, they appeared impossible to fit together. “The supplies for the mortar, here.” A tar-like substance sat upon a large pile of bones.

“Those are bones.” Trevonne hated the words as soon as she spoke them. Vrice looked at her and nodded.

“Bones of the righteous,” he spat.

Trevonne felt nauseous.

“There is wood for building the scaffolding. It will span from this rise to that pit.” He motioned to a recess in the ground fifty yards away. “It will stand thirty feet tall in the center. Get started.” As one, the workforce lurched to movement. Trevonne looked to Collette, her heart stopping. Vrice walked past them and thrust a whip in Trevonne’s grasp.

“What am I to do with this?” she asked.

“Keep them working,” Vrice said. Collette looked to Trevonne, her eyes wide with horror.

Her

Rayph kicked the door to the throne room open and ripped his sword from its sheath. The blade crackled with a black energy that sucked the air around it, causing the immediate area to wheeze and spit. He stormed forward, his robes flapping madly around him. Mandrake entered behind him and took

his larger form. His steel-coated body hovered over Rayph's head, his anger alone holding him up.

The palace guard filed from the walls to form a line before the throne. Rayph had trained them and knew their moves. He pointed his blade at the floor and shouted a word. Energy shot from the sword with a scream and broke on the floor. Its furious wrath licked out in many directions, slamming into every guard and tossing them wide. They landed, groaning. The king jumped to his feet in the grips of terror. Mandrake wished to rip him apart. His skin grew thicker as his temperature soared.

"I warned you!" Rayph screamed. "I begged you not to let that swine set a tower in this country—told you Vrice was evil to the core and could not be trusted!" Rayph reached the throne and the king stepped forward, sputtering. Rayph backhanded him to the floor and pointed the blade's crackling tip at Phomax's throat. "My research brought up *nothing* of his past. I told you he was in hiding. But what did you say?"

The king put his hand over his head and whined.

"Say it!" Rayph screamed. The guards were getting up. Mandrake slipped behind Rayph to spread his wings wide and slide his prongs free. He wanted them to rush him, wanted them to challenge him and try to fight their way to their king. Mandrake hoped for it. "Say what you told me that day."

"I s-said towers were highly taxed," Phomax stuttered. "That he will be a good..."

"Source of income. That is what you said when I told you we would be housing a criminal. Well, your pet snake has struck out against you. He has stolen the essence of your child and will likely be the death of the heir."

The queen, who had sat lifeless through this entire display, who seemed not to care that her husband was about to die, not to care that her life was in danger, instantly exploded in the wake of Rayph's words. She leapt to her feet and sprang on the king. Her hands clawed at him, her fists pounding his body as she screamed out his death and raged upon him.

Sisalyyon slipped past Mandrake, who found he couldn't stop her. She stepped before Rayph and crossed her arms.

"And now what?" she said. "Now what will you do, Ivoryfist? Will you murder the king? How about you, Mandrake? Are you going to slaughter the palace guard to the man? Will you leave the seat of Lorinth's power coated in king's blood? Then, go ahead. I won't stop you. Live the rest of your days in fear and isolation. In a fit of rage, destroy what you have spent ten thousand years building. I'm sure your mentor will support that. Oh, wait. Glimmer is a Trimerian Knight. It will be his duty to hunt you down and bring you to justice." Sisalyyon shook her head. "Well, that should be fun for him."

The queen turned to Rayph. "Kill him, Rayph. He is responsible. Take his life. I will pardon you."

Mandrake turned to Rayph. "Kill him or I will." A spasm ripped through his body and he cried out in pain.

Rayph looked to Sisalyyon and shook his head in disgust. His sword ripped away to nothing in his hand and he sneered down at the king. "I will leave you with your pitiful life. I knew you were a blight on this nation the day you took your crown. I told your father Corin was a better man. Told him your brother would lead the nation to greatness. But he insisted it must be you. And we lost our great prince to treachery. Well, I am done with you. I will have

nothing to do with your reign any longer. When I have finished this work, I will leave this post until the day you die. Until I can put another upon this throne, I am done. I do this last service before I leave.”

“What last service?” the queen asked.

“I lay retribution upon the head of Vrice of Dragonsbane. I go to find my prince’s breath and wrest it from that monster.” Rayph stormed from the castle. Mandrake and Sisalyyon followed.

“I will need a day to prepare,” Rayph said. “That will give us only one day to get there, kill Vrice, find the breath, and return. But there is no way around it. I need a day.”

“You will have it,” Mandrake said. “I will be ready.” Rayph fled down the hall to his chambers.

Mandrake sat on the topmost spire of the castle, toying with dark thoughts, wracked with occasional pain and cursing his lot. Near sunset, Azure joined him.

Mandrake would not look his cousin in the eye. He would not speak to the fey. He longed to take to the air and fly away, not to let his cousin see him deep in the change. But he kept his seat. A deep, hidden place within Mandrake longed for one who loved him, longed to cry his fear out on the shoulder of a friend. But this wish was hidden beneath a raging river of aggression.

“Cousin, I think it was a mistake to forge your exoskeleton,” Azure said quietly.

“What do you know of it?” Mandrake snapped. He chided himself, wishing to take the words away, to meet his cousin with love and find some

reprieve. But he seemed incapable. "Are you here to gloat? Remind me that you warned me? Call me a fool?"

"Of course not," Azure said with calm voice. "I am here to help."

"I am lost. There is no helping me," Mandrake said. "I will finish this work set before me and then I will go."

"Go where?"

Mandrake turned to look his cousin in the eye. They both knew where he would go. He would go home. He would go to the Crag. Mandrake thought of the place and he sobbed. Azure turned away.

"I have something I want you to do before you go into this battle. You have time to do it. I know you want to be left alone..."

No, cousin, I wish that not. Please, don't leave me. I am scared.

"...but I ask you please, for my sake, will you come with me?"

Mandrake lifted into the air. He nodded. "I will go with you. Let us do this thing together. But when it is done, you go home," Mandrake said. "We say our goodbyes and you fight to forget I ever lived. Can you do that?"

"If it is what you want, then yes, I will do that," Azure said. "Come with me." They descended the spire and drifted to the gardens behind the castle. Mandrake knew little hope. He had nearly forgotten all about it. But as he followed his cousin, a thread of hope pulsed through his body.

Please, if you know of a miracle, please work one.

Azure led Mandrake to the cherry tree in the center of the garden. It morphed into Sisalyyon. She stood naked before Mandrake, with a slow, sad kind of smile. He pushed her pity away.

“Have you thought about her, cousin?” Azure asked.

Rage swelled in Mandrake’s chest at the idea of Pea. He wished to throttle Azure. But the sensation passed, leaving behind a hopelessness that engulfed him like the dark wings of a demon folding around his heart. “I have. I think she is better without me, better not knowing what I am.”

“And what are you?”

Mandrake could not bring himself to respond. He left the words unspoken, but reminded himself he was a killer. He replayed scenes in the Crag with Flint, the taking of the queen’s hands, the deaths of the Brutes.

“I wonder what she is doing,” he said. His heart rolled in his chest as he thought of her. She would be about something beautiful. Light was waning from the garden, leaving pools of darkness. “She will be getting ready for her evening’s inking,” Mandrake said. Tears began to threaten.

“Come with me,” Azure said. He stepped into Sisalyyon’s hands and she opened them to Mandrake. He joined them, feeling the press of hard wood around him, followed by the sudden release of the Veil.

Azure jumped to a different branch, making his way around the tree. Mandrake followed. They reached a thick branch and Azure motioned to the ground.

Mandrake’s heart stopped. He gasped as his eye fell to her, sitting below him, her candle lit below her easel. Butterflies crowded around her, waiting their turns. His chest eased with love for her.

“How is she here?” he asked.

“I went to the Stylus Clan and told them a grouping of butterflies could not make it to the city, told them a Stylus was needed. She was the only one who

volunteered. I will leave you now." Azure patted Mandrake on the shoulder and turned away.

After a long silence, the bark behind Mandrake warped and Sisalyyon's face appeared.

"She is lovely. I can see why you love her."

Mandrake turned to the dryad. "When did I say I loved her?"

"Lyadora told us. We all celebrate your love for Stylus Pea. Why do you think you are a hero to our people, Mandrake? Why do we love you?"

