

Identity Crisis

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Identity Crisis - Arden's Story

By Hikaru Katayama

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Chapter 1

A Journey Begins

Sheila

Sheila let out a low moan as she rolled over onto her back. Blinking at the bright sunlight, she reached up to run a paw through her hair only to stop when she saw it. "Oh wow," she commented to herself. "I'm back to myself! The wish worked!"

A groan escaped her muzzle as she sat up and began checking herself over to verify that she wasn't harmed. A quick inventory by her paws verified that she wasn't injured, although she was a bit heavier than she had remembered. "You pig!" she complained as she examined her expanded waist. "How the hell did you manage to gain all this weight?" Not receiving an answer, Sheila turned and hit the prone body lying next to her. Failing to get a reaction, she grabbed the shoulder and shook. "Arden!"

Still not getting a reaction, Sheila became more agitated. "Damn it, Arden," she complained as she grabbed the shoulder and heaved, rolling the body over. "NO!" she screamed as she got a good look at the mummified corpse. The body that she had once inhabited was now reduced to skin and bones.

Screaming in denial, Sheila backed away from the body, unable to accept what she was seeing. Her eyes locked on the amulet that hung around the neck as it flashed in the sunlight, its smiling face mocking her horror.

"**NO!**" Sheila bolted upright in bed. Her pulse raced, echoing the pounding of her heart as she gasped for breath. The first rays of dawn were filtering through the slatted shutters that covered the window.

"Hey, baby. Are you ok?" the man lying next to her in the bed sat up and put his hand on her shoulder. He was a thin man with a robust, weathered look to his skin. His bald head was covered with mystical tattoos that extended down his back and along his exposed arms, creating a tapestry of magical glyphs that would occasionally glow or sparkle in the dim light as he moved.

"Yah," Sheila replied nodding in the morning light, "It was just a dream."

He gave her shoulder a little squeeze. "Was it the same one?" he gently asked.

Sheila nodded in reply, still upset at the nightmare that had haunted her.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to him and holding her tight. "You never have to worry, my love. I'll guard you. I swear my life on it."

"No!" Sheila said harshly as she forced herself away from him and stood. "Don't say that, Ross," she pleaded across the dust-filled shaft of light that leaking through the crack in the shutters. "Please don't say that."

He threw the covers back, revealing his lower torso and legs that ended at the knees. With a

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gesture the tattoos began to glow with an eerie, blue light as he floated up from the bed to hover before her. "It's not for us to choose," he replied in a calming tone. "The fates brought us together for a reason. The second I saw you I fell in love. That's why I saved you from that rogue mage."

Sheila turned and leaned heavily against the wall next to the shuttered window. In a vain attempt to escape her situation, she reached a free hand up to ratchet the slats open and peer out at the sunrise. "I... I... just can't right now, Ross," Sheila stuttered out as a tear soaked into the fur under her eye. "I can't give up on Arden. I know he'll find a way back to me." She turned and looked at Ross as he floated near her. "He's my only hope of going home."

Ross maneuvered himself back over to the bed and settled down on the side. From the table by the headboard, he took out a bandage and began to wind it about the lower portion of one leg. "I know, Sheila, but it's been almost three months since I first saw you. How long are you going to keep hoping against all odds that he's going to turn up?" With a bit of a flourish he finished wrapping the cloth around where his lower leg and foot would have been, creating the illusion of a limb. He flexed the knee, ankle and foot, satisfied with the result, he then began working on the other leg. "We've talked to every stranger passing through town, and nobody knows anything about this Arden of yours. Even our inquiry to Castle Terindell didn't turn up anything. They were as clueless as we were concerning his whereabouts. What was it Ruddygore said--- *I have no idea who this Arden your are searching for is, nor any clue as to his whereabouts.*

His second bandage now complete, Ross stood and walked up behind Sheila, wrapping his arms around her waist and placing his chin on her shoulder. "It's time to stop looking back and start looking forward, Sheila," he suggested with an encouraging tone in his voice. "You've got a whole new life ahead of you and a child coming to boot. Why not make a new start of it with me and settle down here?"

