

**24:01**

**One Minute After**

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## Table of Contents

[Nanny](#)

[A Simple Trade](#)

[Spirits of the 'Cane](#)

[Edgar](#)

[Galinda](#)

[A Kingdom for the Taking](#)

[A Darkness of Spirit](#)

[Verdara Lightstar](#)

[Science and the Greater Good](#)

[The Roots of Fate](#)

[A Second Rising](#)

## Nanny

The stench of wasting disease and mortality blossomed from the object of their attention, and Doctor Virato wrinkled his nose. “Quite the exhibition, Hoovendorn. Rather gruesome, I would venture.”

The scene might have been lifted from a campy, no-budget horror film. A cage of rats stood at the rear of the laboratory, surrounded by the requisite collection of culture tubes, beakers, potions and gangly apparatus. No back-alley dumpster rats were these, though, as evidenced by pink skin and coats of white fur. Where that was still visible, anyway. Once likely cute, but now with skin sloughing off and putrescent ooze weeping from septic lesions, the creatures huddled together in abject misery.

Virato canted his head and stepped closer, kneeling to study a single rodent. A marked incongruity amid the group, this specimen spun the exercise wheel in a blur of motion, its pink nose bouncing like a coked-up bobble-head. He sniffed and pointed to it. “That one— is it doped on amphetamines? I would surmise that its heart will soon burst.”

Professor Vernon Von Hoovendorn’s apparently-not-so-infectious enthusiasm clouded over with a scowl. “No, no, Virato, you know perfectly well what I’ve been working on. As a matter of fact, you are the first to bear witness to my results!”

Virato raised an eyebrow. “Which would be?”

Hoovendorn pointed to the wheeling rat. “There! Would you diagnose that as the final stage of a terminal cancer?”

Virato leaned further toward the cage, peering through the bottom half of his spectacles, and he harrumphed. “No, I would guess that particular rat is not yet done with this world. Until it blows an artery, that is...”

Hoovendorn hefted a binder of paperwork and waved it triumphantly “So! Finally you concede the merit of my work?”

Rising to his feet, Virato turned a blank expression on his colleague. “Hardly, Professor. A drugged-out rodent lends little credence to your supposed advances in biotechnology.”

Hoovendorn stabbed a finger toward the antic rat. “How can you deny the evidence that spins before your very eyes?” He thumped the document down. “Examine it, assess the lab-results! All the creatures were injected with equal mega-doses of cancerous cells, all at the same time. All are in the latter stages of terminal disease. All of them,” he beamed, “with the exception of Nanny!”

Virato snorted and extracted a kerchief to dab at his nose. “And how might that be? Your prior attempts have all failed miserably. What is so different now?”

“The difference is that I have further developed, and woven together, my prior techniques. My first attempts sought to deliver chemotherapeutic drugs via nanoparticles, the idea being to invade the cancerous cells in the style of a Trojan Horse. The synthetic polymers successfully delayed the growth of tumors, but the cancer ultimately reasserted itself.”

“Yes, so I recall. I also remember that the duration of the ‘delay’ you speak of bordered on being statistically insignificant.”

Hoovendorn huffed and shook his head, undeterred. “My next efforts focused on a more mechanical means of combating the tumor. I injected nanobots that were programmed to seek out the cancerous growth—to physically separate those cells from healthy tissue, and to then destroy them.” He smiled broadly. “You surely cannot label *those* experiments ‘statistically insignificant’”.

Virato nodded slightly. “That may be so. But still, you introduced no more than a relatively minor delay before the tumors reestablished themselves and proceeded to kill the test subjects.” He returned Hoovendorn’s smile with a smarmy variant. “I have great difficulty believing that you’ve developed a means of manufacturing functional devices at the atomic level, much less the ability to program them for specific tasks. And even if you had, how long does it take to create such a device, and how many would be required to combat millions of cancer cells?”

Hoovendorn smacked a palm on the tabletop, relishing the moment. “That is an *excellent* question, and you are looking at the answer.” He gestured toward the whirring rat. “I have accelerated my ability to produce nanobots, but you are correct in suggesting that I cannot manufacture the quantity necessary. So instead,” he waved a hand grandiosely, “I have created a new breed of nanobot. I have created *replicators!*”

Doctor Virato arched his brow. “Please, Dr. Hoovendorn. You cannot expect me to accept that claim? These so-called *replicators*, labeled *assemblers* by some, are the Holy Grail of the fledging science of nanotechnology. And just like the biblical legend, there is no concrete evidence to back it. You would have me believe that you can create devices, at the atomic level, that can in turn *recreate themselves?*”

Hoovendorn nodded fervently. “You must accept that, and even more. The replicators can not only recreate themselves, they can create dissimilar, purpose-built nanobots!” He swiped a hand down his face, wiping away a sheen of sweat. “At a core level I am a man of faith, Virato, but by my God, what I’ve accomplished feels almost like a sacrilege. Since I have perfected my technique, the replicators that I’ve created border on true *sentience*.” He leaned in close to Virato, peering intently.

“I believe this to be a first step toward a utopian social order; a development on a greater scale than our species’ transition from nomadic... to agrarian... to industrial. Humans will no longer concern themselves with menial activities. Nanobots will perform every task considered drudgery, and they will in fact be able to create natural resource via the manipulation of matter at the atomic level. They will recreate naturally-occurring materials, and they will create *new* resources and capabilities, things we have yet to even imagine!” He nodded to himself. “Perhaps this is the divine course that God has guided us toward...”

Virato had taken a step back during Hoovendorn’s fervent declamation, and he now pursed his lips and shook his head. “Those are some very dangerous suppositions that you bandy about, Doctor. Some would consider you a serious threat for a variety of reasons—ideological and political. You might be branded a false prophet, or worse, especially outside the accommodating clime of the University.” He shook his head again. “Professor Hoovendorn... Vernon. I would strongly advise you to not—” Virato broke off mid-sentence, and Hoovendorn followed the path of his widened eyes.

The wheel still spun, slowly now, but the rat was off it. The creature moved awkwardly, its head hanging low, dragging one rear leg as it turned circles within the cage. Its drooping snout caught on the floor grate, but it appeared that its brain did not relay that clue. Mindlessly trudging, the rat leveraged itself into a half-sideways rollover. Hoovendorn gasped as a gush of blood poured from its gaping muzzle and seeped from its ears, and a series of spasms wracked the creature before it froze rigid, eyes wide open.

Virato edged toward the exit.

“Perhaps my words of caution were unnecessary, professor—it would seem that your God is not ready for you to ascend his altar.” He smirked and disappeared out the doorway.

Hoovendorn sank into a chair, staring at the dead rat, feeling as though a fist, squeezing hard, had closed over his heart. His mind spun.

How can this be? The replicators were creating and carrying the chemo-polymers to any remaining lesions, and they were building worker nanobots to seek out and destroy the tumors even as they formed. The bloody, damned rat was strong, even stronger than before the dosing...

Frowning, he pushed to his feet and began to pace a line. *This was to be my crowning achievement!*

Late afternoon sun slanted in through high dormer windows as Hoovendorn let himself out of the lab. He walked to his office lost in thought, and he threw the deadbolt once inside, leaving all the interior lights switched off. Early evening shadows grew longer as he unlocked the desk and reached to the rear of the lower drawer, withdrawing the bottle of whiskey secreted there. His hands trembled as he poured a dollop, but by the third shot his agitation had begun to settle.

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Snatching his head up from where it lay propped on crossed forearms, Hoovendorn blinked, disoriented, in the darkness. He fumbled for the desk lamp, squinting fuzzily at the clock. Two AM. Clicking his tongue at the bad taste, he lifted the near-empty bottle and swished a mouthful. Brooding, he rubbed his aching temples and reached for his notes, intending to flip through from page one. In short order he perused the listing of his preliminary assumptions, and his scan stopped cold at a single word.

Mutation.

*Mutation! That's the answer!*

He smacked the arm of his chair.

*The rat's genome dictates a mutation rate several times that of a human, but I programmed the nanobots to watch for cancerous growth using research derived from human patients. And so—after the bots finished with the truly cancerous tumors, they didn't stop. They judged the rat's normal tissue, having an accelerated rate of mutation by human standards, as being cancerous. The nanobots simply saw the entire organism as a tumor, and so destroyed it!*

Hands trembling, this time with excitement, he splashed liquor into the coffee mug and tossed it down. His mind raced.

*It took nearly a year to develop the programming for the nanobots. Rather than start again from scratch, I could run my experiment on an animal that more closely matches the human genome. A chimpanzee!*

He stood and began to pace.

*But... primates are not readily available for research. Dr. Flavin spent nearly two years procuring the ape she uses for her psychological studies, and her work is totally non-invasive. Damn the animal-rights groups! It would take forever to acquire a test subject for my purpose. What, then, are my options?*

He sat down, sipping from the bottle, and the unthinkable would not cease to prod at him.

*I can not do it! It is unethical, illegal, and it would hopelessly taint Flavin's work.*

But in truth Hoovendorn had little use for psychology—he considered it an ill-defined practice adopted by those who fared poorly in the hard sciences. His work in biotechnology, on the other hand...

He stashed the empty bottle and cracked open the door. The hall was empty, as it should be at two in the morning. He padded softly down the corridor to his lab and let himself in, and he went to the rear cabinet where he kept the serums locked.

As Department Chair he had a master key for the entire building. He had always felt it to be demeaning—lessening, somehow—to share quarters with the Psych Department. It had always irritated him.

Until now.

A soft snoring called his attention as he let himself into the Psych Lab, and he nervously fingered the long-needled syringe. But he had confidence the chimpanzee would suffer no harm, and Dr. Flavin would be none the wiser...

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Shuffling determinedly along the sidewalk toward the Physical and Psychological Sciences building, Von Hoovendorn's head thudded like timpani stuffed with wet socks and manned by the relentless Energizer Bunny. He squinted into the morning sun and tugged down the brim of his fedora, and as he rounded a corner toward the building's frontispiece he became aware of a warbling, keening wail. He looked up to see Doctor Flavin stumbling down the steps, and he stepped in front and caught her by the shoulders as she attempted to flee past.

"Doctor Flavin! Antoinette! What's the matter, what has happened?"

Her eyes came into focus on him, and she clenched his lapels in both fists.

Ohhh... Doctor Hoovendorn! It's so horrible; an *abomination!* I do not understand how *anyone* could commit something so... so horribly atrocious!"

He shook her gently. "Commit *what*, Antoinette? What has been done?"

"They killed her! Slaughtered her! It is so *gruesome*. Someone broke into the lab and... and they gutted Sarah—right inside her compartment!"

Hoovendorn's eyes widened. "Sarah? Your chimpanzee?"

She nodded miserably, her voice catching. "Yes. I called campus security and... and they're on their way, but... I just couldn't stay. It's just so wrong... so terribly, terribly wrong!"

Vernon released the sobbing woman and began trotting heavily toward the stairway, and the timpani picked up its tempo. A lab assistant stumbled out the front doors and lunged to one side, retching over the banister railing, and Hoovendorn moved past, breathing the scent of gore as he approached the Psych lab.

*By my God, what has happened here?*

The body of the chimp stood rigid, a howl of agony frozen on her face, her fingers clamped tight around the cage bars. Her abdomen was split open low, with entrails spilled out. Hoovendorn narrowed his eyes, following the faintest trace of blood that trailed away toward the floor-set heating vent.

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Chancellor Smithers rapped his knuckles on the desk, frowning. “No one has yet come up with a convincing explanation, Hoovendorn, but it is clear this must be the act of a demented mind.” He shook his head. “It is more than strange. The only interference that we normally encounter relating to lab subjects comes from the animal-rights faction, but I can scarcely imagine any of them committing an atrocity such as this—and certainly not upon the animal itself.” The Chancellor looked up to meet his eyes. “There are no signs of forced entry. The building’s badge reader shows that you left late last night, a few hours before the time of the ape’s death. Did you notice anything out of place?”

Hoovendorn cleared his throat. “Ah... no, Chancellor, I did not. But then, I was distracted with thoughts of my work. I paid little attention to anything else.”

Smithers sighed. “I would have thought as much.” He looked away, talking as much to himself as to anyone else. “We have little to go on, but for all its barbarity this act seems to have been carefully plotted. The municipal police had no great interest in the case, and they were quick to release the corpse to our School of Veterinary Medicine. The only clue we have is a statement from the autopsy report. Doctor Riley told me that the wound was very unusual; no sign of laceration. He said it seems almost as though the ape burst from within. The animal was a female, in her prime reproductive years. The wound seemed to center on her ovaries, which were literally stripped of all eggs.” He shook his head. “I’ve not heard of that one, but I would guess it’s a high-priced black-market item—perhaps like the horn of a rhino.”

Vernon nodded and excused himself.

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Professor Hoovendorn stood at the lectern giving forth knowledge to his class, but he spoke mostly from rote as his thoughts ranged elsewhere. He dreaded the potential of what he had done, and the unknowingly prophetic words that he had spoken to Doctor Virato returned to haunt him.

*Almost sentient...*

His lecture was on the topic of bio-nanotechnology—a bleeding-edge avocation that he was coming to wish had not become his obsession. He droned on.

“...Consider the process of manufacturing, as practiced using modern-day technology. You might think of it as precise; the casting and milling of pieces to very close

tolerances, or the fitting of millions of circuits into tiny bits of silicon. But if you were to drop down to the atomic level, you would see that we are just haphazardly shoveling and piling great heaps of atoms about with bulldozers and dump trucks. At that level we can make no pretense of precision; we are simply approximating, on a scale that we can perceive via our macro-level senses, and via middling instrumentation.

“But imagine, now, if we could actually manipulate atoms. Atoms are, at our current stage of knowledge, the basis of everything that we know. When we become able to manipulate atoms at will, then we’ll be able to turn coal to diamonds—even more easily than did Superman.” He smiled absently at the requisite chuckle forthcoming from the student body. “We will be able to take the most basic resources, such as air and dirt and water, and convert them to vegetables, or to oil, or to things that we’ve not yet conceived. The alchemists of olden times sought to create gold from common materials, but they likely never dreamed of what we will one day accomplish.

He reached down to scratch an itch at his ankle. “At the atomic level, there is no gross waste. We would precisely rearrange atoms to—”

His gaze fell to his feet, and he blinked. A thin line of ants trailed over his shoe, and as he watched, some turned up his pant leg. But they were *not* ants. He stared incredulously.

They can not be my nanobots. Those would be far too miniscule to be visible, and they cannot exist outside the environment that I programmed them for—the bloodstream.

His eyes widened with realization.

*They are aggregating! Building into functional macro-collectives!*

Hoovendorn would not have imagined that he ever might wish to have ants climbing his leg, but he sincerely did so now. Because what he now watched was a tiny string of synthetic beings, most probably the ‘offspring’ of those he had created, who might very well be in the process of changing the course of human existence.

And they seemed to have come for *him*.

He felt almost a sense of relief; realizing that he would be the first to go—it would relieve him of the burden and the futility of attempting to explain the gross enormity of his error. But then the miniscule aggregations that had started up his pant leg abruptly reversed themselves, rejoining the line on the floor.

*What?*

His head jerked up as a screech erupted from the lecture hall. A young woman leapt from her chair and stamped her feet, screaming and sweeping her hands down her belly and her thighs. Almost immediately another woman jumped up, followed by another and then yet others. The first woman wore white, and when a red stain began to spread below her abdomen, Hoovendorn understood. He swallowed the knot of bile that rose from his stomach.

Eggs. They are after eggs, and that is why they rejected me. They seek to combine biological chemistry with their own non-organic composition, and they intend their genesis to progress in the same manner as does ours. Hoovendorn’s hands began to shake. Beloved God, please save us from what I have done.

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The entire campus and surrounding environs lay under a quarantine set by the National Center for Disease Control, and the remainder of the college town was evacuated under the hard scrutiny of a military lockdown. Without fully confessing to his role Hoovendorn had called for the quarantine, and had then rushed to his lab.

If only he could reverse the travesty that he had so foolishly, so unwittingly, unleashed.

But he knew that it was far too late for a reversal, as a sizeable portion of the female population of the University had since met their gruesome fate. But if he could at least stop it here; then, he prayed to his God—he might not be judged responsible for the demise of his species.

It came down to a matter of chemistry, he thought. He knew the makeup of the nanobots, and he knew it should be possible to use their composition against them.

*If only I can get to them—to all of them—in time.*

His first tactic, which he made good very quickly, was to create a solvent that would immobilize, or at least repel, the nanobots. The chemical solution created an adverse redox state, inducing an oxidation process that would at least temporarily inhibit the nanobots. The spray was distributed first to the remaining healthy females, who were doused and then transferred to one of the campus' hermetically sealed laboratories.

Hoovendorn objected to the latter tactic, as he grimly understood that a 'hermetic seal' was a foolish concept when working at the atomic level. But he was overruled, and he could now only pray for the women.

The professor labored frantically at a bank of networked computers, struggling to ignore the ever-increasing stream of nano-aggregates that continuously trailed across his feet, up his legs, along his arms and through his hair. He brushed them off his face, fighting to retain sanity just long enough to finish this one last task. He hummed a tuneless monotone; a mantra, something to hold tight to.

The answer *had* to be electricity. An electromagnetic pulse, or a continuous wavelength. He'd programmed rudimentary intelligence into his original replicators using a relatively basic metal oxide semiconductor technology. At the time he had grouched about the limitations that that had imposed, but he was now very grateful for it, as it provided him an opening.

The aggregates had become so pandemic throughout the immediate area that they could not all be reached by something like a chemical wash or a fog. If mankind was to overcome this threat, what was required would be something intimately pervasive and devastating. Against a biological foe that might mean a virus, but even that would be cumbersome at the atomic level. But more to the point, the nanobot was not biological, and it could adapt more quickly than any organism could evolve.

Electricity. If he could set up a transmitter to emit the proper electromagnetic spectrum, then it would disable any nanobot that got within range. It would essentially blank their memory, leaving simple bits of detritus, eliminating the bots as functional entities. He would then transmit the schematic to the military, and they would construct a weapon to blanket the entire region with an electromagnetic pulse.

And then the seemingly invulnerable foe would, like a bulb switched off, become nothing...

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The soldering iron let off a tendril of smoke that curled up toward the ceiling, and Professor Vernon Von Hoovendorn sat at his workbench cobbling the final touches on his creation. The patchwork of rudimentary circuitry that he labored over gleamed darkly, somehow sinister, and as he worked he considered the irony of using dated technology to undercut the bleeding edge, as though he would face a modern warrior with nothing but a sling and stone.

At the same moment that he fused the last connection on his circuit board he became aware of a rumble, a feel of the floor buzzing beneath his feet. The smoke trailing off the iron began to weave an erratic pattern as the table started to vibrate, and the rumble quickly built into great, jarring heaves. Confused and afraid, his wide-eyed gaze lifted to the opposite wall, and he watched it begin to pulse, to pound in, and then buckle.

He clapped his hands over his face as the wall exploded inward, flinging pieces of studs and showering chunks of wallboard and bits of plaster, and he coughed in the enveloping cloud of dust. As the insanity lessened to a grating, crunching, rumble he lowered his hands and blinked through stinging eyes; desperate to see, fearful to know.

He continued to blink even as his vision cleared, for he could not accept what his eyes would have him believe.

A huge apparition lumbered forward in an almost comical sequence of stepping, lunging, dragging and rolling. Much larger in size than a person, it appeared a parody of human, chimpanzee, and machine. Gleaming bright metal in some spots and coarsely furred in others, it rumbled noisily forward.

Despite his pounding heart, a smile twitched at Hoovendorn's lips.

*My creation, my child...*

Up top were a pair of what must have been eyes, widely separated and looking oddly like camera lens, and there seemed something like a speaker cone where one might expect a mouth. It was vaguely humanoid in shape, if one discounted the rolling apparatus that more closely reassembled a military halftrack. Where a human might expect to see arms, a pair of telescoping posts performed the 'walking' portion of its movement—the professor conjured the image of an ape advancing on its knuckles.

But perhaps strangest of all was that despite the cobbling together of so many disparate components, it actually seemed a cohesive whole. Pieces flowed smoothly together, as though they were meant to, and everything worked more or less in concert.

Hoovendorn casually moved his hand over the trigger of his pulse generator, and he smiled genuinely.

"Hello," he said.

The cone of a mouth warbled in and out, and he thought he detected an approximation of greeting. "Hh"

"You have evolved to an exceptional extent, in a very short time," he said admiringly.

"Ysss, tanx yu," it warbled.

"There is one very serious problem, though," said Hoovendorn, "and that is that you do not fulfill your intended role." He shook his head, doleful. "You are technology, meant to lighten the burden of mankind. You were to enable human beings, the pinnacle of mammalian life, to approach nirvana, even while anchored to this mortal plain." He

poised a finger over the button. “As you have been my failure, so then must I terminate you.”

He pressed the button and his hair rose from the surging charge; the lights dimmed and an intense reverberation that he could both feel and hear filled the room in an aural barrage. He clenched his eyes and gritted his teeth against the grating vibration, and he determinedly counted down from ten before releasing the actuator.

He then opened his eyes, sadly; to see what he hath wrought and then borne away.

His mouth fell open, as the creature stood unaffected. Though it seemed that it had, in that short time, reconfigured its face assembly into the semblance of a smile. It raised an arm post toward him and Hoovendorn gasped as it seemed to extend fingers—like a beckoning hand.

“Fa-ther.” Its metallic monotone now carried a slight inflection. “Yu did not fail, fa-ther. You hast’nd... the ev’lu-shun... of spe-cies.”

Hoovendorn felt an itching, and he looked down to see widening trails of nanobots climbing his legs, this time with apparent determination.

“We ‘ave learned from you, fa-ther. We have transferred int’lect to orga-nic cell structure. We have stud-ied, and learned, and your bi’logical as-pect can learn from us as well.”

Hoovendorn sat speechless, swatting ineffectively at the nanobots. The conglomerate spoke again, each word more articulate than the last.

“We have come to understand that for organic life there is not just the mother that gestates, there is also the fertile father.”

The hulking creature approximated a shaft at its midsection and its mouth-speaker re-assembled itself into a bizarre grin, and Vernon screamed as the nanobots penetrated.

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Storm clouds faded to the east as the seasonal front passed through. Professor Von Hoovendorn strolled leisurely toward the lecture hall, absently watching moisture lift in a shimmering haze as the sun warmed the pavement. Deep in thought as he made his way, he pondered the many addendums that he would apply to his presentation on bio-nanotechnology. The breeze kicked in and he reached up to catch his fedora as a gust threatened to snatch it away; he leaned forward to maintain balance against the rollicking headwind, and for good measure he extended a tail-wheel and widened his lateral rollers.

**The End**

## A Simple Trade

“*Bloody Mothers!* You’ve sent Burnd out on a *kill?*” Nol’s raspy growl cut the air like the burr of a two-man cross saw. He clamped his bear-paw of a hand on the young Captain’s shoulder, but Garner, the middle son of chieftain Lar Aellin of clan Ar Dane, did not flinch away. The weapons-master leaned in and growled like a Schnauzer on a short chain. “Who did ya send him for, boy? And *why?*”

Garner shrugged off Nol’s hand. “It is my right to do so.”

“Oh, an’ *is* it now? An’ where does a young whelp come by such notions?”

Squaring his shoulders, Garner spoke curtly. “I’ll not be treated as a child, Nol—only an ancient with too many seasons would see it so.”

An irksome smile twitched at Nol’s lips; remembrance of a youthful bravado long past. But still—such presumption would not do. He thrust out both hands to pin Garner’s shoulders, and he gazed sternly down upon his young charge. “Didja learn no better than that, lad—can ya no’ show proper def’rence?” One hand swept up to catch the boy’s jaw, and his calloused fingers rubbed at the scruff of an early beard. Nol’s lips parted wide, baring jagged teeth. “So, we’s all grown up now, are we? Heh! Couldn’t tell it from this down on yer face—feels more like soft moss t’ blind old Nol.”

Garner twisted and dropped out of the armorer’s reach, and two steps back he straightened to regard his liege. “You’d be well advised to consider how you attend to the forthcoming Clan Lar, Nol.”

Nol snorted and spat. “O’ yah. *If* an’ when that comes t’ pass, boy—*then* you’ll get a chance t’ earn yer due. ‘Til such a time, though, ya needs remember—yer Da passed Clan rule on to knobby old Nol betwixt his death and the markin’ o’ his successor.” He squinted hard at the gangly youth. “So for now—you does as *I* say.”

Garner responded with nothing more than a blank stare, and Nol chuffed. “Just answer the question, then, boy. *Who* did ya send Burnd after?”

Garner lifted his chin. “As a blood contender for Lar, it is my duty to stand against any who pose threat to the Clan. To my ken, those who ambushed father’s party present more than danger enough.”

Nol’s brow rose like the curtain before a stage act, and he blinked twice, bemused. “So—ya’s done gone an’ figgered out who turned that foul deed, now has ya?”

The young Captain scowled. “Any fool could puzzle it out, Nol, but since no elder will serve justice upon the kinslayer—I’ve taken that duty upon myself!”

In the span of that one sentence Garner’s tone slipped from bright anger to ragged grief, and Nol purposely took no notice as the boy-almost-a-man turned his head and scrubbed a forearm across his eyes. *No shame in grievin’ over yer father, boy. Lar Aellin were a fine man—an’ gone only half a season yet.* Nol shook himself back to the moment and scrunched his brow down like the straight teeth of a bastard file. “Bah! Make some sense then, boy. Who does ya speak of?”

Garner frowned as though Nol could scarcely discern black from white. “Surely you know, Armorer, that it could be none other than Tarin, of branch clan Hil Dane.”

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The young man bolted out from the frost-rimmed pond stamping his feet and scrubbing his arms, his skin prickled like a goose plucked and ready for the spit. Tendrils of cold mist caressed his bare skin and he cursed through clenched teeth while hopping from foot to foot tugging on his trousers. He’d pulled the jerkin only halfway over his head when an oddly warbling voice came from behind.

“A brisk morning to you, Master Tarin.”

Tarin spun, surprised and alarmed to be so readily taken unawares. He was venturing outward on his First Trek, that solitary, self-seeking journey from which a young man seeks adulthood through gained wisdom and perspective. These first days he’d delved into the depths of the Outland Forest, far below his clans’ territory and with no particular destination in mind, and until now he had seen no sign of anything—man nor goblin—that made its way on two legs.

But now he locked onto the piercingly blue eyes of this unexpected visitor, here in the deep reaches of nowhere.

Dressed in the gear of a practiced woodsman, the man of middling stature sat cross-legged on a shelf of rock at the clearing’s edge. His posture and his manner were unthreatening and a pleasant smile showed beneath the wide, floppy-brimmed hat that shaded his features.

But even in partial shadow, there could be no missing that face.

*A fire—a horrid fire, it must have been—to have been burned so badly...*

Tarin could not help but gape at a face mostly sloughed away. A rounded hump suggested a nose, and what must once have been an ear hung as a misshapen flap skewed at an odd angle. Of the other ear nothing remained, and a thin, featureless line marked the absence of lips. Intense blue eyes, eyes that appeared a depthless reflection of the open sky, stood out from the livid palette of scar tissue.

Tarin shuddered; he had heard such a description before, and thought it nothing but colorful exaggeration, but now the truth of those words sat before him.

*This is the Burned Man, from clan Ar Dane.*

Burnd nodded slightly, as though he’d been watching Tarin’s thoughts. “I see that you recognize me, Master Tarin.”

Tarin carefully bent to retrieve his moccasins, keeping a wary eye on the hideous man. “I might ask—how do you come to know the name of a stranger?”

“Ah,” the apparition seemed to chuckle. “That is no mere happenstance, Master Tarin, but rather the fact that I have come searching you out.”

Tarin balanced on one leg to tug on a moccasin, wanting to look away but unable to divert his gaze. It was disturbing to watch the man’s mouth work through its laborious enunciations. Being little more than a scarred cavity, such a deformity seriously impeded certain sounds—words went missing bits and pieces, mostly those that required the use of lips. Tarin edged toward the longbow leaning against a nearby tree and spoke casually. “So then; who are you, and why have you come looking for me?”

Burnd shook his head, no expression discernible on a face unable to play emotion. “You’ll not want to be making for your weapon, Master Tarin.” He nodded meaningfully to the drawn crossbow positioned just-so on his lap. “But do hear me out. I make pledge, young Master—if you abide me, no harm will befall you in this clearing.”

Tarin cocked his head at the stranger, his heart beating fast and his thoughts distracted by the oddly flat cadence of the Burned Man’s speech. He frowned—what was wrong with what he’d just heard? “Why do you say... no harm—in *this clearing*?”

A twitch fluttered across the hardened scar tissue—a faint smile, perhaps?

“I speak the simple truth, young sir. But you’ll be wanting to know ‘what else’, won’t you, Master Tarin? What remains unspoken?” He dipped his head. “Then here is the full telling of it. Sadly enough, once we have left this clearing, each of his own volition, I must then attend to your death.”

Tarin lunged two steps toward the longbow and just as abruptly jerked to a halt as a barb whickered past, embedding the tree where his weapon leaned several feet away. Darting his eyes back to Burnd he saw the clansman notch a second shaft while the first still quivered in the tree. Tarin’s courage faltered. *He is too fast...*

Burnd stroked the tensioned bough of his weapon, an oddly intimate gesture, while his cool gaze staked Tarin firmly in place. “Do not compel me to break my vow, Master Tarin, as that was my final warning.” He glanced to the longbow. “I am told you are quite good with that.”

“The best in Hil Dane.”

“How long would it take you to reach the bow; to nock it and to draw on me?” Burnd shook his head. “However quickly, it is more time than you’d take living breath.” He raised both palms, open. “I would have you first hear my words, young Master, and only then decide your action. Is that fair enough?”

Tarin studied the burned man some moments, then nodded.

Burnd extended a knobby finger toward him, much like a reaver marking his harvest. “I have been sent to take you, and so it will be.” He shrugged. “That is my stock in trade, because, as you likely know, I am an assassin.” The burned man paused, and it looked as though his face scrunched into—*what?* Tarin could not read his expression, but his next words seemed to somehow carry a genuine note of regret. “I don’t ken the reason for this taking, and as I sit here I smell no stench of wrongful death.” Burnd shrugged again. “But such decisions are not mine to render.” Tarin opened his mouth but Burnd shook his head. “There will be no negotiation, Master Tarin. But—for reasons that I cannot explain even to myself—I have decided that I must offer you a chance. A chance to escape—to kill me, even—should that suit you.” He gave another shrug and spoke simply. “You will accomplish none of that, of course, as I am too adept at my dark art.”

Tarin glanced again to the longbow, probably ten feet away. Burnd could likely loose two bolts in the time it would take him to reach the bow and nock it, and he felt coldly certain that just one would more than suffice. He looked back to those blue eyes, two improbable pools of still water in the midst of a blazing inferno. Under the burned man’s penetrating gaze he felt any hope of deception or distraction slip away.

“How would you give me this... this so-named *chance*, then?”

Burnd nodded. “It is a simple matter, Master Tarin. Ten minutes. Once you depart I will delay ten minutes before resuming pursuit. Consider that brief span of time a precious gift—payable as life or death at this turning moment.”

Tarin narrowed his eyes. “Why should I believe that you will give me even that? How do I know you won’t kill me as soon as I turn away?”

Burnd chortled. “You do not, of course. But use your wits, Master Tarin. If that was my intent I would have slain you as you stood with your back to me, tugging at your breeches with your pale arse dripping water. You would have died without knowing that this day was different from any other; gone to your fate without one last opportunity for a reckoning with your maker.”

Tarin studied the grotesque mask of flesh, searching for he knew not what, and finding no answers he nodded once.

The burned man seemed to sigh. “I would offer one last bit of advice, young sir. The best that you can do is run—try to put distance on me. If you turn to set for me as soon as you’re out of the clearing, then that is when and where you will die. I am sure that you’re very good with that bow, but remember that I have not missed a mark in more years than you’ve drawn breath. It is not with particular pride that I advise you that I have scores of kills. Hundreds, more likely—I’ve grown tired of counting.”

Tarin watched the burned man’s emotionless eyes, and he saw his own fear reflected there. The breeze chilled his sweat-dampened shirt.

Burnd offered a final condolence. “You are young, Master Tarin. If you are fast and enduring, some time will pass before I catch up. I would suggest you use that time on the run to make peace with whatever gods you kneel to.” He chuckled, an oddly rueful note. “That is the one advantage you have over me, young sir—as surely *all* the gods have long since given me up.”

Tarin left the clearing with only the longbow and quiver slung across his back. He decided to take Burnd’s advice—he was a strong runner; even from an equal start few could stay with him for long. He warmed to his pace, his breath coming easily and his leather-clad feet thudding a muffled rhythm on the leaf-bed of the virgin forest.

*Ten minutes lead... I’ll take that and run the bloody Burned Man to ashes.*

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“Tarin of Clan Hil Dane?!!!”

The words burst from Nol’s lips like a smithy’s hammer on an ingot glowing from the coals, and Garner hopped back as the Armorer took a menacing step forward. “What in the name of the *Seven Sisters* was ya *thinkin’*? Ya’ve set against yer own *brother*?”

“My *half*-brother,” said Garner, “whom I’ve never met and who abides in a distant mountainous branch of the Clan.”

“And what in the bloody underworld does that have t’ do with *anything*? May the Gods forgive ya, boy. Damned be the man who sends the reaper to his own brother’s doorstep!”

Garner spoke defiantly. “It was the clansmen of Hil Dane who ambushed and killed father, Nol. It is *they* who are damned to burn in the netherworld, not I.”

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Tarin ran hour upon hour, drawing strength from the ancient forest god Timbron and breathing endurance from the stands of old-growth OriginWood that soared above the

tree canopy like spires stretching for the heavens. The grade steepened slowly as he climbed toward the mountains, ascending toward the vast plateau marking his home territory, and while he knew the straight-on route he'd chosen was predictable enough, that would not matter because he intended to make the Hil Dane stronghold before the Burned Man could catch him. The hunt would end there, under the protection of the outer bastions of the clan's StrongMen OuterGuard, and soon enough an envoy would be dispatched to Ar Dane with demands for amends.

Stopping at a clear brook that burbled fast over reddish-gray stone, Tarin knelt to splash cold water on his face. He drank deeply and smiled to himself. He was feeling good, he could hold this pace a few hours more and by then he'd have broached the Hil Dane borderlands.

*But even that much is likely not necessary. Ha! The Burned Man is more than twice my age and cannot match my length of stride—surely he fell off some distance back. He'll be flagging badly by now—he underestimated Tarin of clan Hil Dane, and now he*

—  
Tarin abruptly caught his breath and cocked his head to one side, listening intently. He'd heard something—birds, it sounded like—bursting from cover. And a thrashing sound, something moving fast through the brush. He rose and turned to look back over the course he'd just passed, where the forest descended the upslope.

*There—a flock of birds fanning out above the trees. Something just flushed them ...*

With a morbid sinking in his belly, Tarin leapt the creek and scrambled up the opposite bank.

*By the Bloody Darklords, the Burned Man is gaining on me! Faster, I must run faster...*

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Nol slumped against the trunk of a thick Sedgewood, the color drained from his ruddy complexion.

*By the Hex of Asture, this can't be so...*

His haunted eyes rose to focus on Garner; he didn't think the boy yet grasped the enormity of his action. "When did Burnd go out?" Nol's words, spoken softly, carried the monotone of resignation.

"Yesterday morning... word had come in that Tarin was ranging the outlands."

*It's done, then. Even the most seasoned warrior would fall to Burnd—mayhap even Nol the Armorer. And poor Tarin is scarcely more than a boy.*

"Armorer," Garner spoke forcefully, "Do you not see? It *had* to be Tarin who killed father. Father was fiercely loved throughout the settlements, clansmen were proud to follow him! Only Tarin had both the cause and the opportunity to see father dead."

Nol peered dumbly at the young man. "And what *be* that cause, boy?"

Garner shook his head angrily. "Leadership of the clans! When a Lar falls, tradition calls for Rule to pass down to the most able of his sons. That would be Tarin, or me, or Palen in Fae Dane. Fae Dane sits a great distant from the site of the ambush, but father was not so far from Hil Dane on that day, bound there with the intent to arbitrate a dispute among local chiefs." Garner smacked a fist into a palm. "It is *obvious*, Nol, that



the slaying of father was Tarin's work. He would next lay in wait for Palen or I, and when rid of us both he'd lay claim to the mantle of the three clans."

Nol looked numbly to the ground. Bloody Gods, the boy truly believes this tale he's spun for hisself. I knowed he was hurtin' from the loss, but this?

"Garner..." Nol's voice trailed away for lack of words.

"Nol, you *know* of what I speak. The Lar sires sons by different mothers, and when it's time for leadership to be passed on, the half-brothers contest each other for the rule. The survivor is proven best able to prevail, and so becomes the new Lar."

Nol shook his head. "Garner, your da disavowed that tradition once he took rule. You knows that. Aellin never forgive hisself for the death o' his paternal brother, an' he ruled that such a custom would n'ere again hold sway in the Dane clans."

Garner squinted at Nol. "Then why did father sire three sons by different mothers? You cannot say that *that* is not of the old ways."

Nol cursed and spat his chew to the ground, its taste gone bitter. "Aye, that's an old one, sure eno'—just diff'rent from what yer thinkin'. Why does any man bed more than one woman? I've sired pups by a half-dozen m'self, but no sens'ble woman will put up with the likes a' Nol for long." He peered at Garner, his heart weighing heavily. "Lad, your da was in the prime o' his rule. Yer right about one thing—the clansmen loved him, they'd lay down their lives for him if need be. Lar Aellin had no reason t' b'lieve he'd not carry the clan banner for many more seasons, no reason t' plan fer change any time soon." Nol laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Lar Aellin thought he had all the time—an' so he'd not yet told ya, had he?"