"Because I saved your sisters in Liefdom."

"That is part of it, for sure, but we admire your ability to love, not your ability to kill. You loved us enough to stand before us, to protect us, even after we were so horrible to you. You loved your city enough to defend her. You loved Pea enough to put your life in danger for her. That is why you are a hero to our kind, Mandrake. It's your capacity for love that we adore."

Mandrake had no words for that. Humility washed over him. He heard Chil telling him his true nature was love. He closed his eyes and let his soul open before her like a flower. He felt beautiful and dangerous. Love was an edge his enemies did not hone.

"Will you go to her?"

"She mustn't see me. I am—" Mandrake couldn't say the words 'deep in the change.' They were too horrible. "I'm different."

"Are you going back to Liefdom when your time here is done?"

"No, there is no place for me in the City of Innocence."

"Then you must say goodbye to her, Mandrake. You owe her that."

Mandrake sat staring at Pea, watching her work. The butterflies whispered secrets to her and she laughed lightly, occasionally responding with a whirling of the tongue that Mandrake would never understand. He smiled as he watched her. His bones lost a bit of pressure and his skin loosened slightly. His body began to tingle and he felt lighter.

“Are you going to come talk to me?” she said after an hour.

Mandrake’s heart stopped.

“Did you think I did not sense you back there? I have always been able to feel your eyes upon me, Mandrake. They call out to me.” She sighed and tucked a loose hair back into her scarf. “I will not soon forgive you if you do not come out to speak to me.”

He grit his teeth, looking down at his steel-encased body. He could feel the abnormalities in his face. He knew he could not go to her. She waited for his response and he cursed.

“I cannot,” he said. “Too much has changed.”

“Have your feelings for me changed?” she said.

They hadn’t. He bit back on the answer.

“Then come see me,” she said.

“I am different,” he warned.

“You always have been, Mandrake.”

Mandrake lifted from his branch and went to her. He landed behind her and she took in a deep breath. She started to turn around and he placed his hand on her shoulder, stopping her.

“They had to do something to me in order to ready me for the fight I must make. I am hard to look at. Brace yourself.”

Pea took a steadying breath and turned around. She looked at Mandrake and her eyes widened. She drew a slow breath and smiled. "Not so different. Your eyes are what matter, Mandrake. They contain your soul. They still fall upon me the same as they always have." She took his hands in hers and smiled. "Do you know why I brushed your wings with my scarf before I inked them?"

"You didn't want to soil your brush," he said. His eyes fell and she laughed a beautiful, tinkling sound that made him smile.

"Is that what you thought all this time? No, Mandrake, yours were the most breathtaking wings I had ever seen. I used my scarf, a gift from my father, because I wanted to carry the memory of those wings with me everywhere I went. Every time I see this, touch it, or wear it, I think of you." She ran a hand along her scarf and smiled. "This is my Mandrake scarf."

He knew not what to say.

"Now that I have you here, I want to ask you a question. I was too afraid to hear the answer before, but I am ready now."

"Ask and I will answer," he said.

"Last time we talked, on the balcony of the Stylus house, you said something peculiar. You said you feel real with me. What did you mean by that?"

Mandrake looked away, fighting back tears. "When I'm with you, I feel—" He shook his head and ran his hand through his hair. "It's just that, I feel this sensation of innocence. I don't feel like a warrior, or a monster, or a hero. I feel like a fairy. We are made to be beacons of purity, to love and create beauty, and I do that when I'm with you."

"You create beauty when you're with me?"

“I create love when I’m by your side.”

She looked deep into his eyes, her fingers trailing to her cheek. She smiled. “Is that what I’m feeling, that intensity that radiates from your body when you’re around me?”

Mandrake turned away from her powerful gaze, looking out at the garden around them.

“Why didn’t you come say goodbye when you left, Mandrake? Did you know how much that would hurt me? I can’t understand why you went to your child. You broke our laws and customs. But I thought you would have tried to explain to me your reasoning.”

“I never wanted to hurt you, Pea. I just thought you would be disappointed in me.”

“The dryads talk of you all the time. They tell us what you are doing and what you have done. They are quick to tell me that you may not survive—it seems the only thing they can say—that you are fighting a demon and you may not ever come back. But Lyadora tells me in private that you may not come back at all, even if you are victorious. Is this true?”

Mandrake felt a pit in his gut and he shook his head. He looked into her eyes and his heart hurt. “There is no place in the City of Innocence for me anymore, Pea.”

She shook her head, suddenly furious, and pointed an ink-stained finger at him. “You belong with your people, Mandrake, with your family. You belong where you are loved.” She turned away.

He wrapped arms around her and she leaned back against his chest.

“If you don’t come back, when you find a place to live, I hope you will send for me.”

Mandrake began to cry. He held her tighter, wishing he could pull her into him and make her a part of him.

“I belong with you, wherever you are,” she said.

“I can’t take you away from your family.”

“Then come home, Mandrake.” She sighed. “Come home and let me wash away all your horrors with my love for you.”

“I am changing, Pea. Becoming a—” He fought to get the word out, but he could not manage it. He trembled as tears ran his face. “I am losing myself.”

She turned, looking up at him. She wrapped her arms around him and shook her head. “You are not changing, Mandrake. That is not possible. You may step on that dark path, but your love for me will pull you back.” She lifted into the air, her wings slowly beating the wind, to hover above the ground. She placed her perfect face before his, the colored stains around her face vibrant and alive in the light of her flickering candle. She took his face in her hands and smiled. “You are not lost, Mandrake. I have you.”

She kissed him.

Her lips, soft as a butterfly’s wings, brought his heart to pounding. He stood shocked and paralyzed before he wrapped his arms around her and sank into her. Her love washed over him, curing his anger and curbing his wrath. Soon, they were both in the air. They spun slow circles as they kissed and held one another—and the world made sense. The darkness ebbed. Gentry Mandrake came back to himself.

Mandrake watched her leave. Morning had come. The day of his battle was here. As Pea grew smaller and smaller on the horizon, Mandrake turned his mind to his work. His heart, he left there. He would not let it turn to stone. It stayed in the garden where she had held him, where she had kissed him.

Tretch's scream filled the halls of the palace. Mandrake and Azure met the crow at the window near Rayph's office.

"Master of Crows, what has brought you here?" Azure asked.

"Liefdom is in peril. A demon rages. He has destroyed two fairy cities and makes his way now for Liefdom. He is a monster, breathing flames, with the head of a dragon and wings of a bat. His skin is—"

"Stone, and his tail is that of a scorpion. We know of the fiend," Mandrake spat.

"Yes, he makes for Liefdom and King Chil believes he will destroy the city if you do not come to its defense."

Mandrake turned to Azure, grabbing him by the sides of the face and looking deep into his eyes. "He won't have the crystals with him, Azure. I have to save Thomas. They are trying to pull me away. If I go, I won't get the crystals. Do you see it? They are trying to divide me and Rayph. I can't go. You see that, right?" Mandrake's heart shattered when he thought of Pea in the clutches of the beast, but he knew he had no other choice.

"What of our home?" Azure said.

"You must go. You must deal with this monster."

"Me! I can't. There is no way for me to. I am not a warrior!" Azure nearly screamed.

“You will find a way, cousin. There is no more clever fey than you. You will find a way to save our city. You must go. Go now!”

Azure hugged his cousin and leapt to Tretch’s back. Mandrake watched, his fear naked and frantic.

Desperation

Vrice stood within the dragon’s cavity, watching as the slaves moved large pieces of stone. Depression was a heavy beast sitting on his chest, sapping all his inspiration and his will to think. He had fallen to disuse, nothing more than a slave driver now for his master’s diabolical plans. Trevonne had been called away and the whip forced into his hands. He lashed it weakly at his feet and mused on the insult of it all. He had spent his entire life in the pursuit of power. His mind was a weapon of destruction, his use of magic deadly and potent. Braid had handed him the whip and snarled, “Kill anyone who stops working,” and left him with naught but brutes for company.

He turned his mind to Trevonne’s body. He could only think on it for a short time before he lost taste for it. He did not bend her and punish her the way he used to. Now he only held her tight, gripping to her flesh as a means of escape. Vrice pushed away the thoughts, disgusted with himself.