Sheila turned and looked deep into Ross' eyes for a moment before wrapping her arms around him and kissing him deeply. Sheila then laid her muzzle on his shoulder and murmured in his ear, "Thank you. You've been a good friend. You've even made me forget about my troubles once in a while and I'll always be in your debt for that." She pushed herself away from his embrace and began to get dressed. "But I won't abandon my search for Arden. I can't. I know he would never give up on me."

Ross hung his head and let out a sigh. "All right," he finally acknowledged, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I can wait for as long as it takes you to find him, if he's really out there. I'll be right beside you in your search."

Sheila stopped lacing up the armor, looked up at him and smiled as she gave his hand a squeeze.

"So," he sighed as he retrieved some clothes from his pack, "what's on our agenda for today?"

Sheila finished lacing the armor up and began to arrange the Japanese swords in the waistband. "I heard a group of wagons come into town late last night. From the sound of the

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horses I think they stopped at the Red Gargoyle, down at the other end of town."

Ross reached over and tickled one of Sheila's ears, causing it to twitch. "I knew those were good for something other than tickling," he commented, laughing.

Sheila spun around and pounced on Ross, driving him backwards and down onto the bed. He let out a small shriek as Sheila softly growled and sank her teeth into his ear.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, putting a hand to his injured ear. "You bit me!"

She sat on top of him and smiled down, mocking him. "Quit whining. I didn't even break the skin."

"That's not what I'm complaining about," he said, returning the smile. "My complaint is that you stopped." Ross reached up and grabbed Sheila by the shoulders, pulling her down to him.

She took his hands and pinned them to the bed, preventing him from doing anything further. "No." It wasn't a comment or a suggestion; it was a statement of fact. "Now is not the time for that." Sheila climbed off the bed and double-checked her outfit to ensure that everything was in order. "I want to go and talk to that new group that came into town last night. Maybe I can get a lead on Arden."

Ross flopped his head back on the bed and sighed heavily before sitting up. "Outside of the council itself, you are the most stubborn person I think I've ever met."

Sheila picked up a small backpack, saddlebag and a bedroll from the corner. "That's probably why you find me so intriguing," she said with a smile. "I'm not one of these females that will just melt into your arms every time you smile at me." Laughing, Sheila opened the door and turned back to Ross. "I'm going to go settle our bill and get the horses ready. I'll meet you in the stables."

"Right," he replied, pulling a shirt on. "I'll be right down."

After he got dressed, Ross walked around the room and collected his effects, piling them on the bed. After he repacked his backpack he pulled out what appeared to be a mirror. Gazing into it he saw Sheila in the stables, cinching up the straps on her horse's saddle. He gestured at the image, which caused it to ripple and change. Moments later he saw the face of an elderly, fair skinned man who bore tattoos similar to his own.

"What do you have to report, Ross?" the old man demanded in a gruff voice.

"She still insists on searching for Arden, Father. However, she has yet to obtain any leads as to his whereabouts."

The old man nodded. "Good. Keep me informed." The image in the mirror glowed for a second before the image vanished, leaving only Ross' reflection.

Ross slipped the mirror back into his pack, then picked up the rest of his belongings and

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headed down to the stables.

Sheila approached the table at the inn where a matronly woman sat examining some paperwork and drinking a mug of coffee. As she neared the table, a tall, thin elf took up station behind the woman. He was almost six feet tall, with an elongated look to him that made Sheila think of a cartoon she once saw of a wolf that had been stretched out on a rack. His ears were long, thin and sharply pointed, framing his face. The eyes were similar to Arden's eyes, with black pupils floating on a sea of red where the whites should have been. This, combined with the yellowish tint of his skin and the talon-like claws at the end of each finger, made him the most unusual person Sheila had seen to date.

The woman looked up as Sheila took up a casual stance across from her. "Can I help you with something?" the woman inquired politely.

Sheila gave her a small smile that didn't show too many teeth. "If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your recent trip."

Her look suddenly guarded, the woman asked, "Just what kind of information are you looking for?"

"I was recently separated from my traveling companion," Sheila explained. "I'm trying to locate him. I'm hoping you may have heard something that could lead me to him."

The woman's guarded expression softened somewhat as she waved for Sheila to a chair. "My name is Isabella. I certainly wish you good luck in locating your missing friend, but I'm not too sure what I can do to help. I have neither seen nor heard of anyone of your species before. Believe me, if your friend had been anywhere along my route, I would have heard about it."