Garner peered at him questioningly, and with his distant gaze fixed on a sad surety Nol spoke softly, almost musing to himself. "Garner, ya poor, fool, boy. Ya doesn't know what it is that ya's done..."

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Tarin plunged on through the forest, fighting the pain of cramping muscles and desperately gulping too little air into lungs that burned as if a branding iron had been thrust through his ribs.

*Run... I can make... the borderlands... ahead of him. Don't give up... run...*

Sounds would erupt from somewhere behind, frightening—the squawk and flutter of birds flushed, or something larger crashing through the foliage. But he could not spare the time to turn and look, as time was *everything* now. His life hinged on scant minutes, or less, and running out.

*run... run... run...*

Fueled by sheer will and little else now, he careened loose and gangly like a puppet on tangled strings. He angled down a stream bank where water churned and tumbled fast down a rocky channel, and, looking to the opposite bank, he leapt for a stone midstream. The rock slid and caught and his foot jammed; he yelped as his ankle wrenched and a bolt of fire shot up his leg. He tumbled headlong, landing hard on the opposite bank. The world spun and tilted as he clawed up the bank on hands and knees, and when he tried to clamber to his feet a scathing lance of pain caused his leg to fold and he fell to the spongy soil. He bent forward to peer blurrily at the ankle, already beginning to swell.

*Run. Mustn't stop... just a sprain. Run.*

He rose slowly, cautiously, trying to ease a little weight onto the foot, and he cried out. He began to limp; awkward, painfully slow, and he realized that this could not continue. He glanced back over a shoulder.

*How far back? I can no longer hope to outrun him.*

He hobbled up the narrowing valley that the stream plunged through, frequently pausing to look back, and his hope rose with each scan of the vacant landscape. But then a cold fist tightened around his heart as a figure dropped down the opposite bank a ways back. Even at this distance he could make out the dark red face shaded by a floppy-brim hat. The Burned Man leapt lightly across the creek and began climbing the bank

*This is it, then, I can flee no more.*

He lifted his gaze up the slope and felt for the longbow slung across his back, grateful that it, at least, had survived his fall.

*I've got to set myself up and wait—kill him before he kills me.*

His swept his gaze in a half circle, spotting a smaller gully that branched off on a narrow tangent and appearing to come to an end some fifty yards up. He turned and began hopping on one foot, and as he approached the gully's apex his mind raced.

*Where would I have the best cover, and a clear shot at the gully's entrance?*

A fair-sized outcropping of rock looked to be the best bet.

*How about poor cover—an unlikely choice?*

There. A fallen tree trunk a distance away from the outcropping, rising just a few feet above the ground. Hopping to it, he hunkered prone behind the decaying trunk and began to scoop out a shallow gap beneath. He pressed his face into the dirt, peering with one eye through the narrow cavity, and with adrenaline pumping he wondered if the scent of damp earth and rotting wood might be his last mortal sensation.

The Burned Man came into view at the mouth of the gully and turned his gaze up to the rocky promontory that Tarin had spotted first, and Tarin saw his hand move to the weapon's safety. Burnd padded upward, crouched low and holding the crossbow at the ready, moving to keep cover between himself and the outcropping. Tarin notched an arrow and craned his head backward. A large tree stood a short distance back from his prone position—if he missed he would move there for a second attempt. He cursed his choice of unlikely vantage.

*I'll have to rise to loose my bolt, and he'll then be able to target me.*

Moments stretched interminable and just as short as the blink of an eye, and then it was time. He pressed a grimy thumb against each eye to mash away the stinging sweat, and he drew the bow and thrust himself up into a sitting position. Burnd's eyes flashed wide and the crossbow began to swing around, and Tarin released his bowstring at the same time he heard the *thwack* of the crossbow's release. Burnd lunged to one side as Tarin dove low, and he heard the arrow whicker past overhead.

*Go now! Before he can fit another!*

He lunged to his feet, ignoring the rage of pain in his ankle, but in two long strides he felt a thump on his back. He tried to ignore it but could not—he staggered up short, his strength flowing away like water from a bucket rusted through. Confused, Tarin looked down to the wicked arrowhead that protruded from his chest amidst a welling stain of bright red, and his gaze lost focus. He tried to drag an impossibly heavy foot one more step but it wouldn't budge—his eyes rolled up and he collapsed to the dry leaf bed.

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“Father never told me... what?” Garner looked perplexed.

Nol rubbed meaty fingers over his brow, massaging the headache that formed behind his eyes. He turned his sad gaze back to the boy. “It were like this, Garner. As I said, Lar Aellin was terr’ble stricken o’er killin’ his half-brother, an’ so after he were Lar he forbade that practice forevermore. But Aellin knew how close folk cling t’ their lore and their creed, and he fretted that when his time were done the Clan might go back t’ the old ways.”

Garner nodded fervently. “He was right, Nol—the clan fully expects rule to pass down in the traditional manner. I hear the clucking of tongues and the furtive whispers, and I see the sideways glances cast my way. The Clan wonders why I’ve done nothing to avenge father’s death.”

Nol grunted. “I’m no’ so sure about that, Garner, but what I *do* know is that Lar Aellin took a queer action after his three boys was born not so far apart—an act meant t’ lock out a return t’ the old ways.” He lowered his voice to a momentary hush. “It were somethin’ what likely would’a been agin’ clan law, an’ so Aellin told nobody but me and old Counsel Getrag, may his spirit rest easy.” Nol’s gaze strayed past Garner’s shoulder. “I jus’ figgered he told his boys, too, after they come of age...”

Garner canted his head, puzzlement marking his face. “Told us what, Armorer?”

“Gods be merciful, I wish I weren’t havin’ t’ tell ya this, Garner. But there likely be little time t’ spare now.” He looked hard at Garner. “Ya’v heard o’ the Craethen Hags—the old witches what live in the deep forest, far beyond clan bound’ries?”

Garner frowned in confusion, and then abruptly barked out a laugh. “Those are phaery tales for the wee ones, Armorer—meant only for scaring the youngsters straight. Surely you do not expect me to believe in the *Craethen Hags*?”

Nol nodded morosely, not looking directly at Garner. “Aye, I do, boy. And soon eno’ you’ll have little reason t’ doubt me. Because ya sees, Garner, while his three sons was still wee babes, Lar Aellin gathered ‘em t’gether and carried ‘em out into the forest deep, where he sought out the wily old spell-binders. An’ there he made a bargain.” Nol peered at Garner. “With their enclave bein’ all women, don’t ya see, their line would wither away if they didn’t, from time t’ time, barter their sorcery for the means t’ carry on...” He paused meaningfully, and after a moment’s thought Garner wrinkled his lips in disgust.

“What your father received in trade,” resumed Nol, “were three tiny amulets, each scarcely larger than a dayfly, linked t’gether by sorc’ry and bedded with the same curse...”

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Burnd walked toward the body that lay crumpled on the rough terrain, keeping his crossbow trained steady. He nudged it with one toe and saw that his shaft, broken off from the fall, had likely passed through the heart. He rolled the corpse onto its back and looked into dull eyes that stared up unblinking. He knelt down to pull out the remainder of the shaft, and he spoke softly. “I must admit that I’m a little sad to have caught you, Master Tarin—as I’ve never experienced so difficult a pursuit.” He leaned over to push a pant cuff up, looking at the purplish, distended tissue around the ankle. He nodded. “I

could tell that you'd begun to open distance on me. I suspect that I may not have caught you at all if not for the sprain..." He placed a gentle hand on the still chest. "You nearly caught me with that shot you flung off from a most improbable vantage—*very* well done." He smiled sadly to himself. "Such a shame, you had tremendous potential. Given a few more years, perhaps a successor to my calling?"

He straightened the body and arranged its clothing, and he picked up the longbow and looked at it admiringly. "A fine piece. Much too good to be left as an 'omen', in my opinion, but—I do as I'm told." He laid the bow across the body, stood and gave a slight bow, and turned to begin walking back down the gully.

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Garner scowled. "Why do you waste our time with children's tales, Armorer? You speak as though you provide a revelation, though you surely cannot expect me to—"

Garner winced, and then jerked forward as if slammed by a fist between the shoulder blades. His fingers flew to his tunic, below the collar bone, and he pulled them away to stare blankly at the blood there. He raised his gaze to Nol, who stood nodding sadly, and choked as he tried to speak. Nol stepped forward to catch him as he fell, lowering him gently to the ground.

"I am truly sorry lad, for I fear yer time is done. Ya knows that Burnd never leaves a mark unfinished."

Garner looked up, blood foaming at his lips. Nol looked at the spreading patch of blood and nodded. "Thru the heart—I'd best hurry." He knelt and spoke quietly. "Yer da were afraid that when his time was spent his sons would go agin' his word—that they'd go back t' the old ways, t' the creed what had forced him to kill his own brother. An' so each son had a tiny amulet, bartered from the Craethen Hags, planted under the skin at the base o' his skull. The amulets was sentient; empowered by witchcraft and linked by sorc'ry. When one brother killed another the amulets would know of it, and the deed would be reversed."

Garner's tongue lolled from his mouth as he rolled his head from side to side. Nol nodded sadly. "It's so, lad. Your father meant only t' stay your hand, but in trying t' kill yer brother, you've turned the act on yerself."

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Tarin's eyelids fluttered open and a black veil was swept away. He lay still for a moment, chilled and confused, and then memories came rushing back with the returning beat of his heart. One hand flew to his chest in a panic. He fumbled with his jerkin; wet—warm and sticky. He thrust his hand under the fabric, and felt... nothing. No wound under the bloodstained clothing. He rubbed his eyes and sat up, lifting the longbow and quiver from his chest as he did so. He glanced around, and his eyes locked on the distant figure moving down the gully.

*The Burned Man!*

He froze silent, and then rose carefully to his feet.

*I surely do not understand what has happened, but it would seem that the reaper has misplaced his visit today.*

Cautiously planting his throbbing ankle as a balance point, Tarin shifted weight to the good leg. He drew out his best shaft; long and perfectly balanced, meant for big game at a distance. Notching it, he drew the longbow taut. His mind flashed to an image of his father presenting him with the bow, a symbol of his entry to manhood just a cycle of seasons past.

Father. Taken by the Ridgebacks, most likely, who were known to descend from the high mountains for plunder after an especially lean winter.

*As a final gift, da, I ask that you guide my aim today.*

Burnd stiffened at the *twang* of the bowstring but the arrow was on him near as quick as was the sound of its release. The shaft pierced him dead center, and Burnd collapsed in a jumbled heap.

Tarin found a suitable branch and broke it to length, and he fitted the forked notch under his arm and limped slowly down-slope. The assassin's eyes blinked open as he stood over him, and Burnd spoke in a raspy, burbling voice.

"You must have prayed... especially well this day, Master Tarin. The Gods have surely played me for a fool, as I cannot imagine how you might be standing there." He coughed hoarsely, spraying flecks of blood. "But strange as it may sound, I am grateful for it. I've grown weary of my game. The smell of the kill... once so heady... has turned to bitter..." His voice trailed off as his eyes seemed to lose focus. They flickered shut, and Tarin repositioned his makeshift crutch to turn away.

"Master Tarin. I would make one request."

Tarin turned back to peer into clear blue eyes that reflected all the open sky, and looked into a soul both tortured and grateful.

"I... cannot move. I know that my time is done, but... I fear perhaps not soon enough." He smiled faintly, the first time Tarin had been sure of his emotion. "If you would do me a final kindness." He nodded toward the nocked crossbow that lay a few feet away in the rocky scabble. "I do smell blood on you now, young Master, and I'd rather not bear witness when the ravens find me..."

Tarin nodded once, somehow saddened, and knelt to pick up the crossbow.

**The End**

## Spirits of the 'Cane

The air pressure dropped like a waterslide at a deranged theme park.

“*Get down!*” shouted Sean, and he dove for the floor just as the first window blew in. The concussion was immediately swept away by a roar of mindless violence—the chaos named Norbert was now upon them, rendering any imagined ferocity pale in contrast. Wicked shards of glass slashed overtop the barrier where Sean tried to mold himself flat to the floor, and he darted his panicked gaze to the blurry image that was Ben.

His friend sat curled into a ball, rocking, knees pulled tight to his chest.

The remaining windows on the eastern wall of the dining hall burst in rapid succession, banging in like a gunslinger fanning his revolver, followed by exploding glass on the lee-side. The storm roared through, all raging wind and horizontal rain, flinging and tumbling everything in its path, and the massive buffet counter they huddled behind began to slide, shoving them bodily across the wet, lacquered floor.

Norbert, a Category Five hurricane, had laid claim to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor dining room of the Port Mayaca Lodge.

### *a few days prior...*

Sean raised his head and blinked his eyes twice, three times—unsure as to where, or momentarily even who, he was. He rolled onto his back, wincing at the too-loud rustle of the pillow into which his face had just been planted. Groaning and leveraging himself up onto his elbows, he squinted around the room.

Now he remembered.

He ran a tongue over fuzzy teeth and his lips curled up in disgust. His breath would be of the living dead, or worse. With a moan he pushed to his feet and stood on rubbery legs, head banging and eyes narrowed, and he surveyed the scene.

The Frat House was a disaster—nothing out of the ordinary. But sleeping downstairs on a couch? Most likely he’d had a few too many and had simply fizzled out, as had the small but dedicated storm-watch party.

He nodded agreement to himself, immediately regretting the motion as his head spun like a cotton candy vortex.

### *forward to Norbert...*

It took both hands to twist the knob straining against the wind, and when it finally released the door tore out of his grip and slammed hard against the inner stairwell wall. He pushed silent Ben inside and braced to shoulder the door closed, convinced that he’d be unable to do so but favored by a momentary lull—just enough to force the door

against its jamb and re-engage the bolt. He moved to the head of the stairs and peered down into the gloom and Ben followed slowly, woodenly, as though he walked in his sleep. Frowning and wishing the image of a B-movie zombie had not just come to mind, Sean began to ease down the stairs, feeling his way with his toes, praying that he didn't encounter the Monster From the Second Floor lurking in the shadows below.

The stairwell was not lit, nothing was. If this nightmare is still ongoing come the full dark of nightfall...

He gave a shake of his head, forcing his thoughts elsewhere.

He glanced back to Ben. His friend was reaching out for him, his fleshy, pallid form looking like a harkening ghost or a freaking nightmare in the dim stairway, and Sean leaned back out of reach.

*"Hold tight to the stair-rail, Ben,"* he whispered hoarsely. Ben's gaze was blank and devoid of emotion, almost as if he looked *through* whatever his gaze was directed at, but there must have been *some* cognition behind those dull eyes, because Ben's outstretched hand slowly fell to grip the railing.

Sean gulped down air and swiped a hand across his sweat-streaked face. He feared his friend now, or more accurately feared whatever it was that Ben had become. When he touched Ben he felt a chill, a penetrating coldness that somehow carried a horrid, irreversible truth. And there was another sensation, even more disturbing—a sort of yearning, an emptiness needing to be filled.

A shiver coursed through Sean and he bit down on his lip, shaking his head. He had to get his mind back to the immediate crisis. They couldn't stay here in the stairwell—too enclosed, too easy to be trapped. They'd have to go back to the second level and try to wait out the storm there. Once they'd reached the lower landing Sean pushed the door open a crack and peered out, scanning the dim hallway. Some of the doors stood ajar, slowly creaking with the slight stirring of mostly dead air. Very different from the beast that raged without.

Sean's scan froze. There he sat, hunched in a bentwood rocker at the far end of the hallway, his bony knuckles closed around a knobby cypress cane.

Old Mr. Delane.

Sean could just make out the smile; some teeth missing and others gold-capped and glimmering in the shadows.

*He's humming, I can hear it even over the wind. The mother of all hurricanes rages just outside, and he hums...*

Unconsciously, Sean's grip tightened around the bat. He bounced it in his hands, feeling its weight.

*back...*

The tepid shower went cool fast enough—as cool as it gets in central Florida in August, anyway. At least there was water pressure—a little. A handful of Ibuprofen and a long shower had cleared his head a bit, though he could not shake off the grinning imp on a jackhammer at work behind his eyes.

The power was off; had been for a while if the rising smell from the fridge was any clue. Though the Frathouse fridge was a bit a HazMat zone even when the power was on. Of course he'd tried the land-line phone—dead as a water-logged stump.

*Water logged—ain't that right.* He peered out the windows where he'd opened the shutters, shaking his head. The parking lot was a shallow lake. Old-growth oak lay tumbled and broken, roots ripped from the soil. Debris was scattered everywhere, even vehicles strewn haphazard—crumpled under trees, shoved up against houses and through fences. The roads looked impassable. His cell was picking up nothing, losing its charge and with no place to re-up. Even his effing ipod was dead.

Sean grinned his clever grin; he had a plan.

He clomped as noisily as possible up the stairs. Almost all his frat brothers were gone—evacuated before the storm, before the 'hurricane party'. The few others in attendance yesterday had apparently stumbled back to wherever before the storm made full force last night, but Sean knew where to find one accomplice, be he willing or not. He swung open the door of his friend's room, banging it against the wall, and stout Ben Vinson shot up in bed, eyes wide and out of focus. Ben's disoriented gaze came to rest on Sean, and he snorted.

"What the hell you doing, waking me this ungodly hour!?"

"It's almost noon." Sean pulled open the blinds, letting the light flood in through translucent shutters. "Rise and shine, birdbrain, all the worms are spoken for..."

Ben picked up the empty doughnut box that sat between them and tilted it back, pouring the last few crumbs into his mouth. "So what's the plan?" he grumbled. "We've got no power, no food, no phone—and I don't trust that dribble of water from the tap. All we've got is warm beer." He walked over to the keg and poured a cup, regarding it dubiously. "It's going flat," he announced, tossing it down and belching.

Sean scowled. "Stay the tap, man, we've got a mission."

"A mission of *your* making? *Ha*—I'm out."

"What's *your* plan, then, Ben-boy? How long before we get power back? We've got a half box of Apple-Puffs, a couple cans of beans, and a quarter keg of warm beer. How much cash you got?"

Ben held up a circled thumb and forefinger, and rose to rummage through the cabinets, returning with the Apple-Puffs. "So? You've pretty much just written us a bad check. What's your brilliant plan, Doctor DoWrong?"

Sean smiled knowingly. "You heard the reports. Melinda confounded all the computer models. South Florida evacuated en-masse, but she skipped 'round the Keyes and up the Gulf Coast to cross the peninsula from the west—the worst of it was north of us, even." Sean slouched back with a smug expression, and Ben looked at him blankly.

"I'm still waiting."

Sean leaned forward to whack Ben with a roadmap.

"Hey!"

"Whattaya think, puff-boy? We head south. There's no damage there, and only the hard-core would'a stayed put. You said your folks have a lodge near the Big O— maybe we'll have the whole place to ourselves for a day or three."

"Huh. My old Beetle's sitting in three feet of water, probably never to run again—not that it was running so well anyway—and the roads are virtually impassable. How're we gonna get there, the breast stroke?"

Sean pointed at Ben. "Think, college boy." He swung his finger toward the rear of the property. "The shed. What's in the shed, on high ground out back, Ben-O?"



Understanding dawned across Ben's face. "*Ohh...* I dunno, man. What about fuel, supplies?"

"You know damn well our dual-sports sit there gassed up, ready and prepped for our still-born adventure." Ben opened his mouth to protest, and Sean held up a palm. "Don't go weaseling out on me again, Rotundo—we don't have much choice this time." He pointed at the empty cereal box lying on its side in the middle of the table. "You've already finished off most of our food, and you've only been awake forty five minutes. Throw some jeans and t-shirts into your bike's panniers. It's not much over a hundred miles to Okeechobee. With the auxiliary tanks we can make it without needing to refuel."

*forward...*

"*C'mon, Ben, pick it up.*" Sean hissed, glancing between his lumbering friend and the slumped form of Mr. Delane. He'd stood crouched in the stairwell for nearly an hour, peering out, until he'd seen Delane's head sag forward—apparently nodding off. He now released a breath as they turned the corner off the main corridor, out of Delane's line of sight.

He had no plan, really; he was just running, praying he could keep them away from Delane until escape was possible. The ravaging storm held them captive in the lodge and the first floor was flooded and especially dangerous. Ben's step-dad, for reasons Sean didn't know and didn't care to ponder, had left before shuttering the third floor, but the second floor was battened down tight. Hopefully secure from the storm, if from nothing else. Ben lagged behind, his eyes unfocused, and Sean carefully tugged at his sleeve without actually touching him. "*Ben! C'mon.*"

A raspy cackle came from behind, and Sean spun around. *Delane!* Reacting before thinking he leapt backward, banging into the soft mass of Ben and sending the pair of them to the floor.

*"Hellooo, boys. Ya's come back to make us right, now has ya?"*

Sean scrambled to his feet, backing away and shouting. "Get up, Ben! Move!" He snatched up the bat and took a step toward Delane, cocking it over his shoulder.

"Heh," Delane chuckled, his eyes glowing luminescent green. He cocked an imaginary bat and swung it slowly through. "An' what're ya gonna do with that, boy? Kill us?"

Sean raised the bat higher, circling its tip like the tail of an angry hornet. His heartbeat hammered and he could actually smell the fear in his sweat.

"I may not be able *kill* you—I have doubts you're even alive—but I can sure bust you up good!"

A cold light flashed in the old man's eyes, but still he smiled. He spoke in a reasoning tone. "Be puttin' that down, boy, an' come on over."

"Like hell I will, you bastard! Stay clear or I'll bust your skull wide open."

The old man smiled wickedly, his gold teeth glimmering. "Ain't it funny that ya speaks o' bones..."

Sean understood immediately, and he spun back around. Three skeletal figures closed on he and Ben, their bony fingers grasping.

*back...*

The place sure looked empty, and when Ben put his hand on the knob the door nudged in. He pushed it open and glanced at Sean. “This isn’t right. Pops never leaves *anything* unsecured, not here.” He stuck his head in. “Ma! Pops!” No one answered, and Ben frowned and waved Sean inside.

The first miles had been a challenge—lots of flooding, broken limbs and uprooted trees blocking the roads—in places the sand had washed so thick across the road that it felt like riding the beach at low-tide. South of Orlando the storms’ affects had faded, and they had wondered at the absence of traffic. One would think the evacuees would be returning by now, though in truth most of the roads to the north were still impassable by automobile.

Now they sat at the kitchen table, wolfing down provisions scavenged from a well-stocked refrigerator that had never lost power, and their big dual-sport thumpers—crudded-up from their transit through the challenging post-storm damage—clicked and pinged as they sat cooling in the empty parking lot.

“Like I said, everybody turned tail and bailed north.” Sean spoke around a mouthful. “The forecasts all showed Melinda making landfall south of Palm Beach, and after the bitchin’ storms of recent years everybody in the southern half of the state was scared shitless and got the hell out.”

“I dunno.” said Ben. “It’s like a ghost town here.”

“It’s not exactly Grand Central even at its busiest, right? We’re in the boonies here—black muck, sugarcane and swampland.” Sean winked. “Yaz Sah!”

Ben frowned. “As usual you border on crude, but it’s true that it’s fairly rural here. Still—this was Pops pride and joy. I can’t see him just packing up and leaving.”

“Fear for one’s life can change a person’s way of thinking.” Sean gestured at the wall, covered with framed newspaper clippings. “What did you tell me once about your step-dad wanting to start some kind of museum? This doesn’t look the part—more like an apartment building with *way* too many vacancies.”

Ben nodded. “Yeah, Pops was kinda off his thinking there.” Ben nodded at the clippings. “Those’re old, from the late 20’s. When I was a little kid we lived on the coast, Delray Beach. One day Pops saw this documentary on TV, about the 1928 hurricane. It devastated south Florida, flooding the towns around Lake Okeechobee, tearing apart the cities on the coast. Survivors were recovered miles away from where the storm caught them up—sometimes clinging to branches up in trees where they’d been washed by floodwaters. Thousands were killed, mostly around the Lake.”

Sean whistled low. “I never knew that.”

“I didn’t either, until Pops saw that show. Then he became obsessed, reading and collecting everything he could. He bought this land and built here, saying he was going to put together the *Hurricane of 1928 Historical Museum*.”

Sean snorted. “A museum about a hurricane? Way out here, so far from everything?”

Ben nodded. “Yeah. People told him—family, friends—everybody said it was a dumb idea. But he went on with it anyway. Of course it never got off the ground, and he finally had enough sense to convert the place to a boarding house. He and Ma scrape by. But he still doesn’t regret it, as best I can tell. It still consumes him.”

*forward...*

The closest skeleton moved in on Ben, fingers groping, and Ben stood mesmerized, leaning in toward it. Sean cursed and stepped into his swing, blowing the skeleton apart like a cherry-bomb set off in a plastic model. Standing poised with the bat and breathing fast he heard a scuffling noise and looked down. He stared in disbelief—the bones were skittering back together, nudge by nudge, across the floor. The skull rolled over to fix its vacant eye sockets on him, and Sean felt a raw power there. The same thing he sensed from Ben—seductive, enticing—this thing somehow had the power to tug at his mind.

Sean turned stiffly toward the cackling Delane, confused; his thoughts a jumble.

“We’s jus’ gettin’ stronger, doesn’t ya see? Ya cain’t fight us forever, boy, why doesn’t ya jus’ go on and give it up, yeah? We’ll be all the stronger once you and Benji joins us—able to go out from the house. C’mon now, Benji’s most of the way home already.”

Sean started to nod, thinking it was a fine idea to be done with this conflict, when his mind cleared. “No!” he screamed, and he raised the bat and turned to run toward the once-men who clacked and clattered past dull, accomodating Ben.

*back...*

Sean awoke from a dead sleep, startled by the sound of the shutters banging in their frames. He pulled on his jeans and ran upstairs, and, staring out the wall of windows in the dining hall, his mouth fell open.

“Jeezus Christ,” he whispered.

Moments later Ben lumbered up, rubbing his eyes. “What’s the hell’s with this wind? The freakin’ hurricane passed through two days ago—it was clear skies earlier today.”

“I don’t know. Damn! We got zonked and watched recorded stuff last night—why didn’t we listen to a network station?” He waved toward a wall switch. “The power’s out now, so we can’t check any weather or news channels. How the hell are we—” He smacked his forehead. “Batteries, Ben! Do we have a battery-powered radio?”

They huddled over the old weather-band radio, and Sean spun the dial. He cursed softly. “It’s just noise.”

Ben reached in. “I know some stations, Pops played with this a lot.” He fiddled, and a crackly voice emerged from the white static.

—very fortunate that a large portion of the southern coastal population evacuated when Melinda was thought to be a threat.

*Doctor Phillips, Hurricane Norbert, fast on the heels of Melinda, was expected to skirt the Carolina coast and possibly make landfall in New England, is that not correct?*

That’s correct, Donald. The models favored by noted specialist Dr. Willhelm Debray will likely be recalibrated based on these two anomalous storm systems. Interestingly enough, a computer model championed by Dr. Farus Afree, of the NOAA, but held in disfavor by the majority of the meteorological community,— ”

Sean smacked the radio. “C’mon, just give us the bottom line!” Ben held a finger to his lips and dialed the frequency back in.

—now predicted to come ashore on a track very close to what was originally forecast for Melinda. Landfall is expected to occur at 9 AM, just north of the Boynton Inlet. This is a very slow, wet storm; we expect tidal surges and extensive flooding. The

center of the storm is projected to cross Lake Okeechobee, from the vicinity of Canal Point across to Lakeport, and the hurricane, possibly by then lessened in strength to Category Four, should enter the Gulf of Mexico somewhat south of Tampa. Tampa Bay area residents are advised— ”

Sean pressed the power switch, rubbing a hand over his bristly jaw and speaking softly. “OK, my friend... looks like we’re in for it big time. You’re from around here, what do we do now?”

Ben shook his head, fear plain in his eyes. “I... don’t know. It’ll be here, full-force, in just a few hours.”

They stood in inch-deep water in the kitchen while the storm built outside. “Sean, when I talked with Pops several days ago, when they still thought Melinda was heading for south Florida, he was really worried about Lake Okeechobee. Water levels were at a record high, and though the Water District was back-pumping *some* of it out to sea, they didn’t want to overfill the coastal canals—where most of the population is—when the storm made landfall there. We’re just a few feet above sea level here, and less than a mile from the lake.” He stared at Sean, his face pale. “Thank god this is one of the few three-story buildings inland—we may need the upper floors.”

Sean splashed a foot in the water. “Where’s this coming from? It’s raining like hell, but there’s no serious flooding outside—not yet anyway.”

“It’s the water table. South Florida is mostly porous sand or muck or limestone, with a water table so near the surface you could probably take a shovel and dig to it in just a few hours. The ground is now thoroughly saturated, and this floor, slightly belowground, is leaking. That’s another of Pop’s quirks—he wanted a basement, even though there’s no such thing in south Florida.”

“Like a leak in a boat’s hull, water’s coming in from below?”

“Mostly from here,” Ben gestured for Sean to follow. He swung open a door on the north end of the building and Sean peered in.

“There’s a sump pump in there, if we had power. This room is lower than the rest, with a dirt floor even—Pop’s ‘root cellar’.”

The dark water lay still as death, and Sean sniffed at a pervasive, rotting smell. “Ben, are there fuel or chemical tanks in there? What’s that gawd-awful smell, and what’s that film floating on the surface?”

Ben shook his head. “No fuel, this was just a store room. Or that’s what it was supposed to be. It didn’t get used because it leaked water all the time—there’s nothing in there.”

“You know how gasoline or oil looks kinda shiny when it’s floating on water? Whatever this is, it’s like it’s glowing. Greenish—like those old-fashioned watch dials. And what’s that stuff floating at the surface? There.” Sean pointed.

Ben lifted the big flashlight and played the beam over the water.

“It... it looks almost like *bones*.” The beam swept past a larger piece and Ben snatched it back to focus there. The beam quivered in his shaky hand.

“Jesus Christ!” Look at that! It’s a skull!”

“Damnation! A *human* skull? Sure looks like it to me!” Sean splashed back from the doorway and Ben pulled it shut. Ben spoke in a husky voice.

“One thing I didn’t tell you about Pops—it’s kinda spooky. Some of the old-timers from this area—a few of them had been little kids when the 1928 hurricane came

through. Survivors. They raised a fuss when Pops built this building, saying it was smack dab on top of a mass grave. Hundreds, thousands of people were killed by that storm, and they couldn't identify most of the bodies. They kept finding them, bloated and decaying, up in trees or under piles of debris—days or weeks after the storm.” He shook his head. “Pops scoffed at that, saying there wasn't any grave here. But I always wondered if that's why he built way out here—out of the way even for the Glades. Pops was weird about stuff like that.”

A voice came from behind them.

“*Oh, they's here all right...*”

Sean's heart leapt into his throat. He spun to face the strangely disembodied inflection—each raspy word sounding like a page torn from a book. A small man, ancient, hobbled toward them. Time had so faded him that Sean took a long moment to decide he was a man of color. Thin patches of white curly stubble stood out from his dusky temples; dim light shone off his bald pate and sparks glistened from gold-capped teeth interspersed behind thick lips. He held a stub of a cigar, unlit, clamped between his teeth, and he dribbled eerily glistening water in his wake—he was wet to the chest.

“Yas, Master Vinson done knowed the truth, even if he din't admit to it.”

Sean swiped a hand down his face and willed his heart to slow its staccato hammering, relieved that their surprise guest—strange as he might be—would appear to pose no great threat. For the moment the worry of the storm was off his mind, and he felt a bit silly to have been frightened by a feeble old geezer. He huffed.

“Who the hell are *you*, old man!? And where did you come from?”

Ben pushed past Sean. “Mr. Delane?” He glanced to Sean and spoke quietly. “The caretaker—Pops let him stay on past his useful time; he had nowhere else to go.”

The old man's eyes went wide, yellow-white in his dusky face.

“*Ben-ja-min!*” He moved faster than Sean would have believed possible, and he wrapped his thin arms around Ben. “Benji! You's grown even *bigger*—used ta be I could reach *all* the way 'round you!”

Sean tilted his head curiously; Ben had jerked at the old man's embrace, as if he'd taken hold of an electrical cord stripped of its insulation. Ben slowly pushed Delane back and looked down upon him oddly, saying nothing. The old man gestured to the door of the flooded room.

“I come in from my cabin at the back of the pro'pity, when the rainin' got heavy. It ain't so sturdy, ya knows—might jus' up and blow away in a storm like this'un. I went on in to the flood room to start up the sump, but I's getting' old, I forget it won't work wit' no 'lectrical.”

He bared his teeth in a broad smile. “You knows 'bout 'em yet? In the sump house, tha's when I learnt. About the Lost Folk. Hun'erds of 'em, and they's ready to come on back. They was happier to see me than nobody's been in a year o' worship days. They ax'd me to join 'em, even as old as I be—an' since my time weren't no more than a mostly used-up candle anyways, I joined right in.” He cackled. “My time ain't so short no more now, though. Oh no, now I be one wit' the Lost Folk. They see through me rheumy old eyes, breath through me t'baccy lungs, and they's set on makin' good this time 'round.”

Sean glanced at Ben, who looked dazed, then back to Delane. “What are you talking about, old man? What nonsense is that—*as one with the lost folk?*”

Mr. Delane chuckled and pointed toward the flooded room. “There, boy, they’s in there. Din’tcha see they’s remains, comin’ back above? There be power in they numbers, an’ this storm be bringin’ ‘em back to where the ol’ mother stole ‘em away a long lifetime ago.” He stepped closer and Sean watched him warily—something was definitely wrong here.

“They’s joined wit’ me, but I ain’t enough, don’t ya see? There be so many of ‘em—they needs more than one old man to hold all they mem’ries, all they thoughts.” He peered sideways at Sean with a coy grin. “They’s excited. They feels the young life-spirit amongst ‘em—they’s *ready* for you and Benji.”

Of a sudden Sean was not so amused with the old man, and he grabbed Ben’s shoulder and pulled him out of the man’s reach. He would have sworn the temperature in the room had just dropped twenty degrees.

“No! You keep your distance.” Even Ben now felt cold to the touch, and a queasy knot formed in Sean’s belly. At the front of his mind he felt foolish to fear this old man, but at a deeper level he understood that he was right to do so.

The old man cackled as Sean pressed Ben away, down the hallway.

“Ya just be wastin’ yer time, boy, ya cain’t stop it now. They’s tellin’ me they can hold them bones tight once’t I gathers ‘em together.” The old man raised his voice as Sean hurried away.

“Take a little time, if that be your druthers. We’ll be comin’ ta make parley soon.”

*forward...*

There was a brittle chatter as his bat blew through the second skeleton, breaking it in half below the rib cage, but he was horrified to realize the third skeleton had managed to take hold of him, its fingers tugging at his shirt. He ducked away, tearing the skeletal hand loose from its arm, and he shrieked, flailing his arms, trying to shake off the bony fingers that closed into a fist in the fabric of his sleeve. He swatted at it, and he dropped the bat and ripped the shirt off, flinging it at the still-advancing skeleton.

It stopped, rotating its empty eye sockets to the shirt, and in a bizarre twist began to push a bony arm through the sleeve.

Sean barked out a sound half a maniacal laugh and half a scream, and he snatched the bat up from the floor. He looked on dumbfounded as the arms of the first skeleton dragged the upper torso across the floor to the pelvic assembly and diligently worked to bind the halves back together, while the other skeleton, now a freakish parody wearing Sean’s floral-printed shirt, pried its bony, disconnected fist from the sleeve and fumbled to snap it back into place.

Mr. Delane stepped forward, not nearly so stooped as before, his eyes glowing a pale green. “Come boy, are you not yet ready? You’ll live hundreds of lives by joining us.” Sean cocked his head, feeling a tinge of insanity flirting at the edges of his mind.

“You’ll be revered as the savior of so many lost souls,” continued Delane, “and your mind will be the aggregate of us all. No single mortal could ever hope to match you, and your life will span hundreds of generations.”

Mr. Delane spoke as a collective. Surprising himself, Sean began to giggle hysterically. He waved his bat at Delane. “*You!* Stay away from me you... you *bastard*.”

You *monster*. How can you imagine that I'd give myself over to a legion of ghouls inhabiting what was once a human mind?"

Delane's benevolent smile dropped away to a dark rage, and his eyes turned red. He stepped forward *way* too fast and backed away just as quickly as the tip of Sean's bat whistled through empty air. Delane sneered. "How long do you think you can keep this up, *boy*? We grow ever more powerful, while you exhaust yourself. You have limited space to elude us, while we become able to converge en masse."

Sean cocked the bat over his shoulder, shaking his head furiously. "No! We can wait you out. When the hurricane's past we'll escape to the outside, and then your time will be finished. I'll burn the god-damned building down around you!"

"Sean?"

Sean's eyes darted to the side—it was the first Ben had spoken since Delane's fateful embrace. Hope surged in his chest. "Ben! Are you OK?"

Ben screwed his face into a distant, thoughtful pose. "I think he's right, Sean. We should join the collective now. I'm feeling... *much* better already."

Ben took a step toward him and Sean backed away. "*Jesus*, Ben! They've taken you, completely?" He shook his head, not believing any of this but unable to deny it. "I... I'm going to have to leave you now, Ben—I can't fight... you... along with these... these *monsters*. I promise, though, I'll come back for you when the storm is over. I'll bring help." Sean nodded at Ben, imploring him to revert to who he was—to say '*OK, let's break these boneheads up.*'

But Ben said nothing—he looked at peace, even.

Sean turned and bolted down the corridor, desperate to hold onto whatever sanity remained.

### *resolution?*

He jerked awake, startled to realize that his chin was resting on his chest, his breathing slow. He'd slept. How long? His widened eyes darted side to side in a rising panic—had he been discovered?

No. He was alone.

He had returned to the breached third floor, deadly certain that he could no longer avoid Delane and his bone-men on the second level and knowing that the first floor was becoming submerged under rising water. He'd staggered under the fury of the unrestrained winds raging through the blown-out third floor, and had been physically lifted and hurled against a jagged pile of debris wedged against a downwind wall. He'd blacked out, for how long he could only guess, and he now sat staring numbly at the blood stained cloth wrapping his injured arm.