Watching the gate inch its way up from the ground fought against his sanity. These were nothing but components now, but soon they would take root. Soon the plan would fulfill its purpose and hell would burst free on this world.

What happened then? Vrice trembled thinking about it. He could not focus on the horror he was unleashing. Bringing one half demon into the world was a crime against nature. What would happen here was a crime against the gods. The consequences of his actions would be dire. His only recourse was Blythe. He would please his master and serve him. When this world fell to the demon's boot, Vrice would stay on top. *My deity will be grateful.* But he wondered. Fear pulled at his mind, sinking talons into his brain and tugging. *Demons are not known as grateful beings.*

"Vrice," he turned to see Trevonne before him. He looked over her shoulder, Collette waiting at the room's entrance. "Master wishes for me to deliver the crystals. Braid does not trust a servant with them any longer."

Servant. Vrice was nothing more than a servant now. He pulled the bag from his hip and caught it in his hand. He could feel the crystals roll within, clinking on one another quietly as they landed in his hand. Vrice opened the bag, running his fingertip over the five crystals before looking up to Trevonne. She cast a nervous glance at Collette, then back to Vrice.

He paused. Resolve and fear were stamped on her face. *No, she does not fear me.... She fears Braid.* He handed her the bag and she exhaled slowly. She nodded to him and turned away. Her sleeves were tied back. Vrice turned back to the workers amazed at how they were still working with no breaks for water or... her sleeves were tied back. Vrice had taught her to tie them back when she was expecting a fight. He glanced at them again. Collette's were tied back as well. Both had pulled their hair back in ponytails. Vrice stepped toward them. His heart rumbled quickly as he looked at them. They were counting the stones. They were turning to go. They tossed a look in his direction.

They broke out in a run.

Vrice screamed as he threw his hand toward them. A bolt of energy exploded on the side of the door, missing Collette's head by a breath. Vrice threw his hands back and he lifted from the ground, rushing to the doorway on a heated current of air. A blast of lightning struck him in the center of his chest. He flew backwards to slam into a team of workers. They lifted from the ground around him, slowly returning to their work.

His students were stealing from him. They were stealing from Blythe—and he had let them. Terror gripped his limbs, locking him in a crippling embrace. He shook his head, moaning as he fought to his feet again. He could not let them escape. Braid would rent his soul from his body—would feed him to Blythe. The sun of hell flashed in Vrice's face. An eternity of languishing on the hips of a burning goddess filled his mind and he wept, frantic to stop his vile students.

He reached the tunnel and rushed into the breach. He couldn't cast in this complete darkness. He spoke his command, throwing his hand out as he ran, touching one side, then the other, of the tunnel. Fire, bright and hot, broke out on each wall, raging to an instant inferno. It raced ahead, lighting the path in garish oranges and reds.

They were moving so fast. They must have enchanted their steps. Vrice prepared to do the same before the flames lit the area and he saw something shrugging from the ground. A jagged, metallic rock broke on itself, snapping and rolling as it clawed its way free. It doubled, then tripled, in size. A clawed foot broke free, and another, a third and fourth, followed by a long, spiked tail. The golem shook free a head that opened into a roaring maw. It glittered as it

snarled. Vrice cast protections upon his flesh as he moved. He cast embellishments and his muscles thicken. His limbs lengthened and his skin became stone-like.

The monster pounced forward, breaking into a headlong dash that sent gouts of earth flying behind it as its heavy paws ripped the ground. It roared a head-splitting charge as it leapt, cutting a groove in the ceiling. Vrice met it with equal fervor. He gripped its throat, bracing himself against its momentum, digging his heels into the ground as it shoved him back twenty feet. He slammed the beast against the flaming wall before tossing it to the ground. It thrashed to get to its feet and Vrice pounced on it. His fists shattered stone as he pounded into its flank. He clamped his teeth down on its throat, biting and gnashing stone. He jerked his head aside and spit gravel. The beast's claws dug at his chest, knocking the breath from him, and pulling fear to the front of Vrice's mind.

His heart raced as he fought the beast. Every moment that passed took Trevonne further away. Every instant that he fooled with this monstrosity, his chances grew slimmer. How far had they gotten now? Were they in the mansion? Were they walking out the front gates? Vrice punched at the head. A shower of rock flew in away. He screamed in fear of Blythe, in rage at his students, and in frustration at the beast. He strained, picking it up from the ground and hoisting it over his head. He slammed the beast down on his knee, snapping its back. It screamed in protest. He gripped its head and twisted it sharply as its neck fractured and its head sagged slightly. He held it to the ground and pulled back his fist. He spit a spell and, with one vicious punch, shattered the golem's head.

Vrice jumped to his feet and rushed up the tunnel. He stared ahead as he ran, but saw no sign of his fleeing students.

Escape

Through the tunnel they ran. Trevonne's heart gushed in her ears. Images of their punishment, should they be caught, sparked in her mind. The things they would do to Collette haunted her. Trevonne had gone too far. How could she have done this? How would they get out of the city? Rose said he could smuggle them away. All they needed was time. But would they have it?

Braid was so close to realizing its lifelong dream. It would not let go easily. The walls broke out in flames. Vrice was close. Their feet barely touched the ground as they skimmed across the floor. Their spell gave them speed they could not have dreamed of, but it would not be enough. They needed more time.

Collette ripped something from her hand and tossed it to the ground. She spoke a word that had Trevonne searching her memory. It was some sort of element magic, some sort of golem summoning. Vrice would have to stop to fight. That might buy them a few moments. But no golem could stand before their master long, not if he held even a shade of the power he used to. They skimmed on until they reached the rope. Trevonne spoke her words and a gust of wind billowed up from behind her. Flames whipped wildly around them as the wind lifted them into the air and out of the hole. They alighted gently on the second floor landing and cast quick spells to mask their dash.

Their sweat was gone, their hair, no longer tied back. Their cheeks, once red, had returned to their pale pallor. Their breaths no longer came in gasps. All the details that would display their deception were neatly hid and the two wizardesses slowly walked down the stairs. Collette had put up a charm that made them appear lost in conversation about some facet of an obscure spell. They talked in such a way that none would interrupt them, save Braid. They walked past patrolling guards and warriors standing at full attention. Many eyes crawled their faces and bodies. They were the only attractive females within the Hive, and had many times been pressed against some wall for a grope and a thrust. Each time, the quick slap of a spell sent the assailant fleeing in pain and humiliation. But the men were always staring.

They moved on, fighting to control their frantic eyes. They had almost reached the front gate when they heard the high-pitched whine of Vrice's indignation. They looked back, his bolt of pure black energy rushing for them. Collette spun and slapped it away with a crack of a word. The guards at the gate turned their attention on Trevonne. She lifted her arms, screaming out a command word that bent the fence in wild angles. The bars wrenched with a whine, snatching at the guards and curling around their limbs. The men screamed as the wrought-iron fence snapped their arms and legs and ripped their weapons from their hands.

"We can't stay here. I can't hold him back," Collette said. She grabbed Trevonne as Vrice stabbed out with his fingers and long arms, ripping up the ground, snatching at them with stone claws.

Collette jerked Trevonne through the fence and Trevonne waved a hand, snapping the gate back to its original form, blood dripping in long cords from its

bars. With a thought, she welded the gate and the fence together, and burst into a run for the bowels of the city.

She could not stop herself from looking back. Guards fought to climb the rails as Vrice leapt over and dropped to his hands. He bounded on all fours, like a beast, gaining ground on them. His robes whipped around him as he snarled. Collette jerked something from her pocket and tossed it far ahead of them. She spoke a word and it boiled out in size as it bounced down the street. Trevonne watched as it sprouted the legs and neck of a powerful horse and turned away from them. Collette grabbed at it and pulled herself up. Trevonne leapt with a spark of a word and landed lightly upon its back. The beast kicked wildly and broke off in a dazzling speed. Trevonne glanced behind her. Vrice screamed as he fell behind.

They raced into the city and turned a corner, seeing twelve guards on patrol. Some force suddenly gripped these guards and their faces went slack. They jerked free their weapons and broke out in defensive stances. The horse stopped suddenly and Collette cursed. Trevonne looked over her shoulder, sure Vrice would leap onto her back. The guards in front of them began moving as one. Seamlessly, they closed around the wizardesses, their eyes vacant.