Sheila nodded after making herself comfortable in the chair. "I understand that; however my friend was human," she commented lightly, "and I'm sure you can understand how that makes my search all the more difficult."

Isabella's brow furrowed at Sheila's statement. "He *was* human?"

Sheila gave a sheepish smile. "It's a long story, but we use magic to travel. Each time we have done so, he has changed shape. That's why I'm not at all sure what he could look like at this time."

Isabella nodded and started to speak, then her expression hardened again. The elf guarding Isabella scowled at something behind the vixen. Turning, Sheila saw Ross approaching.

"Can I get you anything, dear?" he inquired cheerfully as he put his hands on her shoulders.

Sheila smiled up at him. "Sure. I'd really like some of that wine we had last night at dinner."

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Chilled if at all possible."

Ross laughed. "I'll see if there's any left. If so, I'll be sure not to damage it with the spell." He nodded to Isabella and her guard before moving off to speak with the innkeeper.

"You travel with a painted mage?" Isabella challenged, still scowling in Ross' direction.

Confused by their reaction Sheila glanced at Ross before answering, "Yes. Why?"

Isabella looked up at the elf. "Privacy," she commanded.

He made a few gestures in the air and then nodded back at his patron.

"Good. Now we can talk," Isabella stated. "What do you know of the Painted Mages?"

Sheila shrugged. "Nothing, really. Why?"

The woman squinted at Sheila for a second before continuing. "How did you meet him?"

Still confused, Sheila was becoming worried by the interrogation. "He saved my life. I was being attacked by a mage on the road and he rescued me. Why?"

"He killed the mage, didn't he?" Isabella demanded, ignoring Sheila's question.

Sheila shook her head for a second. "Yes! But---what does that have to do with him being a painted mage?"

Isabella glanced over at Ross to ensure that he was occupied with the innkeeper. "Listen to me well, girl, for your life depends on this. The painted mages do nothing without good reason, and their reasons are never obvious. You can't even count on greed, as they have little use for money and even less use for morals, scruples or a conscience."

Sheila was dumbfounded by what she was hearing. This was a total contradiction to what she had come to expect from Ross. The mage was so kind, so gentle. He was always worried about her welfare, and he made sure that she got anything she needed or wanted. What possible motivation could he have other than love? "I find your words hard to believe," Sheila finally stated.

Isabella glanced again to ensure Ross was still busy. "Be that as it may, girl, you must trust no one. Everyone in Husaquahr has his or her own agendas. Never assume that someone is doing something simply because it is in your best interest."

Sheila scowled at the old woman. "What about you? Why should I take your word for this? Why should I trust you?"

Isabella laughed. "Absolutely no reason other than the fact that it's good advice," she said as she lowered her voice again. "But I would also advise you to ask others about the Painted Mages. They will tell you the same thing I have." She glanced over at Ross as he began casting a spell on the drinks. "Do not assume that, just because he is elsewhere, you are safe. Painted Mages carry a magic object to scry with, usually a mirror or a crystal ball.

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Don't assume that just because he's elsewhere you can not be watched."

Now Sheila was truly concerned. She had remembered seeing Ross looking into a mirror once while they were camped in the wild. At the time she didn't think anything of it, but now it made sense. Why would someone carry a mirror when they never needed to shave? Still, he had never given her any reason to doubt his good will.

The tall elf gave his mistress' shoulder a squeeze as Ross started over.

Isabella smiled at Sheila. "Now tell me about this friend of yours and maybe we can help you find him."

Sheila and Ross left the inn, untied their horses and climbed into the saddles.

"Where to now?" Ross asked.

"To the provisioner," Sheila replied. Wheeling her horse around, Sheila headed down the street towards the other edge of town with Ross bringing up the rear.

"Are we leaving town already?" he inquired and received a nod. "To where? She didn't have anything that we could use as a lead on your friend."

Sheila nodded and replied sternly, "I know. We're heading to Castle Terindell."

"Terindell?" Ross cried out. "Why go there? They already told us that they had never heard of your friend."

She looked at the mage for a second before turning back to the street. "Arden was positive that Ruddygore would help him with his quest. If I confront him, make a personal appeal and tell him about Arden's quest, then maybe he'll help me."