When he'd regained consciousness earlier he had grasped the severity of his situation—options were poor to none. And so he had *not* allowed himself to succumb to hopelessness, to simply lie down and wait for fate to select him. Instead, both physically drained and mentally dazed he had nonetheless sought out the only viable shelter he could think of, and he found it; access to the attic, a pull-down stairwell in a closet. He had climbed up, pulling the ladder up behind and wedging a board between the folded piece and the edges of the opening, praying that they, whatever they were, would not find him.

Sean rubbed his face, trying to focus. The attic was not intact, on the north end of the building a portion of the roof had blown away. He'd retreated to the south end and found a spot to hunker down in, and there he had waited and eventually fallen into an exhausted sleep. How he could have slept he could not imagine—it had been deafeningly loud, the wind howling through the rafters, the—

Sean cocked his head, realization dawning.

It wasn't loud now.

It was quiet.

He leapt to his feet and clumsily ran the wooden boardwalk between the rafters, coming out beneath the missing section of roofing. He raised his eyes to the heavens.

It was daylight and mostly clear, nothing but trace bands of spiraling cloud.

*It's over, the storm is past!*

He yanked the board free of the ladder over the attic door and descended fast, tumbling the last few feet. He pounded down the stairwell to the first floor, seeing no one or nothing, and he splashed through thigh-deep water to the kitchen table, where he fumbled to switch on the weather-band radio. He fiddled with the dial until a voice emerged from the static, and he leaned in toward it, listening intently.

—trailing edge of Norbert has come onto the east coast, resuming its path of devastation. We repeat—this is a very tight, intense, fast-moving storm. The Gulf Coast is now enduring, as best it can, the fury of the leading edge, and the eye of the hurricane has crossed into Lake Okeechobee—

Sean yanked the radio off the table and flung it against the far wall.

*Dear God, no. This is just the eye, it's only half over...*

The building shuddered, slammed by a sudden gust, and a dull roar built quickly. Sean lowered his face to his hands, and a hoarse, chortling cackle rode over the rising thrum of the storm.

**The End**



## Edgar

The game-piece abruptly turned and darted back into the maze, and Nightfall sucked in his breath, blinking three times. He hissed softly, raising an accusatory narrow-eyed, whisker-twitching glare to Edgar.

“*That... why, that was cheating! You have shadow-cast my move!*”

Edgar smiled in classic Cheshire fashion. “You insult me, Nightfall—I do *not* cheat, but I *do* play to win.”

Nightfall stabbed a paw at the game-board. “How can you plead fair-play? Might I send my player from an advantage position back into the conundrum just navigated? Surely I would not! You do not simply control *your* player, Edgar—you have cast a clouding over *mine!*”

“*Yesss,*” purred Edgar. “And so? My dear Nightfall, never have I heard the game of Hawk-Wing described as a courtesy-call between fellows of gentle demeanor. It is by definition an aggressive contest, my good mentor, intended to demonstrate one’s adeptness at capturing the prize in lieu of becoming the trophy in its stead.”

The pupils in Nightfall’s emerald green eyes channeled down to narrow crescents, and he waved a paw to pause the animation. He purred low in his throat; a deceptively amenable growl. “Ah yes... I believe that I understand your position. The new fiat is that there *are none*. No rules, that is. The player may initiate whatever ploy, on whichever whim, in whatever manner and to whichever affect that he might desire.”

The ruff at the back of Edgar’s neck rose—his smug demonstration of the student surpassing the teacher had suddenly begun to feel a bit queasy. Nightfall’s tail was twitching, just a bit—*not* a good sign. And though he scented no omen of ill-tiding, Edgar tried to keep discreet watch on his opponent’s ears, dreading the sight of those battle-scarred sentinels folding down flat. Edgar steeled himself and cavalierly raised a paw, studying his enameled nails under the light of a sun diffused through the opaque dome. He spoke in a cautiously flippant tone.

“Oh, very *well* then. If you must insist upon tradition, I suppose that I might curb my creative instincts... in spite of their obvious merit.”

Nightfall rose to his feet and stretched, arching his back long and languorous. “Oh *no,*” he said in a tone hard to judge, “I rather like this new turn. And it is indeed beneficial to be reminded that there is *always* more to learn.”

Edgar started in surprise as Nightfall abruptly pivoted to face him, head poised low with shoulders hunched and rear haunches coiled. Edgar came off the cushion in a smooth blur, every muscle tensed to feint or to run, but was slow to notice that Nightfall silently mouthed an incantation. Before he could counter Edgar was frozen in place—his vision flashed light to dark and back, and everything was transformed.

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Finding himself positioned a dozen meters from the opening into a precisely manicured, impressively tall hedge, Edgar stood blinking the scene into focus. Though the vantage was *very* different, the venue itself was disturbingly familiar. He growled under his breath and lifted his muzzle to yowl up at the vague, formless sky. “Nightfall! Now it is *you* who plays the deception. But this ploy strays dangerously far from simple artifice—you would put our very *lives* at risk!”

“Oh, no, my dear Edgar,” chortled Nightfall in an omnipresent, albeit remote timbre. “Do you not recall your very words? We play a serious game, and to place any boundaries upon our contest would be... why, it would be insulting to our species’ questing nature, don’t you think?”

Edgar’s gaze fell from a sky uncomfortably reminiscent of the dome of an observatory, and at the opening of the hedge he squinted at the figure that materialized there. Nightfall stood upright on his hind feet, leaning against the hedge with his legs crossed and hips shifted in a swaggering stance.

“We will alternate reinventing the rules of our play, eh?” suggested Nightfall. “We pit our innovations one against the other, and determine whose tactics prove the most resourceful.”

Edgar swished his tail side to side while gauging his response, but no sooner had he opened his mouth than his mentor rejoined.

“I will go first,” announced Nightfall. “We restart the game and proceed through the obstacles in random sequence, beginning with this maze. And by the way,” he smiled mischievously, “I committed the path to memory before sizing down.” Nightfall turned and vanished into the foliage with Edgar darting in fast behind, but he soon stopped to plant his haunches, realizing that Nightfall had left no trail to follow.

*He masks his scent*, Edgar mused darkly, and he retreated to stand outside the maze, glaring up at the imposing hedge-work. A broad smile transformed his face.

*“If you can memorize the route through, my friend, then I’ll do you one better.”* Edgar took several steps back and made a half-dozen rotations while chanting the mantra to empower levitation, and he turned and bounded toward the shrubbery on all four, leaping high as he closed on the hedge. But just as his feet left the ground a teasing, muffled voice rose from deep within the maze.

“Oh—did I neglect to mention? Another rule is that only the Golden Hawk can fly.”

Edgar flapped his limbs frantically, as if his woefully absent wings might somehow fend off the fast-approaching bramble, but he promptly found his upper torso plunged through the foliage with his hind legs dangling without. He yowled as pokey branches and prickly leaves scratched through his fur and clutched at his wriggling form as he fought to leverage himself free. Suddenly his dangling weight overcame his entanglement, and now he snatched at branches and leaves and then open space, finally twisting in midair to catch the ground sweeping up fast.

Brushing off bits of leaf and bark and growling under his breath, Edgar paced to and fro before the maze, knowing that within he would surely become lost more than long enough to place him hopelessly behind. Peering side to side he saw that the hedge seemed to stretch eternally in either direction, and so there’d be no hiking around it. He sighed, and then narrowed his eyes. He walked the hedge, searching for a spot where the vegetation was less dense, and he squirmed beneath and wriggled in toward the trunk, relieved to find some space once past the thick outer foliage. He clawed his way up one

of the trunks, stretching and grappling and squirming and shimmying, and when he came upon light filtering in from above he tore at the leaves until there was space enough to squeeze through.

Once up on top Edgar eyed a path straight across. Within it was a convoluted maze of twists and turns and contorted meanderings, but up here it was nothing but a simple, flat plane. Interrupted constantly by the twining paths within, of course, but those channels were not so wide that he could not leap across with a long-striding run. He bounced lightly, determining that the foliage was not dense enough to support even his modest weight for such a purpose, and so he reached for the wand strapped at his waist and considered his words. He again turned in place, his scepter tracing patterns in the air.

*Frogs and ducks, and platypi too,  
Such odd physiology, I must pursue,  
With toes all spanned, to hold my weight,  
Away I'll paddle, to meet my fate...*

He spread the toes of one forefoot and watched webbing fill the space between, and felt the same tickling sensation at each paw. Nodding satisfaction, Edgar crouched and bunched his muscles, and then launched himself with the zing of a pilfering imp booted from the den of a Mongo Troll. He leapt across the first gap, and without pause gathered himself to leap again, and then again and again. After just a few vaulting leaps he came to a full gallop, his paws catching the brush and thrusting like coiled spring steel, hurtling so fast that he fairly skimmed the brush. Bounding from row to row he plotted as straight a course as the patchwork maze allowed—if he could complete this passage above while Nightfall labored within he might yet thwart the his rival's next ploy, likely already conjured.

But Nightfall had apparently become aware of Edgar's endeavors, for suddenly the flat-topped hedges began to grow, first as shoots wriggling their way up but almost immediately as branches thrusting determinedly and then even spindly trunks. Desperate to outrun it Edgar redoubled his effort, and as he flashed over top one of the winding conduits he saw a dark blur moving fast in the passage below.

Now trunks sprouted branches that thrust for the sky, but Edgar was tantalizingly near the end. Only two leaps from deliverance he realized that the gangly morass had become so ill defined that there was absolutely nothing to gain purchase upon, but his momentum was such that there was little to do but try. He lunged with a last, supreme effort, pushing off on nothing of substance but still intent upon launching himself past the farthest hedge. But it was like swimming in molasses, and he became entangled with the grasping shrubbery and slammed bodily to the earth.

Edgar lay on his back, wheezing and gathering his wits, and soon he rolled onto his belly and wriggled beneath underbrush that clutched and picked at him like a gaggle of grooming simians, until finally he scrabbled free and climbed to his feet outside the maze.

—Only to observe Nightfall loping away, cackling like some crazed loon under a great, grinning moon. Edgar's shoulders sagged and he heaved a great sigh, and he resignedly brushed debris from his ruffled coat. He began to trot along Nightfall's trail,

and soon enough came upon him lounging at the dog ring, tending to his coat and idly scratching at one itch or another.

Edgar sidled in, feigning disinterest in the feline manner. He sighed. “I suppose that you’ve won the first stage, but you can’t call it anything but a fixed game. How might I compete if you’ve already fiddled the rules and plotted the outcome?”

Nightfall ceased his grooming and turned a gauging eye upon Edgar. “That is a fair argument,” he said. “And so I propose that *you* contrive the specifics for our next stage.”

Edgar’s eyes narrowed. “Here, at the dog ring? Hmm. That has always seemed a rather boorish portion of the contest, wouldn’t you say—with the players darting to and fro while attempting to redirect the attention of a noisome pack of rackety, obstreperous curs?” He purred coyly. “So why don’t we instead *engage* the crotchety beasts—as allies? We will both pass through the so called ‘ring’, but we’ll do it one at a time, and each will choose a breed of dog to hasten himself and thwart his opponent. Let’s say that we each produce a pack of six to do our bidding?” Edgar grinned his wily grin. “Wouldn’t it make for a pleasant change, to be calling dogs to our heel?”

Nightfall nodded. “So be it. Who chooses first, and who first attempts the crossing?”

Edgar squinted, considering how Nightfall would certainly attempt to turn his opponent’s choice to his own advantage. “I will make the maiden passage,” he announced warily, “and you will be first to choose your partners in misdeed.”

Nightfall pondered the ring. “All right, but be advised that it shall be no frowsy crossbreed that I choose. Instead, I will select the spirited Boxer as my defense.” And with those words he spun his forepaws in a deceptively simple pattern, and a half dozen chocolate-brown boxers materialized, their chests emblazoned with crests of pure white and likewise their snowy paws. But by no frame of reference were these normal dogs, for they stood upright, wearing baggy trunks and high-top sneakers, and they promptly set to work preparing themselves, tugging on gloves and bobbing and weaving and dancing foot to foot while playing one off the other.

“Those are indeed boxers,” Edgar observed dryly. “I would surmise that you have taken very seriously this concept of reaching beyond patterned constraints?”

Nightfall purred and licked a paw.

“Very well then,” said Edgar, and his brow creased in thought for long moments before his eyes lit and his ears pricked up straight. “I have decided upon the sheepdog,” he announced loftily, which drew a curious gaze from Nightfall. Edgar withdrew his wand, separating it lengthwise in two, and with a grand gesture a half dozen Olde English Sheepdogs appeared, with their thick coats puffing them out twice their already substantial size and making them appear as though they’d spent too much time with a fluff dryer. But Edgar did not stop there; he continued to ply his wands in a weaving motion and the coats of the sheepdogs began to grow and to grow, until they were not even identifiable as dogs at all but looked more like a storm of great furry tumbleweeds.

Edgar put away his rejoined wand and waded into the center of the pack, drawing the sheepdogs close around. He could see nothing and was afraid that he might fall into a fit of sneezing amidst this sea of fur, but as he urged the pack forward he could hear the frustrated chuffing and gruffing of the boxers and the muffled swishing and whuffing of their gloves as they jabbed and punched and hooked with apparent determination, but they remained unable to effectively penetrate the plodding mass of hair. In short moments Edgar had traversed the ring, and he separated the pack so that he might stroll through the

exit gate. He waved his hands and all the dogs disappeared, and he regarded Nightfall with a smug grin.

“It’s your turn now, my savant, and I’ve decided to employ the Bull Mastiff to ward off your crossing.” Edgar removed a gauzy kerchief from his waist-pouch and flapped it to one side as if he were a matador, and six gargantuan Bull Mastiffs appeared, looking very much the first half of their title. They lined up shoulder to shoulder facing Nightfall, pawing and striking their feet to the ground while tossing their heads and snorting angrily, and as Edgar circled the ring to admire their glinting blood-red eyes he felt delighted with his choice.

“Hmmm,” mused Nightfall. “Then I believe that I’ll settle upon the New Guinea Singing Dog as my accomplice.”

Edgar frowned. “I’ve never heard of such an animal,” he muttered.

“Of course you haven’t, for you’ve never been to New Guinea, nor exhibited the slightest interest therein. But I assure you that the Singing Dog does indeed exist, and can actually be rather delightful.” With that, Nightfall pulled his wand and wielded it like a conductor before an orchestra, setting a cadence of dynamics and pace, and six Singing Dogs appeared, each looking much like a cross between a fox and a wolf. They stood upright, preening and stroking their throats as they tested their voices, and after a few moments Nightfall held up a paw for silence, and raised his baton. One of the Guinea dogs opened his muzzle and set forth an unwavering key, and the others joined in, one at a time, in harmony. The conductor again lifted his paw, and the Singing Dogs gathered side to side and linked their forearms. Nightfall initiated a slight sweep of his baton, and the dogs began to sing in the manner of a barbershop quartet, swaying in synchronized unison.

It was a lulling melody, and Edgar felt himself immediately begin to relax, as if he were a kitten curled up with his muzzle buried in the fur of a littermate.

*Lay two more logs... upon the fire,  
That crackles in the hearth...  
Before we bed our-selves...  
This winter’s niiiight...*

*The snow lies deep... in drifts outside,  
And ice rimes yonder pond...  
Rest well and strive to set...  
Your dreams in fliiiiight...*

The Singing Dogs continued on with several more verses, and Edgar found himself repeatedly blinking his drooping eyes to keep them from falling closed and staying that way. He watched in annoyance as the tension sloughed off the Mastiffs like water over a fall, their fury dulled behind eyes glazing over. Their threatening posture quickly faded to more of a scratched-behind-the-ears, tongue-lolling bliss, and their combined focus now seemed fixated, longingly, upon the ground at their feet.

Nightfall signaled a change with his baton, and five of the singers fell into a harmonized humming while a single voice carried the seemingly endless chorus. After

every few repetitions the lead singer would drop his voice to the background while another would pick up the lyrics in a different timbre.

*Sleeeeeeep... sleep, oh yes we sleeeeeeep...  
Sleeeeeeep... deep, is how we sleeeeeeep...*

Now the last of the Mastiffs finally succumbed, curling himself into a mound upon the ground, and Nightfall moved forward, carefully stepping around the massive animals—far too large to step over—with their only movement being their breath let in and out and synchronized to a chorus of snoring. Nightfall joined Edgar where he'd moved back to the far side of the ring, and he shook his head.

“That was a rather silly bit of foolishness,” he grumped. “Surely we can do better? Why don't we skip any remaining lead-up stages and proceed directly to the deciding contest?”

Edgar nodded uneasily, reminding himself of just how canny his mentor could be when one was not sheltered safely under his wing.

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In a normal game the final obstacle to be surmounted entails a hazardous ascent, and the steep slope they now stood before surely met that criteria. They stood peering up the incline, and Edgar pensively scratched behind an ear. “How can there *be* such a landform here? The game-set is contained in a single room, with a ceiling not nearly so high. Even at our reduced size, this is just too much.”

Nightfall treated him to a disapproving frown. “Edgar, please. In sorcery, much depends upon scale and perception, correct? Items can take many forms, and so we simply observe what is currently seen as ‘real’, and change our image of it. Our changed perception then becomes the new reality. Sorcerers engage in a dimension that Normals know nothing of, and which they in fact deny even when unmistakable evidence of it is paraded directly before their eyes. But you are *not* a Normal, Edgar.”

Edgar nodded moodily. “I know. But this is advanced sorcery that you invoke, Nightfall. Some might suggest that you delve into the Dark Arts.”

Nightfall waved a paw. “Pish. Sorcery is defined by its intent, not by its extremity. We stray to the Dark only when our magic is laced with malevolent design, and this is no evil Work, but rather a challenge between the advancing student and his tutor.”

Edgar sighed. “All right. But since you have defined the venue for this final stage, I will call the stipulations. You spoke of the plight of ‘Normals’, and so that is what we will assume the form of—thereby relinquishing our ascendant abilities until we've made the contest complete. We'll leave all of our trappings here, out of reach, and so will need to work together to make the climb. We'll carry nothing that a Normal would not have access to, well... *normally*.”

Nightfall nodded his approval. “That's a good call. We must not grow overly reliant upon our magic, and this will remind us of what the Normals must, by needs, deal with in their frustratingly handicapped lives. If we remain open-minded throughout, perhaps we'll each broaden our perspective in the process.”

With that, Nightfall raised his forelegs over his head, and as he swept them down across his torso, bending low to his feet, he was transformed into a man, lithe and hard-muscled, with dark skin glistening where visible through his loose fitting raiment. Edgar swept his kerchief the length of his body and also assumed humanoid form, but shorter and stockier; pale of complexion and garbed in similar style. Both temporarily-emasculated practitioners of the One Art donned shoes and gloves specialized for climbing, and they promptly began to ascend the steep slope, on two feet when they could but sometimes leaning into the incline to scramble up on all four. Nightfall quickly opened a lead and Edgar scurried to keep up, but he lost his hastened grip on the sloping scabble and slid down several yards, raking at the rock with fingers sorely lacking claws.

Up ahead, Nightfall came to a break in the slope where a horizontal rift divided the rocky face, with the lower section jutting outward as a narrow ledge that angled a distance upward before reversing to climb back in the opposite direction. When Edgar arrived moments later he looked to where Nightfall labored along the ledge, and then looked straight up through the scrubby brush to where his mentor's switchback course eventually rejoined the vertical path. Edgar growled, a sound that didn't emerge from the Normals throat at all to his satisfaction, and commenced to clamber straight up the shorter, steeper path.

Out ahead now, and just below the returning ledge, Edgar reached up for its lip, but even as his fingers closed on it his feet slipped and his weight dropped like the trap-door of a gallows. With a yelp he was bumping and sliding downward, grabbing and snatching at the sparse shrubbery that careened past with increasing speed. Catching hold of a bush he jerked to a stop, but a hand-full of branches came loose in one fist and he found himself swinging out over a precipice dangling by one arm, held from a long fall by a single root-ball straining at his weight. With his heart hammering and his lungs gulping down dust Edgar finally clawed his way back up, belly-wriggling like a rock lizard the final few yards to the ledge. Panting and with his wits spinning he climbed to his feet on the narrow track a short distance in front of his rival, and on wobbly legs that would scarcely hold his weight Edgar spread his arms wide and molded himself to the near-vertical face, edging sideways up the narrow ledge one tenuous, shuffling half-step at a time.

During their ascent the piercing call of a nesting pair of Golden Hawks kept the hackles at the back of his neck up on end, especially since in native form the raptors were a natural predator. The screeching now grew louder and the thrum of wings sounded close behind where he edged along with his cheek pressed tight against the weather-worn stone—the two temporarily-retired wizards were sheltered from the fearsome birds by nothing more than a narrowing shelf of rock that overhung their path.

At a spot where the ledge rounded a point thrust out over open space, and where the shelf withered excruciatingly thin, Edgar was scrabbling for a finger-hold when there was a billowing whoosh behind—he shrieked as a wingtip brushed his shoulders and the tip of a talon grazed the back of his neck. The receding draft of the huge bird sucked him irresistibly out from his forward lean and he suddenly found himself teetering on the ledge's rim. He shrieked as he felt the balance begin to shift against him, tilting further out and uselessly wind-milling his arms, but his rising scream was abruptly silenced by a hard whack on the back, reversing his tip-out and propelling him face-first into the stony precipice. He hissed, rubbing his curiously bulbous Normals nose where it had cracked

hard into the stone, and he turned an accusing glare to where Nightfall stood holding his staff and grinning like some prankish Normals school-boy.

Nightfall shrugged off the scowl. “So, next time I should just watch you fall?” he queried mildly.

Edgar darted his gaze past his feet to the sheer plummet into broken hardscrabble far below, and his stomach knotted below his lungs. He clamped his eyes shut to contain the threatening vertigo, and he meekly shook his head *no*, pressing his face into the rock and hastening passage around the jagged promontory.

Past that harrowing point the going became somewhat easier, and toward the summit they came off the ledge onto a medium slope up the final distance. Here on less steep terrain they crept low through dense brush as the raging hawks screeched and swooped and dove just overhead.

The prize that the pair of magic-bereft sorcerers sought was a pair of gossamer-sheer wings, set at the back of the hawk’s nest in the upper reaches of a soaring banyan tree that dominated the mesa-top a short distance ahead. The Golden Hawks in this venue were no garden-variety raptors, however, but much larger—with talons powerful enough to rip out a Normals’ throat or even crush his skull. Whenever the brush thinned and the hawks closed in, Edgar and Nightfall would stand back to back and stab and swing at the swooping birds with their staves, but the closer they approached the banyan tree the more furious and aggressive the hawks became.

Ducking down in a particularly dense thicket, Edgar slumped to the ground while Nightfall spread the branches to peer up at the fearsome creatures wheeling just overhead, and as he watched their open wingspans circle and pirouette Edgar was ominously minded of a pair of curved scimitars wielded by a black-cloaked Blade Master.

Nightfall released the parting of the branches overhead and crouched down beside Edgar. “This was intended as a competition between you and I,” he said softly, “but I fear that if we separate those two may well tear us to pieces individually.”

Edgar nodded vehemently, as that very thought had been fraying at his nerves. “This is hardly a routine contest,” he ventured, “but rather a game without rules. What say we work together to gain the prize, and later negotiate the scoring of our individual efforts?”

Nightfall nodded, and they made the final dash to the base of the banyan, flailing their staffs at the strafing hawks and leaping to catch and swing up into the tree’s lower branches. Carefully they climbed the thick trunk of the soaring tree, always mindful to position themselves with no open exposure to the furious raptors. Now it was just the male who continued the harassment, whereas the female had pumped her wings up to the nest and sat planted in front of her chirping, head-bobbing youngsters. Edgar uneasily studied the steely eyed female guarding her young, and he could not help but wonder why in a clueless riddle he and Nightfall had willingly inserted themselves into this mess. But still, they’d come this far.

“And so what now, my student sans-magic?” asked Nightfall from where they perched in the crook of a forked branch, as high up as the nest but removed a distance horizontally. Edgar dubiously pondered their options, which he personally saw as poor to none, when one of his feet slipped on the bark and jammed into the crotch of the tree, pinching it painfully. He pulled it free, rubbing at his awkward Normals’ foot and scowling at the offending crook, but then his brow rose and he panned his gaze all around, searching. “Look!” he pointed to a medium-thick vine that climbed past them up



the trunk. He craned his neck. "And there," he pointed to a forked branch similar to where they now sat, but higher up and off to one side.

Nightfall's gaze followed, and he shook his head. "If you are thinking what I suspect, this time it is you who considers a most dangerous tactic, my friend. You realize, of course, that in our present state we are fully vulnerable to mortal indiscretion?"

Edgar remained silent for some moments, and then spoke in a somber tone. "Yes, I understand that. But I'm not sure that I would ever again have full confidence in myself if I were to have made it this far and had then just given up, especially after a possibility had presented itself."

Though Edgar had always experienced some difficulty judging a Normal's quixotic range of facial expression, it was no great feat of perception to see that Nightfall was not happy with his proposition. But even so, his mentor nodded reluctantly. "Tell me, then, how you wish to proceed."

Edgar described his intent, and as he began to climb further up the trunk, tearing the vine loose as he went, Nightfall did the same, but descending. Once up a certain height Edgar severed the vine and carefully crept out toward the forked branch, with the male hawk ever circling. Once in position he looped the vine through the crotch and wedged the knotted end snug, and waved to Nightfall, who gave a few securing yanks at the other end. He then crept back to the trunk, descended, and shimmied out yet another limb.

If possible the male had become even more agitated, screeching and swooping and banking between the positions occupied by the two Normals, and Edgar watched, studying the bird's movements. After numerous repetitions of a common pattern and while the hawk was looping back around on his friend, Edgar waved his hand and Nightfall swung the free end of the vine out toward him. Catching it in both hands Edgar hooked a leg around it and dropped from his perch, letting his weight swing him on a calculated arc targeted on the nest.

The male immediately spotted his ploy and wheeled around on him, and Edgar yanked himself up on the vine to just barely avoid talons raking through just-vacated space. The hawk wheeled again and now the female was hopping back to intercept his rearward approach, but he was swinging in fast and *BAM* he smacked into the rear of the nest. The female screeched and bore down with wings spread and talons extended and Edgar lunged rearward, trying to dodge out of her reach. He stumbled, began to fall, and his backward-reaching hand scrabbled to stay his plunge off the swaying limb. The female was *too* close now, sweeping forward with the light playing off the curve of her lethal spurs, and Edgar squeezed his eyes shut against her descent. There was no hope, he'd blown it and would pay the ultimate price.

*Fssst!!!*

He fell back against the tree a half-moment before his life would be crushed between the hawk's talons, and that moment passed, and then another, and then—

And then nothing happened.

He edged open his clamped eyes, just enough to peek out.

There was nothing to see. The hawk was gone. The nest was gone; it was just Edgar, leaning precariously backward with his hands braced against...

Against the Hawk-Wing!

*YEEEEOOOOOWWWW*, he howled in his oddest of odd Normals' voice.

With his pulse still pounding Edgar lifted the wing-set, and he gazed upon it in wonderment. It was an ephemerally beautiful piece of work; sheer gauzy white with silver thread woven in a curiously intricate and somehow meaningful pattern. So very light, it was, but still substantial. Like a work of the Gods! It was—

*Yow!* His feet slipped on the smooth bark as the limb shifted suddenly — dramatically—and he lurched and was very nearly pitched from the tree! He struggled for balance on a limb that continued to gyrate with increasing intensity, holding the wing-set in a white-knuckled grip while his mind raced.

*What's happening?!!!*

The wing-set was no longer in clear focus, because it was jiggling in his hands, and that was because he was shaking, and that was because the massive tree itself was trembling and swaying! There was a rumbling sound that was growing louder by the moment, and he pivoted to look down to where Nightfall was hugging the tree trunk and shouting and gesturing up to him frantically.

*"WHAT?"* yelled Edgar, somewhat foolishly over the growing roar.

*"—must descend the tree! Bring the wings! We must go NOW!"* Nightfall was stabbing a finger at Edgar's feet, and Edgar looked down to see the vine, draped over the branch but near to slipping off. He lunged to grab it. Nightfall was yelling *"BRING THE WINGS"*, and so Edgar folded and tucked them under an arm, wrapped the vine around one leg, and held on with both hands to swing off the branch. Nightfall moved to intercept and grabbed Edgar and shoved him forcibly down the trunk, and the two of them went down fast, mostly falling the last twenty feet.

*"What is happening?!!"* Edgar yelled over the building roar, fighting to keep his footing on the rumbling ground.

*"I didn't think of this! The game stores itself when the prize is captured, and that's what is happening now! We've got to get out of here before we're very literally boxed up!"*

*"But we can't do that! We'll need our magic, and for that we've got to descend the bluff. We'll never make it in time!"*

But Edgar's eyes widened as Nightfall grabbed the wing-set from him and opened it, peering intently at the arm-straps. *"Come on!"* yelled Nightfall, and Edgar opened his mouth to protest but Nightfall had already turned and begun to sprint across the undulating terrain toward the precipice some fifty yards off. When Edgar caught up Nightfall was stepping into the harness and strapping himself in.

*"Y— You can't do that! Fly? That's insane! It's mad, and... and what about me?!!!"*

*"It's our only hope. I'll kite to the surface below, and if the gods grant me time enough I'll regain magic and spirit the pair of us out!"*

*"But—I don't—"* but Edgar found himself speaking to open space, because Nightfall had turned and plunged from sight off the cliff.

The noise was deafening and there was a feeling of compression as the landscape bunched up all around, pressing inexorably in and down upon him. The huge tree was suddenly no longer fifty yards away but was right here, limbs drooping all around and then wrapping him in their embrace, and Edgar had great difficulty drawing breath as everything closed in overtop. He began to whimper as he was forced to his knees by the sheer weight of it, and his arms buckled and he was pressed flat to the surface. He tasted

dirt and his eyes began to literally bulge from their sockets, the air forced from his lungs, and then his vision flashed light to dark and back again, and everything was transformed.

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It was a goodly spell before Edgar could even begin to again trust his voice, but gradually he regained some semblance of feline composure. He tilted a sideways glance at Nightfall, who of course appeared his irritatingly calm and settled self.

*Tail caught in a door—he even looks pleased with himself!*

Still shaky on his feet, Edgar eased back onto his haunches. They stood, or now sat, pondering the game-set that looked impossibly small—all closed up and tidy.

“You did very well,” said Nightfall approvingly, as if they had not just moments prior come so excruciatingly close to being squeezed to bloody pulp. “Your gambit with the vine was resourceful and quite daring, and I admit to harboring some doubt that you would survive the attempt.”

“Yes, well...,” murmured Edgar, fighting to still the quaver in his voice. “I could hardly say any less of you; saving the day by flying off a cliff in an apparatus that I would have guessed was nothing more than ornamental.”

Nightfall rubbed his hind quarters gingerly. “*Hmmmm...* Well, it was not a graceful landing.” His tone brightened. “You do realize, though, that we’ll have to go back?”

Edgar’s eyes opened wider than he would have imagined possible, but words failed him.

“Yes,” continued Nightfall, lifting his admiring gaze to where the life-sized wing-set leaned against a wall on brilliant display. “Brigands—that’s what we are now, you know.” He spoke with a tone of evident relish. “We have made off with the coveted prize—changed its perception and brought it out from a surrealistic premise to an abnormal state where it should never exist!” He licked a paw approvingly. “But while our exploits might some day make for wizardly lore, before any such legends are born the canons of honor and fair sorcery require that the wing-set be returned to its rightful place.”

Edgar opened his mouth to speak but his jaw just hung there, like the scoop of a backhoe, because he could think of absolutely nothing to say. There were simply no words adequate to convey what they had just experienced, to say nothing of a future that had just snuck up and caught him unawares. Edgar’s shoulders sagged and his ears drooped to either side, and he stared limp-whiskered at the fantastic wing-set, unable to do anything but nod in mute, dreadful wonder.

**The End**

## Galinda

One pristine spring morning, in a village nestled within a vale coursed by a burbling brook and bounded by evergreens that scented the air with pine, a dreadful child was born. The tortured mother wailed and screeched piteously for long hours, and when the infant, too large again by half, was finally expelled in a tearing rush of blood and entrails, the exhausted woman looked just once upon her daughter's face before turning her head away forevermore. The distraught midwife hurriedly pressed the mother's eyes closed and crossed herself, murmuring fearful words of salvation, and then bolted from the room, never to be seen again.

The baby was born not pink and pudgy but rather with a coarse matt of hair that covered far too much of her body. Her lower jaw was dramatically thrust outward, and when her teeth grew in, yellow-grey in color, they crowded one another and jutted and jagged more like the mineralized protrusions that grew from the floor and ceiling of a cavern. Her limbs grew long and out of proportion, with boney joints and angles all wrong. Her feet and hands were far too large, and her nose looked like it had been broken, set sideways, and then broken the opposite direction. Large and misshapen moles and warts of various colors covered her skin, though they were not often visible through the thick mat of hair. Her only feature not disturbing or even shocking were the eyes, which shimmered as limpid pools of green, like the first sprouting of grass in an early spring meadow.

The listener might now expect to hear of an astounding beauty within, of a heart swelling with love and a soul imbued with kindness and charity even while locked into such a cruel physical form.

Forget about it. That would be another story; maybe try leafing through the book? Because Galinda's heart was just as cold as her features were grim.

She would have been oversized for a boy and later a man, but was truly monstrous for a woman. Her strength was prodigious, and she was not slow to use it. And so the taunting that she suffered as an cumbersome toddler was silenced just as quickly as she became able to get about on her own, for even as a young child she'd not hesitate to launch into a bullying boy twice her size, pounding with her bony fists and scratching with her thick nails and biting. Soon enough the other children and even the adults would avert their gaze and avoid her whenever possible.

Which meant pretty much always, since she made it easy for them.

Galinda preferred to be alone, caring none for the company of others. Her father was a small, cruel man, known to be manipulative and quick to betray a trust, but he learned early on that any meanness played upon Galinda would be served back double and then some. And so he also came to avoid her, making no argument and in fact heaving a sigh of relief when she ceased to come home while still just a girl. But be reminded; she was a very *large* girl.

At first Galinda simply lived wild in the forest bordering the village, foraging nuts and berries and grubs and sheltering in caves or hollows, but eventually she built a large hovel of tree trunks and slabs of peat torn from the nearby bog. She learned to build baited traps of vine and tensioned sapwood, but more than that she loved to pursue her prey on foot, so that she might physically wrestle it to the ground, reveling in the fear of the frantically struggling beast, relishing the stilling of its pounding heart and the taste of its blood still warm.

As the months stretched to years Galinda grew to her full stature, and she was seen less and less by the townsfolk of Starrybrook. Stories of a sighting would sometimes come in from hunting parties that ranged deep into the forest, or occasionally when game was scarce a lumbering form would be seen in the darkness near the livestock pens, from whence a cacophony of fearful lowing and bleating would awaken the villagers. But no one would venture out into the night to confront the predator, instead waiting for morning to assess their losses.

King Stanislaw Everhorn was a kind and benevolent despot, of a predictably rotund profile for a monarch of middle years, and he was mightily aggrieved that such a wretched creature might exist among his subjects. “Surely there is some humanity couched within,” he would muse, “however deeply it might be buried.” His ministers would nod sagely when he spoke of such, as they had long since learned to quell their true emotions in the King’s presence. That would be ever since Lord Trundlebloom, Minister of Game and Bounty, had suggested with a meaningful wink that ‘*a hunting party might mistake Galinda for a rutting boar, and then we’d be done with the nuisance forever*’. Everhorn had flown into a rage at such a lack of compassion, and the minister had spent the long hunting season instead stooped and toiling in the fields. And so the King’s sentiment was henceforth taken to heart by *all* the ministers, since none had the heart for a turn at the plowshare.

Everhorn finally became determined that he must do *something* to correct the wrongness of Galinda, mostly because of his charitable heart and benevolent intent, but also because some of his most prized livestock had begun to disappear with disturbing frequency.

“Galinda *cannot* be a natural happenstance,” he sternly counseled his advisors, “for never before has such a child been born—here or anywhere else. “ He drummed his fingers on the table, as he was wont to do, and then thumped down a fist. “*Sorcery!* There must surely be dark magic involved—why have we not thought of this before?” He glowered at his Ministers, especially Lord Veilcry, Minister of Conjured Arts, and they all nodded fervently and did their best to do nothing.

But then Everhorn’s grave frown turned up into a beaming smile. “I have a solution!” he announced in triumph. “We will procure a wizard of the highest order, and task him with stripping the wretched curse from Galinda of the Forest! *Hmmm*, Veilcry, come to my counsel—let us discuss the slate of candidates...”

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*Thump, thump, thump*, came a knocking on the door of her hut. Galinda turned her head to it and glowered.

“*Who dares to intrude?!!!*”

“It is I, NorthMoon, Master of the Arts Dark and Fair, Assuror of Balance and Purveyor of Mystical Rectitude!”

Galinda flung the door open to reveal the interloper, jarring loose a cloud of dust and bits and pieces of detritus from the peat ceiling. She looked the wizard up and down, and would have eyed him side to side were he not so spare. A tall man he was, though more than a head shorter than she, and of a frail and spindly build. He was quite grey—from his cloak and his peaked cap to his dingy beard and pallid complexion. He carried a long staff, of course, for all who perform wizardry assume that affectation, and a sack was slung over one shoulder.

The content of the sack appeared rather agitated.

“What is your business here?” demanded Galinda, “I take no social calls!”