“Braid has ahold of them!” Collette shouted. Terror gripped Trevonne before the Rose boys began moving. Breathtaking swordplay broke out in the midst of the guards, the three swordsmen moving flawlessly. Rose moved ahead. His slashes and parries set up death blows for Spider and Renalt, who followed. They cut the guards down and turned to the girls.

“Everything has fallen apart. My plan is no good. Brian tried to get ahold of you, to warn you to wait, but Braid has a barrier around that building.”

“Where is Brian?” Collette asked.

“He is busy. He will catch up,” Rose said.

“What are we going to do?” she asked.

Trevonne’s brain was shutting down. Vrice was directly behind them. He would tear them to bits when he caught them. Rose shook his head.

“There is one play, but it’s a mess.”

“We have no other choice. Lead on.”

Rose turned to the religious district and they ran as fast as they could. They passed a plethora of churches, bolted up tight against the coming storm. Most businesses and city buildings had closed their doors, forsaking the people in this time of martial law.

When they met Oddy on the street, he stopped them. “Absolutely not!” he stated. “Find another way!”

“There is no other way. They are right behind us. If you want to fight Vrice and the entire city guard here in the street, then we are with you. But that will be a short stand. I like it as much as you do but—”

Trevonne didn’t know what they were talking about, but she knew they had no time to discuss it. Vrice was seconds behind them. Her gut twisted, nauseous and near the point of purging.

“No, you have no idea how I feel about this!” Oddy was furious. His face blazed with anger, his hand clutching tight to his axe, ready to smite Rose.

They heard a concussion and a crumbling of stone behind them. A building was falling in, struck by a crippling blast of power. Vrice landed many feet away, and Brian stood before him. Brian held his staff in both hands. His

hair billowed around him, riding the updraft of pure magical energy that surrounded him.

“He can’t stand against Vrice for long,” Rose said. “Make a decision and make it now.”

Oddy shook his head and growled. “I knew it would come to this,” he spit. “Follow me.” He turned, fleeing down the street to his church. They ran under the wall and the portcullis rumbled to the ground behind them. “No harm will come to my charges. Is that clear? These children are more important to me.”

Trevonne stood amazed that a church would boast such a powerful wall. An impressive garrison of men guarded it. She turned to Collette, who looked in horror at their surroundings. Confusion bucked within Trevonne and she pulled her friend close. “What is wrong? This is perfect. We could not have hoped for a fortress to hide in. We will be able to make a stand here.”

Collette shook her head as she turned for the wall. “This is an orphanage, Trevonne. Children live here.” Collette ran for the stairs leading up to the wall. Trevonne followed, her heart tolling in her chest. Toys and kids milled around the courtyard. A statue of a child, smiling up at a butterfly on his finger, stood bold in the middle of the yard. Trevonne shook her head. “Boxhead, child god, protector of orphans and sick children.” Trevonne realized the atrocity of bringing Braid’s army to this spot and tears rose to her eyes. She reached the top of the wall in time to see Brian’s staff shatter to splinters under the oppressive power of Vrice’s rage.

“We have to go out there and help him!” Collette said. “We can’t let him die out there. Vrice will devour him—the army will be on them soon.” Rose gripped the wall, staring at his little brother, his eyes wide with horror. “I’m

going!" Collette said. She cast upon herself and leapt the wall. Trevonne could not hesitate. She spit out a spell and followed. She hovered above the ground over Collette's shoulder as her friend sprinted to the side of her love.

Collette's bolt of lightning cracked from her fist to Vrice. He spun on her in the breaking of the second, and grabbed out at the energy, catching the blast and holding the jumping bolt within his grasp. Trevonne had never seen that done before. She had no idea it could be done. How sorely outmatched they were. Vrice turned his hand to Brian, gripping him by the hair and loosing the bolt into his skull.

Collette screamed in dismay and readied her next spell as Brian slumped to the ground. Trevonne shot forward toward Brian, casting a spell upon herself that brought her muscles rippling with strength. She had just about reached him when she realized she carried the crystals in her robe. She was bringing them directly to Vrice.

Vrice leaped into the air in her direction, his face twisted in hate and insanity. Collette stomped her foot and clapped her hands out before her, sending a blast of air ahead of her. The force struck Vrice, throwing him backwards to tumble many yards away. Trevonne grabbed Brian under the arms and jerked him from the ground. He bellowed in pain, but Trevonne ignored it. She pulled him into the air and shot for the church. She flew up and over the wall and dropped him to a heap.

Vrice and dozens of guards closed in on Collette. Trevonne cried out as her friend loosed spell after spell. Trevonne lifted into the air again and Oddy gripped her robe, jerking her back down.

“You have the stones. You can’t go after her. They will take them back.” Trevonne handed the bag to Oddy and ripped her robe from his grasp. She shot forward, tossing a blast of power into the mix, throwing men back in a wave. She reached Collette, who had a crossbow bolt in her shoulder, and she cursed. Collette sagged for the ground and Trevonne caught her. She turned, leaping into the air, flying back, until a blazing chain wrapped her ankle. Trevonne screamed as Vrice began to haul her in with the enchanted chain.

She struggled in his grasp, but could not wiggle free. Collette turned in her arms and spit out a spell that shattered the chain. The two of them sped for the church in the midst of a hail of crossbow quarrels.

Trevonne reached the wall and dropped to the ground. She gripped Collette tight, trembling and weeping. Collette turned to her and sobbed, clinging to her in a crushing embrace. Brian joined them, grabbing them in relief and murmuring words of thanks.

The three of them stood and Trevonne looked around her. The faces of innocent children filled the yard.

“Oddy, what have you done?” a kind voice asked. The voice held no judgment, no rancor or venom, simply a peaceful need for understanding. Trevonne turned to see a beautiful older woman, still in her prime, wearing grey robes with greying hair. She carried an infant, whose one large eye stared at Trevonne with peace. She had never seen a cyclops baby before. She stepped closer, curiosity taking hold of her.

“Nothing that could be avoided, high mother,” Oddy said. “There is an evil beyond the wall that must be faced, an evil I cannot let grow unchecked. This is the task Simon recruited me to. He has, once again, endangered the lives

of our children. I will defend us as best I can. Please take the children into the temple and pray for us. I stand beside powerful allies and we search for a way out of this. I will find a way, high mother.”

She stepped forward and laid a gentle hand upon Oddy’s cheek. “I have full faith in you, and our Great Child. Set your heart at ease, mighty father. You will protect us. We are safe from harm.”

Oddy touched the cyclops child and the infant cooed. Trevonne saw the true heart of this man. Fearsome battle axe and scarred face aside, Oddy was a father before anything else. The children of the orphanage surrounded him, touching his armor, talking to him all at once. Trevonne stepped back and met Rose.

“You saved my brother’s life. For that, I am indebted to you.”

Trevonne looked at Rose, distaste rising to her throat. “I saved my sister’s love. What I did, I did for her.”

“Why must it be like this with us?” Rose asked. He did not stay for an explanation. Trevonne cursed. Her discomfort around good men was driving them away. She needed darkness and hated it. She went to the wall, staring over at the growing crowd of city guards below.

They began to gather materials in the street, wood and boards, carts and crates. She knew little of siege warfare, though she was facing that sort of battle. Children came to the top of the wall and met with their soldiers there. The warriors dropped to their knees and the children kissed their cheeks. When they pulled away, the cheeks glowed briefly. Trevonne looked down at a beautiful child tugging on her robes.

“Oh no, dear, you don’t want to kiss me. I’m not—”

The girl smiled and beckoned with a finger. Trevonne lowered her head and the girl held her face gently. She smiled and Trevonne felt the presence of the divine. She desired to pull back, but held in place, mesmerized.

The girl laid a gentle kiss upon each cheek and smiled.

"I'm sorry I have brought danger to your home," Trevonne said. Her chest tightened and tears slowly dropped.

"You brought heroics to our door. Do you think this a fight my Great Brother does not want? You are His toys now. He readies to play war. You will play your part. You are strong and good. And we love you." She giggled and, for the first time in years, Trevonne felt good and pure. She never wanted this little girl to leave her.