"You want to just ride up to the gates of Castle Terindell and demand an audience with Throckmorton P. Ruddygore, a member of the Council?" Ross' tone clearly showed his disdain at the vixen's plan.

Sheila nodded. "That's right."

The Painted Mage flung his hands towards the heavens as he looked to the sky for some sign. "By the gods!" he exclaimed. "Have it your way. We'll head for Terindell."

They continued their ride towards the provisioner's store in relative silence. Ross's horse slowly fell behind Sheila's as they rode. Every once in a while the mage uttered a small curse and shook his head while shooting a harsh glance at Sheila's back.

Father was *not* going to be happy.

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The long and winding road

Sheila and Ross sat on their horses at a crossroad. Behind Ross' horse was a packhorse that was lead by a tether connected to his saddle.

"Pretty simple system once you understand the symbols. The trick is that there are a huge number of symbols," he commented, pointing to the sign. "Arrow to the left shows open plains, little water, some game and the symbol for the village of Pomak. The numbers under say that it's a three-day ride. The arrow to the right says that it leads to the Debasar River, and travel time is two days."

Sheila nodded. "Fine, we head left," she replied as she urged her horse forward.

"Left?" Ross asked in confusion. "But we can catch a boat down the Debasar to the River of the Dancing Gods. From there, we can just follow it up to Terindell. "

Sheila reined her horse to a stop and looked back. "I know that, but I've seen the maps. Taking the Debasar will lead southeast before getting to the Dancing Gods. This way goes northeast and is more direct. Taking the river will add weeks to our ride."

Ross shook his head. "I know that, but if we follow the river, our passage will be safer. It's better patrolled. You've got us going out across the high plains of Leander. In case you have forgotten, Leander isn't renowned for its hospitality."

"Oh, come on," Sheila said as she wheeled her horse around to face Ross. "Are you telling me that a high ranking adept like yourself, along with a swordsman like myself, can't handle ourselves out here in the plains?"

Ross cringed. "It's not that. It's just..." he trailed off as he tried to choose his words. "If we go over the high plains, it will be days, even weeks between towns."

Sheila closed her eyes as she rubbed a paw against her stomach. "Is that all you care about?" she asked, looking back over at Ross. "Making sure that we're always within easy reach of civilization?"

"Hey! Don't knock it, babe!" Ross shot back angrily. "There's a lot to be said for being near civilization, versus stuck out on the plains."

For a moment Sheila just started at Ross before she shook her head. "Fine. You take the river. I'll wait a couple of weeks at Terindell for you to catch up."

Without waiting for a reply, she wheeled her horse around and spurred it on down the trail at a trot. Behind her, Ross muttered a few silent curses to himself before he kicked his horse into motion and followed her.

For most of the day they rode on in silence. The only change in their routine was to vary the pace for the horses and occasionally give them a brief chance to drink at the intermittent watering holes along the path. Their general surroundings changed gradually as they moved away from the river. At first they saw sporadic farms nestled near a narrow tributary or

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pond from which they could gather their water. After the better part of a day's ride, they had left all signs of civilization behind, with the exception of the path they rode along.

As dusk slowly began to settle in, darkening the sky, Ross finally brought his horse up even with Sheila's. "Don't you think it's time to stop?"

Sheila glanced over at Ross and then over at the setting sun. "Not yet. We've got another hour or so of light. After that, we've got moonlight to show us the way."

Ross pulled ahead of Sheila and blocked her path with his horse, forcing her to stop. "Are you seriously suggesting that we continue riding on after dark with just moonlight for illumination?"

Sheila looked annoyed. "Don't you have any spells that will let you see in the dark?"

"Of course I do," Ross answered back harshly. "But they won't do us any good if one of the horses steps in a hole and breaks its leg because *it* can't see where it's going."

Sheila pursed her lips and looked around, avoiding Ross' glare. "All right," she conceded. "Point taken. Find us a good spot and we'll settle down for the night."

Now it was Ross' turn to survey the terrain for a moment. "Over there, by those low hills. We should be able to find a low-lying area that will shelter our fire from prying eyes." Without waiting for Sheila's approval, Ross spurred his horse towards the cluster of hills.