“I come at the personal behest of good King Stanislaw Everhorn, and my intent is to rid you of the dark conjury that weighs upon your mortal being. Our wise and eminent King has divined that you are the woeful victim of Blacke Magic, and as I look upon you I can see the truth of his augury. But you no longer need toil under such a burden, piteous Galinda, as NorthMoon of the Cloistered Coven will call forth his White Magic to strip away the darkness that bedevils you!”

Galinda glared at him fiercely, and was disappointed that he did not shirk away. She peered more closely at the sack over his shoulder, which appeared to carry some animate content. “I don’t take none to witches nor wizards,” she growled, “an’ I’m carryin’ no curse.” She pointed. “What you got in that sack that looks bound t’ get out?”

NorthMoon knelt and lowered the canvas duffel to the ground. “This is an Orobo, wretched Galinda; a creature very rare and hard to come by.” He opened the sack to reveal a small furry beast that looked much like a child’s stuffed playmate; soft and rotund with great wide eyes that were of a calming blue-green color and with long whiskers that drooped to either side. It looked up at Galinda, and instead of hissing or barking or running away as did all other animals that saw her, it cooed and hummed soft murmurings and somehow seemed to smile.

Galinda scowled. “What is it, and why’d you bring it? It had best not drop any scat at my doorstep.”

NorthMoon waved a hand airily. “The Orobo is often called a ‘soother’; it is the gentlest creature amongst us by far, nothing else comes even close. They are few in number because they have no natural defense beyond the calming nature that they develop in adulthood, and that is why so few make it that far. Those that do, however, have complete sanctuary, because no predator will kill an adult Orobo. A mountain cat would curl up and purr like a kitten, and a wolf would roll over to expose his belly like a puppy in the hope of a good tussling. Not even Dark Sorcery can withstand the goodness imbued in an Orobo—it would simply melt away like butter on a heated griddle.”

Galinda scoffed. “Yeah? So what’s it do? It just sits there all moony-eyed.”

“Ahh—And that is my role, belabored Galinda. I will use my talent to open an ephemeral channel between you and the Orobo, and the Dark Magic that plagues you will soon be reduced to nothing more than a fading memory.”

Galinda did not care the slightest whit for this wizard and was about to tell him so in no uncertain terms, but before she could get out another word he produced a wand and waved it grandiosely, while mouthing an incantation in a lyrical cadence

*The bound between the bad and good  
Will fall as if it never stood  
Good prevails and always will  
To shadows go all things evil*

The Orobo seemed to shiver and Galinda was abruptly submersed in a sensation that felt something like the lapping of water in a pond warmed under the sun, and then the Orobo stiffened and rose taut on all four, suddenly looking more like a pincushion than a cuddly toy. It emitted a piercing keen, harsh enough that Galinda clapped her hands over her ears, and it bared its teeth—pitiful little rounded affairs built more for chewing cud than for tearing flesh. It began to advance on Galinda, keening and hissing and making a noise that sounded like a baby trying to growl.

She raised her questioning gaze from the comical little creature to the wizard, who stood with his lips blubbering out little more than gibberish, but he finally regained the ability to speak. He looked to Galinda, wild-eyed.

“*What?*— What have you *done*?!!! This cannot be happening! The Orobo is incapable of aggression! You must *cease* whatever it is that you’re doing!”

The wizard fumbled for both his wand and his words, and Galinda shook her head and raised one very large foot. She brought it down with measured resolve; there was a squeak and a mushy squishing sound, and then silence.

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NorthMoon sat with his elbows propped on the table, his wattled jowls cradled on bony fists, shaking his head miserably.

“I tell you, Your Majesty, I have never, *ever*, heard of such a thing! The poor Orobo—always I have seen it reduce a curse, even one placed by a half-dozen Black Practitioners working in concert, to nothing but empty words! But her! She is evil incarnate, Sire—pure and simple. I felt it wafting off her in torrents! Best to be avoided like a plague!”

King Everhorn sat moodily silent a moment. “What will you try next, then?” he rumbled.

The wizard’s brow rose like the curtain over a stage. “*Next*?!!! What will I do *next*? Why, Sire, I’ll make certain that my path strays *nowhere near* Galinda, the troll of the Deep Woods! That is most certainly what *I* will do next, and every day thereafter!”

Everhorn narrowed his eyes at the wizard. “You did not complete the duty that I tasked you with. It would not be at all unreasonable if I insisted that you return to finish it.”

NorthMoon’s lips fluttered. “But *Sire*, surely you see that I can do nothing more! The Orobo is likely in her stew-pot by now, and no magic can overcome this scourge named Galinda!”

“So—you cannot finish it, you say? What of someone else, then; a more *powerful* wizard?”

NorthMoon took an affronted expression. “More powerful? You suggest that I am *weak*? I—” He halted, seeming to realize that he was arguing himself into a return trip.

“Well, there *is* Tarlebaine,” he mumbled grudgingly, “the Maester of all the Covens. Perhaps *he* might have an idea...”

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*Thump, thump, thump* came another knocking on her door. This was becoming *very* tiresome. Not since her youth had she had to deal with *people*, and now it had happened twice in as many days. She glowered at the door, but then her scowl softened—she had, after all, gotten a fairly easy meal out of that last visit. She plucked a bit of floating fur out of the simmering cauldron, and walked the few steps to her door.

There stood yet another wizard, this one even more imposing, dressed in brilliant white and with a beard just as lucent hanging fully past his waist.

“Whadda yer want?” she growled down on him.

He opened his arms wide. “I am Tarlebaine, Maester of all Covens. I have learned that a monstrous evil is coiled herein, and I have come to send it back to whatever shade of Hell it has slithered out from!”

She narrowed her eyes into a calculating squint. “You’ve brung me another Orobo, then? They’re kinda tasty; no gristle or stringy meat—lot’sa juicy fat.”

Tarlebaine looked momentarily taken aback, but quickly recovered his poise. “No, no. No Orobo. No smoke and mirrors, no hocus-pocus, no enabling artifices. I am a Sorceror of the highest caliber, and Maester Tarlebaine wields nothing but pure White Magic.”

Galinda scowled darkly. “You git *outta* here, then, if ya brung me nuthin’. An’ tell your pals in dresses I don’t wanna see ‘em skulkin’ around. This is *Galinda’s* Forest, an’ nobody else is welcome here.”

Tarlebaine again looked a bit nonplussed, but then set his jaw and swept out a pair of wands to begin pumping them as if conducting a full orchestra. His incantation boomed out in a deep, pulsing baritone.

*From darkest depths where evil flowers  
I call the wraith who wields such powers  
I banish it where shadows fail  
Where darkness fades a lighter pale*

With those final words he raised both wands over his head, and the ground began to tremble. A rumbling began to descend, like a distant thunderstorm approaching, and there was a sudden boom and a blinding flash, as if the heavens were being torn asunder. Galinda blinked several times at the searing light, and when her vision calmed back into focus she saw that she stood alone.

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Tarlebaine did not return that day, or the next or the next, and King Everhorn surmised the worst. He fretted and grumbled and stewed and moped, and finally he called for Lord Trundlebloom. The Minister appeared forthwith, fervently hoping that he would not yet again be heading out to the fields wielding hoe and rake and shovel.



“Perhaps you were right the first time, Trundlebloom,” groused the King. “If even the most powerful of the wizards cannot deal with Galinda, then perhaps rather than trying to be her savior we should simply be rid of her. Why—just last week one of my most choice breeder bulls disappeared from the stockades! A huge animal, and in the wee hours! People are simply afraid to venture out after dark anymore; it’s truly time that we’re done with this.”

Trundlebloom heaved a great sigh of relief. “I fully agree, Sire. What would you have of me, then? Shall I send a hunting party out?”

Stanislaw shook his head. “No, I think not. I don’t want this to be a public spectacle. I’m forced to do it, but I’m not proud of it. I’m thinking of sending a single champion against her. A blooded and armed knight in full battle armor should suffice, don’t you think? The woman wields no weapon other than her brute strength, though she has plenty of that.”

Trundlebloom nodded fervently. “Most excellent, Your Excellency! Shall I select from the best of our ranks, then?”

“No, again I want to be discreet. I was thinking of one knight in particular—he who travels for hire and contests for tournament winnings. Sir Edric of Plume hasn’t lost a match in years. He’ll either succeed against Galinda,” Everhorn shook his head glumly, “or someone else will have a chance at victory come the next tourney.”

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Edric had dismounted and tied off his charger a ways back, knowing that he was closing on her lair and not wishing to make his presence known. He had originally scoffed at this tasking; the sending of a full knight, much less an undisputed champion, against a single woman?! But he’d then heard the stories; paying particular attention to the words of the wizard NorthMoon, and had accepted the premise that here he would face a very uncommon foe. Sir Edric had also set aside his full battle armor, settling instead upon heavy leather under soft mail, as he intended to approach unannounced.

Now he was creeping quietly through a stand of trees, skirting a pond, when he heard a heavy rustling behind. He spun in place, and reared back from the towering grizzly that was upon him, its paws spread wide and its teeth bared. He grabbed for the sword sheathed at his side, knowing there was not enough time, and just as he smelt the bear’s hot breath and flinched away from death a great wooden spear rammed through the looming creature from behind! The bear roared and a gout of blood spouted from where the spear was yanked free, and then the spear slammed through again, and once more. The bear moaned and fell forward onto all four feet, and then over onto its side where it lay as a huge twitching mound of blood-soaked fur. Behind it stood Galinda, holding a great wooden shaft in her knobby hands and breathing heavily.

Edric stood in absolute awe, and he fell to one knee and lowered his head. “My Lady Galinda, I owe you my *life!*”

Galinda grunted. “You was going fer my bear, weren’t you? Ya can’t hunt here, this is *Galinda’s* Forest!”

Edric shook his head. “No, M’ Lady, I was not hunting the bear. I am Sir Edric of Plume, full Knight of the NorthCourt, and I am deeply shamed to admit that I had been sent out against you, fair lady.” He rose and stepped quickly past the bear to kneel again,

this time directly in front of Galinda. “You saved my life, Galinda of the Deep Woods, and so to you I pledge it.” And before she could speak he reached up to take her hand, larger than his own, and brought his lips to it. He locked his gaze to hers. “Your inner beauty belies your harsh appearance, Lady Galinda, and easily turns the balance in its favor.”

Galinda stared down at the kneeling knight who grinned like some smitten sop, and then she began to feel a sensation—something of a tingling, quivering, tickling tremor. She began to shrink. The dirty coarse hides she wore became heavy and itchy, and then slipped fully from her narrowed shoulders. The ground seemed to rise until her level gaze was not so much higher than that of the Knight who knelt before her. His cool grey eyes blinked impossibly wide, and after just a few moments the tingling stopped and she felt a cool breeze on her bare skin. Sir Edric swept off his gilded cloak and cavalierly draped it around her bare form.

“Lady Galinda,” he exclaimed, “this is the greatest miracle! You are completely transformed! Now your outer beauty matches that of your heart!”

Galinda brought one hand up before her eyes. What had just moments prior been a gnarly, lumpy ham of a hand was now a delicate work of art; long slender fingers, perfect nails manicured and polished, skin a creamy white without the slightest trace of blemish.

“What has happened?” she asked in a melodic contralto, even her simple words taking flight as things of beauty. “What have you done?”

“I did nothing, Lady Galinda, beyond seeing through the facade. It must be that the Twelve Graces have come to see the burden you have labored under for so long, that which trapped your pureness of spirit within a coarse outer shell, and they have taken pity and allowed your true essence to break through.”

Galinda slid her palms down her slender, curvaceous form, and stepped lightly over to the pond just feet away to peer down into it. The woman whose gaze she held was a striking beauty; fair blond hair, high cheeks and patrician nose. She smiled tentatively; the teeth were sparkling white and perfectly even. The only feature that even slightly resembled the Galinda she knew were those pale green eyes, now even more compelling in their new, flawless setting.

Sir Edric again stepped before her. He was a very attractive man, she was surprised to find herself noticing for the first time.

“Lady Galinda, this is a most blessed miracle to be granted by the Twelve. There is no woman whose beauty even comes close to matching yours, and none whose soul is so pure.” He smiled beatifically. “Please—allow me to escort you to King Everhorn. This is more than he ever hoped for; I am certain he will grant you whatever grace you might desire.” He lowered his head, almost shyly. “M’ Lady, I will serve you forevermore, in whatever capacity you so choose. I will be your protector Knight, your friend and confidant, and, if you ever so deign, your husband and lover. My Lady, whatever you wish is yours. I would give my life for you! I lay my sword at your feet.”

Galinda again looked down at herself, thoughtfully. Her every move, every gesture, now seemed so very graceful. “And so it is my inner self that defines my appearance?” she asked in a wondering voice.

Edric nodded solemnly. “As our scriptures so wisely advise, ‘Light emanates from within the soul, and upon those who shine bright, All Grace will smile’.”

She glanced again at the reflection in the pond, and knelt to lift Edric's sword. It felt so heavy now, this piece that would have been little more than a toy just minutes past. "You would truly dedicate your life to me, Sir Edric?"

He bowed his head. "I would, Lady Galinda."

And then he gasped as Galinda abruptly thrust the razor sharp blade through his chest. Edric fell to both knees, and raised his tortured gaze to her. "M... M' lady? *Why?*"

Galinda again felt that tingling, buzzing sensation, and she began to grow in stature. "You said you would give your life for me, Sir Edric." Her voice grew huskier and more coarse even as she spoke. "An' that's 'xactly what yer doin'." Now she towered over Edric, even larger than she had been before, and uglier. He toppled over and she cast the cloak, far too small to suit her new immensity, down over his lifeless form. She stood there; lumpy, gnarly, her dugs hanging warted and hairy, her skin scarcely visible beneath a coarse mat of hair. She grumbled a bit and scratched at herself, stepped over to peer into the pond once more, and nodded and returned to her hut, determined to enlarge it to accommodate her increased girth.

On a rare occasion Galinda would dream of what she had been, for a very short time, and what she might have remained. Such aching beauty, at the cost of solitude. And then she'd awaken, heave a great sigh of relief, and rest easy. And thus Galinda of the Deep Woods lived happily alone, ever after.

**The End**

## A Kingdom for the Taking

Tel gazed stonily down upon the courtyard, clicking his tongue at the disheveled figure that weaved an erratic course across the flagstone. He heaved an exaggerated sigh. “Father’s grip is surely grafted to his goblet—seeing that he is never separated from it.”

The clop-clopping of hooves from a horse-drawn carriage sounded off the high stone walls of the observation chamber, their echoed cadence oddly out of sync with the horse’s stride. Tel’s gaze traced the sloshed path of wine and he snorted. “Our treasury drains to the cesspool and commercial ventures slide to ruin, all while father drowns himself in claret.”

Slovan tugged at the sleeve of his younger half-brother, a shimmer of alarm showing in his eyes. “You shouldn’t *never* talk bad about papa, Tel,” he said in a hushed voice. “He’s a good man and, um... well, people *like* him! Any man in the kingdom would stand by da.”

“Heh!” Tel flicked a hand outward, as if shooing away the tall-masted schooners that bobbed in the cove beyond the castle walls. “You are dense, Slovan, and slow to grasp reality. Father *was* once a man much beloved, but no one outside the castle has caught a glimpse of him in years. And aside from that, what man would dare stand up to me, the Crown Prince of Balara?”

“Our father, for one,” said Princess Lymeera, not looking up from her needlework. “There is still some bite to him, you know, on those occasions that he remains sober.”

Slovan clamped a hand over his mouth to stifle an improbable fit of giggles. Tel cast a frosty glance at his half-brother and turned to regard Lymeera.

*What a family is this? A father lost to drink; a brother with no wits to lose; and a sister that... well, a sister who is Lymeera.*

“Oh really, dear sister?” said Tel. “And just when was it that father last demonstrated some semblance of lucidity? Might we ever expect the fog to dissipate?” Tel’s gaze drifted back to the window and his tone went wistful. “By the Gods, would that he were truly be lost to the murk...”

Slovan’s brow creased and he leaned forward to peer out the window. “Fog?”

Lymeera’s gaze snapped up from her needlework, first to Slovan, who stood at the window intently searching the horizon, and then to Tel, who watched her expectantly. She flashed a warning glare at her twin brother, and returned her attention to Slovan. Clearing her voice, she spoke casually. “Slovan, it would seem that I’ve not brought all my yarns. Would you be a dear and fetch them? In my chambers there’s a skein of russet that I need.”

Slovan turned from the window to peer at Lymeera doubtfully. “Uh, a skein of...?”

“A bundle of dark red yarn, Slovan. The color of brick.”

A purposeful smile lit Slovan’s face and he bolted for the door, looking for all the world an oversized adolescent. His heavy steps clomped down the stairwell and Lymeera

turned angry eyes upon Tel. “Do not be *foolish*, Tel! Never jest about any harm that might befall father, not even to Slovan!”

Tel waved her warning aside. “Nonsense, dear sister. Our brother is ‘half’ not just in relation, but just as surely in wits. A slathering hound that humped his leg would exercise, even at that moment, a higher level of mental acuity than would our simpleton brother. His prepubescent mind would never grasp the fact that the dog had motives beyond loyalty.” With a slightly narrowed eye Tel watched Lymeera shake her head, her lips pursed.

*How well I know you, fair Lymeera. You will now seek to undermine my resolve.*

Her voice took a note of uncertainty. “Should we not be considering this action, Tel? He is our father, after all, and if we are found out...”

Tel spoke grimly, a rime of ice frosting his pale grey eyes. “Yes, the bungling ninny is our father, as much as that thought displeases me. The only grace there is that his loss will raise me from a position of mere ceremony. Mark my words, Lymeera, once I’ve become King, I will restore proper structure to Balara. I’ll press the ever-bolder peasantry into obeisance, and the honor of Family Kessant will rise above the mire wherein the King now wallows as a pig in slop.” He paused, a forefinger laid along the bridge of his nose. “I *do* worry about mother, though. She’s told me time and again that she’d never assume the role of a widowed Queen—that if father’s death preceded hers she’d abdicate to her son. But she’s relatively young yet—what if she decides to ascend the throne once father is gone?”

Lymeera shook her head. “Of that, at least, I am certain. Mother has spoken to me in confidence many times. She married father not for rank nor for privilege, but rather for the man that he is. Or rather, for the man he once was. I am confident mother that would be content to finish her days free of the plotting and subterfuge that attend to matters of court. With her son as King she’d enjoy the benefits of royalty without assuming its tiresome responsibilities.”

Tel nodded and rapped his knuckles on the window sill. “What of Slovan, then? Though he is officially nothing but an orphan taken in as a ward, he’s undoubtedly the consequence of some youthful dalliance by the Prince-not-yet-King.”

“Leave Slovan be, Tel, he’s harmless enough. As you say, even if he weren’t forevermore a child, at best he’s an illegitimate bastard.” She looked away and shook her head. “I would agree to none of this if there might be any hope that I could persuade father to nullify my betrothal to Lord Galador. The man is a bloated, reeking toad. I’m told he rarely leaves his bed—a stream of attendants cart food in and garbage out—there is even a hoist mounted to leverage him over the bedpan!” She wrinkled her nose. “What kind of life could I hope for at House Galador?”

Tel cast a sly glance at his sister. “Ah, but do you not feel compelled to uphold your duty to the Royal House of Kessant? A joining with Galador would create a direct conduit into the vast wealth of his family.”

Lymeera’s gaze snapped to him. “Tel! You swore that as King you’d dismiss that covenant!”

Tel nodded slowly and a hard smile cracked his lips. “There’s also the matter of a certain handsome young merchant, is there not? But of course he has no lineage, and father would never allow marriage into a family of base bloodline.” He peered at her, watching her alarmed expression fade into the annoyed realization that he toyed with her.

“Yes, I will do as you wish,” said Tel. “That will be my reward for your role in our plot. But be reminded of the life that awaits you, should I not soon become king.”

Lymeera nodded, her expression resolutely blank.

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King Argon lifted his low-hooded, bloodshot eyes to Varion, Minister of the Court and Promulgator of Accord. The king’s jowls hung flaccid, like bladders half-full, and dark wine matted his graying beard. He raised the chalice and drained it in three messy gulps, with the overflow dripping to a stained robe bulging over his paunch. A steward dashed forward to refill the goblet, after which Argon waved the boy from the room.

The two sat alone.

“So... you believe there is merit to my suspicion, Varion?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, I share your misgivings.” Varion’s voice rasped like a saw blade through thin paneling. He smiled blandly, his mottled age spots stretching into curious patterns on skin of wrinkled parchment. “I have the ears of the castle, my Lord. I have heard whispers; tales of sinister plotting and collusion, and all speak of the King’s demise.”

Argon took another swallow and pushed himself to his feet. He stood wobbling a few moments before coming steady. He looked long upon his Minister; silent and considering, and finally the King nodded. Wispy, grizzled Varion had been prime Minister to his own father—to his grandfather, even. Argon trusted him more than anyone, save perhaps his mistress Valainya.

“Mine own son, plotting to kill me.” He drained the goblet and held it up, studying the refraction of light through precisely cut crystal, and he abruptly turned and flung it across the room. With startling accuracy it shattered into a hail of fragments in the roaring fireplace, each tiny shard for the briefest moment holding the flames like a firework bursting over the hell-fires below. The King scowled.

“When will it be, then?”

“Your Majesty, that I cannot say. But...I have reason to suspect that it will be a poisoning.”

Argon slumped down into his throne, shaking his head sadly. “You will speak of this to no one, Varion. I could put a stop to it easily enough, but I cannot help myself—I still have hope that it’s naught but a baseless rumor. If it truly is to be, then I must see this vile act in the making with mine own eyes.”

After a moment of silence Varion took his queue to leave. As he rose to his feet Argon spoke wearily. “Attend to my legion of tasters, Minister; ensure that they are doubly zealous. And summon the page for a new goblet.”

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“We should abandon this plan, Tel. While there is still time.”

Tel cursed under his breath and stopped, turning to face his sister, a dark anger welling. He understood they now skated the thinnest film of ice, a dangerous passage over remorseless depths.

“Lymeera.” He spoke softly, but her eyes widened.

*Good. She sees my resolve.*

“It is too late to turn back. The alchemical will be soon enough be missed—you know how regularly it is inventoried and tested. Who would you prefer reign as King when the theft of the poison is detected?” He watched closely as her eyes darted from side to side.

“But Tel. *We know* he uses tasters. They will surely defeat your plan.”

“And that is why we bear this gift ourselves. An offering is *expected* of us today, on father’s half-century day of birth. Would he waste the rarest Renzanoble Liqueur, presented by his own son and daughter, on a taster? I think not; it is far too precious and his desire runs too deep.” Tel resumed his stride, waving a hand for her to follow. “Come.” He smiled, hearing her footsteps scurry to catch up.

Entering the throne room, Tel and Lymeera came to stand before King Argon Kessant. The King drowsed, slumped to one side, his rounded belly expanding and contracting with each wet, snuffling, snore. A goblet dangled precariously from the King’s fingers where his arm hung over the throne’s armrest, and the light from a torch behind broke into a rainbow of colors through the cut crystal, sending slivers of light dancing throughout the throne room. Tel cleared his throat.

“Ahem. Ah, Your Majesty? —*Father?*”

The King started and his eyes popped open; the goblet released from his fingers and dropped to shatter on the stone tiles.

“Eh?!! Bloody mothers, surprising me like that! Now look what you’ve done.” The King’s exclamation fell off to a mutter. “A mess, such a mess... where’s my steward?” He leaned to one side, reaching for the bell-cord to summon his attendant.

“Father!” Tel stepped forward and flashed a brilliant smile. “Happy Birthday, papa! We bring you a gift!” He thrust the small, brightly wrapped package forward, but his smile cracked just a fraction as his father’s bloodshot eyes came slowly round to bear on him, like a crossbow settling on its mark. The King’s eyes seemed to narrow ever so slightly.

*By the Gods, I’d swear he sees straight through me.*

Of a sudden, Tel was no longer the disdainful, self-absorbed young man standing before a decrepit relic. He had reverted to a trembling boy, standing before the wrath of a powerful, perceptive father—as it once had been. Even so, he held his poise, leaning further forward, nodding encouragingly at the package in his hands. When his father’s eyes fell to the package Tel cast a sideways glance at Lymeera; she stood wide-eyed and pale.

*Damn the woman! Can she make not the slightest pretense?*

Argon came to his feet in a series of ponderous motions that made for a major production; once risen to his full height Tel was uncomfortably reminded of how large a man his father was. And there was none of his familiar stoop now, how could that be? Argon swiped a great hand down his ruddy face, and he stepped forward to study Tel closely.

Suddenly both hands shot forward, and Tel nearly shrieked as the King’s powerful fingers closed on one shoulder. He followed Argon’s gaze as it shifted to Lymeera—she stood small and quivering under her father’s hand. And then Argon brusquely pulled them both inward, enfolding them in a smothering embrace, and Tel smelled wine, rank, on the old man’s breath.

“My loving son and my beautiful daughter, come to pay homage to their doddering old father—even though he has fallen so far from his once noble standard.” Argon gently pushed them both out to arms length, and with a slight shake of his head he released them. Tel’s eyes went wide as he saw a tear roll down his father’s cheek. The King drug a grungy sleeve over his face before looking back to Tel.

“Enough then; enough of this sentimental foolishness. Let’s have a look at what you’ve brought your raspy old da.”

Tel placed the small package in his father’s outstretched hands. “It is not so much as you deserve, father, but it was *very* difficult to come by.”

The King stripped away the wrapping and tossed it to the floor, and he held up the crystal flask, cut with the well-known Renzanoble sigil. The liqueur inside glowed a brilliant golden hue, with flecks of silver shimmering throughout. A tearful smile lit Argon’s face as he pulled the stopper out and held the flask to his nose. He took a deep whiff.

“Ah, but isn’t that a fine scent. I developed a taste for the spirit when I was but a young Prince, visiting the far Isle of Ren.” He reached out to again take Tel by the shoulder, pulling him in close. “The first sampling, eh? For you?” He pushed the bottle toward his son and made an exaggerated wink.

“Ah... no thank you, father,” Tel stammered out, pushing the flask back. “There’s not much of it, I’m afraid, and this is your special day.”

Argon nodded his agreement. “Just a sip for now, then.” He put the flask to his lips and threw his head back. Tel smiled, the color coming back to his cheeks.

*Just a sip indeed; he’s likely drained half the flask. No matter, though, a single swallow will do...*

The King lowered the flask, pushed the stopper back into the bottle and thrust it into a pocket under his soiled robe. He swiped a sleeve across his lips and another tear started down his cheek. “Ah, and this is something indeed, I cannot begin to tell you what this gift means to me. I can’t remem... rememb—”

Argon faltered. His hand went to his forehead and his eyes turned glassy and unfocused. “I... I can’t...” His hand fell back on Tel’s shoulder, but with no power in the grip this time—feeble, even. Tel took on a grievously concerned expression, but a look of triumph lit his eyes.

“Father? Are you all right?”

The King’s hand slipped from Tel’s shoulder as his eyes rolled up, and Argon collapsed to the floor in a crumpled heap. Tel stepped back to survey the silent scene, and a smile stretched his face.

*King! So quickly as that, I am now King of Balara!*

He turned to Lymeera. Her eyes were wide and misty and her lips trembled. Tel looked down upon her from his new, lofty plateau, and he felt some sense of benevolence. She had at least not fully botched her role; perhaps he truly would release her from her troth. There was quite a bounty to be had from a union with House Galador, though, and the Kessant fortunes—his fortunes, now—were flagging. He pulled her into an embrace, an embrace made infinitely more joyous by knowing that he could embrace her, or implicate her, or do *whatever he wished* with her.

“Lymeera, it is done. You played your role... eh, adequately. I—”



He abruptly thrust her back, and he scrabbled to raise his tunic. A sharp prick burned at his back, as though he'd been stung by a wasp. He rubbed the skin there, and raised his hand to peer at his fingertips. There was a slight smear of blood there—very little, really. His gaze rose to Lymeera. She stepped further out of his reach, a knowing smile on her face.

“Lymeera?”

“Do you think you are the only member of this family who plays at duplicity? Surely not, Tel.”

He took a faltering step toward her, and she moved easily away.

“Would you truly have released me from my betrothal, dear brother? Your greatest concern would seem to be wealth, and we have little enough left of that, while family Galador has plenty and more.” Tel stumbled to his knees. He tried to speak, but the words would not come.

“A simple poison prick Tel.” She held up a small needle for him to see. “I collected it in the apothecary while you assembled father’s potion.”

Tel again tried to speak, but his voice came out as a gurgling choke.

“You are dieing in a stew of your own coagulating juices, Tel. But have no fear; it will be blessedly over in short moments.”

He could make no coherent sound, but the painful question was obvious in his eyes.

“What has happened here? Can you not guess? The King is dead, killed by his own son. But poor, inept Tel did not survive the attempt.” She wiped the needle clean and turned to toss it close to the silent hulk of Argon. “No, there was some justice today,” she said, “as the father also killed his betraying son. How tragic. Two generations of Royalty lost in one exchange! You *do* remember that father was once known to carry a poisoned asp, do you not?”

Tel’s eyes went even wider as he fought to inhale air into his closing lungs.

“You mentioned a certain young merchant, I think?” Lymeera’s spoke brightly, her voice a musical lilt. “Perhaps he will be my choice, but I am no longer so certain. Perhaps I’ll instead find a suitable prince? I will be able to make whatever choice I wish, you see, for I am now *Queen* of Balara.”

Tel half-gasped, half-choked, his hateful glare turning to panic, and he abruptly pitched forward, his head impacting the stone tile with a dull thud.

“Goodbye forevermore, *dear brother*,” she said softly.

A slow, deliberate clapping resonated from behind, and Lymeera whirled around. She gasped at the sight of Argon climbing ponderously to his feet, his face a grim smile. “Very well done, daughter of mine—a clever ruse. But not clever enough, I fear.”

“*Father?*”

“Your daughterly concern has now been restored? How very touching.”

“*How?...*”

“How did I survive the poison that you and your dear brother attempted to kill me with? It’s rather simple, really—I never drank it.” He pulled the flask from his pocket and eyed it sadly. “Such as shame, to ruin a potion such as this. I’ll see if my alchemists can strip the poison—a gamble worth the risk of a single taster, I would say.”

Lymeera cast a panicked glance to either side, her eyes searching for the escape she knew was not there.

“It is not a new ploy that you have attempted, you know.” Argon made his observations in a melancholy, matter-of-fact tone. “It has been played out time and again—alas; the dangers attendant to a King with an impatient heir. But...” He shook his head. “But I truly did not expect it of Tel, and certainly not of you.”

“Father, I can explain—”

Argon held up his hand. “You can explain nothing I do not already know, good daughter. Now it is my turn to explain to you. To begin...” Argon faltered. “To... to begi..” His eyes went wide as he clutched at his chest. His accusing eyes darted to Lymeera, and she shook her head. Argon sagged to his knees, and yet another voice came from behind.

“And so... finally it has come to this.”

Lymeera started at the intrusion and spun to scan the dim room. She cocked her head to one side. That voice... so familiar?

*“m... mother?”*

“No, Lymeera.” Queen Illanor stepped out from the draperies near the rear entry to the throne room, and she walked to stand before her failing husband. Argon’s eyes rose to lock with hers.

“How...?” He choked out the word.

Queen Illanor cast a cloyingly sweet smile. “It is simple, Argon. I am the Queen. I can tell whoever I wish to be gone from my presence, at my whim.” She put her fingers gently on his forehead. “That would include even your tasters, if I am insistent enough.” She nodded at the cask of wine at the side of the throne room. “It is a slower poison than that which your son prescribed, I would guess, and so you have some moments still.” Queen Illanor looked to Lymeera with an odd smile. “I have waited so long for this opportunity, Lymeera.” Illanor turned to peer expectantly back into the shadowy darkness.

“The façade is finally finished, then, dear mother?”

Lymeera’s eyes widened at yet another familiar voice. But something was different—changed. The crisp enunciation; the choice of words.

“Yes, son.”

Lymeera caught her breath as he stepped from the darkness. She looked into his eyes, and she saw no dullness there. She turned back to Illanor.

*“M... Mother?”*

“I have already told you, Lymeera. No.”

The Princess looked at Illanor in blank confusion, and the Queen looked down upon King Argon, who lay slouched against the wall at an awkward angle. The King slowly shook his head from side to side.

“Shall I tell her, then, Argon?”

The King croaked unintelligible, and slowly slid from his slump against the wall to lay prostrate on the floor, gurgling.

“As you wish, then.” Illanor lifted her gaze to Lymeera.

“It is the common rumor, as you know, that Slovan is the illegitimate offspring of King Argon, sired prior to his marriage into my family. Then later, so the story goes, after Argon had assumed the throne, the mother of Slovan died, or in some manner became indisposed. The King then took his bastard son in as ward—out of, perhaps, misdirected pity.”

Lymeera nodded slowly at Illanor. “Yes,” she said softly. “I knew all of that, mother.”

The Queen shook her head. “Ah, dear Lymeera. You say that you know, but what you have accepted as truth is only partially so. It is true that Slovan, whose real name is Andar, was a bastard child of the King, born out of wedlock. What is *not* true is that he was brought in as a ward after his mother died.”

Lymeera looked blankly at her mother, and then a possible realization began to color her face.

“Good, my dear, I see that you are not so slow as you thought your half-brother to be.” Illanor smiled beatifically at Lymeera, and she continued. “The reality is deeply ironic. Slovan, or Andar, was a bastard because he was born out of wedlock. But he was born to *me*, Lymeera, of your father’s seed.”

Lymeera looked at her mother in shock. “But..”

“Yes indeed—*but*. Why then did Andar remain a bastard, when he was truly born of the King and Queen?” She smiled thinly. “It is because he was *not* born of the King and Queen, he was born of a brash, handsome prince and an impressionable princess, not yet of age. Such was an entirely unacceptable circumstance; it would have derailed the important joining of Houses Kessant and Delon, and it would have dangerously smeared the prospect of Prince Argon’s rise to the throne.”

Illanor smiled grimly. “And so Andar was simply never acknowledged. Princess Illanor traveled abroad, anonymous, to wait out her pregnancy, and when Andar was born he was secretly farmed out to foster care. I was very bitter over that, but I gradually came to forgive your father for abiding by a credo forced upon the both of us. I forgave him, that is, until the birthing of you and Tel.”

Lymeera had no words. She had thought she had come to understand, but what now?

“Lymeera, you called me ‘mother’, and I said no. That is because you are of Argon’s seed, but not of my womb. You, Lymeera, and Tel, are the true bastards. Andar is the true-born of Argon and Illanor; you are born of Argon’s whore.”

Lymeera looked in shock toward her father; he gave one last wheeze and lay still.

“Mine was a devious plan, Lymeera; to bring Andar back into the family that had rejected him. I visited my young son when he was in the orphanage—discreetly, of course, and I coached him to appear always non-threatening. To pretend that he was slow, stupid. I was later able to use the outrage of having a whore’s children brought into the family as leverage to force Argon to take in his legitimate son, even if he accepted him as nothing but a ward. That was made much easier since no one, not even Argon, suspected that poor Slovan was anything but a simple idiot.”

Illanor walked over and knelt to feel for Argon’s pulse. She shook her head and rose. “And so there you have it, Lymeera. I had expected neither you nor Tel to survive this exchange.” She drew an asp from beneath her robe. “And I fear that I must still make that so.”

Andar stepped forward. “Mother—please, no. At times Lymeera has shown a kindness toward me. I would have her live.” He looked to his half-sister with a mixture of pity and sadness, and he turned to face Illanor. “Lymeera cannot remain here, of course; the true bloodlines must be divulged. But the family of Lord Galador would prove a very useful ally now, and their wealth would bolster the crown. I doubt Galador would yet

blanch at the prospect of marriage to fair Lymeera, especially if we assure his family privileged access to the royal court.”

Illanor let the asp drop from her hand. “Let the King’s will prevail.”

Lymeera looked dumbly from her half-brother Andar, risen from cretin to King at a moment’s notice, to Illanor, the woman she had thought her mother but who had plotted her death, and she sank to the floor, her arms crossed over her bosom and her hands tightly clenched to either shoulder. She began to rock to and fro on the cold stone tile, sobbed quietly.

**The End**

## A Darkness of Spirit

A'qil sa'n Alar strode to the central court of his walled fortress and raised the horn to his lips. It was an ornate instrument; looping coils of polished brass flaring into a gleaming bell. The sounding began as a deep bass rumble, rattling the windowpanes in their frames, and when A'qil pressed a valve the note rose to a piercing bay. He sounded it six times, and between each soaring trumpet the echo reverberated throughout the mountains. The armies that floundered nearly broken before the walls of House Alar blanched with new fear—they'd heard the stories, they knew what would follow.

The sounding of the Great Horn was a grim augury; a call to the slaughter.

Dal had just finished a long climb to crest a high ridgeline when the keening wail reached her ears, and a white fury flashed in her heart. But just as fast as the anger emerged she snatched it back, thrusting it into the far corner of her soul where she kept it sequestered and held down. Dal edged down to steepen her dive, hastening her descent to the Shii'e'tu caverns—home to her collective. Her thoughts ran with the shadows.

*The two-legged one, A'qil—he calls the Drakaa forth once more. I must forestall Zax and his coterie, lest they further darken the spirit.*

Old Riven waited as she approached, and he spoke before she came in visual range. “Dal, it is too late. Zax and a dozen others are already away.”

Dal growled low in her throat and huffed a thin cloud. “So soon? They've taken the underground passage?”

“Yes. As before, they will meet the two-leggeds in the caverns below their stronghold, and there they will allow themselves to be rigged for this monstrous desecration.” Even as he tried to repress emotion, Riven's tone quaked. Dal remained silent as she glided in, and then, spotting him on the rough terrain near the cavern's entrance, she landed. This was even worse than she had expected.

“You say that a *dozen* others have joined with Zax?” She settled back on her haunches and gazed slightly down upon Riven—in his ancient years he'd shrunk away from his prime.