"I must go. I hope you understand," the girl said. Trevonne wiped tears from her eyes and the girl skipped away.

Oddy stood at the top of the wall, joined by the Rose boys. They peered down at the gathering forces below them and dread filled Trevonne's heart. Collette gripped her hand and the two of them held tight to one another as the horde that would tear the sacred building to the ground assembled.

"The high mother has spoken to the church in Corlene. They are sending out messengers, enchanted riders that will pass through stone and enemy alike. We can give them the crystals, and they will draw the enemy away on steeds faster than any that can be tracked. We need only hold out until they get here." Trevonne heard little hope in the warrior's voice.

The guards were constructing a ram from bits of wood they strapped together.

"How long must we hold?" Spider asked.

“Four days.”

Her tears falling again, Trevonne tightly gripped the panic about to overtake her.

Breach

Vrice watched as his students stared down at him from atop the wall. His spells dissipated upon approach. The blessing of Boxhead had dashed his full-throated attempts to rip them down. He shuddered as he watched those around him moving as one. Braid’s dark intent gripped every man on the streets. When four of them turned to stare at him, Vrice knew Braid had seen him.

These guards turned as one to walk in his direction. The first pure thought that rippled through his body was of Trevonne. For years he had possessed complete mastery over this girl. He could feel her now, trembling in his grasp, and he craved ripping the skin from her bones.

“It is not my fault,” he cried as they closed on him. Their faces spasmed to something wholly inhuman. Vrice stumbled back into the waiting arms of a fifth guard and he screamed. The first blow railed against his body and his chest snapped. Breathing was instantly impossible. He fought to scream out again. The second hit brought white flashes to his vision and forced him to the ground. “I didn’t know. I thought it was your will. I was obeying what I—” Another impact shattered teeth and ripped his lips. A tooth lodged itself in his throat and he coughed, his rib wailing.

“I will make this better,” Vrice promised. But the beating continued. Impossibly hard fists and boots and weapons pummeled him, hammering him into the ground. He fought to rise and they knocked him back down. He moaned as pain met him everywhere and hope left his body. The men above him tired and they pulled away. A new group of attackers closed and the beatings continued. Vrice lost everything, every coherent thought, every emotion, every bit of control he had over his body. He curled up in a ball to protect what he could and he wept.

He waited to pass out. He wallowed in impossible misery.

The beating stopped. Vrice rolled out flat, gasping as he looked up. He saw the sun and knew he was still alive. He didn’t know whether to celebrate or cry damnation. When he died, he would go to Blythe. But until then, he belonged to Braid. Vrice’s last vestiges of humanity fell away. His remaining existence would be pain and humiliation.

The sounds of battle filled the air and Vrice could make no sense of them. How could anyone move? How could something exist that wasn’t in terrible agony? He was choking on blood and he rolled over to vomit. Teeth clattered against the paving stone like rain falling on a metal roof. Vrice laid his hands on the ground beneath him and fought to push. He grunted as parts moved within his body that had not moved before. He shoved himself to his knees and moaned as he rocked back. His head keened and he wavered before settling. Men were surging forward, slamming a makeshift ram at the portcullis, as his students threw spells he had taught them. Arrows rained down from the wall and Vrice wiped his chin, peeling back skin. Something was behind him and he quailed, terrified in its presence.

A fist gripped his hair and jerked his head. His scalp peeled back and he roared with the pain. A breath, hot and fetid, felt loathsome on his skin and he vomited again, his chest crying as he did. "Why did you betray me?" The voice was calm, quiet, almost demure. But the fist curled tight and his scalp peeled further from his skull.

"I did not betray you, master. I swear, your will is precious to me. I treasure your commands. Please—" He broke into sobs, his chest heaving as tears burned down his face. "Please, don't hurt me again." He knew how pitiful he sounded. Pleading would not serve him, but he could not stop himself. Long had he wondered at fools who continued to beg as they died. He had laughed at them and chided them and hurt them for it. But now it all made sense.

He could do nothing else, had no other course of action. The need for mercy was so great, the insatiable hunger for relent so overwhelming, that the words formed in his mouth without his control.

"I can still be of use to you," Vrice muttered.

"Oh, can you? There is only one thing I want, Vrice, only one way to make this up to me. I want my crystals back, and I want to feed those cunts to my father when he arrives in this world. Can you do that for me?"

Vrice gripped frantically at hope, pulling it tight to his chest and nurturing it. "I can, master. Let me perform for you. Let me prove my value to you—my allegiance." He was crying again. His overwhelmed body knew only one emotion, could master only the crippling fear of more pain.

"Fine." His scalp flopped down painfully and Vrice sobbed. "Get me my stones, slave. Do it now." Vrice lifted his knee and placed a foot under him. His body screamed and threatened to crumple. He sobbed out again and placed a

hand on the ground. He pushed as he struggled free of the ground. His breath held tight in his chest, his head railing for mercy. He stood and stumbled, his feet catching under him. He called for a spell but nothing came to him. He gripped anything he could and caught a standing guard. He pulled himself up as his legs wailed and his gut churned. He fought to steady himself.

He was exhausted, more tired than he had ever been in his life. He needed rest from the horrible work he had just done, needed a merciful break to mend. "I'm waiting, slave." The voice, so run through with venom, spurred him forward. He shoved one foot before him. His head slumped on his shoulders. He fought to lift it and the world swayed. He stopped before the church and opened his mouth to speak. His throat felt on fire.

"I want those stones back, bitch," he shouted. The words fell to the ground before him.

"She can't hear you, slave," the crowd around him chanted, dull and monotonous. Vrice thought he would lose his sanity in the grip of it.

Vrice threw his head back, closing his eyes and swooning as he shouted, "I want those stones back, bitch!" The words echoed back at him and he felt sudden relief. He looked up at Trevonne. He had made love to her, had been gentle with her. His heart hurt with her betrayal. "Come down here, please," he sobbed. "He will hurt me if you don't."

Her face screwed up in disgust, and he felt the pure impotence of his situation. "I will rip this wall down with my power!" he screamed. "Give them to me, you bitches!" He summoned his aura to his body. It swelled close and shoved instant pressure on him. He howled in agony and let the magic seep away. The pain was too great. Mercy, he needed mercy. He sobbed quietly.

“How mighty is my slave,” Braid’s guards chanted. “How destructive the power at his command. How sorely I need him. Maybe his death would serve me better than his life.” Hope, fleeting hope, entered his mind as he clung to the idea of release from his agony. Then he remembered hell’s sun suspended above the Sulfur Fields, burning.

“How long before your throat grows too hoarse to scream?” Braid said.

Pain. It was his world. It was the answer. Innocence, he needed something innocent, something to use as leverage. “A family,” Vrice said. “Open the homes of this town until you find me a family—a family with children.”

Braid chuckled. “You may prove useful yet.”

Vrice sobbed in relief. “Can you heal me so I can fight for you?”

“You think I would stoop to heal? How dare you insinuate I even have that power.”

Vrice cowered. He threw his hands over his head and moaned. “I’m sorry, master. Please, mercy, master.” He had come this far just to anger it again. How could he be such a fool?

Braid laughed. Vrice trembled.

His entire body screamed to sit down, but he dared not show weakness. He concentrated all his power on the will to stand. He nearly lost before they came to him.

Vrice looked into the faces of the family before him and grinned a toothless smirk, blood trickling from his chin. The little girls began to cry. The father struggled between two guards. Vrice walked up to him and, carefully so as not to jar his own body, patted the man on the head.

“Don’t worry about your daughters. They are in the hands of Boxhead, I’m sure,” Vrice said. He gripped the man by the temples and summoned his magic, snapping out a word that sent a concussive blast from his fingers. His arm was blown back, creaking and snapping loudly, as the man’s head shattered. The body flew into a crowd of guards. Vrice turned his mind to the mother.

The portcullis rose. A fearsome warrior strode from the wall. He carried a menacing axe and from his shoulder hung an odd doll made of cornsilk. “I will buy that family from you,” he said quietly.

Vrice sneered and ran his hand through the mother’s hair. “Not the whole family, that is too expensive.” He waved a swollen hand in her direction. “My guards will take her to that alley now.” Guards pulled her away as she screamed. “She will know cock and fists and nothing else until we tire of her and slit her throat.”