Nestled in between the hills was a small natural spring surrounded by small trees and brush. Ross examined the area once again before they dismounted and set up camp. Sheila quickly built a small fire in a pit, which had obviously been used for such purposes before, while Ross took care of the animals. Soon they were sitting by the fire, eating dried meats and fruit.

"Why don't you let me whip you up some real food," Ross suggested, trying to lighten the mood. "It wouldn't take too much effort to summon up something good to eat."

"No," Sheila replied flatly, again rubbing her stomach absentmindedly as she ripped some more dried meat from the chunk in her hand. "You know how I feel about that kind of stuff."

"You know, if you let me feed you some real food occasionally, you might not be having stomach problems," Ross replied. Seeing Sheila's confused look, he pointed to the paw she held against her abdomen. "You've been holding your stomach off and on for the last few days. It's probably that crap jerky you keep eating."

Sheila hastily pulled her paw away from her belly and used it, instead, to pick up a stick and stir the fire. "There's nothing wrong with my stomach."

"Yah, right," Ross responded sarcastically. "Tell me that's just a bad habit you picked up."

Rather than look at Ross, Sheila continued to stir the fire for a few seconds. Apparently satisfied with her handiwork, she tossed the stick aside and then gave Ross a sideways

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glance. "My stomach is fine. It's not that."

Finishing off the last of his meat, Ross set his platter aside and scooted over closer to Sheila. "If it's not your stomach, then what's the problem?" His tone reflected the concern that was on his face.

Sheila took a deep breath before letting it. "It's the baby," she admitted. "It's started to kick."

Ross' face lit up. "Hey, that's great news!"

Sheila's entire countenance wilted slightly with Ross' zeal.

"Come on!" Ross nudged Sheila in the arm as he tried to encourage her. "That's great. The kid is really coming along."

Sheila suddenly stood and walked away from the fire and Ross, stopping as she reached one of the small trees. Ross paused for a second before he too stood and walked over to the tree.

Gently he laid a hand on Sheila's shoulder. "Hey, what's the problem?" he gently asked. "You do want this kid, don't you?"

She glanced back over her shoulder at Ross for a second before looking back out at the stars. Her eyes had a haunted look to them that bothered the man. "I don't know any more," she said after a long silence. "I just don't know anything any more. This is all so wrong." She leaned heavily against the tree, hugging it with her arm. "Ever since I met Arden, my life has been one big, swirling tornado of things happening to me. All I want to do is to get this all over with and go home."

The vixen turned and looked at Ross with a tear in her eye. "I miss my bed. I miss having Zig and the others to joke around with. I miss the lights and cameras." She turned away again, gazing wistfully at the stars. "I want to go to sleep and wake up at home with all this having been a bad dream. I want to find out that it was all a nightmare, that Bjorn's really all right and waiting for me to do our next film."

Sheila paused again, holding her womb. "But I know it's not. Every day I'm reminded of the fact that I'm really stuck in this nightmare and my only way out is to find Arden. Worst of all, the only lead I have is a dream."

"A dream?" Ross asked, his face suddenly intent on what she was saying.

Sheila nodded. "A few days ago Arden's squire, Thomas, came to me in a dream. He said I needed to head across the Leander flatlands towards Stormhold, and on to Terindell. Somewhere along the line I'll find someone who will lead me to Arden."

"So you headed out here because of a dream?" Ross asked intently.

Sheila nodded. "It was so real, I could remember every detail after I woke up." She turned and looked back at Ross. "It was almost like the time that Nanuk had drawn me into the spirit realm."

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Ross nodded. "Dreams can bring very powerful omens or portents to us, but you have to be careful about how you interpret them." He reached out and dried the fur under Sheila's eyes. "I'm sure you were right about the meaning of the dream, but next time, how about talking it over. It would have explained a lot about why you've been so moody lately."

Ross' words penetrated the depression that Sheila felt and sparked a response somewhat different than what he had wanted. Smiling, Sheila nodded. "All right, I'll do that," she lied, while inwardly kicking herself for the lapse. She hadn't wanted to let Ross in on any more of her life than he already knew. Even though she didn't have any real reason to distrust him, her instincts still warned her that, like Arden, he, too, was too good to be true.