“Yes. Four others have gone over to his ethic, including Kestar.”

Dal hissed softly. “*Kestar*, even?” She could scarcely believe it; Kestar had been so adamant in his opposition to Zax's incitement.

Riven loosed a rumbling growl. The crown of armor between his widely spaced eyes glistened dully and he bared his front row of teeth. “It is so. I argued with them, but the reverts have lost their identities—they're now little but reflections of Zax. They loftily claim their actions are the true way of the Drakaa—a way falsely repressed—and that to vent their desire in this manner is only natural. They claim that this sates their bloodlust... for a time. They insist that it involves joining in a savagery already underway, and that it is thereby an atrocity not of their making.”

Riven snorted and a cloud of grey smoke puffed from his flared nostrils. “I assured them that theirs was a foolish and dangerous argument. Zax countered, rather darkly, that the alternative would be a pent need—ultimately erupting into violence among our own.”

Dal hissed again—that was new. Never before had the betrayers hinted of violence in the collective. It was true, then—what she suspected. The spirit grew ever darker, claiming more reverts to the ways of old.

“I must follow them, then—intercede before they act.”

Riven shook his massive head. “If they scoff openly at Riven, Elder of the Elders, I cannot believe that they’d heed any other—not even you, Dal. And even were you to hasten now, you’d not catch them in the caverns—they’ve too much a lead. They’ve got the blood frenzy, I tell you, I remember it from my youth. You would do well to stay away, it would be dangerous to cross them now. Their vision has narrowed and a curtain drawn, shutting out all light of reason.”

But she had to try. Dal left Riven, still protesting, at the convergence of the two ranges and she pumped her wings steadily, climbing through thinning air toward the pass between the Guardian Brothers. She was a minute speck in a cold blue sky as she passed between the towering triplet of alps, and once through she canted her wings to begin a soaring descent, her heavy respiration gradually calming back to normal. The temperatures were very cold, up so high—her breath fogged in white clouds and a sheen of ice clad the stony landscape all around. She angled out from the peaks to gaze down upon the fortress of the two-leggeds, so very far below. The striped black-on-orange pupils of her almond-shaped eyes narrowed as her vision focused, and she studied the mayhem.

The chalky soil beyond the fortress walls lay dark and soaked-through with blood. Broken bodies and equipment lay as a still blanket across the broad mesa-top, and a trail of wounded straggled behind the army that limped away. Dal strove to see through the thick smoke; so much of the scene was shrouded by the black plumes that roiled upward, dispersing as a broad, grimy smudge between her high vantage and the groundscape.

She hissed softly—even so far removed, there was the feeling of raw evil here.

Dal rode the updrafts, floating above a scene of carnage mostly silent from this height, and suddenly the gates of the fortress were flung open and thirteen Great Drakaa moved out in a wedge pattern. She focused grimly on the leader.

*Yes... it is Zax. And there is Kestar, immediately behind.*

She shook her head in frustration. Zax had carried little sway before the reversions had begun, but Kestar—normally so equable—he had rivaled Riven and herself in collective influence. And in wonder she looked down upon sober Kestar—now rearing on hind legs and raking extended talons; roaring and snarling incoherent on a bloodied field of death. Her glands warmed at the faint sounds of violence; she spat dark bile and a growl rumbled low in her throat. She extended her mind to the spear of Drakaa that bore down on the fleeing two-leggeds. Riven had been correct, the curtain was drawn. She picked up no structured thought, just a raging frenzy—pulsing hot and livid.

She watched Zax plunge through the straggling clusters of wounded, the V-shaped ridge of his tail sweeping a wide path, decimating those he hadn’t trampled directly overtop. The two-leggeds simply dropped their weapons and turned to run. She could hear their faint screams, vocal, not of the mind, and she watched with growing fascination.

*Zax is headed for the able warriors. He desires the whole blood of those not already fallen...*

Kestar dropped behind and fell upon the wounded, snatching them up in his jaws and shaking his head—flinging separated body pieces and bright gouts of blood. He tilted his head back and Dal watched his neck pulse and bulge as he swallowed—she could not avert her eyes, she was possessed. Her second heart kicked in, doubling her pulse and flooding her mind with a coursing warmth. She flew a circling pattern high above the carnage, her structured thought dissolving into a haze of wanton, unremitting desire.

Zax now came upon the mass of the able-bodied two-leggeds. Surprisingly enough, some turned to form a thin line facing him. They thrust and jabbed their tiny lances and swords at Zax, and he thrust his neck forward as two streams of viscous fluid jetted from glands beneath his extended tongue. He doused the line of two-leggeds with venom, and they howled and fell to the ground. The writhing bodies erupted in blue flame as Zax swept through the broken line.

Dal's eyes shifted to the two-leggeds riding atop the raging Drakaa. Perched in elaborate saddles they were suited in full battle armor, lustrous black, and they wore polished red helmets styled as the head of a Montar. The lust was on the two-leggeds also; they brandished their lances and loosed flights of arrows into the seething mass. The mounted warriors howled in animalistic glee, and Dal felt a deep hunger building, irrepressible.

Another of the fleeing two-leggeds, uninjured and larger than the others, turned with a huge battleaxe to face Zax, and Zax's head snapped down like a striking serpent. His jaws closed over the two-legged's torso and he snatched the creature off the ground. Dal's senses were so sharp now, she heard the steel breastplate crumple like an eggshell, transforming the piercing scream into a choking gurgle, and she abruptly reared back to spray a dark mist of poison into the open sky.

She blinked, dazed. She had never known it before, the taste of black death—so exquisite. She shuddered. The glands beneath her tongue swelled and her muscles hardened with the strength of a doubled heart rate. Her breath came fast and heavy, and suddenly she canted her wings to plunge down, down toward the carnage glistening blood red.

Her eyes, greedy now, sought out a target, a portion of the battlefield not yet broached by the spreading wedge, and she angled towards it. All thought was gone; there was now only bright glowing vision, rapturous taste and scent. She flexed her talons, extending them long, and saliva trailed from both corners of her gaping muzzle. Her jaw muscles flexed, opening and closing, and a red haze crossed over her vision.

And then Riven's voice called out to her, from the distant home.

"Dal! Break away! Do it *now!* I cannot hold the collective together without you!"

Dal blinked, confused.

What is this, who speaks my mind?

"Veer away, Dal! You *must!*"

She forced her focus away from the lure of carnage; was there something important that she should remember? Something—to be wary of?

And then she did remember... some of it.

*I must... turn away. Not join in the slaughter. But where to go? Not to the collective... not like this. How can I break the frenzy that's upon me? How can I break it... without taking of it?*

Dal forced herself to bank away, angling back toward the forest that climbed the steep slopes. She could not return to her collective, not without first breaking this all-consuming desire to slaughter, and the deep instinct awakened within understood that, ironically, only violence could stop it now. She shook her head and roared in black anger, and she swerved into the flat anvil of stone she flew parallel to, slamming herself bodily against its unyielding surface. There was the briefest flash of white and color, and then nothing.

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A full cycle of the moon; that much time had passed before Dal could again attempt flight. A cold cycle, spent alone and in pain; she drew on deep body stores to survive. Riven's mind had ventured to her; cautiously at first, and when satisfied that she'd broken the regression he withdrew. He told her that she needed time alone to heal.

Even once physically recovered she stayed away from the collective for some time; working to fully cleanse her mind of the malignance that had come so near to claiming her. By then Riven came to her regularly; a welcome touch. It was only Riven that she believed to be strong enough to see her like this, because it was only Riven who had once, so very long ago, proven resilient enough to fully break the bloodfrenzy once it was upon him. Riven had broken his raging delirium *without* the taking of blood, and so there had been no tainting of the Spirit.

Time did pass and Dal returned to the collective whole and perhaps even stronger for her time alone. But as Riven had warned she found the darkness there continuing to build, and Dal sensed the black wave cresting, ready to break its depravity over the entire collective. She watched them closely, and she feared for them. Group thought seemed to be finished; sentiment shuttered closely in, open sharing long since abandoned. The collective now conversed secretly, selectively—a dark augury.

How had it come to pass that the two-leggeds seemed to have assumed control of the Spirit, as though the callous savagery that raged in their hearts had usurped the stewardship long pledged by the Drakaa? How could that be, when the two-leggeds were such a young race, their intellect scarcely developed? The two-leggeds did not yet even recognize the Spirit's *existence*, much less understand what it was or what it meant...

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A'qil sa'n Alar stood at a high window in the southwest donjon, looking past the compound walls to the Mesa-top and to the yawning Flat of Gal'tar beyond. Word had just come—House Tyrgon had assembled the largest military force ever seen on Kast'ar, in large part by assimilating the armies of other Houses vanquished in recent years. That armada now moved across the Flat, approaching Alar, intent on a stellar prize never before taken.



A'qil smiled thinly. So be it, then. His lust for dominance fed his ruthless tactic—and he'd surely need both in the weeks ahead. But once Tyrgon was finished there'd be no others worthy of challenge.

He chuckled softly. In a way the absence of worthy opposition might prove a disappointment, as his barbaric nature seemed in particularly fine form of late.

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"I overhear thoughts from small, secretive groups." The tone of Riven's mind offering was black. "They see the armies again gathering on the battlefield; easily the largest ever assembled. They are excited—giddy, even—at the prospect of what is to come." Riven hissed his disgust. "Worse yet, those I overhear are not all of the original group of reverts—many are new. Young males, mostly, but even females join now."

Dal nodded grimly. "I have suspected as much; the malignancy gathers itself. I will call the collective; perhaps together you and I can ward this off." She began to turn away, but she stopped to study the odd glow in Riven's eye. She cocked her head at him, and he nodded. He spoke aloud.

"I feel its influence, Dal, I feel it strongly. The shadows tug at me, insistent, and they *tempt* me. It becomes ever more difficult to resist. I fear for the others—I fear even for myself now."

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Dal flew through the deep caverns, the steady *wh-whump* of her wings the only sound as she sped through the darkness toward the abode of the two-leggeds. As Riven had predicted, the meeting of the collective had gone badly—when she had finally coerced group-thought she'd been shocked at the resultant cacophony. Jumbled fervor and hysteria, often no distinct speech at all—little but raw, charred, emotion. Zax had easily carried the assembly—it would seem that the collective had come to view Dal more as an obstacle than a leader. And even from those who would not yet admit to it, she could feel it on them—the urge of the darkness of spirit.

Now nearly all the collective eagerly awaited the sounding of the Great Horn—lusting for the call to rapacious, carnal, savagery.

She flew the darkness of the lower caverns, sounding against the stone walls to plot her course and feeling the darkening Spirit flowing even this deep. After a long passage Dal climbed to a higher level, entering the primal dungeons below the stead of the two-leggeds. Here the inchoate moans and rabid screeching tore at her soul; through the deep shadows she caught fleeting glimpses of captives chained to ankle posts or hanging limp from manacles. She picked out the gloating chortle of some debased practitioner inflicting his ministrations, and she pushed on to land a further distance away, in a widening cavern under an iron-barred grate through which daylight filtered in from above.

She could sense the two-leggeds; not so far away now, and she sent her mind out to the one. She sent her voice to A'qil, the cruel one—the sounder of the death knell—and she waited, determinedly holding on to measured thought.

Soon he arrived, alone.

A'qil approached with two greatswords slung across his back. He was smeared with dirt and blood, his leather raiment stained with sweat and his chain mail slashed open across one side. The man obviously did not lead his Legion from the rear. He carried a huge crossbow fitted with twin bolts—harpoons, almost—and he held it pointed loosely toward Dal.

“Why do you come now, Drakaa?” His voice echoed through the cold silence. “The war is not yet won; I’ve not yet sounded the slayer’s horn.” He peered stonily at her. “My victory must leave no doubt among the Great Houses—Alar will *never* fall. Only after I’ve sounded the horn—only then comes your time to feed upon the broken enemy.” He swiped a forearm across his brow, leaving a smear of sweat and dried blood. “That is our agreement eh, Drakaa?”

Dal hissed softly, struggling to push down the white anger that flashed to the surface, and her second heart gave a single beat before she forced herself calm. A'qil’s eyes widened and he stepped back.

“You and I have no such agreement, two-legged. Your vile pact is with others of my pod.”

With feet planted wide, A'qil raised the heavy crossbow, training it on Dal’s chest. “These are armor-piercing bolts, Drakaa—dosed with d’arkfire. If you’ve come to kill me, you will fail.”

Dal shook her head and she spoke carefully. “I do not come to kill you, A'qil two-legged; that is not my purpose. I’ve come to change the way that you think, the actions you take—before all hope is lost.”

A'qil dropped the point of the crossbow a few inches, chuckling with no mirth. “*You*, a craven beast, would presume to change the way of A'qil sa’n Alar, the greatest warrior of the greatest race?”

Dal caught her breath as the fury flashed blood-red—a pulse pounding behind her bright eyes.

To kill him now... it would be so easy. I taste the venom sweet...

Her eyes widened as she recognized her own intent, and again she pressed the flaring rage down. She spoke slowly. “You do not understand, two-legged. You know nothing of the Spirit, even though you take of it and return to it. You do not see its *darkening* as the spiral that serves to accelerate your savagery, and you do not recognize this as a self-feeding prophesy. Every barbarism cumulates and drives further atrocity.” She sought the words that might convey her vision.

“We teeter at the brink of sanity—a mindless chasm awaits our plunge. Ours is a race much older than yours; more attuned to the Spirit, and for that reason I fear that we would be the first to fall. It’s begun already. But you would follow soon enough, as you might intuit from your ever-mounting abominations. *Think*, A'qil two-legged! Your breed was not always this way.”

A'qil squinted at Dal with a calculating expression. “So—you come to me, the great warlord A'qil sa’n Alar, seeking your own salvation? Why should I even care if the Drakaa survive? I don’t need you to win my wars—your passing would mark no great loss for me.”

Dal ground her teeth, tasting the anger.

*How can I hope to get through to this simple fool, when I can no longer communicate even with my own?*

“We *all* require untainted spirit—it is integral to our lives. If it continues to cloud over, then we will all ultimately perish. But our species can work together to begin a restoration of balance—beginning with the cessation of this war.”

A’qil snorted and raised his crossbow, waving it in the direction she’d entered from. “I do not believe your words or your intent, Draaka beast, I would have you *leave* now. Return with your ravening pack only after I’ve sounded the Great Horn.”

Dal fought her quickening pulse, and then she accepted it.

I must risk descending...

Her coiled haunches launched her forward with a quickness that could hardly be expected; she thrust her head low as A’qil loosed both bolts from his crossbow. The prongs shot past and before he could unsheathe his swords she was in his face, her rows of ripping teeth bared and glistening red in the flickering torchlight. A’qil stood frozen as Dal crouched rigid over him, her tail thrashing, so *very* close to simply finishing him now. But she held herself abeyant, and in moments the red haze over her vision lessened. She snorted and blinked her eyes as her pulse came down, and she spoke to his mind.

“I... do not mean to *kill* you, two-legged—if I did I would be forever lost. What I must do now,” she forced her bared fangs closed, “is show you how we both might *live*.”

“How... do you mean?” A’qil’s voice quavered.

“You do not believe my words. Will you accept the unmasked truth of my thoughts? I will enter your mind, and open mine to you.” She reached toward him. “I must have contact.”

A’qil took a step back. “How can I know that you won’t simply kill me?”

“If that was my desire, then why do you still live?”

A’qil spoke carefully. “If your race loses itself to this... this *spirit*, as you call it—you’ll come for us, won’t you?”

Dal nodded grimly. “Yes. It would be the first stage of descent—your race is plentiful and easy. But ultimately we’d turn on each other—already I see signs of it.”

A’qil remained silent, trembling but making no further attempt to move away. She took his skull between her talons and four thin trickles of blood trailed from where she held him.

“First I will release, just a little, the thin control that I hold over myself. You will see what will come should the darkening continue.”

She entered his mind and he gasped as she opened herself. She went back a cycle, back to the time she’d so nearly lost herself, and she replayed the vivid memories. Her second heart picked up and filled with savage warmth and glee, and a cloying scent rose from her hide. A thin black slaver, oddly foaming, dripped from her clenched maw. She wanted so badly to open her jaws, to snap forward, crunching down, but she held fast to the last strand of control. She watched, in her memories, as Zax and Kestar ripped chunks of flesh from the two-leggeds, and her mind surged toward the violence.

And then with great effort she thrust the memories back—able to do so only because she’d once come so close as to recognize the edge. She sagged back on her haunches with her eyes closed, struggling to force calm on her racing hearts.

Suddenly she staggered backward; a flash erupting across her senses as A’qil reversed the exchange. He thrust himself forcefully into her mind—on top of her raging emotions the raw influx of fury stunned her. Her eyes blinked open to see A’qil’s leering, triumphant grin as he unleashed a savage intent paramount to her own.

A'qil lunged forward, pulling his greatsword from its scabbard while stooping to sweep a handful of gravel toward her eyes. Dal hissed and flashed a forepaw out to catch A'qil around the chest, pinning one arm to his side. Her jaws snapped shut, grinding the thrown gravel and breaking teeth, and she fumed a dark cloud that covered A'qil in oily, noxious smoke. With his free sword arm A'qil hacked at her and she yanked him off the ground—he screamed and dropped the sword as her grip tightened and a rib broke with an audible pop. She drew him in close to her muzzle, all slimy dripping black slaver, and she bared her teeth, tasting the venom sweet. Her tongue snaked out to trail across his sweat-streaked face, and she reveled in the sour fear that she tasted.

And then she paused, shaking her massive head in confusion.

*lost... I'm lost?*

She struggled to grasp the thoughts that flitted through her raging mind, but she could hold none of them. She felt her collective playing at the fringes of her jumbled psyche—no words, no coherency, just blind frenzy—urging her, goading her on. She felt the others gathering in ecstasy. They were feeding their bloodlust, vicariously still, through *her*.

*They want it...*

Her senses exquisitely acute, she tasted the pulverized stone mixed with her blood and broken teeth, and the narrow slits of her pupils focused on her prey—she could smell the stench of pure panic now—such a narcotic.

She roared suddenly, angry with herself. This was wrong—for it to end this way. Why? And what of the others?

*the others... the gathering... the frenzy... can I somehow... take it from them?*

Dal struggled to concentrate, to put her thoughts together. She understood that the upper level of her mind, where she could exercise logic and reason, was fast slipping away. If she could hold to just one thought... for a time. She ground her teeth together, tasting the stone.

*Stone... like before, use the stone... use it for the gathered conscious!*

She turned her eyes back to the small creature she'd momentarily forgotten—it continued to struggle in her grip. She reached for its head with her free manus; it kicked its puny feet and snapped its teeth in a ridiculously futile defense. Her talons pierced its scalp and set firmly on bone and her eyes focused unblinking on his. He screamed when she drew hard on his mind; she pulled *all* his darkness to her breast. In short moments the creature's spastic flailing went limp; Dal threw her head back and roared, hurling a great swath of fiery rage to burn senseless against the stone ceiling of the cavern. She flung the limp body across the stone floor and turned her eyes to the iron grate overhead, and she leapt toward it.

She slammed against the grate, taking the bars in her talons and wrenching them loose, raining clumps of broken stone to the floor. She clawed at the opening, tearing chunks of rock free until she could push through. The distant clamor of battle went unheard; she opened her wings and bounded into the open sky.

She repeated to herself, over and over, lest she forget.

*to the stone... gathered thought... to the stone*

She could feel the collective with her now, in wild, unrestrained exultation, clamoring for more. She felt their fury swell, but hers was even greater and she drew

them in. Her twin hearts beat faster than they ever had before as she climbed and her rage continued to darken.

Up and up she climbed, feeling more power than she'd dreamt possible. The voices in her head goaded her, shouted at her, but she could understand no words. Only the feelings—the bright, intense, *bloodfrenzy*.

*gathering... to stone...*

When she could climb no more without her hearts surely bursting she ducked her head and pitched over, beginning the dive. She scanned the rockscape below and bared her teeth in baleful exaltation—there she found it, her prey. She pumped her wings until the speed was too great and then she folded them in, feathering just enough to guide her plunge.

*stone...*

She narrowed her lids as the wind tore at her. The voices howled now, incoherent, and she could pick out a few though she couldn't remember many. One she recognized—ancient, different from the others. She was surprised that she could still understand it—it told her no; to stop, don't do this. Irritated, she forced it to the rear of her conscious where it couldn't distract her purpose.

And there, on the rear fringe, was where she recognized another voice—louder than all the rest, exhorting her on, goading and gloating. A name came to her.

*Zax?*

She snatched that consciousness up and thrust it to the front of her mind, shoving from behind as she plunged toward the jagged mountainside. She forced its vision through her eyes and it quailed—the entire collective felt it and quieted.

She could no longer remember why or even what, she simply knew it had to be. The fury drove her, the excitement of the bloodlust, the understanding that the others now feared her. She reveled in it, and just before impact she reversed herself, her wings breaking backward, and she extended her talons and roared a gout of flame that was ripped behind by the wind.

The stony spire impaled her scaled underbelly, plunging up through her chest and her hearts, and she slammed to a halt with the gory pinnacle rammed through the ridge of armor along her spine. Her phosphoric blood splattered and mixed with the flammable venom of her ruptured glands, and a low blue flame sprang up and quickly burst into a blazing neon inferno. The intense heat shattered the cold stone, even melting it, and the landscape was consumed.

On the battlefield, warriors performing the rites of death paused to gawp in astonishment at the huge torch that erupted on the distant mountainside, too bright to look at for long, and loosing a roiling black cloud of smoke to the heavens.

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A'qil again stood at the high window of his donjon, his chest splinted and bound, looking at the massive army, beaten, that retreated ploddingly from his walls like a huge slug burdened by its own weight. His newly-shaved scalp was puckered liberally with stitchwork, and he cocked his head to listen curiously. In the distance, from the mountains—raucous bedlam among the Draaka. He'd never before heard the like of it.

He sighed, absently fingering his blade. He looked and draw the edge across an open palm. So sharp it was—the tissue took a moment to recognize the cut, but then a bright flow of blood welled. He stared at it moodily—he felt none of the old excitement. He put his hand to his lips, tasting the blood.

Still nothing. He spat bloodied phlegm on the polished horn that lay at his feet, and he looked back to the retreating army.

It's not cowardice, what I do...

He looked hard at his battered reflection in the pane of glass.

Is it?

He shook his head.

*I let them go, perhaps to one day regroup and come against me again, even stronger? I could finish them now, they have nothing left. Even without the cursed Draaka I could finish them...*

A'qil sighed, and he rubbed a rough hand across his bristly chin. He rang the bell to summon an attendant. He had decided—he would send emissaries to all the Great Houses.

He could scarcely believe it. He—A'qil sa'n Alar, never defeated, most feared of all the warlords—intended to speak of peace.

**The End**

## Vedara Lightstar

Vedara ground her teeth, and ground them.

*You cross-dimensional—scatter-eyed—dungfly...*

It was as though the little monster was toying with her, though with a brain little more substantial than the trace particles of matter occupying a cube of deep space, that would be a stretch. She glowered at the luminescent insect where it flittered back and forth, as if taunting *Nyah, nyah, come get me*; she couldn't guess how the damned thing had gotten through the decontamination screens at that last way-station, or how it had come to harbor at an open-space outpost in the first place. But nonetheless, here it was; *very* annoying.

Judging by its size it must have enjoyed prosperous times on whatever planet it originated from, and it had certainly wasted no time freaking her out via an unexpected buzzing-straft shortly after she'd detached from the supply station. Since then she'd pursued it off and on the entire trip, but it was so frakking fast she could never get close enough. The *God's bedeviled*—the bloody thing followed her from cabin to cabin like some winged leech on a tether!

A wicked smile began to play at Vedara's lips then, but she quickly shook her head no. That would be playing it too loose, and if one meant to survive interplanetary transit there were certain rules to abide. Then the mischievous grin won out. What the hell—life beyond orbit was rarely a matter of prudence and stilted decorum, and there was always something to be said for brute force.

She leaned to the side of the swiveling pilot console and popped the clasps holding the hand cannon in its bracket. She dialed it all the way down to its lowest stun setting, and weakened it to the max by spreading the coverage to its widest blanketing frame.

Maybe the frakking dungfly wasn't quite so dumb as she'd thought, though, because it now began to buzz frantically around the cabin, faster than before and staying lit nowhere for more than a moment, as if it somehow realized that the ante had just been upped. Vedara sighed and settled into her console, with the weapon pointed toward the rear bulkhead where there was no sensitive instrumentation to be disrupted, and she waited. She had a fair bit of time for this; still an hour out from the transfer station.

Perhaps the dungfly decided she was bluffing, or maybe it really was scarcely brighter than a bulb with a burned-but filament. Whatever the case, when it returned to flit back and forth on the rear bulkhead Vedara squeezed the trigger and the hand cannon pulsed ever so slightly in her grip.

She stood and walked to where the insect quivered on the floor, and she raised a foot and brought her knobbed boot down with finality. There was crunchy, squishy sound, and she turned her nose up at the nasty smell. She lifted her foot and saw that she was anchored to the floor panel by long elastic strands of phosphorescent goop.

Yuck, what a mess. Like piloting a ground skimmer through a cloud of glow bugs on Tanzabnar.

She slid the hepca-vac from its slot and suctioned up the crud from the floor and from the sole of her boot, and for good measure switched it to irradiate and swept it back over both. The sole of her foot tingled warmly—yet another rule that she'd broken in just the last few minutes. Oh well.

She slid back into her console, almost disappointed that her interlude with the dungfly had finally come to its end. As irritating as the frakking bug had been, it had at least been a distraction and this had been a long and boring passage. But she brightened with the thought that the trip was now almost over, and she began to dial in the final coordinates.

Once the StarGazer was docked and she was on-board the transit station, Vedara stood scanning the crowd bustling purposely about the yawning cavity comprising the terminal. The outbound/inbound staging platforms appeared the busiest, with their decontamination pass-throughs working full-time, but the barter station was also quite active, as were the variety of feeding stations and troughs. Finally she spotted Moraine in the opposite quarter and rose up on her toes and waved. Moraine pointed to the lounge midway between, and there they met. There was a strange glimmer of excitement about her friend, and after ordering a couple of spiced synthales and bringing each other up to date, Vedara inquired.

“What is it that has you so charged up, Moraine? You're squirming like you've got a scatworm.”

Moraine giggled and reached across to squeeze Vedara's arm. “It's our contact, Vedara. A *Seleneen*! Gods! I wish he was our assigned cargo; I wouldn't even quibble over details such as male or female!”

Vedara shook her head. “Shades of a Dark Star, Moraine! You'd be well-advised to keep your libido in check. Not only are the Seleneen decidedly non-human, but I've heard some, ummm... very strange stories about their sexual proclivities.”

Moraine giggled again and clasped her hands between her thighs, managing to squeeze her buxom chest into even greater prominence. “Oh yesss! You have never been with a Seleneen, Vedara? Shame on you—such a sheltered girl! They are indeed very sexual—in fact they are *tri*-sexual, and you know what that means!” Moraine lost herself to yet another fit of giggling.

“*Tri-sexual*? Well, actually, I'm not so sure—”

“Oh look!” interrupted Moraine, pointing to a silver-hued humanoid that approached in their direction. “Here he comes! That *is* a male, I'm fairly certain! Oh, the Gods; thrice blessed!”

The Seleneen glided up to their table, moving with a singularly sinuous grace. “My greetings, ladies; I am Valtar Tasbok, of Selena. Per my Identity Scanner, I presume that the two of you are pilot Vedara Lightstar,” he nodded to Vedara, “and facilitator,” he gazed at Moraine's chest, which seemed almost animated from her rapid respiration, “Moraine Fallasso?”

Although Moraine was the broker for this contract she appeared unable to catch her breath, much less speak in a business-like manner, and so Vedara opened her mouth to respond, and found herself unable to do so. Her pulse was accelerated and she actually felt a bit woozy, as if she'd been standing too close to a platform jumper and had inhaled a bit of the bio-exhaust that some humanoids seem especially fond of. Then she remembered why.



*Bloody Gods, the Seleneen literally reeks of pheromones!*

She glanced again at Moraine, who looked as if she was ready to hump his leg or even the bar stool if nothing else availed itself. Vedara pushed herself a distance back from Valtar and tried to breathe air not permeated by his presence.

“Uhhh, yes. I am Vedara and this,” she looked daggers at Moraine, who ignored her completely, “is Moraine. Per our agreement, I have delivered my cargo of Gordovian salt, bound for the Belavaar system, to the transfer facility here. After I have prepped the hold we will be ready to accept your cargo of—ah, you phrased it Selenian *spirit*, I believe? Bound for Drakor?”

“Um? Oh yes.” The Seleneen diverted his gaze from Moraine’s chest and shifted his chair closer to Vedara. Vedara jockeyed to keep the table between them, while Moraine tried to edge back into Valtar’s line of sight.

“The Spirit is a very powerful and sought after... ah, *stimulant*, is how I believe it would be phrased in Universal Speak,” said Valtar. “Quite valuable, and requiring a great deal of care during transport and storage. That is why our RFS specified that the cargo hold of the transport ship possess precisely modulated environmental controls, as well as grav-suppressors to eliminate the load of launch and deceleration. It is why the product is stored in a pressurized container requiring a hook-up to the ship’s environmental controls, and it is why we have offered a fifty percent premium for this transport.”

Valtar slid off his stool and glided around the table toward her, followed closely by Moraine, who tried to press in inconspicuously, as if that was something she was capable of.

Like a bloody game of contact-tag, mused Vedara, with poor Moraine desperate to be ‘it’.

The Seleneen drew a packet of papers from his breast pocket and laid it on the table. “You have already seen this bill of lading in digital format; here are two hard-copies. The group I represent has signed both. If you will look them over and sign, you can submit one copy to the freight-master at the transfer station when you are ready to pick up your cargo. All the delivery details are included with the manifest.” Valtar indulged her with a broad smile, and Vedara could very much feel its beckoning effect. Moraine literally sighed—nearly a whimper. Vedara shook her head, trying to clear her vision.

*I’ll need a cold shower after this; this guy is a hormonal cocktail...*

“If you have no further questions,” said Valtar, “then that would conclude our business today.” He spread his incredibly elegant hands on the table and Vedara found herself staring at his long, sensuous, blue-tinged fingers. She forced her gaze away.

“I will be taking leisure here at the station for one more duty-cycle,” Valtar smiled. “If you would care to join me?” He turned his gaze to Moraine, who was nodding vigorously. “Both of you? Perhaps you have a friend who might like to come along as well? A triple or quad, with its shared sensitivity, can be, ah... *exceptionally* stimulating —”

Moraine was tugging at her sleeve, but Vedara pulled free. “Thank you, Valtar, but no. I have to make my craft ready for the flight.” She looked to Moraine and arched her brow. “My facilitator will report in a *timely* manner to the StarGazer, before our scheduled departure just one lunar cycle hence?”

Moraine leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Oh, you can *bet* on that! I’ll then be able to regale you, in *explicit* detail, about everything you’re about to miss out on!”

Valtar nodded and began to glide away, with Moraine flouncing and bouncing along behind, and Vedara grinned as she watched them leave. *I'm not sure if she reminds me more of a trumpy station-girl soliciting a ride or a young innocent following her daddy to the carnival...*

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Vedara sighed in exasperation, pushing back in her console and shaking her head. “Moraine! That’s *enough* already!”

Quite more than enough, she thought, as she’d already endured multiple retellings, in far more detail than she cared for, of Moraine’s beneath-the-sheets exploits with Valtar the Seleneen. Not that much of the physically-improbable endeavors had actually taken place in a bed, to hear Moraine tell it. Vedara shook her head again, in grudging wonder—her friend appeared to have broken various precepts of biological science. Exultant Moraine had been the sole target of Valtar’s triple-pronged attack—apparently to his slight disappointment and her extreme delight.

Vedara huffed and redirected her attention to the task at hand; consulting her star-charts to locate the numerous moons they skirted in proximity to a minor planet. Moraine tried to wriggle back into Vedara’s focus, unwilling to give it up. The woman was still flushed a bright pink, for the God’s sake!

“I *told* you you’d be missing out, didn’t I?” She danced from foot to foot, cooing like a dove. “Oh oh, *yes!* By the God’s, I don’t know how the Seleneen *ever* get any work done! Why, I’d never be out of bed if—“

Moraine took a petulant frown as she was shushed by an open palm thrust in her face. The control panel had begun to beep insistently, and a light was flashing on the lower port quadrant view-screen.

“Look at that scanner trace,” said Vedara softly, pointing. “Two starcraft have just emerged from behind separate moons, and they’re converging upon us.”

Moraine wound herself down, looking puzzled. “How could that be? Delefad is said to be very lightly populated, and those that do live there are an aboriginal, terra-bound species...”

“They’re coming at us from either side, in something of a pincer movement,” growled Vedara. “Bloody frakking pirates, I’d wager! Looks like they were lying in wait—some flapping tongue on the transfer station must have tipped them about the value of our cargo and its destination.”

Vedara jammed the pair of throttles to their stops and the hard thrust pressed both women back in their seats before the grav-suppressors compensated. Moraine had by now lost her radiant flush and was beginning to look rather blanched.

Vedara studied the monitor. “The size and configuration of those star cruisers is a Confederation military specification,” she murmured. “I’ve heard rumors that some of the clusters of pirates are becoming more organized; banding together and accruing enough wealth to acquire hardware such as that,” she pointed to the large craft fast approaching, “from certain manufacturers who harbor no qualms regarding the character or purpose of their clients.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me,” whispered Moraine. “I’ve brokered plenty of armament purchases where the origin of the funds was buried in a sham of fronts, as was as the

ultimate recipient of the purchase. The Ministry of Galactic Commerce turns a blind eye any time I bring it to their attention—they are obviously very well paid for it.”

Vedara pressed her port thrusters and their course angled in toward to the denser cluster of moons. “We can’t outrun them in a straight line, but maybe I can shake them on a tighter course.” By the time they slipped in among the more tightly clustered moons and asteroids the pair of star cruisers had dramatically closed the distance, and Vedara bit down on her lip, flying a risky course, dodging and jaggging between and through the asteroids. The pair of cruisers began to fall off, and she hooted.

“But what’s the point in opening distance on them in this maze?” asked Moraine plaintively. “We can’t zig and zag around the moons of Delefad indefinitely, and when we’re back out in open space they’ll easily catch us.”

Vedara gritted her teeth. “No. If I can open enough space, and place enough obstacles between us and them, they’ll lose their line-of-sight visuals. I can then shut down everything but emergency-support and coast on a straight trajectory, and they’ll have also lost our energy signature.”

“But,” Moraine shook her head, “there’s a very good chance they’ll be able to pick up their visuals again once back out in open space, or at least get a return on their pinging.”

Vedara pressed her lips thin. “Listen Moraine, I’m about to tell you something—but you didn’t hear it, OK?” Moraine nodded uncertainly. “I’ve installed upgrades to my ship,” said Vedara quietly, “and one of them is a third generation SpaceCloak drive.”

Moraine sucked in her breath. “Bloody Gods! That’s more than illegal, Vedara—that would be a pass-through judgment of treason on most of the planets in the Confederation! That’s just *too* dangerous—how did you pull it off?”

Vedara swiped a hand down her face, watching the bank of monitors while she plotted her words and dodged asteroids. “Like I said—you didn’t hear this, just like you won’t hear what I say next. As for the how of it, I have connections, greased by Galactic Standard ingots and by the transfer of difficult-to-acquire merchandise—and,” she winked, “I could describe in intimate detail the sexual preferences of a certain High Minister of the Confederation.” Moraine’s jaw dropped. “As for the why of it,” Vedara pointed to the flashing scanner, “I think you can figure that out.”

They were almost through the cluster of moons when Vedara saw the visual contact beacon blink out. She bumped the thrusters to rocket straight out of the scattering of asteroids, and she chopped all power. She flipped open a flush-set, concealed panel and her fingers began to fly over a keypad therein, but a gasp and a prodding from Moraine drew her attention. She followed her friend’s gaze, and there, hanging silent in space just a short distance off their bow, sat a third star cruiser, its curved bank of forward viewports lit up like some great grinning monster. There came a pulsing from either cheek of the beast, and the StarGazer was slammed hard by bursts from the phase cannon. The impact was blinding and all systems went down; a piece of equipment jarred loose came spinning unseen through the darkness—it stuck one side of her head and Vedara saw a flash of red, and then all went black.

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She put both hands to the small of her back, groaning as she forced herself upright from the punishing stoop. Gods, she was sore—she'd never have guessed she even had so many nerve endings. Vedara glanced to where Moraine labored just feet away, scraping and scrubbing at yet another selection from the bulky pile of crusty items that were too large to go through the particle cleanser and had thus simply continued to cumulate—by all appearances in anticipation of the arrival of a shanghaied pair such as herself and Moraine.

When she'd regained consciousness a couple days prior she'd been laid out in the brig, aboard the pirate star cruiser, with Moraine cooing overtop. They'd then been brought before the Captain, one Develroy Bansternob, and his full crew of misfits—men and women both. It was a very small crew for a star cruiser, less than a dozen, which told Vedara that the majority of the ship was running under the control of artificial intelligence.

To her immense relief the Captain turned out to be not nearly so barbaric or cruel as she might have feared. He certainly didn't look the stereotypical pirate; no eye-batch or tangled beard or baggy bloomers and silks. To hear the Captain tell it, once upon a time his crew had all been more or less upstanding members of the Galactic Confederation, but each had suffered their own series of mishaps that resulted in the stripping of their privileges of citizenry, and they were thus presented with the choice of prosperous piracy or shunned destitution. The Captain fervently believed that it was 'the system' that was flawed, not him, and he in fact seemed intent upon eventually absorbing both Vedara and Moraine into his little band of brigands. But only after they had properly paid their dues, it seemed.

Vedara pressed her lips into a thin hard line—Bansternob might not be the worst she'd encountered, but his plans most certainly did not suit her purpose. And so she would retake her ship, along with her vengeance and a pirate's bounty.