The man rubbed his face, fighting to handle the burden of her suffering. Vrice turned to the oldest of the children and laid his hands to her temples.

“No, wait! I can’t let her blood be spilled on this ground. I will give you what you want. I will give you the crystals.”

Vrice smeared his hand across the girl, collecting tears and brushing his blood on her face.

“I want the wizardesses, too.”

The man winced and Vrice put his hand back on the girl’s forehead. He couldn’t do it. His power would break free of him if he tried to use it again. All he could do was threaten. He checked over his shoulder to see if the threat was working.

“I will do it. I will give you the wizardesses as well.”

“Do you know what the stones are? What they will do?” Vrice asked.

“I do,” the man said.

“Good. So you give me the world. I give you three little traumatized girls. Sounds like a fair trade.” Vrice did not understand the righteous—so little a prize for so great a loss.

“I will see you again,” the man said. Vrice waved a dismissive hand to the children and the warrior opened his arms wide to gather them up. “This is far from the end of our involvement. I give you what you demand just to come and take it away again.” This man held great faith in what he said.

Weeping, Trevonne and Collette were marched out to him.

Vrice sagged against a nearby guard.

“My clever little slave, do not think you have earned my mercy. I can still use you, so I will do so. But you have drawn my ire and I will find a suitable punishment for you.” Vrice let the guards grab him under the arms, dragging him back to the Hive. He sobbed quietly to himself. It seemed now all he could do.

The Gate

All colors blurred to a tight myriad that squeezed together, pressing the air from his lungs and leaving Mandrake gasping. When air came to him again, when colors returned to rational behavior, Mandrake realized they had traveled to the distant city of Dragonsbane in little more than an instant. An overgrown garden sagged around them. Merciless weeds choked everything precious.

Rayph held the handle of his sword as Mandrake took to the air above him. With a dire need for justice, he surveyed their surroundings. They stood behind a massive tower constructed of slick, black stone. The building rose from the ground like a rotted fang. "He is in there?" Mandrake whispered.

"I know not. I can sense an overwhelming darkness to the air. Something is close, something not of this world," Rayph said.

Mandrake nodded. "The imp."

"If that is what I'm sensing, it is much more powerful than anything I have prepared you for."

Mandrake shrugged the idea away. "I will find a way."

"This tower seems abandoned, but there is no knowing for sure. Stay close," Rayph said.

They crept around the building, staying clear of the servant doors. They came around front and saw the lot across from the tower. An eight-foot wall denied passage, along with hundreds of guards standing in tight formation in the yard. In the center of the courtyard stood a massive stone behemoth carrying an inexplicable mace. Water gushed from the many wounds the sculptor had given the beast. Looking at it brought Mandrake a finger of fear. Rayph stared beside him with a carefully controlled face.

"He has taken the Hive. He has taken the town guard. He has taken the city. Vrice alone could not have done all this."

"Very astute as usual, Ivoryfist."

Mandrake turned, extending his prong to the dusty man who stood before them.

"Do you want to know what you're walking into?" the man asked.

Mandrake dismissed him for a weary traveler, but Rayph took a knee and bowed his head. "Simon, I could not have hoped you would come to me at this hour of dearest need. Thank you for your guidance. I will gladly take what information you will give me."

Mandrake took a second look at this stranger, after Rayph's alarming reaction, but saw little to alter his original opinion, until he gazed into the man's eyes. Within those orbs sat immense wisdom that humbled Mandrake.

"There is a half demon within. He builds a gate to transport the legions of hell into our world. He is nearly complete with his masterpiece. He is hungry for victory and I believe he can do it." Rayph scowled in concentration. He took a step forward.

"Let us wait a bit," Simon said, touching Rayph's robe. "They have not yet arrived."

"You have recruited aid for me?" Rayph asked.

"Oddy and the Rose boys will be here in moments."

"Todd Delmar of Boxhead?" Rayph asked. Mandrake detected awe.

"The same."

"And Rose's crew, his swordsmen, and his brother?"

Simon nodded.

"You have given me a great gift, Storyteller. I thank you."

"Brian is wounded, but would not stay at the church. He fights for his love—one of two wizards captive within, waiting to be sacrificed to the half demon's father."

“You’re about to tell me that this half demon is Braid. You’re going to tell me the beast that brought about the fall of Corin’s Brood now fights to destroy my prince and my country.”

“Why would I tell you what you already know?” said Simon.

Five men marched across the street. Mandrake gathered up the looks on their faces and the power in their strides. He knew his own kind when he saw them. These were warriors. He looked back at the yard full of guards with hungry eyes.

“I’m for the crystal and nothing more,” Mandrake said, looking at Simon.

The man smiled and nodded. “Your intent is noble and needed. Concern yourself with it and it alone. This nation needs that child, if the signs are being read right. The gods were desperate when they crafted you, Gentry.”

Mandrake knew not what to say.

Simon turned to the five men approaching, “I give you Rayph Ivoryfist and Gentry Mandrake. They are mighty allies and possess hearts like yours.” He finished the introductions and then turned to Ivoryfist. “Rayph, I hand this force to you for your leadership. But before I leave you to your fate, I will do one more thing for you.”

“I can’t take too many more favors from you, Bard,” Oddy growled.

Simon nodded and stepped up to the gate. Mandrake hovered over his shoulder as Simon touched the gate. The lock tumbled and the gate screamed open on angry hinges. A guard stepped forward and lowered a spear upon Simon, who laughed. “That was unwise.... My children are protective.”

Mandrake’s heart quailed in his chest as the monolith within the fountain broke

loose of its bowl. The massive golem stomped out and roared at the guard. Rayph pushed past Simon and his men followed.

Mandrake flew amongst the guards, dodging weapons and slicing into the enemy as much as he could. The steel clashed behind him, and Rayph shouted a word. A blast broke out over the air, a wave of armored men washing forward. Rayph stomped through the opening and their group followed readily. He reached the door to the manor and pulled his bow. The monster swung his impossible mace, crushing men and steel in passing. Rayph loosed an arrow and the door exploded to splinters. He stowed the bow on his back and entered.

Mandrake felt Thomas nearby. He glanced about him, seeking its source.

“Where to now?” Oddy asked before he returned to muttering some prayer.

“We will search each room. Stay together and—” Rayph began, but Mandrake shushed him.

“I can feel him, no—it.” It was close. Mandrake drifted toward the stairs.

“The demon?” Rayph asked.

“No, Thomas’s breath. I can sense it. Follow me.” He flew up the stairs to the top, where a gaping hole looked down over a fall. Mandrake buzzed down as Rayph named off their descending order. Mandrake flew the only direction he could, his elation building as Thomas’s essence grew in strength. But something foul commanded the air here, and it mixed with growing hope to twist Mandrake’s gut.

He neared a door and pushed through. He did not know how far behind his allies were, but he could not wait. The breath was so close. His heart

pounded. His hands were trembling. He flew through the doorway and stopped before the grandeur of the demon gate.

A twisting black spine rose high, curling and uncurling like a back stretching. The pieces were ragged and jagged, with spurs at odd angles. A foul being, angular and vile, crawled across the gate like a spider racing across dead wood. It reached an alcove and gripped something tight to its chest. It spat horrible words and Mandrake winced. It thrust its fist into a hollow in the gate and a bright light issued forth. The gate trembled and the creature crawled on. Nearly a hundred guards mingled with tired drones that looked to have built the structure. They swayed and moaned and Mandrake tried not to think about them. They were not his problem. They were for the others. The beast, thrusting a second fist into a second hollow, was not his problem.

On a long, flat stone directly before the gate stood two women, naked and bound, with gags on their mouths, their faces bruised and beaten, their bodies covered in cuts and claw marks.

They are not my problem. They will be sacrificed to a demon, but they are someone else's problem. He fought to harden his heart to their terror as the gate exploded light in a second hollow and the monster crawled to a third. Mandrake had no time. He had to focus on—his eye turned again to the women and he cursed. “She would want me to save them. I can’t leave them to their fate.” Mandrake lifted high into the air and descended before the stone. The gate began to bleed over its opening. Black lightning ripped across its surface.

Mandrake hovered before them. He waved his hands to get their attention, but their eyes were locked upon the gate coming to life. Mandrake slapped the nearest one as hard as he could across her face. Her eyes wavered

before turning to him and fighting to focus. Her jaw hung open and Mandrake could only imagine she thought herself insane.

“I will cut you loose. Will you help me?” Something shambled forward and lurched at him from the crowd, lifting its arms in his direction. It was once a man, the shredded muscle of its body now woven together with a bond that pulsed and throbbed its own light. Mandrake flew tight to their bodies, reaching their bonds and slicing them free. Hands ripped from the ground to swat and clutch at him, but Mandrake was far too fast. The girls fell from the altar and rose, spitting words of power and snarling, turning to face the pulsing creature.

Mandrake heard the gate crackling and saw a vista behind it. Yellow sands exploded with fires, yellow storms ripping the air to shreds. A being of yellow stone neared, whose face burned and steamed.

The creature crawling the gate stopped at its pinnacle. It reached its fist in the air above it, howling in glee. Mandrake could sense Thomas struggling within the beast’s grasp. The thing thrust its fist into the hollow at the top of the gate. Bellowing gusts of heated air threw sulfur dust into the room. The sulfur demon reached into the world before an arrow slammed into the gate creature’s hand and the crystal flew free. A concussion throughout the room knocked guards to the ground. Workers dropped in the fury of the arrow’s detonation. The crystal tumbled in the air as the sulfur blew away.

Mandrake’s companions were surging into the room. Screams and death filled his ears, but his attention focused unerringly on the black gem as it whizzed through the air. Mandrake caught the crystal and hugged it to his body. He turned for the doorway as Rayph lifted from the ground to leap forward, unleashing his wrath on the monster atop the gate. The two passed each other in

the air and Mandrake was gone. He had the bit of clay Rayph had given him. He need only shatter it and the magic within would take him back to Thomas. He gripped the clay and crushed it in his fist.

Trevonne felt a sharp pain across her face and shook her head. A form floated before her. She fought to focus before her eyes gripped it and her mind reeled. A tiny man hovered there. He wore armor and a helmet and flew on wings of steel. Had her mind snapped? What was this? Some sort of demon that had broken free of the gate, and now tormented her...

"I will cut you loose. Will you help me?"

Trevonne could not process the words. She stared at him. He looked up over her shoulder and his face drew into tight lines of...was it fear, concentration? No, this tiny man held a resolve of stone. He buzzed away on his steel wings. The cords cutting into her wrists went slack. Her feet were suddenly loose and she could breathe again as the bonds around her chest released.

She rolled from the altar as Collette tumbled off. Trevonne stumbled backward, getting her feet under her, and gagged in disgust at her lover. Vrice's muscle and bone had been sliced apart and he had bound his torn flesh with cords of power. Only magic held him together now.

His eyes wide and fixed, he opened his mouth and howled, spitting foul spray. He held his arms aloft and his body swelled. What little sanity he clung to the last few weeks had burned away. Collette stood beside her, naked and determined, bleeding from a thousand cuts and bites. Trevonne had never loved someone so much in her entire life. No matter what happened today, Collette had to survive.

Trevonne and Collette turned as one to their master and pulled spells forward. They spoke as he laughed. Their spells slammed him, soaking into his limbs, the magic that held him up devouring theirs. Trevonne gasped as she turned to Collette. He drooled at them, locked in an expression of ecstasy. He waved his hand and a whiplash of magic tore across her cheek, ripping skin from the bone. He laughed and Collette stepped before her.

Vrice snarled and snapped a lash of magic across Collette's face and down her body. She screamed as the spell wrapped tight around her ankle and Vrice jerked her from her feet. He opened his mouth to taunt them, but only ramblings and squeaks, rumblings and grunts, broke from his jaws. Trevonne grabbed Collette by the hands and fought to pull her away from Vrice. She could not get a foothold on this abominable ground and she slid forward. She sobbed and looked up at Vrice. He would make her watch as he shred her friend to bits. Then he would turn on her. Trevonne cried out and fought again to pull her friend back but to no avail.

Trevonne cursed and looked frantically around her, through people dying and to the Rose boys fighting. She called out for Brian, but if he heard over the din, he did not look over. A tentacle burst free from Vrice's body and slapped across Collette's thigh. It gripped her tight and jerked her closer. Trevonne could not cast on him. He would soak up the magic. She needed to kill him with something. What did she have? She was naked. She had nothing. She screamed in frustration before her eye fell upon the altar. She turned her mind to it and extended her hands. The oppression of its weight fell upon her and she sunk into the tainted dirt. The stone began to lift, but she was simply not strong enough.

She looked to Collette and they locked eyes. Collette reached back and gripped the stone with her. Together, the two students struggled under the weight of it. They hefted it and tossed it at their master. Vrice's mouth slathered in foam, he didn't notice the altar as it crushed him with a sudden pop. He exploded, rocking everything and tossing the wizardesses to the ground. They fought their way to their feet.

The Rose boys had fallen into a defensive circle around Oddy, who clutched his chest and the broken sword there. The circle could not hold long.

A monstrous battle was unfolding at the top of the gate. A wizard Trevonne had never seen before battled Braid with a fury she had never imagined. The air around him filled with a crackling energy that sizzled in a cocoon, nurturing his power. He lashed spells faster than Trevonne thought possible and, at the same time, wielded a sword with a dazzling ability that struck her dumb. Never had she seen power like his, but Braid took everything he threw and tossed more back. Their battle, accented by curses and vows, dominated everything around her. She found herself mesmerized by their ferocity.

A hand whipped across her face. "We have to help him. He can't keep this up—I don't care who he is," Collette shouted.

"We can't cast in the midst of that. We'll distract him!"

"We have to lend him our power, make him even more devastating."

Trevonne nodded and pulled her aura full to bursting with magic. She opened it in a fount that she directed at the wizard. Her strength waning, she dropped to her knees. She hadn't realized how tired she was, how drained she had become. She pushed harder. The wizard held his sword aloft, bringing its tip

down toward Braid. The crackling energy around the mage entered his body. He added theirs and, with a word, smote Braid in the chest. The half demon flew backward in a deep detonation and exploded at the waist. It dropped to the ground, howling, a pitiful sound run through with fear. It had failed and was going back to its father. Trevonne shuddered to think what that meant.

The Prince

Mandrake popped into the room and sighed in relief. He squeezed the crystal to his chest. The caregiver of the child slept nearby. Mandrake smiled and flew that direction while the scent of blood filled his nostrils. He paused. Waves of heat rippled up from within the cradle. Mandrake hovered closer and peered down into the crib.

Curled around the struggling baby, a foul beast sneered up at him. The creature nuzzled its snout close to Thomas's face, billowing out noxious fumes from its slightly open jaws. Its claws closed around his throat. The sharp tips dimpled the tender flesh and Mandrake's gut churned. His heart stopped and he thought he just might fall from the sky.

"Gentry Mandrake, born warrior, defender of all that is right with the world, defies the gods, defies nature," his eyes seethed with black hate, "defies the Crag." He blew smoke from his maw, filling the room with greasy black smog. "I went to your home, little fairy. Found myself a meal," he laughed and snorted. "And found myself a love. She likes violent things—vile ones—so she

came with me." He motioned to the right, to Mandrake's beautiful Pea, bound and tied to a pillar. The bonds cut wickedly into her, crumpling her wings. She wept, her mouth gagged.

"She would not deny you, even when it meant her death. I can admire that. I will find that strength delectable." Mandrake turned her direction and the imp belched out a ball of flames. "He dies a burning death if you move toward her. You'll burn to a crisp right before her eyes. I'm sure that's your fate anyway," he cackled. "You started a rebellion in my home. You maimed my queens. You dared to seek me and my child." His heat grew with his rage and Thomas's skin began to redden.

"I dare even more than that," Mandrake said. "I dare face you and your wrath. I fear you not. You hold my life in your hands, and you can take it with no effort, but you're a coward. You cringe in a bassinet, afraid to come out and face me. So do your vile work, fiend, and have my life, if you're afraid to come and take it. I was born to fight you—prepared myself from the bloom to be your demise. Your death awaits you here. I am your doom."