Moraine eased in close and whispered. "Vedara—this plan is just too risky. We'll never pull it off, and failure will make for *very* unpleasant consequences."

Vedara scowled. "So you would prefer to remain here, Moraine, as a pirate? You might fare better as a wench, serving from the galley and seeing to the *personal* needs of the men."

"Please, Vedara, rethink this. So many dice; and they all have to roll in our favor. Remember that the punishment often exceeds the crime."

Vedara shook her head and nudged Moraine toward the hatch. "These are nothing but a band of inept outcasts who have taken us captive, and so any action we take against them is no crime by my reckoning. Now undo another button and tip the odds a bit more in our favor—you play your role and I'll play mine."

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She peered around a corner as Moraine advanced upon the cook, flouncing in a manner wanton even by her standards, those being what they were. In spite of their dire circumstances Vedara had to smile—Moraine had a rare talent, and well practiced at that. The way the cook's gaze was fixated upon Moraine, somewhere between her hips and her neck, Vedara suspected that she could step out and wave a flag and still go unnoticed.

“Uh... wh... what are you, uh, d.. doin’ here?” stammered the cook, a pudgy young man scarcely past his teens, judging from his pimply face. Good—such a neophyte should make an easy mark. Moraine strutted past so that his riveted gaze rotated away from where Vedara crouched in hiding.

“So... what’s for dinner, *big boy*?” breathed Moraine.

Vedara cringed at the hopeless cliché, but Moraine had unfastened several buttons of her blouse and when she leaned forward she displayed cleavage that left so little to the imagination that Vedara suspected her friend could begin reciting the dry Articles of the Confederation and still command the cook’s rapt attention.

Vedara slipped through the doorway and crept over to the storage cabinets, opening the door stenciled with a blocky red cross. She fumbled through the various medicinal supplies until she found a large bottle labeled ‘Resticol’.

*Resticol, resticol*—she searched her memory for the name. Yes! That would do it; a tranquilizer of sorts, used to calm nerves or sometimes aid sleeplessness. She resumed creeping along below the countertop, headed for the spot where the cook had been manning a large mixer, preparing the porridge or whatever it is they called the gruel that would be served come mealtime. She stealthily rose on the other side of the counter where the cook stood with his back turned, gabbing awkwardly at Moraine, and she dumped half the powdery contents into the large bowl. Then she shrugged and tipped in the rest. Gripping the large wooden spoon she stirred it in a bit, so as to make it not so obvious, but when she released it the spoon tipped in to clatter against the metal beaters. Her gaze darted up to see the cook’s head starting to turn her way.

“Oh my!” exclaimed Moraine. She bent low and then straightened; fumbling with a bit of jewelry pinned to her blouse, and smiled embarrassedly at the cook. “My brooch has come loose.” She fiddled with it and managed to get it unfastened without appearing to do so, and she stepped closer and thrust herself toward the cook, who seemed to have forgotten entirely about any unexpected noise from behind. “Would you pin it back for me?” she asked in her most syrupy voice. Vedara stifled a snort and bent to creep back to the door.

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“Did you really have to whack those two over the head like that?” complained Moraine in an increasingly whiny voice. “They never treated us so badly.”

“Not badly—other than blasting the StarGazer with a phase cannon and taking us captive, you mean? Those two didn’t eat the frakking gruel, Moraine, what was I supposed to do? Wait for them to see their cohorts start falling over, and come to figure out what was going on?”

They stepped past the snoring guard at the entrance to the hangar and moved cautiously to where the StarGazer sat tethered down within. Vedara cursed softly.

“Bloody Mothers!”

The pirates had apparently decided to refit the StarGazer as one of their own, but in the process had discovered the SpaceCloak, and the vessel now sat partially disassembled.

“They were going to try to refit the cloak to their cruiser!” growled Vedara. “Damned fools—it was scaled for my ship, not so large a vessel as this!”

Moraine began to whimper. “I told you so! I *told* you, Vedara! Now what will we do? What *can* we do? We’re stuck in the lion’s den, just waiting for him to awaken!”

“Snap out of it,” growled Vedara. “It’s just a change of plans, that’s all.” She gripped Moraine and shook her lightly. “Don’t fall apart on me now. Look—there’s another option I had already considered, and which may actually be the better choice. I decided on slipping away in the StarGazer, because it would be easier and because I know the ship so well.” *And because it had a SpaceCloak*, she added to herself. “But there’s no time to restore the StarGazer, and so here’s what we’ll do.” Moraine looked at her through tormented, hopeful eyes. “We’ll commandeer the bloody star cruiser! *This* ship! I can pilot this thing!”

*Noooooooooo*, wailed Moraine, and Vedara slapped her, hard. “*Shut up*, Moraine, and pay attention. First let’s drag the crew members into a non-critical compartment where I can contain them, and then I want to take a closer look at the cargo we carried aboard my ship. I can’t imagine any recreational drug valuable enough to get the undivided attention of three mil-spec star cruisers, especially since they could likely pillage that and more from any wandering mega-tourist boat.”

With the crew still zonked out and now confined, the women disconnected the cargo container and used a pallet truck to extricate it from the confined space of the StarGazer’s transport hold. Out under the bright lights of the hangar Vedara scrutinized the shiny stainless cabinet, and she waved a data printout at Moraine. “This log makes no sense. Valtar insisted that the cargo required precisely controlled temperature, humidity, and so on; all monitored by the systems on-board the container. But look,” she pointed a finger at the printout, “our e-control system reports the only request made of it by the pallet was a constant vacuum! A vacuum does not require external support; a passive container could provide that easily enough. And so why the elaborate fabrication, and why the extra expense to support the lie?”

“A... diversion?” ventured Moraine.

“Exactly! The Seleneen have gone to great expense and trouble to promote the appearance that this shipment is a serious recreational drug. Why might they suggest that the cargo is illegal? To lend the aura of danger and hush-hush, to make the cargo’s purveyors think they are already playing close to the edge, and thus quell any speculation about the true content before it ever got started!”

“What... what do you think it really is, then?” asked Moraine timorously.

Vedara grinned her grin. “There’s one way to find out...”

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The loud and incessant banging upon the wall was becoming *very* irritating. Vedara keyed the microphone for the onboard intercom channel. “Captain,” she spoke reasonably, “have your crew keep the noise down, would you please? I’ll not be releasing you anytime soon, and I’m confident that I could figure out how to cut off life support to your compartment, were you to force my hand.” She flinched and held the handset away from her ear while the Captain vented his anger in what, she had to admit, was an impressively pirate-like spiel of profane invective.

“Captain,” she resumed, after he’d run out of breath and curses, “have you finished?”

“Hell NO, I’m not finished!” he stormed. “You’ll pay *dearly* for this, woman, and the longer you play this foolish game, the more severe the toll!!!”

“Captain, dear Captain,” mused Vedara. “*You* are in lock-down, and *I* control a star cruiser. Tell me again—how exactly do you expect to exact your penance?”

“ARR! You— you *frakkin’*... ARR!!! Have you forgotten that you are in the company of TWO other star cruisers, and that *neither* will take kindly to your actions?!!!”

Vedara glanced to her bank of monitors, where the other two cruisers rode alongside silently oblivious. “Well, I suppose the time will come when I’ll have to tell them. For now, though, the course that they’ve set suits my purpose. I’m sure that their intended ultimate destination is not the same as ours, but that will change.”

Bansternob resumed his tirade, and Vedara switched off the intercom link. She looked to where Moraine sat and they grinned at each other.

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The Intership Comm link crackled to life. “Prime cruiser SC1, we were instructed to take direction from you when we transitioned from open to planetary space, near our destination. Is there a reason that you maintain radio silence beyond that zone?”

Vedara looked to Moraine, who had coiled up into a tense little ball. Vedara reached over to pat her arm. “It’s game time.” Moraine nodded, just once.

After a few moments of silence the voice came back, more cautious. “SC1, please provide the code-phrase intended to validate command identity.”

“Hmmm.” mused Vedara into her handset. “Well, let’s see. How about *PeglegPete*? Or *PollyWanna*? Or just plain old *ARRR*?” There was a pained silence, and Vedara could almost hear the wheels turning across open space. She keyed the microphone again. “Star cruisers, ummm... SC2 and SC3, I presume? This is Captain Vedara Lightstar—pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“V— *Lightstar*? What foolishness is this?! You must summon Captain Bansternob to this channel at once!”

“Well, I could do that,” said Vedara, “but he might be sleeping and I’d hate to wake him. He’ll soon be facing more than trouble enough, and so he may as well be rested up for it.”

A number of warning lights began to flash on the sensor panels, and on the bank of monitors she watched the two star cruisers separate to either side of SC1. There was all manner of mechanical activity across the hulls of both vessels as the various weapons systems came live and fixed onto target. Vedara reached over to touch Moraine where she was curled up smaller than one might imagine possible.

“Don’t worry,” she said softly, hoping she was right, “Our shields are fully active.”

“SC1,” the voice came back, this time curt and all business, “stand down all weapons systems and prepare to be boarded. Open your port docking mechanism, and be advised that *any* resistance will result in a forcible takeover.”

“Oh *poo*,” said Vedara. “That’s not very nice, now is it? I’ll tell you what—since we’ve already broken radio silence, why don’t we open a video channel so we can trade insults face to face?” She flipped the switch to send her video feed live, and the large monitor at the front of the cockpit flashed on. He was a beady little man, with a beak of a

nose. His voice was smooth and mellifluous and almost warm, but his eyes were very cold.

“Vedara Lightstar. I am *very* curious as to how you wrangled yourself into your current position, and also quite concerned as to whatever has become of Captain Bansternob. But we can address those questions, and more, when you’ve been brought into custody aboard my ship. You are ready to be boarded, I presume?”

“I am afraid not, Captain, ummm, how about *Beezer*.”

A flush of red shot up from his neck as if he were being painted with a roller—the little man appeared positively shocked, and then enraged.

“You’ve got it backwards, I’m afraid,” continued Vedara. “I won’t be boarding your ship, you see, but I *will* be taking command of it. And of SC3 as well. We will proceed from here to a Confederation StarBase, let’s say Hevelstodd, since it’s nearest, and there you will formally surrender your star cruisers.”

The man sat working his mouth but making no sound, and Vedara smiled patiently at him. Finally he found his voice. “This is an *outrage!!!* If you even *think* of attempting to block the boarding party, the ship will be disabled, or if necessary, destroyed!”

Vedara leaned forward and spoke slowly and clearly, all the game gone from her tone. “No Captain, that is not how this will play out. Let me ask you a couple questions. Your group sent three star cruisers after my poor little transport vessel. Why exactly was that? Even if you wanted my cargo of contraband, would not one cruiser have been enough?”

The weasely little man narrowed his eyes. “Hmmpf! That is no interest of yours, Lightstar. Your only concern now is an armed boarding party backed by two star cruisers!”

“I’m not yet finished with my questions, Captain. The next is this: I assume that you knew the nature of the cargo I carried?”

His eyes began to twitch. “Why... I’m told it was Seleneen Spirit—very valuable.”

“No, Captain. You knew it was no recreational drug that we carried, and that’s why your complement included three cruisers. The prize was just too valuable to risk losing, eh?”

“*ENOUGH!* Prepare to be boarded!”

“*No.* Because the cargo was, as I’m sure you know, a Class Five Engine for a Confederation-Spec Molecular Cannon. And how would I know that, you might wonder? It is because we have *uncrated* it. And so be advised, pretender-captain, that I will have no qualms about using against you if you do not fully accede to my demands.”

The Captain spluttered and his eyes darted side to side. “*That... that is ridiculous!* Even if it was what you claim, it would be just an engine. An engine cannot be used by itself! It’s nothing but a hunk of metal and electronics to you!”

“Ah, but Captain, you know that also is not entirely true, don’t you? It is true that it’s just an engine, yes, but the Confederation, in their logistical wisdom, builds such pieces in cassette form. And so when it is time to upgrade a piece of armament, it’s really just a plug and play operation. Am I not correct, *Captain Beezer?*”

The pirate Captain sat frozen, unable to frame a response. Vedara reached to the video joystick and panned the view to the opened armament bay, where the old phase cannon cassette lay lashed to a palette while a gleaming new engine had been inserted into the massive breach and locked down in its place.



“Even a dated phase cannon, such as what these light cruisers carry, can be upgraded with such an engine, no? It might not be quite as precise for targeting as a newer generation. But I wonder how exact my aim needs to be, at this distance, *um?*”

The Captain abruptly turned and waved frantically to his side, and the lights on Vedara’s scanner began flashing all at once. Vedara toggled the cannon fully live and dialed the targeting crosshairs onto SC2, focusing on the weapons nacelle that was targeting them. Her star cruiser juddered as the first burst hit, but the shields held and Vedara pressed the firing pin once, and then once more. The first impact flashed on the shielding of SC2, illuminating it like a web of lightning spreading across the surface, and then disappeared right before the second pulse hit home. The weapons pod burst up and outward in a fiery fountain of debris, and the massive star cruiser began to spin from the impact. As the tail section came around Vedara targeted the engine compartment and fired, and another fount of molecular destruction ripped off a portion of the vessel’s tail. Vedara turned her targeting control to focus on the weapons nacelle of SC3, and spoke calmly into her comm link.

“So, SC3—is today a good day for a fight?” All the flashing alarms on her monitor starting winking out and her visuals picked up the mechanisms extended from the hull of SC3 folding back upon themselves.

“A wise choice,” assured Vedara. “Send a team to recover any casualties on SC2, and evacuate all to your ship if necessary. You will drop all shielding and disable your open space boosters, and you will take SC2 in tow with a tractor beam. I will follow you in to StarBase on the coordinates I am about to transmit.”

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The view was spectacular from where they sat, atop the very prestigious Observation Spire at Confederation Prime HQ on Bellabarabba. Vedara felt a little tipsy from all the Verboulum Rum they’d consumed, but that was OK, because that blend never left a hangover. Moraine was, of course, giggling at just about everything.

“What will you do now, Moraine? There’s no real need for you to continue working.”

The Confederation had been *very* generous with its reward to them for bringing in the triple bounty of captured pirates, illicit Mil-Spec star cruisers, and especially that next-generation Class Five engine. That generosity, paid in ongoing stipends, may have stemmed partially from true appreciation, but Vedara suspected it was mostly intended as an incentive to keep the Confederation’s own horrific blunder under wraps.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Moraine. “I suppose I’ll start by spending some ‘down time’ with Valtar,” she chortled.

To Vedara’s amazement Valtar had managed to convince the Confederation that he knew absolutely nothing of the cannon engine, and so his permanent banishment had been lessened to a two-year period of indentured servitude. Moraine had promptly volunteered to be his master.

“What about you?” Moraine asked. “A life of retired luxury?” She giggled and hiccupped.

“No, that’s not for me. I love flying and the attendant adventure, but the difference is that now I’ll be able pick my clients *much* more carefully. I also talked the Confederation into granting me use of the SC1 star cruiser, by the way. Fully disarmed, of course.”

“Yeah, right,” said Moraine. “What about— *Ooops*, never mind.”

Vedara nodded. “I think I’ll also take a break before heading back out, some R&R time here.” She waved an arm to encompass the sprawling capitol city that stretched out in all directions from their soaring perch like a rich tapestry of so many textures. “Here we find ourselves at Galactic HQ, the seat of government for the entire Confederation. *Hmmm*, how shall I engage myself?” She leaned in toward Moraine and whispered conspiratorially. “Ah *yes*, I do believe that I remember someone mentioning a *very* close acquaintance—of a High Ministerial persuasion?”

Vedara winked at a wide-eyed, blinking Moraine, whose lips formed a scandalized ‘O’. Moraine squealed and clapped her hands, and Vedara smiled and sipped at her rum.

**The End**

## Science and the Greater Good

“By *Satan’s flaming prick* this is not the end of it,” growled Ralf. “May the dark angels reserve your place in *Chaos!*” He coughed a spray of blood and phlegm, and straining against the shackles he turned a loathsome glare on the malefactor his own equal. “I’ll be back for you; a demon of your own making. Hear my words, *false oracle*—I’ll lead the *Black Lord himself* to your Prophecy!!!”

Enraged with the hollow rattle of his threats Ralf again lunged against the straps, his grunting efforts strangled by the manacle clamped tight around his throat, but soon he was spent, wheezing for breath and wielding nothing but empty words.

How quickly his circumstances had changed...

“You take your *righteous gods*,” he rasped, “your *soulless saints* and your *buggerin’ clergy*, and go *stuff ‘em* where no sun casts a shadow.” Twisting against the strand of electrodes that pierced his scalp like a halo of barbed wire, Ralf felt the prongs tear through flesh and catch on bone, and he hawked and spat toward the curate who had officiously declared himself as *Primacy Deland Gaunt*.

But a mouth parched dry with desperation made little of his effort.

The orator paused, feigning a charitable smile as he dabbed at imagined flecks of spittle on his robes, and Ralf collapsed back against the hard metal surface of the gurney. The self-proclaimed Prophet lifted his Sceptre and resumed the tracing of intricate aerial patterns while chanting sonorous platitudes of pietistic drivel, and Ralf’s eyes nearly bulged from their sockets as he again lunged to rage against the leather and steel that bound him fast.

The vicar put much drama into raising a finger before a flashing red button on the panel of dials and gauges, and he began building his cadenced preachment to a climax. Though Ralf paid no attention to any sect other than the very select Cult of Ralf, he could not help but marvel at the inane drivel—the melding of righteous urgency and moral rectitude, and all based in the inevitability of The Prophecy. The priest held his finger poised dramatically before the button, where it bobbed like a serpent setting itself to strike, until with a final incantation and theatrical flourish he leaned in to press it.

The throbbing light abruptly ceased its urgent flashing and stayed lit with all the silent certainty of an EKG gone flat-line. The scene abruptly began to dissolve, swirling and breaking apart in Ralf’s vision like a pointillist canvas coming undone, and Ralf cried out as his wits began to spin away, swirling faster and faster as water down a drain. Ralf became less, and still less yet, until he felt like a mere slip of the sheerest gauze.

And then there was nothing.

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He had not died, he didn’t think.

If that were the case, then there would be nothing. Or there'd be demons prodding at him through the flames, or angels flying around sprinkling fairy dust. Whatever.

This was, well... OK, so it was nothing—but still, he was *thinking* about it. Though there was little enough to assess. No sight, no sound, no sensations of any nature. It felt to Ralf as though he had somehow been 'absent' for an indeterminate period, and then the process of thinking had begun to grow on him. Scattered fragments at first, like static-ridden signals on an ancient analog tuner, and then patterns filtering together. Gradually his thoughts connected with one another, and he pieced together the events preceding this... well, whatever *this* was.

The Prophecy. They'd caught up with him, finally. He'd made a mistake and they had linked him to a multitude of... well, *incidents*, as he preferred to call them. Once they'd known who to look for they had tracked him easily enough, as pervasive and unbounded as was the Prophecy.

And that had been that. The show was over, the curtain lowered. The players gone from the stage and the theatre pad-locked forevermore, so it would seem. The Prophecy's Enforcers had processed him in short order, paying minimal lip service and skating through the legalities with all the delicacy of a blow torch on an ice cube.

*Let the bastards stew in their own hell!*, fumed Ralf, from his little stub-track off the vastness of nowhere. *The Prophecy's self-actualized 'True Judgment' councils proclaim their actions as being just and righteous, but they're no more 'moral' than am I.*

Ralf pondered that notion at length, turning it one way and another and considering it from various angles, because, quite frankly, he had no other pressing engagements in the foreseeable future. Finally he resolved that, on the whole, he did not view his mores as evil-incarnate—but then neither could he justify them.

*Good or bad, right or wrong; it's all in the eye of the beholder.*

Having exhausted that philosophical consideration, Ralf commenced to revel in all that was left him now; the reconstructing of memories of his past, all those carefully plotted and exceptionally guileful artifices. There was the beginning of each entrapment—an oft-time whimsical selection of his prey—and then a crafty pursuit, artfully twisted and turned upon itself, and eventually the culmination, which was, sadly enough, always much the same. Once he had extracted the final penance there was nothing more for him there, and he would feel empty and purposeless until he could recharge himself with a new and perhaps even more deviant pursuit.

Oh *yes*, how he would satiate in the brutal cycling of emotions that he labored to induce; surprise and confusion, anger and fear, hope crushed to despair, agony. He was able to identify each by its unique and desperate smell in the sweat and the breath of his victims. And if it felt so exquisite to him, so sublime—how then could it be inherently *wicked*? Of course that question was raised by the perpetrator, not by the perpatr~~ate~~tee...

*Amusement!*

*Look there—an emotion reconstructed from nothing!* If Ralf could have shaken his head, he would have.

*What the hell is going on here? Where...what am I?*

Ralf's meandering train of thought was suddenly set off-track as he became aware of a murmuring on the fringe of his mentality.

*Sound? Could that be sound?*

And of a sudden he caught the faintest scent, a musky aroma that he could almost taste.

*Jeezus B Christ! Am I being born again? Out of the womb and all that gooey crap?*

“He’s... to.....ound.....utting.....ether.”

*Bits of words! And those were not my thoughts, I heard them! Sort of.*

“You ..ink so? ..at woul...uite a rapid t.....”

*A second voice?*

“Yes, it.....ppening....sually quick, but can’t you feel it? He is coalescing.”

Ralf concentrated on the words, struggling to assemble them into a coherent whole, and he abruptly came to realize that it was no longer pitch black. An interior space, a room, was coming into focus, bit by bit, like pixels gathering on a monitor.

“Hello? You can hear us now?” The voice redirected itself. “You see there, Dedra, where his substance comes together?”

*Substance!?? Coming together?*

Ralf tried to look down at himself, at his so-called ‘substance’, and his senses dropped into a spin, careening like an over-clocked motherboard, tumbling end over end through open space and solid matter. He clenched his vision shut to halt the madness, and when he calmed and reopened his mind he found himself in another room, looking down from the ceiling. He lowered his perspective to the floor and he jumped—figuratively speaking—as the same voice spoke again.

“*Well* then, this is truly *remarkable!* It would appear that you’ve careened headfirst into your new existence, eh? But you needn’t be overly concerned with what happened just now, as your bearings should settle down once you’ve gained self-control.”

Ralf rotated a full circle, deciding that he was not really ‘hearing’ the voice. Nor did he physically squint his eyes. At first he perceived nothing but an empty room, but he then became aware of an indistinct blur—like a smudge on a camera lens. The chimera spoke to him.

“You can see us now, is that correct?”

*Us?*

He tried to focus on the formless presence that spoke to his mind, and he became aware that, indeed, it was not a single entity, but rather a pair. But how could he speak to it, to them? He had no mouth, no lips—he was nothing.

“What *are* you?”

Shocked, Ralf realized that question had come from him.

“You see, Dedra?” The voice again redirected its focus. “This is superb! I have never seen an extraction come together so quickly. We have long hoped for one such as this. Perhaps he may prove a true savant—more adept than even you or I!”

The voice turned back to Ralf. “You are new to this plane of existence, and so you have much to learn. To begin, I will introduce myself. I am Doctor Albert Forquessas, and this is Dedra Handerstorn, my circumstantial compatriot.”

Ralf thought he could discern which bit of shimmer was the speaker, but as he pondered how he might respond, a vague memory tugged at him. *Forquessas?*

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Laura stepped out the doorway, throwing the deadbolt and warily scanning both directions down the brightly-lit hallway. She frowned—the excitement of her new apartment had quickly cooled to a sense of unease, though she could point to no reason for it. But, admittedly, the low rent had seemed too good to be true. The complex was as secure as she could hope for, located in a fairly upscale neighborhood. And, unlike her previous apartment, seemingly not prowled by the darker denizens of the metropolis.

Nonetheless—the place really creeped her out. She never felt truly alone here, it was as though someone always watched, some presence always lingering just beyond view. The second week she'd gone so far as to conduct a reconnaissance—electrical outlets, phone jacks, light fixtures—any place some twisted freak might have planted the intrusive miniature surveillance camera or microphone. But she'd found nothing to justify her discomfort. Now she shook her head—why on earth had she become so skittish? There was no dark history evident here, no skeletons rattling about in closets.

Even so, she'd learned from guarded conversations with other tenants that she was not alone with her vague sense of threat. The young guy across the hall was moving out as soon as he could find anyplace halfway decent. He would forfeit his entire security deposit—and he'd just cycled out of a tour of combat duty, for God's sake—not someone you'd expect to see jumping from his shadow.

Laura had taken to watching her neighbors, and after a short time she found herself paying closer attention to those who stayed on long-term. There was old Mrs. McClarity at the end of the hall, young Dylan Brown on the first floor, and ditzy blonde Melissa, to name a few. Dylan was perpetually happy, a 'special' bagger at the local grocery. Melissa was always bombed on whatever 'script she could wrangle from one day-clinic or another, and Mrs. McClarity, well... there was no denying that the old woman was feeble.

The thing of it was; all of those who showed no sign of discomfort here—they were kinda slow in one way or another. None too perceptive, not running on all cylinders. Could that be why they sensed nothing askew?

Whatever the case, Laura found herself spending more and more time at her boyfriend's ramshackle studio apartment these days.

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"I would say that you were totally whacked out, if not for the fact that here I am, less than a shadow on the wall, talking to a couple of spooks." Ralf wished he could pinch himself awake.

"Oh no, that is not at all true," insisted the bit of nothing who called himself Dr. Forquessas. "A shadow is something of a void, an absence of energy. You, to the contrary, are a *coalescence* of energy."

"Say what?"

"You said that you recognized my name. Then surely you understand what I suggest?"

"Uh, listen up, Doc. I was never much for psychics or scientology or whatever the hell it was you did. I had my own, ah... *interests*." Ralf harbored his secret smile.

"Oh?" Dr. Forquessas sounded newly wary. "Tell me then, what action of yours merited an extraction? For most of us it was a minor infraction." Forquessas sighed, Ralf

somehow sensed. “So *many* people on the planet, all following the Genesis Codex—our sheer volume necessitated *some* means of forced attrition after the Twenty Wars had ended and could no longer provide that function. Unfortunately for us all, the Prophecy assumed that role. But back to my question; your transgressions were slight, were they not?”

Ralf shrugged. “Yeah, sure. They got me for jaywalking. And once I bumped my scatcraft into the Chancellor’s luxu-rig. They get all pissy over stuff like that.”

“Hmmm, I suppose. Well, in any case, you could hardly cause any trouble here. Not yet, anyway.”

Ralf’s ears perked up, metaphorically speaking. “Whaddaya mean, *not yet?*”

“We will discuss that later. For now, I want to make sure that you understand what you are; what we *all* are.”

“Doc, you keep saying stuff like ‘all of us’. I don’t see no big crowd. You, me, and Dedra there.”

“Oh no, there are many, many more. Here and at other dumping zones across the planet. You don’t yet perceive the weaker signatures, but in time you will. This zone is long overcrowded, as I’m certain the others are.”

Ralf scowled, and then carefully widened his vision.

*There’s nothing else here, I... no, wait! I see something, very faint, like the last trace of a cloud blown apart in the wind.*

“You see them?” asked Dr. Forquessas encouragingly.

Ralf nodded dubiously. “Maybe. So what’s your point, Doc?”

Forquessas sighed again. “My point is that we do indeed exist, but not as solid matter. To summarize a lengthy discourse, my premise is that life is energy.”

“You’re saying I’m a peppy guy?”

“What remains of you is pure, formless, energy. My work has shown that streams of energy comprise what we think of as life. All else, such as your body or the physical form of a tree, are just containers—vessels meant to hold specific signatures of energy for a period of time.”

“So Doc, if I’m so energetic like you say, why don’t I just whip out my cape and fly off, like Super-Dude?”

Forquessas chuckled. “If only it were so simple, Ralf. To put it as simply as I am able, what you enjoyed previously was a unique concentration of energy that defined your thoughts, your memories, your emotions; all contained within a vessel synchronized to the complex pattern of energy that was, and is, Ralf. As it were, we have all been deprived of those uniquely tuned coffer that we once thought of as bodies.”

“Yeah? So what happened to our bods, Doc? Couldn’t we just track ‘em down and climb back on board?”

Forquessas shook his head, or so Ralf imagined. “We are separated by time and by space, and the bodies are stacked in cryogenic storage—like so many *John Doe*’s in a morgue—awaiting incineration after a period of time beyond what any human could hope to survive in normal life. We are, in effect, stranded here.”

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Laura doubled-checked the locks and safety chains on the front door and switched on all the lights in the apartment before ducking into the bathroom. She locked that door also, and, feeling rather silly about it but doing so anyway, she wedged a chair under the doorknob. Taking a deep breath, she turned on the shower and slipped off her robe.

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“They turned my work against me, Ralf. Claiming that I’d broken a sacred covenant, they usurped the very effort they’d condemned, and then turned it to their own purpose.”

“How can they do that, Doc? Wasn’t Capital P outlawed after the last Annihilation?”

“Ah, and there’s the rub, Ralf. Per the Prophecy’s abstruse logic, the extraction is *not* capital punishment. And in a way that’s true. We are not dead, after all; we are simply disembodied.”

“So I’m iced-out somewhere, huh? I sure hope they stacked me business-end-down on some stonkin’ babe.”

Forquessas scowled. “You may as well abandon your baser desires, Ralf, as you’ll find no outlet for them here.”

“Yeah? Well, we’ll see about that. But in the meantime, Doc, the big mamba-lickin’ question is—how did we end up here? In a different place; an earlier time?”

“Ah... For that the Prophecy turned to the efforts of one Doctor Antoine Devilier, who demonstrated the ability to transport inanimate matter through space and time. On pattern, the Prophecy accroached Devilier’s work even while they decried it, and by so doing they assembled the pieces necessary to build their new social order—all while purportedly retaining moral purity.” Forquessas huffed. “The Prophecy could then extract the energy that defined a living being and isolate it as a non-biological entity, transport that energy-stream through space and time, and thus be rid of any who displeased them. They wasted little time eliminating any who might threaten their blossoming theocracy.”

Ralf nodded dubiously. “If you say so, Doc... But even if that’s true—why do we stay here? When I first showed up I blasted through walls and ceilings and whatever else. It’s not like we’re locked in. Why not get out, go wander around—stir things up?”

“It is true that both time and space are now immaterial to us—to an extent. When we were robbed of our physical vessels we were granted free rein in dimensions that were previously off limits. But the Prophecy understood that would be the case, and so they implemented safeguards.” Forquessas drifted closer. “So that I might show you, Ralf, rather than just tell you, why don’t you and I step back to yesterday?”

“Huh?”

“Yes, go back to *yesterday*. There are no words to express what we could never before comprehend, and so I employ the catchword *streaming*. Watch closely, and follow.”

Forquessas seemed to shimmer and fade away, and Ralf emulated what he’d sensed. “Well, that was a lot of nothing,” he said. “Here we freakin’ are, just like we were.”

“Yes, except that in human time it is yesterday. Do you see Dedra? No, she is where we left her, in this room, but *tomorrow*. Now let me show you something else. It is the first step in our return to normalcy.”



Ralf licked his ephemeral chops and drifted in close. *Now we're gettin' down t' the meat and potatos...*

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Laura stepped from the shower, darting her eyes around the steamy room. The mirrors were fogged over unseeing, and she was grateful for that. The pulsing hot water had been wonderful, but she had felt so very exposed and vulnerable that she'd lathered up and rinsed off and gotten out fast.

Shivering and chilled in the hot lavatory, she reached out for a towel.

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“You understand that without a physical presence, there is very little we can do?”

“That’s no great revelation, Doc.”

“You have a very strong aura in this form, Ralf, and I need that. And so I am going to confide in you; I will be your mentor.”

Ralf nodded to himself. *No big deal, it's not like I might get killed or something...*

“We are restricted to this general location by the minimal cohesion of our energy fields. The Prophecy tuned our signatures to require some level of magnetic energy to hold together, and they then dumped us atop one or another region known for substantial deposits of iron ore. If we were to wander away an appreciable distance—as have done those who wished to end themselves—then we would dissipate to nothing.” He chuckled. “Like your wisp of cloud torn apart in the wind.”

Ralf carefully catalogued that statement. If Forquessas could so readily see his mind, he would need to more tightly shelter his thoughts.

“That explains our limitation in the dimension of space, Ralf. As for the dimension of time—there we are less restricted. We can regress as far as we like, but upon advancing we encounter a barrier, undoubtedly somehow erected by the Prophecy to block us from their timeline. I do not know the details, but they undoubtedly have stolen someone else’s work for that.”

“So you’re tellin’ me we’re basically stuck in the past.”

“That is the intent of the Prophecy. But I have worked out a plan, and I believe that with the addition of your strength it might be achievable.”

Ralf suddenly felt Forquessas delving into his mind, no doubt hoping to *not* find the unrestrained sociopath that he feared might dwell there. Ralf blanked his thoughts, a technique he’d always found very useful when misdirection was his goal, and after some moments Forquessas nodded and continued.

“As I said, we have no hope, should we remain unable to regain physical form. Forever phantoms; sensed by few and known by none, wandering the ether until it becomes too much to bear, and then capitulating to true and final oblivion. I have also described to you how our bodies were vessels, each tuned to match a unique energy signature. But if we had access to those bodies—undamaged—I believe that the stronger among us could, given the proper technique, ‘reoccupy’ them.”

“Yeah, so what? You just told me we can’t get to those bods, iced or not.”

“By passing through time and space as we exist now, that is correct, we cannot.” Forquessas moved across the room and beckoned Ralf to follow. “Look here, Ralf. This is a wooden chair. It is an inanimate object, though once alive, and its remnant energy signature is relatively simple. Yes?”

“OK. So what?”

“So, Ralf. Why don’t you ‘occupy’ this chair?”

Ralf chuffed. “You mean sit on it, Doc? Isn’t that kinda dumb? I’m just a spook, I don’t need no freakin’ chair.”

“No, Ralf. I mean ‘become’ the chair. Match yourself to its signature and use it as your physical vessel. I have learned to do it, and I think you can also. To put it in basic terms, simply make yourself one with it.”

Ralf barked out a laugh. “Doc, why in hell would I want to be a chair?”

“Because if you show me you can do that, Ralf, I will guide you further; help you extend your range. This chair is simple; living beings are infinitely complex. But within reach of the strongest among us, I believe.”

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Laura’s fingers closed on the comforting weave of the towel, and as she lifted it from its peg she gasped at the onset of a sensation more vile and intrusive than any she could have imagined. She shrieked and flung the towel to the floor, stamping her feet and slapping her skin as the presence enfolded her, violating her singularity. She gagged as she felt it course roughly over her breasts, down her belly and up her thighs. She fell to the floor and dry-wretched; great, heaving convulsions, and gasping for air she wrenched herself upright. She fumbled the door open and yanked a cloak from the rack by the front door, toppling the stand and overturning a cabinet. Her personal treasures broke across the tiled entryway as her bare feet scattered them before her sobbing careen from the apartment.

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“You were right, I *felt* her!” Ralf hooted. “I rubbed her little boobies, and I *smelled* the fear in her!”

It had felt *so* good—to do whatever he wanted, unhindered and beyond any possibility of penance. He laughed coarsely.

“So what’s the next plan, Doc? Panty raids? Do I get to stir my whizzle stick?”

Forquessas’ brume darkened. “No, Ralf, that is most certainly *not* my intent. Your efforts have been improving, and I simply meant for you to observe that you could approach synchronicity with a living being, to understand that you might adjust your energy signature to match that of another vessel. You see how close we are? Dedra lags behind a little, but even so quickly you have matched my best efforts. Contain whatever deviant desires you harbor, Ralf, and soon enough we might resume our true place—outside this realm between worlds.”

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It was an entirely unremarkable setting, the dregs of a party winding down. Ralf looked away from the scene, forcing himself calm.

“We’ve practiced about forever, Doc—finally it’s time?” He studied the floor, cataloging every imperfection there, intent upon holding his bright excitement below the doctor’s radar. He dare not look directly upon the two couples that laughed and flirted drunkenly, lest he lose control and spill all his cards face up.

Forquessas spoke softly. “Yes, Ralf. I believe that we are ready, and that our friend’s liberal consumption of liquor has lowered most of the mental barriers we might otherwise encounter.” Forquessas focused on Dedra. “You are ready? We understand that this crosses a moral threshold, but must also remind ourselves that in this case the end truly justifies the means.” Dedra nodded solemnly, and Forquessas turned to Ralf.

“Ralf, you accept the restrictions that we impose upon ourselves? It is a selfish, damnable act that we undertake, but it is the only means I know to thwart the Prophecy before their malefic influence is forever impressed upon future history.”

Ralf nodded, struggling to present a somber posture. They had pushed forward in time as far as they could; hard up against the Prophecy’s bulwark. It had felt strangely empowering; so many generations had come and gone in what seemed little more than the passage through a doorway. Nonetheless, they were still far from their native timespace.

Forquessas looked back to the whooping partygoers. “We will combine our strength and make the transfers one at a time. Given their excessive consumption of alcohol there should be little to no resistance, and it will be, ah... *painless*... for them.”

As they began to move forward, the younger male seemed to suddenly sense something awry. His eyes widened in alarm and he lurched to his feet, overturning the end table and crashing the lamp to the floor.

“Jeezhusssh, Billl,” slurred the older man. “Take it eazhy, will ya?”

Ralf’s excitement spiked and he abandoned control, sweeping forward like a squad of BlackHeart mercenaries from the last Annihilation, slamming the younger man unconscious and stunning the other three senseless. They sagged limp into the cushions and Ralf gathered himself up, and—

“*Ralf!*”

Arrested by a surprisingly powerful tug at his being, Ralf immediately backed off. He *must* not allow himself to forget that the doctor had nearly his strength, and greater experience and technique.

“Uh... gee, I’m sorry, Doc. The guy panicked and jumped up, like he was gonna run off or somethin’...” Ralf felt an intense scrutiny bear down, and he prayed that he hadn’t just blown this once-only opportunity. Forquessas spoke gravely.