The imp let loose the child and stood. He straddled the babe's body and held his hands high above his head. "Let us make this fair, then. I will need a leg up." He hissed out a cracking of magic, diffusing Rayph's time-slowing spell. The child's thrashing sped up to a normal pace and Mandrake could no longer take in air.

The beast jumped out. Its vile wings beat and it opened its mouth to spit fire. Mandrake slapped his visor down and turned his head. The flames enwreathed him. He closed his eyes and held as long as he could.

The fire died and Mandrake flew up to the ceiling. He begged for sweet air and his head began to lighten. He turned for the floor, speeding for collision. A wicked claw slashed him from his course, throwing him wide. He fought for control but slammed into the wall. His head rang out loudly and he fell to the ground. He fought for breath, his mind screaming, as he lifted again into the air. The imp laughed and kicked out savagely, throwing Mandrake off course. He was losing consciousness. Darkness crept up from the sides of his vision. Mandrake flew as high as he could and sped down.

He held the crystal out before him and hit the ground fast and hard. It chipped in his hand and the black essence rolled from within. It hovered in the air over the cradle before descending on Thomas.

Mandrake gulped precious air as Thomas's cry, the most glorious sound he had ever heard, broke out over the room. He lifted from the ground. A claw snapped out around his body and the imp squeezed. Mandrake pumped his sharp wings and the hand released him. Lava blood coursed from the wound, cooling when it hit the air, and hardening to a wicked, black stone.

Mandrake flew a circuit around the imp, thrusting his bladed wings into the stone-covered body. The muscle sliced clean in two. The searing blood washed over his wing and the beast flapped back as its wounds closed.

"Fun," it spat. "Can I play?" It burst forward with immense speed. Mandrake turned to retreat when jaws snapped around him. He cursed and fought to pump his wings. They trembled, too close to his body to do any damage. The beast exhaled. Flames rolled forward, baking Mandrake in superheated rage. He struggled, flexing his wings again and gripping the inside of the mouth. He unsheathed his prongs, slashing out as hard as he could,

fighting to cause any damage, and cutting barely any skin. His prong finally punctured the soft flesh, but burned away as lava coursed into the wound.

Mandrake screamed in agony and flexed his wings again. The monster ground his teeth and Mandrake's exoskeleton cracked under the pressure. In the intense and searing heat, he felt his doom play out. He was dying. Heat ripped into the tender flesh inside his armor. He was not supposed to fall to this foe. He flexed his wings one more time in desperation. The imp snapped his mouth open, to close again for a better grip. Mandrake slashed deep into the monster's lips. The creature shrieked and Mandrake escaped.

Seared horribly, he bled heavily and could barely stay in the air. He fled and reached the window as the imp laughed. Mandrake needed the beast to think him weak, to think him a coward. He had one play left. He raced for the gardens, wind slicing into his body, and he screamed.

The imp could kill Thomas at any moment and finish Mandrake from afar, and he might kill Pea. The idea flapped madly like a trapped animal in his mind. Mandrake tried to remember how changelings would act. The imp's need for revenge would win out. It would want to wring the life from Mandrake with its own claws. His chances were good. He reached the royal gardens and plunged into the nearest mandrake bloom he could find.

The white world grabbed him and eased away his pain. He let himself sink into the tight press of the bloom. He found quiet sanity there.

What had the traveler said? The gods were frantic when they crafted him. He was born to fight—to kill this creature. His entire life had prepared him. He had trained for battle. He had learned the healing power of his bloom. He had left the Veil—had been destined to leave—in search of this one encounter.

Mandrake was not a rebellious one who defied the gods. He was an agent of the gods, born with everything he needed to know—everything he needed to be—to carry out divine will.

Fully healed, he lifted from the bloom slowly. His body, no longer coated in steel, felt lighter and more balanced. The bladed wings were gone. Mandrake smiled. His strong musk billowed out on the air, filling the world with his might. The imp had tracked him and now hovered before him.

Mandrake used the form he could only take here. His body grew immense and he looked down at the little imp with a peace forged from destiny. “Were you meant to be here, demon, meant to make this fight? Were you born to take that form? I have come to this world to blot you out.”

He buzzed forward and the imp belched out fire. Mandrake stepped aside, now able to dodge the flames. He slipped behind the beast and punched it in the back of the head. He extended a prong at the moment of impact, jamming it into the skull. The prong melted and Mandrake winced, but the beast slumped to the ground, finished.

Mandrake’s heart soared as he raced in the air to return to his child and his love.

Epilogue

Oddy’s remains rode a cushion of air from the Hive to the church of Boxhead. Beside him strode Rayph and the Rose boys, Renalt limping and Spider wincing. Trevonne followed Collette and Brian, who walked hand-in-hand. They

entered the church and playing children greeted them. The boys and girls gathered around Oddy and sang songs. They held hands and danced in circles as he lay upon his pyre. The same little girl who had kissed Trevonne smiled at her before climbing atop him, unfastening his doll from his shoulder.

She kissed it and jumped down, skipping away. One by one, the kids placed a toy upon the body. One by one, the toys covered his corpse completely. The high mother led them in a song of love and hope. When the last chords rang out, the toys collapsed, betraying no body at all.

Light issued from the clouds and Trevonne began to cry. She suddenly felt a little hand in hers and looked down into the shining face of the blessed girl.

“There is no reason to cry. Oddy has been a mighty warrior for his Son for a long time. The weary father goes home to his Boy now. His war is over.”

She took the doll and kissed it lightly before slipping it to Trevonne, who looked at the foreign artifact and moved to hand it back.

“Keep it, please, as a reminder.”

Trevonne sobbed, breath hitching in her chest as she asked, “A reminder of what?”

“That you’re shiny, too. You fought. You almost died. You are a hero.”

Trevonne clutched the doll to her chest.

A week later, they sat in the tower, their eyes following Rayph as he spoke. “I recognize you both as wizards and grant you my mark. Your training is complete. I give you this tower to command as you see fit. You will rule it together for the good of the city.” A sudden darkness crossed his face and he looked lean and hungry. “Know that I will be watching you. I guard this nation

against its many enemies. You do not wish to become one. For a time, I will not be court wizard of Lorinth. But I will travel her roads. I will guard against her enemies and seek those who do not deserve her. There are many secrets in this tower, items I have yet to identify. I place it in your hands to catalogue it all. I will be back to claim anything you deem unworthy of the tower. I will destroy its darker artifacts utterly.”

They watched him walk into the garden. Within a breath, he was gone. Trevonne turned to Collette and giggled. She hugged her dear friend close and they turned to their tower, overwhelmed by their new responsibility.

Mandrake eventually returned to Liefdom with pageantry as they welcomed home their wayward son. The citizens had long been mourning Ebony Rose, who had been tossed to the jaws of the horrible beast. After Ebony’s death, Lotus had stepped down, announcing a new age in the City of Innocence and naming Azure its ruler. Many trees had been scorched, homes had burned, but the City of Innocence was rebuilding. Love and beauty would reign again.

Mandrake landed atop his roof and turned to face Lyadora. “I feel different today,” he said, “lighter, or more powerful, more at peace.”

“Maybe you want to strap a branch to my sides and punch it to splinters. Maybe you need to go and fight something somewhere.” She smiled and he shook his head as Pea joined him. He took her in his arms, peace radiating from his body in waves.

“Something is different,” he said.

“I feel it, too,” Pea murmured.

They turned to the morning parade and watched the city greet its newest citizens. Mandrake looked toward Missiniah to the beaming face of his cousin. Azure had stood before the imp and brought the army of raptors along with him. Hundreds of war birds had encircled the city, prepared to rent the imp to pieces. Mandrake stared at the fearless king, wondering how he could respect one being so much. His cousin had insisted Mandrake take the crown when he returned, but Mandrake refused. The throne was Thomas's destiny, not his. His war was over. Azure had prepared for rule since his day of blooming. Mandrake could think of no one better for the job.

His cousin turned to him and shook his head, pointing as Mandrake heard Pea gasp.

A fierce creature hovered before their home. The fey was a foot tall and boasted the wings of a great beetle. His mane of hair flowed wild and purple. "I present myself to you, father. Gentry Wolfsbane, warrior of Liefdom."

Mandrake began to cry as he opened his arms to his son.