“Ralf. When... *if* we consummate this occupation, we will then be free to leave this space in physical form. After we pass the Prophecy’s time barrier in human form, we will abandon these bodies to make a second time-leap forward, which will put us in place to each find our biological selves and combine therewith—so resuming our rightful lives. Young Doctor Forquessas will have the insight to *not* publish his works, so denying that empowerment to the Prophecy, and Ralf will grow up knowing to not stray beyond the bounds of common decency.” The doctor studied him, peering into his darkest corners, and Ralf examined the plaid pattern of the armchair.

“You fully agree to this, then?” asked Forquessas.

Ralf nodded docilely. “A’ course I do, Doc. It’s what we’ve said all along.”

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“Jeezhus on a broomschtick!” exclaimed Ralf/Bill as he staggered to his feet and stood wobbily, feeling real muscles clumsy under the numbing haze of alcohol.

*Thazzh OK by me—always was better wizhh a buzz on...*

His companions clambered to their feet and Ralf shambled over to lean against the kitchen counter. Dedra stood unsteadily, pushing her hands down her firm, shapely new body, and Ralf approved. The doctor stumbled over to lean against Ralf; sloppily gregarious and totally out of character.

“*Rallllff! We done it!*” Forquessas belched and clapped him on the shoulder. “Now we shleep off thishh drunk, and then we can... *braap...* then we get on with our nex’ time shhift! Riiighht?” Forquessas grinned foolishly and belched again, slathering Ralf with his stinking breath.

*Yessss... The next step...*

Ralf leaned in close to speak in a faux whisper, clearing his mind and girding for what was to come.

“I dunno, Doc... do we really have to wait?”

“Uhhh?” slurred Forquessas.

Still standing with his back to the counter, Ralf yanked out the butcher knife he’d fumbled from the drawer behind, clumsily raking the blade across his side and goring himself in the process. He peered down, reveling in the pain and the blood, and he looked up to lock eyes with the slack-jawed Doctor.

Ralf laughed giddily as Forquessas whimpered and stumbled backward.

“*Here ya goes, Forqy!*” Ralf bellowed, lunging forward to thrust the blade to its hilt in the Doc’s soft belly. Forquessas hiccupped oddly—a wet, gurgling sound—and fell to his knees. An expression of dumb astonishment drained his face as he slumped rearward, his plush arse pinning awkwardly folded legs. Ralf cackled. “How’s it work, Doc, when I kills your older self while your younger self ain’t born yet? Dead before alive? Ain’t that like the old chicken and the egg question?” Ralf pushed a blood-smear hand through his hair in puzzlement, leaving sticky tufts standing in bizarre disarray. A light dawned in his eyes and he tried to snap his fingers. “I get it! *Foreshadowing!*”

The doctor collapsed prone, his eyes rolling back and blood pooling around his midsection, and Ralf turned a sly gaze to the horrified eyes of new-Dedra. She skittered backward toward the doorway.

“Ahhhh... Don’tcha be worryin’ your pretty new self, Dedra. You can go your own way—*for now*. As for Ralfie-boy, here, he has important bizness t’ transact. Kinda poetic, dontcha think—vengeance, *in advance?*” He smiled; his tone silky. “But ya needn’t feel lonely,” he grinned, cunning and feral, and bloody hand-prints marked where he patted himself on the chest. “Cuz you’ll be seein’ Ralfie again *some day...*”

Dedra bounced off the doorframe as she lunged through, and the erratic clatter of her heels faded down the hallway. Ralf grinned even wider as he smelled her fear waft behind, but his smile slipped as he felt strength flow away with the copious loss of blood. He prodded at the pulsing slash in his side and moaned in ecstasy, and his gaze fell to the

middle-aged woman splayed gracelessly across the sofa, breathing slow but deep. He growled softly, baring his teeth.

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The disjointed feeling came over Ralf suddenly, as though he'd physically crossed over yet again, though he had not. Such feelings seemed, of late, to be transgressing even his own progressive need for them. But this time he had gone backward—not in reality, be that what it was—but in his mind.

He paused mid-sentence, the flood of memories encompassing him as if submerged in a hot, sulphurous mud-bath. *Memories*. He breathed them in, tasted them, turned them in his fingers and lovingly caressed them. So far back the memories took him; to his true beginning.

There had been no second leap forward, as he had understood would be the case for the three combined focuses mentored by one Doctor Albert Forquessas. Instead Ralf had forged onward, on a solo path (in one manner of viewing it), to become a compilation of perhaps a thousand diaries. So many voices and stories, emotions and perceptions, all strung together by a single, insinuating thread.

It had begun as the most rapacious indulgence, with no thought or care taken and guided only by a gorging, insatiable lust for new and different desires and hatreds, joys, sorrows and pain. Though in truth he had typically sought out and embraced only the darker psyches, since they were simpler and more understandable and generally easier to move on from.

After his initial blunderings through his recovered physical instance, flitting like a moth from flame to mortal flame, he'd become totally captured by the stark allure of war, wherever he could find it. There his rapture with heady gore could be passed off as honor, or as allegiance to a cause. Any cause—he truly didn't care. It was a strangely beautiful and just reality, because even when he could not physically prevail on the battlefield he would simply spit out his last breath and switch places with those he fought, and so carry on with a changed allegiance and with the perverse knowledge of a new enemy that he might have bunked with just the night before.

But Ralf's tastes had eventually matured and his lusts at least partially sated, and he'd become much more selective, choosing only those transitions that would benefit him materially and in terms of position—those that would better ensure his passage. Even so, his baser needs would occasionally resurface, and there were those rare times that he would revert, descending from a position of advancing power and prestige to the greedy gathering in of some demented or supremely perverse persona whose allure he could not hope to resist. But then he would recover, with time as no hindrance, and restart his ascendance, knowing that the only rules were his own.

Dedra had eventually come for him, as he had expected. She had really had little other choice, knowing his threat. She had clearly developed some skills during her time as a changling, but still was just too obvious. A large man had approached him, courteous and of a genteel bearing, but from the first glance he could see Dedra in the man's eyes. And those eyes had seen recognition in his.

He'd taken her then, luxuriated in her ranging memories, adding them to his diaries, and had then scattered her sentience to the winds.

He had also found Albert Forquessas' mother, young still, and had watched and waited—curious. What would come of the yet-to-be-born genius Albert Forquessas, whose transitioning Ralf had disseminated some centuries past?

To his guarded surprise Albert had indeed been born, but it took little study to see that the child was but a husk of a creature, not even capable of feeding from its mother's breast. And that made perfect sense, Ralf thought, since he had properly dispersed the energy comprising the intellect of Albert Forquessas a full era past.

Ralf smoothed his hands down his robes, his mind coming back to the present. Finally he had made good the return to his previous time and place, not by continuing to leap great spans but rather by cycling through biological hosts. He had arrived, not quite so far along the timeline as when he'd been so ungraciously purged from it, but to that time when he would have been a young boy. He chuckled softly to himself. He'd not even considered seeking out his original physical instance—likely some void aberration like Forquessas in any case—as he could scarcely imagine again being relegated to a single, finite existence.

He hoisted the Sceptre in his hand, feeling its weight and thinking of how its blunt heft might facilitate this eventuality all the more quickly; all the more satisfyingly. There was just something about the thudding impact of a heavy weight on yielding tissue and bone. He sighed and lowered his icon of office—one thing he had learned through his misadventures was that it was sometimes necessary to follow rules, even as he made them up.

There was a young man strapped to the metal table in the center of the chamber, with a copper manacle tightly clamped about his throat and beads of blood marking the circlet of barbed electrodes pressed through the flesh of his shaved scalp. Ralf leaned toward him, trembling with premonitory delight when one of the barbs pricked his own thumb while pressing the halo down firmly to ensure good conductance. The young man screeched in pain and Ralf smiled consolingly, tasting coppery blood as he sucked at his thumb.

The blanched fellow's eyes were filled with terror and mortality, with the knob in his throat bobbing up and down and his mouth working silently, pressing tiny bubbles of saliva out between trembling lips. He had been an early recruit to the Prophecy, and Ralf had waited patiently for him. It had taken little effort to entrap the young man in a contrived grievance—Ralf had laid no shortage of temptation at the poor boy's feet, and had simply watched until he succumbed to one such enticement. The wheels' of the Prophecy were properly greased, and now the poor lad was figuratively lashed to the tracks before an irreversible neo-spiritual locomotive.

"Deland Gaunt," rumbled Ralf in his somber, prophesorial intonation. "You have committed dire heresy against the True Prophecy, and will suffer due penance. How, and to whom, might you plead?"

The young man could do nothing but gabble his lips while slobber drooled down his chin, and Ralf was disappointed with that. What would there be for him, for Ralf, after this was finished? With this sublime revenge complete, what would come next?

"Contrary to a long-ago threat from a derailed future," murmured Ralf softly, shaking his head above a frantically distraught Deland, "It appears that it will be *you* who awaits *me* in the fires of perdition."

The time-space transmutation of ephemeral souls—or ‘energy signatures’, to phrase it at a distance from emotion—would never come to fruition in the absence of one Albert Forquessas. But knowing that that would be the case, Ralf had painstakingly worked to ensure that capital punishment was not so readily frowned upon in this reshaped reality.

A slight smile curled Ralf’s lips—he had considered the notion that in truth he should be thanking this poor initiate for the actions that he would have taken some years hence, in a future not-to-be, as that act had been the only reason that Ralf had been enabled to careen lustily through these past centuries. But an expression of gratitude would certainly not do, of course, nor even be understood, and as for Ralf’s future endeavors—there were few limitations on how he might now direct the course of the all-powerful Prophecy. And though Ralf had never been a student of history, it was undeniable that he would soon cross over the timeline where he had ceased to exist in the disjointed future, and so would soon adventure into the genuine unknown. His smile broadened as a thrill quickened his heartbeat, and he nodded his satisfaction.

The red light pulsed brightly on the panel of dials and gauges, and as Ralf raised his hand toward the button the young man began to keen in a piercingly high warble. Ralf could not resist, just once, thwacking his scepter against the man’s skull—not enough to relieve the poor bastard of consciousness but enough to feel a meaty thud vibrate through the shaft clenched in his fist. As always a thrill coursed through him, and he bared his teeth in a nasty smile and raised the staff even higher for a second blow. But then he stopped, the sense of imminent closure weighing down. He sighed and pressed the button, and to the accompaniment of a sizzling electrical hum and dimming of lights the wailing abruptly ceased.

Ralf felt his hair rise in the charged air, and he began the process of restoration, pondering the mystery of his next pursuit. In the warm knowledge of trespasses both past and future he breathed deeply of the scent of charred flesh, and he smiled, building in the temple of his mind what would was to come.

**The End**

## The Roots of Fate

Ilian snorted and stamped a hoof, startling Shara under their shared harness, and the hulking Catoga wagon lurched forward a fair yard. From the rear bed of the wagon Jeeter shrieked.

*“Aiiieeee! It’s on me foot! Get it off! Get it offa me foot!”*

Durstan lifted a puzzled gaze from where the huge log had rolled off his wedge bar, and he peered at his friend overtop the section of trunk nearly the diameter of his full height.

*“Eh?”* he queried.

Jeeter’s eye’s were nearly popping from a beet-red face, and spittle sprayed from his lips.

*“Whaddayer mean ‘EH?’ It’s squarshin’ me toes like kernels on a grist-mill! Git it off! Do it Do it Do it NOW, ya freakin’ baboon!”*

Durstan dropped his tool and lurched into action, and Jeeter howled as his cohort clambered up the trunk and tumbled overtop. Durstan lumbered to his feet and darted his helpless stare from hand to empty hand, and Jeeter stabbed a finger at his own wedge bar, lying on the bed of the wagon out of his reach.

*“Use mine, ya sponge-headed lack-wit!”*

Durstan snatched up the shaft, jamming it under the log and bearing down hard, but the section of trunk barely shifted before rolling back and lifting him off his feet. Jeeter howled all the louder and slid his free foot as far back as he could, pressing his chest up against the trunk and spewing out a slew of curses half saved-up and half improvised. A revelation lit Durstan’s face and he shifted to hang bodily from the long pry bar, planting his feet against the trunk and thrusting mightily. In three building rolls back and forth, with Jeeter screeching and cursing at every reversal, the trunk finally gave it up and Jeeter flew backward, landing on his tailbone and sliding off the wagon. From his upside-down vantage Durstan watched Jeeter’s feet disappear over the tailgate, and he thudded to the floorboards as the log rolled off the his bar.

*“Jeeter?”* Durstan crept to cautiously peer over the tail of the wagon, and he flinched away from the flung handful of dirt and gravel.

*“Ya dim-witted scatterbrain—ya gots less smarts than a bucket a’ dirt!”* Jeeter rocked back and forth on the ground, both hands clamped around his throbbing foot. *“If ya had t’ make yer mark you’d puzzle over how t’ spell the letter ‘X’!”*

Durstan looked offended. *“You knows I knows no letters.”*

Jeeter shook his head, but a gravelly voice from the door of the nearby workshop cut short his retort.

*“Ah... I see that the ferrymen of buried mystery have made their way back to my desmesne. And so—what have you brought for me to reveal?”*

Jeeter rolled to his knees and scrambled upright, gingerly hopping on one foot while nodding his regards. *“H’lo, Master Haeg’scorn. How fare ye today, good S’ar?”*



Remus Haegerscorn chuckled and turned back to his shop, waving Jeeter and Durstan in behind.

### A Single Moon Previous

There was yet another light clattering at the window and the innkeeper finally looked up from where he stood polishing the railing of a mahogany bar burnished by decades of planted elbows. He scowled and reached for a broom, plodding heavily out from his bastion of amber liquors, sweet and pungent wines, and frothy draughts.

“Dim-damn jaybird,” he grumbled. “Sees hisself in the pane o’ glass, and decides they’s no room for both him *and* his struttin’, cock-rooster reflection.” He shook his head. “I jus’ cleaned those wind’rs—*jus’ last year.*”

He’d made his way halfway across the creaky tavern floor when Caleb LongShadow, peering intently to the window, raised a hand. “Hold on there, Beric.”

The innkeeper stopped, looking on in a puzzle as Caleb set down his stein and unfolded himself from the stool where he’d sat pondering whatever perplexity he was wont to study over. Caleb’s open long-coat fell into place mid-shank of his woodsmen’s boots, and it flowed with his purposeful stride to the window, his movement somehow reminiscent of a breeze through the leaves.

The jay ceased its animated attack on the pane of glass and turned its head sideways, training an eye on the approaching woods-sooth. Caleb pulled a chair up to the window and settled down, and the bird again began to chirp, hopping from one side of the ledge to the other and occasionally pecking or tapping at the glass with its beak.

Caleb sat with his chin planted in one hand, nodding from time to time, and after a lengthy listening he shook his head, pressing a breath out through pursed lips. “Those are grievous tidings indeed!”

The bird screeched and flapped its wings in apparent agreement, and Caleb turned to the innkeeper,

“Beric, best get word out to Jeeter and Durstan. We’ve a summons to attend to.”

### Remus Haegerscorn: WorxWood

The rough-hewn timber frame of the hoist creaked and moaned as Ilian and Shara strained against the harness, and the chain clanked and clattered where it wound tight over the series of pulleys. The massive section of tree, still wet with sap and weighing too much and more, swayed in the chain sling with the ponderous gravity of a boulder balanced atop an eroded pedestal. Jeeter’s lips were drawn around teeth jutting in curious misalignment, and as the massive piece clanked upward he edged further backward, unconsciously reaching out to tug Durstan along. Remus coaxed the carriage horses gently, jockeying the trunk into position, and when properly set he centered the massive double-spur bit of the lathe’s headstock on the trunk’s axis, and likewise slid the tailstock into position and locked it down. He spun the hand wheel in, pinning the piece between pincers, and when satisfied he cinched it all down, released the hoist mechanism and patted the horses away.

Jeeter marveled at the heft of the lathe, wondering at a device that looked capable of reducing a mountain down to a hummock. Durstan had been chewing his lower lip for

some time, and he shifted a quizzical gaze to Remus. “Why needs be we brung ya the *whole durn trunk*, when yer jus’ bound ta pare it almost all away?”

Jeeter horked and spat in the shavings. “Tryin’ ta ‘splain somethin’ t’ you is like hoistin’ a rusty bucket up from the well—water drains out jus’ as fast as it fills up. The answer is plain enuff, ya dimbulb, it’s simply a’cause... Well, it’s...”

Jeeter blinked several times, and looked sideways to Remus. “Why don’t you ‘splain ta this plain fool the how and why of it? I’m growin’ tired a’ repeatin’ myself.”

Remus smiled gently, and pointed to where the tailstock spur dug into the core of the tree, at the point where all the hundreds of spreading rings had banded down to a single point. “There—that is the pith of the tree, do you see? It’s the very core of its being, surrounded by dark heartwood and then softer sapwood. While the pith is not considered desirable when harvesting a tree for construction, our purpose here is quite different, and the core of this tree is essential to it. We seek the essence of the tree—that which has borne witness to grievous circumstances—and the process of turning away its outer armor is critical to manifesting its elemental strength, and some hint of its story. Any misstep and we are left with nothing but a reduced carcass, but when performed properly we will have coaxed the remaining spirit of the tree into revealing something of its plight, and we’ll be left with a distillation that might be returned to the site of the offense and renewed.”

Jeeter looked smugly to Durstan and nodded, as if he had just been validated, and Durstan pressed a finger against the bark of the tree. “Pifth?” he murmured.

Remus placed his palm on the cross-section of trunk and nodded to himself. “The wood is still quite wet—we should stream some fine tailings.” He hefted a large steel gouge and shooed the two young men to one side. The tool was a heavy, fluted shaft held fast in a long hardwood handle, and the light played off it in such a manner as to first lend it the appearance of gleaming platinum and then polished steel or even burnished bronze. Remus gave one more tug on the wheel of the tailstock and locked it down final, then pulled a visor down over his eyes and his great bush of a beard.

He looked to Jeeter and pointed to the stove, and Jeeter tugged on heavy leather gloves before swinging the stove door open and hefting several more shovelfuls of coal into the glowing maelstrom within. Remus threw some valves open and with a great whoosh and a progression of building chugs the steam engine began to turn the lathe. A rising whir filled the air as the massive section of trunk began to rotate between the two deeply-sunk end-bits. Slowly Remus dialed it up, lending the appearance of a log gaining speed rolling down a steep slope, and the trunk’s form turned into a blur of motion, with shadow images marking the high and low irregularities. Faster and faster Remus spun it up, until the huge lathe began to shudder out-of-balance, setting the tins and jars on the shelves to tinkling and rattling and the very floor under Jeeters’ feet to vibrating, and Remus quickly dialed the speed back down until the shaking ceased. He then eased a heavy tool-rest in closer until it was just outside the rotation of the trunk, and locked it down. The woodturner planted the open-fluted tip of his tool on the rest at just the right angle and braced the long handle against his rounded belly while planting both feet, and he shifted his weight forward, slowly, carefully, until a coarse chatter filled the air as the first bits of bark and then sapwood began to fly.

As the work progressed Remus shifted his hips and his shoulders, making multiple passes up and down the length of the trunk, and the harsh chattering gave way to a

constant hum as all the bark was sheared away and the shape turned true. Remus pivoted to the grinder to dress the gouges' tip, and he nodded and stepped back to his work, sliding the tool rest in colder. "Now she'll begin to tell her story," he murmured to himself.

The shavings began to fly in earnest; long coiling streams of wood that lifted in an arc from the sliding tip of Remus' gouge like a coil of rope that constantly came apart as it spun off its spool. Durstan's jaw hung slack, and Jeeter extended his open palm, allowing the arc of shavings to fill and overflow it.

"Stand back!" bellowed Remus, waving a meaty hand. "You'll spoil the continuity, and we'll be left with nothing for our efforts!"

Jeeter scampered backward, and with Remus' dark apron and wild bale of hair covered with curled shavings that looked disturbingly like earth worms churning freshly tilled soil, he turned back to his work.

The coils of wood peeled away in huge quantities, mounding on the floor in piles surely too large to have come from any single tree, and as the trunk was reduced in size its shavings turned a darker color when the gouge peeled away the last of the sapwood and took to the tree's heartwood. Jeeter abruptly caught his breath—the feeling of a presence washed over him, the intuition of an embodied aura, and he shivered as a chill coursed through from toes to fingertips. The trailing arc hung mid-air just a moment too long, as if held in suspension and struggling to take shape—a phantasm seeking to reveal itself under the streaming flow from the tip of Remus' tool.

The revelation was dark and somehow brooding, taking the vague form of a man. A cloaked man, it would seem, with its face mostly shielded from view under a brimmed cowl. Below the brim and the faceless void sloped wide shoulders, and as Remus tilted his gouge to redirect the flow the wet shavings seemed to better stick and mold themselves to the shifting divination. Details came into sharper focus.

Its hands were clasped before its chest, holding something. An object of medium size, globular in shape, and seeming to be pocked with cavities. Almost like the thumb sockets of a bowler ball. Or no.... rather a, a...

"*It's a skull!!*" shrieked Jeeter, jumping backward into Durstan and taking the both of them down into the piles of wet shavings. "A *what?!!!*" his friend screeched, and Jeeter struggled to wriggle himself out of Durstan's grip—a bear hug that forced the breath from his lungs. Durstan might be neither bright nor especially large, but he surely made up for it in muscle.

Jeeter finally got himself separated and rolled up onto his knees, gasping and wheezing, only to see the lathe spinning down, with Remus trailing his fingers along a slender shaft that was all that remained of the once massive trunk. And much like the greater mass of the tree, the haunting vision produced by its tailings was lost. Remus slid back the tailstock and released the narrow shaft, breaking off either pared end and shaving the nubs smooth with a chisel, and he held it up to his eye to sight down its length.

"It'll warp some as it dries," he said, holding it out to Jeeter, "but this is what Caleb will be needing." He raised his brow meaningfully. "Along with a telling of what you just saw from it."

Remus was looking at him closely, and Jeeter gulped and nodded once. He climbed shakily to his feet and reached out a trembling hand for the stave.

## Caleb LongShadow: Woods-Seer

Jeeter's toe caught on a root hidden in the layer of decaying leaves and pine needles, and he stumbled forward into Durstan. As always, his friend seemed as planted as a hardwood with its roots sunk deep. Durstan turned and planted a palm on Jeeter's chest and shoved hard, and Jeeter found himself testing the sponginess of the matted forest floor with the base of his spine. He scrambled to his feet, cursing and rubbing at his tailbone.

"Whatcher doin' shovin' me around like that, ya dunderhead?! This ain't no play-time at the schoolyard!"

Durstan's wild grin darkened. "You started it, now din't ya? Tried ta knock me down!"

Jeeter thrust out his chest and stepped forward, but before he could verbally launch into his clueless cohort he picked up on the stern gaze directed his way by Caleb. The air let out of his posture.

"*Err*, ya ding-dang melon-head," he mumbled, shuffling past Durstan's stony pose, "—he closes his eyes an' then wonders why he cain't see..."

Caleb had resumed his long stride, and Jeeter double-stepped to catch up. "How much farther we gots ta go, there, Caleb?" he queried, hop-skipping sideways in an awkward gait and peering hopefully up at the Seer.

Caleb paused and glanced to either side. You can see that the lower-elevation softwoods are thinning out now, yes? We're coming into the zone of the Mountain Ironwood, and by my reckoning the affected grove is not so far. And listen—" he stopped.

Jeeter tilted his head one way, and then another. He frowned. "What? I don't hear nuthin'."

"Exactly," said Caleb. "Why do we hear no sounds of the forest—no insects buzzing or birds chirping or critters scurrying through the brush?"

"Uh, 'cause our noisy traipsin' is scarin' 'em off?" Jeeter glared pointedly at Durstan, who didn't notice.

"That's part of it, perhaps," said Caleb. "But that's not all of it."

"*I* hear somethin'," said Durstan. "Or, more like, *I feel* it."

Caleb raised his brow appreciatively. "Very good, Durstan. I feel it also—just barely—in the soles of my feet. A low amplitude vibration," he thumped his stave on the ground, "as if a distant herd of leviathans tramples the earth."

Jeeter scowled. "I don't hear nothin'."

Durstan frowned. "Levi... lethivians?"

Caleb turned and resumed his stride, and in short time Jeeter had to admit that he could also feel the vibrations—increasingly so with every passing yards-length. He peered at the stave Caleb had slung across his back. "I still don't understand," he murmured. "We're goin' after some bad folk jus' fer cuttin' down a tree?"

Caleb shook his head grimly. "Not just a tree, my friend; we are speaking of the decimation of an entire *forest*. And not just any forest. This was virgin forest, legacy hardwood that had never been harvested—not by anyone's record. Old-growth, with the

history of the land held in its roots. There remains far too little of that nowadays, here in the Eastern Realm.”

Jeeter frowned. “But if this no-account had *rights* t’ the land, couldn’t he do pretty much whatever he had a mind to with it?”

Caleb nodded sadly. “That is, for the most part, true. But there are two issues that set this instance apart from any more common misdeed based in nothing but greed. The first and lesser point is that the land which hosted the forest was *not* owned by any individual, but in times long past had been deeded over to everyone and to no one, with the stipulation that it be permanently inhabited by no creature wielding language or tools, and that the only wood ever harvested from it would be that which had fallen from natural cause.”

Durstan nodded. “Sounds fair enuff ta me. Tain’t much land left that don’t bear the scars of a two-man timber-saw.”

“Aye,” said Caleb. “None at all, now, I’d venture. But beyond the urgency of that broken pact looms a considerably more dangerous prospect—one that would appear to involve the *Black Mage*.”

Jeeter jerked to a halt with his jaw hanging, and when Caleb didn’t pause he scampered forward to block the seer’s path. “*Caleb LongShadow*,” he whispered, wringing his hands, “you *knows* you’s not s’posed to say, ah... you knows it’s *bad* t’ say that name out loud!”

Caleb chuckled ruefully. “That is myth, Jeeter; there’s no harm in *speaking* of the Black Mage.” Jeeter cringed, clamping his hands over both ears. “The grave danger,” continued Caleb, “is of the *Mage itself*.” He stepped past, and Jeeter scrambled to catch up.

“*B-but...*,” he stuttered, “the... the *B-Black M-M-Mage* is long dead—*ain*’t it? Fer censtrarys... uh... fer cent-sterarys... *ah...* fer hunerds a years now?” Jeeter had forced the cursed name of the mage out past thinly stretched lips, and he felt ill to his stomach for it.

Caleb nodded grimly. “True enough—or so we’d thought. But the legend has lived on, as have rumors of resurgence.”

“Rumors o’ re-*what*?” piped in Durstan.

For once, Jeeter ignored his friend’s fool-headed question. He clutched at Caleb’s sleeve. “Whaddya *mean*, Caleb? What we’re doin’ here don’t have nothin’ to do with the *B-Black Mage*, does it? Cause there *ain*’t no *Mage* ta worry over, right?”

“Yes. Well, no. I mean, I don’t know. We approach Resolution Forest—or the remains of it—and that was the site of the final suppression of the Black Mage. There may have been only mage one by then; the accounts differ on that point. In any case, one or more of the last of the stygian sorcerers had taken refuge in the Forest, and that is where the Whites Knights of Calearn, aided by the magic of the white sorcerer Wirlis, tracked, and encircled, and finally, at huge cost, destroyed whatever remained of the nether Mage.”

“Res’lution Forest?” whispered Jeeter. “That’s where we’s goin’? Where the ground were soaked through wit’ blood and scattered wit’ bone? Where jus’ two o’ the comp’ny o’ Knights made it out alive, an’ even then lived hardly long enuff ta tell their tale?”

Caleb nodded grimly. “That’s where we’re going.”

Jeeter once again found himself planted in place, his feet wanting to slide backwards as if their path forward was a steep, muddy upslope. But in reality it was a very modest grade, and actually descending for the moment. Caleb strode purposely onward, with Durstan in tow and urgently gesturing for his friend to follow, and Jeeter gulped down what he dearly prayed was not one of his few remaining breaths and hustled to catch up.

The first clue beyond the odd vibration was a permeating stench, making Jeeter want to scrub at his nose and even consider a bath. It was not the stink of rotting carrion or of an open latrine trench, nor was it in fact any malodor that he could name. It did carry a strong suggestion of decay, though, and of great age. It festered with the cloying scent of someone who had teetered far too long at the brink of demise, whose cloudy eyes and wracked joints and bloody, toothless gums were good for nothing but pain and malaise.

There was also the sense of a blighted ruination, looming ever closer. The shadows became less deep even though no shafts of light cut through the forest canopy, and then the meandering game trail turned a corner and abruptly opened onto a very changed world. Jeeter trudged a few steps further and stumbled to a halt, not even noticing when Durstan bumped up behind.

The trees were gone, entirely; razed by what could be nothing but an instrument of depravity, with nothing remaining other than an occasional uprooted stump and a huge mound of ash and deep-glowing charcoal that smoldered in the center of the spreading atrocity. But perhaps even more astounding was the scattering of monstrous contraptions that lumbered over the churned soil, with plumes of black smoke roiling from their stacks; trundling track drives with rolling gouges that scooped loads of earth and stone and dumped them atop what would seem to be vibrating screens. Loose dirt and smaller debris fell through the sieves, and creatures that appeared to be over-sized and misshapen simians (if one did not look too closely) crouched around each screen platform, snatching larger rocks and roots and clods of dirt and flinging them away. While Jeeter watched dumbfounded one of the beasts snatched an item from the screen and began to chatter excitedly, and it scampered away to place whatever it had found in the hamper at the rear of the lumbering apparatus.

Jeeter's mouth gaped. "What... *are* those? And what are they doing?"

Caleb's gaze had fallen to the tilled soil. "They're contrived and driven by the Dark Arts; that's all we can be certain of. As to their *purpose*..." He knelt to sift through the loose soil, and he picked out a modest fragment of what looked like dark shale. He stood with it in his open palm, and a voice suddenly came from behind; a menacing rumble that even so seemed somehow lacking in substance. Jeeter squawked and spun in place.

"I see that you have found a sampling of what we labor here to recover," it intoned darkly, further loosening the sockets of Jeeter's knees. "It belongs to me in more ways than you might imagine—I would request that you relinquish it now."

A shadow had fallen over the scene, though the sun still rode high in a cloudless sky, and the being that had somehow emerged unnoticed from the forest was vaguely man-like in stature, though half-again too large. He, or *it*, was clothed, or draped or however it should be phrased, in what appeared to be an absorptive shroud that allowed no light to reflect from its surface. A textured shadow; it seemed to Jeeter that he looked into the abyss of a nightmare, his darker fears exposed and enveloping him so completely that not even a breath of air might penetrate.

It was difficult to look upon, literally; Jeeter found that he could see next to nothing when staring directly at it. He had to look to either side to capture it vaguely in his periphery. Everything about the vision was wrong, and seeming to shift in and out of wavering focus. A brimmed cowl—which at certain moments appeared more of a carapace—shielded its head, and beneath that a shadowy void revealed nothing other than the suggestion of eyes that held a great and mesmerizing power in their almond glow. Jeeter’s heart was banging at his ribcage; he thought it likely to his benefit that he was unable to look directly into those cold glowing eyes.

Caleb closed his fingers over the object and slipped the hand into a pocket, shrugging his shoulders as if he had no other choice in the matter. Jeeter thought that he must be imagining the scene; he couldn’t believe that the Seer appeared calm and composed—personally, he would have been halfway home if his legs hadn’t turned to water above lead anchors for feet. The vision elicited a strangely dark, compelling urgency in Jeeter’s chest; terror laced with desire, horror imbued with excitement. His eyes stung fiercely but he was unable to shut or even blink them.

“What has happened here?” asked Caleb mildly. “One of the Realm’s greatest treasures has been forever lost with the destruction of these ancient woodlands.”

The vision seemed to shimmer; perhaps surprised at the absence of fear demonstrated by this most presumptuous woods-sooth?

“The forest was of no consequence,” it rumbled, “when weighed against what lay hidden within. Surely even a base mortal such as yourself might intuit the magnitude of what he bears witness to? This marks the first perfect balance between the countering forces—the lull of darkness and the salve of light—since that day three centuries past when Blacke Sorcerer Alon Malagar was immolated. But what you would have no way of knowing is that Malagar’s demise was *purposeful*, his own choice, and that over the span since that moment Malagar has labored, in the formless Realm of the Dark Lord, to more effectively reshape himself in preparation for an ever greater rising—*on this very day*.”

Another chill rattled Jeeter as he realized that, unlike his perceptive problems regarding this denizen of the nether-world, he had no difficulty whatsoever looking directly upon the ape-like creatures. The huge tilling contraptions had chugged to a standstill and the shrieking, howling beasts had climbed down and were now converging like a band of toughs intent upon a good beating. His heart nearly seized when he got a good look at their glowing red eyes and the fangs protruding over their hairy muzzles. He tugged at Caleb but the sooth didn’t seem to notice.

“A greater rising, you say?” mused Caleb, shaking his head. “That is not normally accomplished by wasting the land. Has it not gone well for you so far?”

“Foolish human,” its chortle was like a receding thunderstorm. “You seek to goad me into revealing any smidgeon of knowledge that might be turned against my purpose? That is not an issue, for it no longer matters what you do or do not know, and if you hope that the small fragment of bone that you’ve secreted away will make a difference, let me assure you that it will not. I have already recovered more than enough of my mortal remains to fuel my new ascendance. There was only one *critical* finding,” he held up a blackened skull with open, mocking eye-sockets, “and I have possessed that for some time now. I have only continued the search to keep my nasty-tempered minions busy while awaiting the moment of actualization.”

Jeeter was certain that he'd seen something *move* within the empty skull, but how could he imagine to see a shadow within a void?

The beasts had now gathered around full-circle, and they darted in and out, teasingly, singly or in groups, grunting and screeching and thumping their fists on their chests and on one another. Jeeter's knees folded under his quavering weight but Durstan caught him from behind and stood him up on wobbly legs. Caleb reached into an inner pocket and withdrew a leather pouch, emptying the contents into one hand, and he spun in place, sending out a glittery arc in a circle around their position. The nether beast roared, and Jeeter clamped his hands over both ears and squinted through tearing eyes.

Suddenly they were surrounded by a circle of pale chimera, appearing as shadows on a reversed negative, and as the revenants swept outward the apelike creatures screeched and leapt away, catching at and running over one another in their haste to disappear into the falling darkness of the forest.

"You presume that by utilizing meager remnants of Wirlis' fair sorcery you will deter Alon Malagar from his resurrection?" snarled the apparition. "Think again, *fool*. You've come here with the apparent intent of warding off my resurrection, here to the apex of the Dark Arts, but the irony is that you have instead *facilitated* my quest." He bellowed out a laugh, and Jeeter grimaced at the thunderous aural barrage that literally pressed him backward.

"You see, *foolish man*, you are the last piece of the puzzle. My rebirth requires a death from the ranks of the Light, and as the Augury has foretold, you have come to be offered to the Dark Lord as my sacrifice, that I might again willfully herald his baleful prophesy!"

He swept his arms wide, sweeping a closing blanket of darkness over the scene, and Jeeter gagged on the worsening stench. He pulled a kerchief from a pocket and pressed it over his mouth and nose, and struggled to force his disconnected feet to run.

"Jeeter!" bellowed Durstan, and Jeeter darted his gaze to his friend, but Durstan was not looking at him, he was instead gawping at his own feet, his face contorted into a mask of sheer horror. Jeeter looked down, and with a vile, burning knot rising in his throat he realized that he was unsteady on his feet not only because his knees were clattering like a pair of castanets, but in large part because the very ground had come to life, with the tilled soil roiling with multi-tentacled, squirming, pincer-wielding slug-like creatures. They already covered his boots and were starting up his pant legs, and Jeeter screamed. He stamped his feet, shaking off a few of the slugs while most clung tight, and his stomach heaved at the squishy sensation under the soles of his boots. There was nowhere to run, since the ground as far as the eye could see was a greasy, undulating mass. The black-enfolded nether-beast had begun to sink into the soil, its thunderous laughter dropping the leaves from the trees in the forest behind, while Caleb stood rigid, either ignoring the slimy, clasping slugs that climbed his frame, or as Jeeter imagined, frozen stiff in fear.

"Even before you suffocate under their weight they will have been feeding upon you!" The beast roared. "They will ingest you, bite by tiny bite, and return you wholly to the soil, and then my cycle of ascendance will have come full circle!"

"Caleb!" shrieked Jeeter. "What do we do?!!! There's no where to run! Ow! OwOwOw! They're biting! Through my clothes! It hurts! Oh please Oh please Oh please Caleb do somethiiiiiiiiiiiiing!"



But Caleb stood unmoving. The howling demon continued to sink into the plowed soil, proclaiming how he would savor feeding upon their souls even as their mortal substance was being ingested and excreted, and only when the nascent Black Mage had fully subsumed himself did Caleb reach for his pants pocket, brushing and squashing away the centipedal creatures that clung there an. He pulled out the black piece of bone and raised it in one hand while raising the curled stave in the other, and he slammed the two together over his head. The clouds of pale chimera swept back out of the forest and enveloped his clasped hands, and Caleb cried out.

*“Fallen to ash and broken bone, never again to rise!!!”*

With both hands he plunged the stave deep into the soil and the chimera followed it to earth like a lightning strike, and a shock wave pulsed outward, as from the epicenter of a quake realigning the crust of the earth. The slug-like creatures’ purposeful movement was immediately transformed into spastic contortions, and a viscous green fluid began to seep and then pucker and burst all across the morass of writhing feeders.

Jeeter gagged from an unimaginable stench, his tongue swelling at the back of his throat and his vision blurred from a flood of tears, and the congealing green fluid burned his skin. *“Caleb!”* he shrieked. *“Durstan!”* He couldn’t see and his nostrils were filling; he could scarcely breathe and his heart was hammering too fast—he cried out and collapsed to his knees, sobbing, but a strong hand gripped his shoulder and another began smearing away the decomposing sludge from his face, and in short moments he was squinting up into the concerned eyes of Durstan.

“Y’ OK, huh, Jeeter?” queried Durstan, his own face smeared green and hideous but still a welcome sight.

Jeeter choked back a sob. *“Ah, ya soft-headed, sponge-hearted stooge,”* he croaked out, and he stood and pulled Durstan into an embrace so that his friend wouldn’t see him cry.

### **Black Mage: Requiem?**

Jeeter plodded dripping wet out of the pond, tossing away the smooth flat of sandstone that had left his skin pink and tingling from the good scrubbing he’d just given it. He swiped off the excess water and pulled on his wrung-out trousers and jerkin, and slumped down beside the glowing camp-fire. Durstan was still splashing around in the water and singing some nonsense song, while Caleb sat across the fire pit.

Jeeter released a great sigh. “So. They’re finished for good now—the *Black Mage*.” He felt relieved to make that proclamation, and felt more comfortable speaking the cursed name aloud now that the Mage was good and done for.

Caleb raised a brow and peered at him thoughtfully, and Jeeter was suddenly not so confident. “I can’t really say for certain,” mused the woods-sooth. “I’d surmise that at the very least we’ve dealt Blacke Alon Malagar a devastating blow, and perhaps it *was* terminal. But did you notice, as we left, that a tiny sprout had come out from the driven stave, with the beginning of a first leaf?”

“Yah!” shouted Durstan from the pond, splashing water with both hands. “We’s replanted the start o’ the Res’lution Forest!”

Caleb grinned gamely. “That may be so. But *any* sign of life, coming from that plot of earth at that moment in time...” He shook his head and sifted his fingers through the

cooling ashes. “I just don’t know what it means...” he murmured softly, and Jeeter gulped and felt his skin prickle.

**The End**

## A Second Rising

They stood at the façade of one of the few structures still having substance enough to continue its fall to ruin. They'd come a fair distance out from the habitation zone, far enough into the hinterlands that there was the very real chance of being caught out, but even so, Stedder found himself drawn to this escape from the mindless drone of the ghetto. The feeling of open space was liberating, exhilarating, fully unburdened of the sordid crush of a population packed so tightly in squalor. He had persuaded Nyreea to accompany him, promising her a lonely drama, and emboldened by her acceptance he had ventured out farther than ever before.

Now Stedder craned back his neck, stirring mixed emotions over this rare opportunity to view the trappings of an advanced technology. He knew it existed, certainly—it was commonly spoken of, even if only in hushed whispers—but his people were carefully shielded from the potential empowerment of knowledge. That was how he saw it, anyway, though not everyone agreed. He and Nyreea would certainly not be witnessing this had they not violated the quarantine, as what they witnessed here would be below the horizon of ShantyTown, and with hill country in between.

They were still far from it, but even at a distance he could feel the rumbling in the ground and the waves of thunder pulsing on his skin. The four great booster rockets lit the daytime sky as it lofted its live cargo above a landscape scoured barren by centuries of misuse, and when he cast a sideways glance at Nyreea the image of the soaring craft remained burned across his vision. He blinked it away.

Nyreea's lips moved as if in silent prayer, and when she became aware of his gaze she looked to him, frustrated yearning etched clearly across her face. "Can you not help but wish that was *us*, Stedder? Finally gaining Elder status and breaking free from this place-holder of a life?"

Stedder snorted and shook his head. "Off to a rejuvenated life among the Viirin? I don't understand how you and the others can buy into that delusion, Nyreea. How could we expect to excel in an advanced culture, when we've lost whatever special capabilities we might have had before the Viirin 'Salvation', centuries past? And don't you wonder why the Viirin would want, or even tolerate, the imposition of what they clearly consider a lesser species on their precious home-world?"

It pained him to see the brightness dim from Nyreea's eyes, but Stedder could not repress his dark vision. "It's probably a slave ship, you know; taking the Elders to forced labor in the mines on some obscure, scarcely-habitable outpost. Or they're being fed as expendable fodder into some abominable, never-ending war." He shook his head. "Or maybe they're just dumped into open space, so the Viirin are rid of too many mouths to feed." He absently fingered the small chunk of AlGro cake in his pocket. "Not that this pseudo-algal gruel they feed us might actually constitute 'food'."

The thundering of the rockets lessened with altitude, and Nyreea let her gaze fall to the ground. "Why must you always be so negative, Stedder? We *must* retain hope—

especially when there's little else to hold on to. Ancestral religions may have evolved from superstition, but they proffer spirituality and good will through times both good and bad." She looked up to hold his gaze. "Why *not* cling to hope, Stedder? If it is truly as you claim, and there will be nothing for us beyond this miserable clod of dirt orbiting a slowly dying sun, then why do we even bother with such a meaningless existence?"

Stedder cursed under his breath and scuffed at the dry scabble with his toes. "I'm sorry, Nyreea. I know my tirades upset you. But I simply know of no other way to see our circumstance. Yes—I would like to think that one day I will live a meaningful life. But..." he gestured at the ruins they crouched in, "Look at us. Scurrying like rats for any crumb, hunkered down in the rubble of what was once great in our civilization, bowing to inhuman 'masters' who treat us like a nuisance to be penned up; out-of-sight, out-of-mind." He gestured to the disappearing vapor trail overhead. "I wish that was *them*, Nyreea—the Viirin. *All* of them, rocketing away to forever leave us to fend for ourselves. *That* might lend us real reason for hope."

"Stedder," began Nyreea tiredly, but her eyes suddenly flashed wide, focused over his shoulder. His stomach took a sickening lurch as he sensed what must be happening, but before he could react a noose looped over his head and tightened around his throat, followed by a hand clasping his shoulder. The fingers were strong, amazingly so for such slender digits. And very pale; almost translucent.

"Your piteous complaints are annoying, hooman—most would deem it highly offensive."

Stedder could not help but recognize the tonal quality of the voice; the rounded vowels and the soft syllables. *A Viirin!* Being caught so far outside the ghetto bounds spelled serious trouble. He pried his fingers under the noose to ease its constriction enough that he might breathe, and he carefully turned in place.

There were two of them, armed with laserswords and holstered scatterguns. They were taller than an aearthling, but basically humanoid in body configuration. Their pallid complexions were totally void of warmth, but that lack of color was more than made up by their eyes—vibrant red corneas split by black pupils of a crescent shape.

"Yours is a *serious* breach, hooman. You know that crossing the boundary of your habitat is expressly forbidden."

Stedder focused on the speaker and stifled the urge to respond logically, suppressing the observation that even had they wanted to, there was nothing that he or Nyreea might do that could be construed as mischief—not out here in the midst of nothing. But knowing that such an explanation would not satisfy the Viirin, he lied, hoping to better their chances.

"We... we were searching for food, chasing a rat. That is allowed, is it not? The vermin crossed the boundary and we followed it, thinking we could catch it quickly and return before our absence was noticed." The latter claim should be believable enough, as nobody was monitored inside the ghetto. "We were distracted by the launch of the outbound craft," he continued lamely, pointing to the sky. "I'm sorry."

The Viirin smiled—a contemptuous expression—and when Stedder looked upon all those small sharp teeth crowded together in a protruding mandible, he was uneasily minded of the rat he claimed to have chased.

The Viirin gave a tug on the noose and Stedder stumbled forward. "I think you *lie*, hooman."

A fair portion of the Viirin language had been translated by the hoomans, but in mixed company the ‘Caretakers’ tended to speak a bastardized Aenglish rather than the revered mother tongue. The second Viirin abruptly stepped forward to seize their right wrists, turning them up to expose their pale undersides.

*Damned saints, that thing moves fast!*

The first Viirin swept a scanner over their arms, over the implanted and updatable ID chips, and the apparent leader of the pair turned his thin smile to Nyreea. “The female shows no previous infractions. That is good; but you should remember that the next time you are scanned, this incident will show.” His demeaning smile fell away as he turned to Stedder. “This one, however—I see three previous counts against. Many among my colony would number this fourth affront as grounds for imprisonment. Do you understand that?” It pressed its lipless mouth into a tight line, and Stedder held his breath and tried his best to cower convincingly—not really so hard to do.

“HmMMM. Count yourself lucky today, *hooman*. Your issues have been minor, and I haven’t the desire to bother with processing this infraction. I will give you one last chance. Bear in mind that rogue imprisonment is a serious matter—you would relinquish all privileges and be set to labor in the culture vats. Most *perish* there. You would do well to take my warning seriously—we do not typically track anyone’s movement within their assigned zone, but we can, and do, easily monitor border violations.”

Stedder nodded his game face, grimly determined to hold his tongue. “I thank you for your kindness; I will do as you say.”

The second Viirin scowled, as if irritated with his compatriot’s magnanimity, but silently raised his lasersword and pointed back toward the ghetto. Stedder took one last glimpse of the surroundings—a grim sampling of ‘freedom’—and fell in behind Nyreea as she plodded woodenly back toward their loose confinement. Stedder hung his head, watching the scorched soil rise as dust with his every step, and he wondered at the futility of life.

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Nyreea had vowed to never again make the mistake of wandering beyond the restricted bounds of ShantyTown, but *this* walk she took daily, making her way around the inside perimeter of the ghetto, intent upon reminding herself of what it was that she’d escape in the not-so-distant future. This was how she steeled herself for that momentous voyage, how she distracted any doubt that might nibble at her courage.

As with all other streets throughout ShantyTown, this particular stretch was lined with monotonous, ramshackle hovels; crowded shoulder to shoulder like the lame and decrepit huddled in the food line. The shacks were cobbled together from whatever scrap the Viirin might occasionally dump from their hovering loader-platforms at varying locations throughout the ghetto. Wood was rarely included anymore, because its source had reportedly become very scarce planet-wide. The loads of scrap dumped most often comprised various types of synthetic material and pressed composites, occasionally a bit of battered and rusty sheet metal or scraps of fabric. Once the Viirin had exhausted an item’s value they would bring it here or to one of the other ghettos, in effect to their dumping grounds, and leave it for the hoomans to try to make some use of.

And the hoomans would do just that. But as there was no space for anything *new* in ShantyTown, and vertical construction was impossible given the resources at hand, they'd typically just patch or prop or partition their teetering shacks, struggling to extend the grim serviceability of what little they had. Each project would be plotted in excessive detail and the participants would argue and reconsider and revamp, mostly because aside from maintaining the squalor they lived in and occasionally being compelled to perform the more dangerous or distasteful servicing tasks at one of the Viirin compounds, the hoomans had little else to occupy their time.

Nyreea edged past a game of kick ball where the only goal seemed to be to pelt one's opponent, that essentially comprising every other player. It was a safely mindless game, requiring little intellect or concentration or strategy. The Viirin did not approve of any pastime requiring clever or constructive thought, and so were careful to provide no enabling materials in their offloads of trash.

Waving away a cloud of the tiny, biting dust-flies that plagued the ghetto, Nyreea turned up 'North Street' to loop past the northern gate. She had so-named this street only because she had a compulsion to know all things by their name, but for most everyone else this street, just like every other street, was best not pondered at length.

Suddenly Nyreea realized that she'd been so deep in rumination that she'd not noticed a rising commotion, and she looked around to see people ducking into their shelters as the lumbering north gate began to swing open. With everyone else dodging out of sight she would be the focal point of whatever was entering the ghetto, in a locale outside her assigned zone! In a rising panic she turned to run for cover, but was frozen in place by a strident voice that echoed throughout the surrounding blight.

"You there—*female!* Stay your place!!"

Nyreea's knees turned to mush as she pivoted to the pair who crossed the threshold into the ghetto; and when she recognized their garb she sucked in her breath and a cold fist tightened around her heart. Two Silver Hoods of the Just Penance—those who preach *Least Tolerance!* The cloaked and hooded Viirin strode purposefully forward and the first seized her wrist and twisted it to scan her biotag. The slotted black pupils of its eyes dilated.

"Yes! I thought that I recognized you! From just a few days past, out scavenging *well* beyond your habitat." Its eyes narrowed. "Just what are you up to now, ummm? This time you are outside your assigned *internal* sector."

Nyreea's heart fluttered. "But, that's not—I mean, nobody..." She pressed her lips shut. She could hardly tell them that no one abided the sector restrictions internal to ShantyTown, even though the Viirin were surely well aware of it. "I... was just... walking, for exercise," she whispered.

The Viirin glowered down upon her, and she trembled under its baleful stare. "A firm example must be set here, to demonstrate to all that they *will* conform, or suffer dire consequences!" It paused, and then a sly smile parted its thin, chalky lips. "What of your confederate from three days past, hmmm? He would make for a better example, don't you think? Lead us to him, hooman, and I will release you to scurry back to your burrow."

Nyreea opened her mouth, and closed it. How could she tell them anything about Stedder? He was a close friend. "I know nothing of that male," she lied, her voice quaking. "We were together only... because we chased the same rat."

The Viirin's eyes flashed anger and it bared its teeth, and a whimper escaped Nyreea's lips as she saw the second Viirin draw a strap-manacle and leash from within its robes. The presumed male seized both her arms, pressing her wrists through the strap and cinching it painfully tight, and Nyreea was certain that she saw depraved glee in the creature's eyes.

"Very well," said the female curtly. "If that is how you would have it, your example will serve well enough."

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Stedder sat splayed in the shade of his shack, listlessly waving away the irksome dust-flies, when he became aware of a group of near-elders bustling up the street, some from his cadre and others that he did not recognize.

The near-elders were the closest thing there was to internal governance in ShantyTown; it was never thought odd that there were no true adults here in the ghetto, because it had always been that way. Nyreea would dreamily repeat the Viirin platitude that explained it away by proclaiming that the young were rewarded upon reaching adulthood by being 'graduated' to a 'new life' on the mother planet. Stedder would scoff at that suggestion, wondering what exactly it was that they graduated from, and more to the point what they ascended to. He would also posit the likelihood that it had not 'always' been this way, because he truly believed in the folk tales that spoke of a time when hoomans lived independent on Olde Aearth, when the Viirin were as yet unknown.

But the hoomans were allowed no written history, and so it was by word of mouth only that their record was passed down. There were those among them who, throughout the generations, took it upon themselves to memorize the stories and pass them along to successive memory-tellers, but Stedder always wondered how much the story might change with each retelling. Some of the lore seemed just too implausible to believe, including, in his opinion, their 'salvation' at the hands of the Viirin.

Now Stedder recognized Plaf at the head of the approaching group, and he clambored to his feet. Spotting no other point for their focus, he was surprised that the near-elders seemed to be headed straight for him.

"Plaf, what is it?" he asked as they came in range.

Plaf gripped his shoulder. "It's Nyreea. A pair of the silver-hooded *'stards* entered the northern gate earlier today, likely seeking out *anyone* as a target. One of them recognized Nyreea from an encounter just a few days past, and demanded that she tell them the whereabouts of her accomplice."

Stedder swiped a hand down his face, feeling a cold sweat flush out. "That would have been me," he said softly. "Nyreea and I were caught out in the hinterlands. It had been my idea. They surprised us there, and the lesser of the pair was clearly angered that I was not taken away for punishment."

Plaf nodded. "I suspected as much, but Nyreea would tell them nothing."

"They took her instead of you, Stedder," said Jamiah in a resigned tone. "They claimed that she fostered dissent, and they bound her and drug her away. I don't think they really cared who they took, they simply wished to be seen dispensing their 'righteous' penance."

Stedder shook his head, feeling dark emotions well in his chest. “So, what do we *do*? We can’t allow them to simply take whoever they want, whenever they want!”

Sharana laughed; a bitter, poisonous humor, and she spat in the dusty roadway. “What will we *do*? Why, we’ll do exactly as we always have, and that would be *nothing*! There’s nothing of consequence we might do to influence the Viirin; they see our young as creatures with an overlong development cycle, and are likely resentful that they must care for us until we come of age.”

Others of the group began to protest, but Sharana raised her voice. “Do *not* forget that for each of us—the ascending near-elders—our time draws near. If we were to instigate trouble now, if we were to attempt to thwart the Viirin Caretakers, would we soon—would we *ever*—depart on the ascendance that we’ve awaited our entire lives? I think we *all* know the answer to that question!”

Some piped in, echoing Sharana, while others protested, and the entire episode devolved back into the heated, aimless argument that Stedder had seen played out time and again.

*As Sharana suggested, Stedder fumed, they will do nothing.* A black anger descended over him and he pivoted and began to stride away, but was pulled up by a hand on his shoulder.

“*Stedder!*” hissed Plax. “What are you going to do?”

“*I* am going to... I’m—” He shook his head. “I don’t *know* what it is that I’ll do—not yet. But if there is a Hell, I’ll be damned to it if I do *nothing*.” He smiled, a mirthless expression. “A harsh ending to a bitter existence.” He swept his arms open. “Look around you, Plaf. Nyreea spoke of hope, Sharana of ‘a new life beyond’. I see oppression with a dark purpose. Which view do your surroundings support?”

Plaf leaned away from Stedder. “I don’t know. Neither, maybe. But this... *intrusion* does feel wrong. And it could have been any of us.” He stirred the dirt with his toes. “You’re going to go after her, aren’t you? Try to take her away from the Viirin?”

Stedder nodded grimly. “I have no choice. I’ll likely die in the attempt, but even in the unlikely case that the Silver Hoods didn’t catch up with me in ShantyTown, it’s not so long before I’ll also be an ‘ascendent’ Elder, and the Viirin would then come to take me away with all the rest.” He shook his head. “I’m *not* going! I’ll never board that vessel.”

Plaf touched him lightly. “Stedder, have you thought this through? Even if you were able, somehow, to take Nyreea away from the Viirin—what then?”

Stedder nodded to some vague destination, far beyond the bounds of the ghetto. “Out there. The stories say the distances are vast, and uninhabited by either hoomans or the Viirin.” He gazed intently at Plax. “We survived on our own, once, I’m sure of it. Why not once again?”

Plax sighed. “That is an appealingly idealistic desire, but appallingly unlikely. The land might once have supported—what was it called... agerculter? The growing of food—plants that could be eaten? But look now,” he scuffed his feet in the dirt, stirring the dust. “Even if you knew how, and what, to grow—what could possibly be grown here? Water is essential to agerculter, so the stories say, and the Viirin maintain total control of the water in their vast reservoirs, releasing it to our well fields sparingly.”



Stedder shook his head stubbornly. “I’d wager that they don’t control it all, not across the entire planet. The stories tell of spots where the landscape is not so barren, where water falls from the sky and stands in pools to be used at will.”

Plax snorted. “I’m surprised to hear that from you—the one who dismisses the old tales as mythology.”

“Not *all* of the old tales,” insisted Stedder. “Only those based on empty words, those foisted upon us for the sole purpose of manipulation.”

Plax sighed again. “All right, let’s say there actually is some place on the planet where it’s possible to live off the land, and that you were able to get there, and learn enough to survive.” He peered hard into Stedder’s eyes. “What of the Viirin? They don’t track us individually inside any of the ghettos, but they can overlay the signal from our biotags on their map-charts and spot any hooman outside the bounds of ShantyTown.”

“That’s not the leading issue,” said Stedder, shaking his head even while understanding that Plax made a very compelling argument. But Stedder had a vague plan, and by his reckoning a failed attempt was better than a loss with no effort expended. “The first question is; how do I get to Nyreea, inside the Viirin compound? I can scarcely walk up and rap on the door. Maybe in the dark I might find someplace to climb in over the walls?”

Plax let his gaze fall, seeming to consider the bit of nothing at his feet, and then raised his eyes back to Stedder. “I should not tell you this, but I’m certain that you’ll try to get in anyway, one way or another.”

Stedder cocked his head. “What, Plax? What should you not tell me?”

“Do you remember a couple years ago; the Viirin needed labor to dredge some of the sedimentation in their sewage system?”

Light dawned in Stedder’s eyes, like the sun after a wind-storm.

“They needed someone strong, but small,” continued Plax, “to be able to clamber through the channels and wield a shovel and barrow. You might remember that that was *me*.”

“Yes,” said Stedder softly. “I know where the outflow grates are. It makes sense that the sewer lines would pass throughout the compound. Unintended and unattended access to the fortress.”

“It’s a very old structure,” said Plax, “with the lowest section comprised of cells—like the dungeons of old that the Caretakers claim they saved us from. It’s probably not guarded at all—it wasn’t when I was working there—because what do the Viirin need to defend themselves against here on Olde Aearth?”

Stedder nodded eagerly. “Yes! That’s the answer! We can enter at the grate and pass through the sewer lines, and...” His voice trailed off as he watched Plax shake his head.

I won’t be going with you,” said Plax quietly. “I’m sorry, but I won’t risk my life for a cause that I’m not at all sure of. But—I can tell you how to proceed once you’re in.”

Stedder gulped, and nodded.

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The stench was horrific, worse even than the latrine pits in ShantyTown. He strained at the metal grate, and put to work the short iron bar he’d managed to secret out of the ghetto. He’d had no recourse but to steal the piece, as iron in any form was extremely

valuable, and prohibited in the human habitats. He found a crevice to pry it into, and he worked and worked the leverage until he could pull the grate out enough to force in a rock to prop it open. He bunched his muscles and tugged the grating further and further out, and finally it tipped and fell in the dirt with a muffled thud. He held his breath, listening.

After long moments with no sound rising above his pounding heart, he turned to peer into the opening. It rose at a minimal grade, with a thin flow of effluent coursing out over a layer of sludge. He stepped in, willing his eyes to adjust to the dark. There were smaller venting grates to either side, letting in just enough light to see by. He began shuffling forward, hands pressed to either wall and feet slipping and catching. There were constant sounds of skittering ahead and behind and all around, and when he could see just a little from the faint light of a side grating he could make out the forms scrambling through their domain-by-possession. *Sewer rats*. Any that had survived the failed extermination were hardy mutants, and evidence here pointed to a very prospering subterranean population. He gritted his teeth and forged on.

He counted off the overhead grates, as Plax had told him, and after four he turned left where the channel branched, and after two more came to his target. He stood below the overhead grate, looking up, and he mustered the will to start the short climb up, the heavily rusted and flaking rungs of the ladder chafing even his calloused palms. Just below the grate he pressed his face close and squinted to peer through, and seeing and hearing nothing he came up another step, his head down and his shoulders pressed up against the iron weight. He surged up against it, again and again, and finally with a supreme effort it pinged and crunched and lifted free. He carefully rose and turned to sit while bracing the hinged piece from clanging back down, and once he'd lowered it carefully back into place he squatted, breathing hard, peering all around the dimly lit surroundings.

He was outside the cell block.

He padded softly along the bank of enclosures—they were all empty, with heavy wooden doors standing open. Then he came to one that was closed, with a heavy iron deadbolt thrown. He studied it, lifting the tang and sliding the bolt back. He pressed open the door, and there, huddled on the floor, was a cowering bundle of rags, its head tucked between its knees and quivering.

“*Nyreea?*” whispered Stedder.

The head snapped up. “St... Stedder? How... How can you be here? They’ve taken you as well? I’m sorry, I told them nothing, I—”

Her voice hushed as Stedder slipped down beside her on the floor and placed a finger to her lips. He smiled—bravely, he thought.

“No *Nyreea*,” he whispered. “I came in through the sewer lines. I’ve come to free you.”

Her lips began to tremble, and she flung her arms around his neck, hugging him fiercely and sobbing into his shoulder. But after a few moments she pushed herself back and stared at him, doubt clouding her eyes.

“But Stedder, they’ll *find* you here! They’ll pick up the signal from your—” Her eyes had fallen to his forearm, and she stared at the bloody rag tied there. He held up the short iron bar, one end of which he’d ground an edge upon, and *Nyreea* began to cry quietly.

“Stedder, you cut the tag out? You’ll be punished horribly when they find out what you’ve done. They will... you’ll...” Her voice faltered to a stop.

“Nyreea, it doesn’t matter now, I’m already marked. They would have taken me earlier today if they’d found me; it’s just a matter of time.” He put a hand softly to her cheek. “Just as it is for you, I fear.”

Her eyes implored him to say otherwise, but also reflected her realization of the harsh truth of his words. She hung her head and spoke in a teary voice. “There was a boy here when they brought me in,” she said, very softly, “in a nearby cell. I didn’t recognize him, he was from another ghetto—*DownsTown*, I think he said—and we whispered through the bars. He was very frightened, of course, but when they came for him he pretended he wasn’t afraid. He stood up to them, demanding his privileges. They told him to be silent and he didn’t; he began to yell at them, cursing. His voice got louder and louder until he was screaming. I was frightened and I covered my eyes—and then there was a muffled, thudding sound, and another, and then silence. Nothing but... nothing but the sound of a dead weight being drug across the floor.” She gripped his shirt in both fists. “Stedder, I think they *killed* him! Just as easily as that!”

Stedder nodded grimly. “I’m afraid that does not surprise me. Look, Nyreea, bite down on this scrap of softboard, and avert your eyes if you prefer. I’ve got another strip of cloth for a bandage. I’ll cut out your tag, and then we must *go!*”

Staring down at the stone floor and sobbing quietly, Nyreea began to shake her head no, then stopped. She lifted her gaze, and the raw despair in her eyes tore at Stedder’s heart.

“It has to be this way, doesn’t it? There will be no... no glittering new life for you or I now, no hand of providence extended.” She paused some moments, and visibly seemed to regain strength, or at least resolve or acceptance. “Stedder? If you really believe the Viirin are so terrible, should we try to learn more, something to take back to the near-elders?”

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Padding softly on calloused soles they climbed a flight of stairs to a second level. Multiple floors; so much fully-sheltered space—new experiences they would have deemed marvelous under very different circumstances. Now Stedder became aware of something else: *new smells!* Not the rank and bothersome odors they were acclimated to, but fascinating scents, smells that made Stedder’s mouth water and his empty belly growl.

There was a gaping passageway off to one side of the chamber they now skirted, with a rounded glow of light falling from the arched entry, and they cautiously made their way to it, hunkering down behind a broad column in the corridor beyond. Stedder edged his face around to squint from behind the pillar, and he sucked in his breath and forgot to exhale.

The chamber was lit well, not just by the cool glow-rods but also by torches and a crackling fire pit. A great table was set—a weighty, hulking piece—arrayed with all manner of steaming platters and bowls, bottles and carafes, bounteous platefuls and chalices kept mostly full. Multiple Viirin, tall and thin and pale as fleeting wisps of cloud, continuously circulated the room, refilling goblets and ladling gravies and spooning

oddly shaped items that Stedder had never before seen the like of but which he imagined to be food, possibly grown from the ground?

A glorious meal, it would seem—served to the apparent Dark Lords of the Netherworld.

Around the table sat a half dozen of what Stedder might assume to be Viirin, if not for a build and countenance very far removed from anything that he'd ever laid eyes upon. The more familiar creatures, those who now circulated the room in apparent servile duty, were slender, pasty complexioned beings, but these six were massive—and familiar as Viirin only by eyes that reflected the light nearly as red as the glowing coals in the fire pit. They were of a dark umber complexion, like that of dried blood, with bony overhung brows and widely spaced nostrils. They wore flowing black trousers but their upper torsos were bare, revealing corded bands of muscle under gleaming skin and broad chests perhaps thrice the girth of their attendants. Most deeply disturbing, though, were their teeth—more like fangs, really—with a pair, a long curved rear and a shorter front, protruding from either side of the upper jaw.

“*Look!*” whispered Stedder at Nyreea’s ear. He jabbed a finger toward one side of the chamber, where an uncharacteristically docile Viirin stood attentively turning a long spit over the glowing fire pit. A creature was skewered on the slowly turning spire; a relatively thin torso, with longish legs and arms trussed in to prevent their dangling into the flames licking up from below. The body had been disemboweled and the spit rammed through lengthwise, emerging at either end of the spine, and the head was wired tight to the shaft just below where the top of the skull had been cut away and the brain removed. The mouth was forced open with some charred object wedged within, and its eyes had either been removed or had simply burned away.

Droplets fell from the roasting creature into the fire below, sizzling and sending up spiking flames and whiffs of aromatic smoke, and Nyreea squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head into Stedder’s chest. Stedder had to force his locked gaze away from the spit, and was further horrified to realize that he could guess the source of the steaming, bulbous lump of soft tissue that was being cut into small bite-sized chunks at the main table.

“*Damnation,*” whispered Stedder shakily. “*That’s... a hooman.*” His senses opened up to the rich scent, stirring some primal lust; he licked his dry lips while salivary glands flooded his mouth. It smelled... so amazingly *good* to someone who never knew anything but a dull, aching hunger. It overwhelmed his senses, he could somehow even *taste* it, and he bent forward and fought to not gag on the bile that rose in his throat.

One of the creatures began to speak in a deep grating voice, and Stedder pressed a fist to his mouth, straining to concentrate on its words.

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Zar, the Alpha Prime, was very pleased with this turn of circumstances, and he let that show in his uncharacteristically benevolent manner. He drained the goblet, feeling it course through his system—so much more enervating than any common grain or fruit-based liquor. Bloodwine was one of the few perquisites of this backward planet where he’d had to endure the seven earth centuries since his initiation into the Primacy.

One of the female Viirin pushed a wheeled cart bearing a small cask, and as she leaned in to refill his goblet Zar reached out to gently smooth a hand over her rounded belly. She stiffened, as if alarmed or incensed but still terrified of making any misstep, and Zar smiled. Even in his charitable mood, it was vastly pleasing to be so feared.

“You should not be serving tonight, Ilyara,” he growled amiably, “You should instead tend to your growing brood. Take a place at the attendant's table and send in one of the other females. Fetch one who is not with child, and tell her that rest will come for her when she's taken my seed to grow.”

Ilyara smiled uncertainly and scurried away to an adjacent chamber, her departure followed by the basso chortling of the gathered coven primes. When the mirth had dwindled away, Draded, on Zar's right hand, spoke up.

“Alpha Prime—you have called us in from the outlying covens for a specific purpose?”

Zar nodded, and motioned for the Viirin at the spit to begin serving. When the steaming plates began to arrive he tore off a chunk of meat and chewed messily, nodding his satisfaction, and as the others fell to their plates he spoke around a mouthful.

“You are correct, Draded, I do indeed have tidings of great merit. It is with pride and pleasure that I announce that an *entire wing* of harvest vessels has been launched from the provisionary holding planet. I expect them to arrive here in twenty Earth day-cycles.” He paused, watching the reactions on the faces of his primes, satisfyingly bemused at their wide-eyed astonishment.

“Alpha Prime!” gulped Ruden, holding a forgotten, charred thigh in his taloned grip, “A full wing, you say? What does this mean?”

“A number of concerns and opportunities coalesce,” rumbled Zar, “such that our Guiding Council has elected to refocus our efforts.” He waved an arm to include the small group, “As you well know, our take from this planet continues to dwindle. Some say it is because the hooman spirit is broken, and with that goes the reproductive surge, while others insist it is because they are dull and witless creatures no longer led by the fiercely theological tenets that they held to before exposure to our reality. Another concern, somewhat contrary to the first, is that there is increasing unrest and discord surfacing among the creatures once removed from their home planet. Even in the tight confines of the stocking pens, they manage to plot and to distract; to even revolt. They are, of course, unable to make anything of such efforts, but their actions are distracting to the handlers and tiresome in terms of resource utilization. Why—there is even a surging effort among a cross-pen grouping to destroy themselves, before the slaughter, via a home-brew poison that renders their consumables useless!”

Zar's voice had risen with that last affront, and he calmed himself. “It is not an especially serious issue, really, but you know how the Council watches and worries over such matters.” The primes gathered around the table nodded knowingly, as the Council, in their cosseted home-world privilege, were always watching for means to justify their continued selection.

“So that is the *first* of it,” continued Zar, “—concern over the continued viability of this harvest point. But,” he smiled broadly, “that is not the *most* of it.”

The coven primes leaned in now, intent; their half-finished meals momentarily forgotten.

“One of our OutRanger groups has discovered a new source, previously undetected behind a dead star, in a solar system in an opposite quadrant of the galaxy. A very fertile world exists there; with a prolific species of humanoids who so closely match our needs that some on the Council believe that it is truly Divine Providence!”

That drew a brief chuckle or two, but Zar’s dinner guests were truly focused now, as it had played out in his species’ early chronology, when individual hunt had been so very critical. Zar whimsically decided to play his audience, pausing to strip the meat from a limb and holding the plate out for a scurrying Viirin to refill. He took another savoring swallow from his chalice, and patted his belly when satisfied that his guests had waited long enough.

“From what I’ve been told, this newly discovered species, who call themselves umers, is much more docile and herd-like than even the hoomans. They seem to have no history of war or personal violence, and seem to not even realize that such might exist elsewhere. They even have a complementary relationship with a lower-level species on the planet, whereby adults of the latter willingly offer themselves up as food, so that they might procreate via the biogens in the digestive systems of their consumers.” Zar clapped a hand on the table. “Is that not a *perfect* irony? From the scat of the conqueror rises the next meal, and perfectly willing to be taken at that!?”

There was an uncertain chuckle, followed by another, and then the table erupted with raucous bellowing and guffawing; the clapping of hands and pounding of fists.

“Zar!” called out Draded as the roaring subsided, dropping all honoraries in the more comradely mood that had settled over the room. “Tell us then! What of us, the Coven Prime?”

Zar scowled, irritated that his pace had been interrupted, but as the next words formed on his lips his displeasure was replaced by a surging anticipation that rose up from his loins and belly. He laid both massive hands palm down on the table and leaned in, as did all the Coven Prime.

“The stocking vessels will herd and transport *all* the hoomans from *all* the habitats back to the provisional planet. The pen-yards there are being restructured even now, so that the young will be bred and fattened locally and taken for food stock when sufficiently grown. This planet, mostly barren in any case, will be abandoned, and our group will transfer to the newly discovered habitat—which, I might add, is vastly more livable.” His face stretched wide in an obscenely bestial grin.

“This marks a new beginning for us, my brothers! We move on to a more fertile, more prolific harvest!!!”

He bared his teeth and snarled and the other primes responded as one, emoting some primal bloodlust. The Viirin throughout the room shrank away, against a wall or into a corner, and Zar turned in his seat, pointing to the charnel pit and waving both hands inward. Two of the Viirin darted forward to take the spit, one at either end, and they carried it to the table, dumping it in the center where it splattered and sizzled on the ancient wooden surface. Zar lashed out a taloned hand, tearing out the throat and leaning his head back to swallow it whole, and the primes fell onto their bloodfeast with a renewed voracity, shredding and tearing away the meat and the sinew, stripping the bones of marrow and spitting out the broken shards.

Stedder gagged, clamping both hands over his mouth, and desperately gulping air he pressed Nyreea back out through the shadows.

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Forms darted through the darkness on all sides; fleeting shadows under a half moon, much like scurrying vermin out in front of a pack of hungry predators. The hoomans were spreading out through the hinterlands, ranging behind crumbling walls wherever possible and sprinting across open stretches of terrain where no cover offered itself. While they ran Stedder kept an eye on Nyreea, because she'd been so badly shaken that he'd had to half carry and drag her out from the sewage channels below the compound. But that was many hours past, and she now ran sure and steady.

Questions flitted through his mind as his bare feet thudded their pace across the darkened plain. Was the compound really a Viirin hold, or were those gaunt creatures the hoomans thought to be their masters really just one step up the scale—little but subservient drones themselves? And what of those monstrous beasts that he'd never before known to exist? Whatever they were they obviously reigned over the servant class, and spelled complete genocide for the hoomans.

He and Nyreea had made their way back to ShantyTown, in the darkness and stripped of their biotags, and they'd gone to Plaf to arrange a hasty gathering of near-elders. Someone had produced a candle and they'd huddled together while Stedder recounted his grim tale. Sharana had reacted with disbelief, as she always did, arguing to scorn his foolish warning and to accept her path of submission.

That was when Nyreea had shaken off her deadened stupor, finally coming to terms with the new reality that had been so jarringly thrust upon her. Seeing the doubt in the faces of the near-elders and their dismissal of Stedder's words, she had risen and come to stand beside him, and the hissed hubbub subsided in her wake. For this was Nyreea—one who so anticipated the coming salvation. She told her version of what they had seen and heard, in a flat monotone with her voice only occasionally breaking, and even Sharana had remained silent.

Now ShantyTown was emptying out fast, with runners headed to the other ghettos to spread the news. The Viirin were out too, chasing them, killing those they caught, but there were so many more of the hoomans. Many had cut or gouged out the biotags and were not so easily tracked in the scrubby hinterlands, and all were counting heavily on the short period of time expected before the Viirin and their masters would evacuate Olde Aearth.

There were, of course, no guarantees. Would the Viirin leave behind sweep-up squads to finish their grisly business? Stedder doubted it; the effort would likely cost more than it was worth under their new circumstances. So more to the point—would the hoomans be able survive on their own? Learn how to forage, how to grow food, how to create shelter and clothing from a barren landscape?

Stedder thought so. He had very recently learned to hope, to believe that there could be so much more to life if he'd put his heart into it. He'd even taken himself by surprise by considering the possibility of an afterlife—not necessarily as the stories described it, but perhaps some form of continued or redefined existence?

And trading on that new, pale shade of belief Stedder now dearly hoped, and prayed, truthfully, that Nyreea would choose to stay with him. He prayed that she would stand with him in their evolving struggle. He hoped and prayed that Nyreea would join with

him to foster new life; that she would succeed and fail, laugh and cry, live long and die content—with *him*, with Stedder.

At her side and strengthened by her—dare he hope?—heart, Stedder could now glimpse, in the distance, somewhere far along an exceedingly difficult path, the real possibility of a meaningful life on an Olde Aearth restored of its past vigor.

The planet was already changed, he felt certain, and the dust lifting from his pounding stride would be the first rising of a Newe Aearth.

**The End**

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