"Good," he replied, giving her a little hug. "Now why don't you go ahead and get some sleep. I'll take first watch and set out the wards."

Ross watched as Sheila returned to the camp and lay down on her bedroll. Once she was settled in, he opened his pack and removed a series of ornately carved stones and began placing them in a perimeter around the camp. With the last one in place he made a sign over it, causing all the stones to glow for a second, before they appeared to return to normal. Anyone with fairy sight would be able to see the web of magic that now formed a dome over the encampment. It wouldn't stop anyone serious about getting in, but it would give the pair enough warning to set up a defense.

Satisfied with his work, Ross sat down and poured himself a mug of coffee. He sat by the fire and watched Sheila as she slowly faded off to sleep, wondering what new tidbits of information he'd be able to get from her tomorrow.

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Sheila woke up to the sound of a bird chirping in the trees nearby. Confused, she sat up and looked around. There was no sign of the camp that she and Ross had setup. She found herself in the middle of a small clearing in a lightly wooded forest. The only odd thing was the large, moss colored wall that shaded her.

Confused, she stood and tried to get her bearings. She studied the wall and saw that it wasn't moss covered, or even stone. It wasn't until a large eye opened high on the surface that she realized it was the head of a dragon.

Terror filled her as she fled screaming, and blundered right into the arms of a tall, well-built human. Still searching for an escape, she fought with him in an attempt to flee.

"Sheila, it's all right," he repeated, trying to calm her down, but without effect. Finally he released one arm and slapped her, breaking her panic.

Sheila looked up at him while holding a paw to her muzzle. He looked familiar, yet she couldn't place the face. "Who are you? Where am I? What the hell is going on here?"

The young man smiled. "I'm Thomas, you're in Nanuk's realm and hell has nothing to do with this place."

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"Thomas?" Sheila shakily reached out and touched his face to make sure he was real. "But how? You're just a boy?"

Thomas smiled again. "In this place, time has little meaning."

"But when you came to me in my dream, you were just a boy still." Sheila looked around, confused by what was happening. The dragon simply sat and watched.

"You remembered me as a child, so that's how I had to appear to you," Thomas explained. "I now serve Arden as Nanuk's protector. As such, I must take on the roll of a man, therefore I assume the aspect of a man."

Sheila shook her head at the information overload. "This is all to too much," she complained, rubbing the bridge of her snout. "Why did you bring me here?"

"I didn't," Thomas replied, nodding to the dragon. "Lakash did. Unlike Arden, I don't have that kind of power."

"That still doesn't tell me why," Sheila repeated, glancing nervously at the dragon.

"Soon you will encounter an agent of Lakash. You must do exactly as he says or Arden will be lost to us. All hope now lies in your hands."

Sheila looked up at Thomas with a glimmer of hope in her eye. "Then Arden's alive?"

Thomas glanced over at the dragon. "Yes, and no."

"What do you mean, 'yes, and no'?" Sheila demanded angrily.

"That's the problem, Sheila," Thomas explained. "He is, and yet he isn't alive. If you fail in your part of the quest he'll be lost to us forever. If you succeed, you'll bring him all the way back into the real world where he will be able to complete his quest."

Sheila looked back at the dragon, which had yet to do more than blink. "So how will I know this agent?" she asked Thomas.

Thomas nodded. "He'll have a mark that you will recognize. You must trust him, as he is your ally."

Sheila nodded in acceptance. "OK. I'll keep an eye out for this guy. You can't give me any more to go on than just look for a mark? This guy could be anywhere."

Thomas looked up at the dragon again.

"Keep on your path and it will bring you to him." The voice of Lakash resonated directly inside her skull, echoing slightly.

"Also," Thomas said, getting her attention. "Be wary of this man you travel with. We are unable to divine his intentions. However, don't assume that he is your enemy. Just be on your guard."

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Sheila nodded, digesting the information.

Thomas stepped forwards and cupped her muzzle in his hand. "I want you to understand this, Sheila," he explained in a serious tone. "Lakash has sworn to me that if you do your best to help Arden fulfill his side of the bargain, then Lakash will guarantee that you will be returned to your world, even if Arden fails." He paused a second for his words to sink in before he released her. "I swore to Arden that I would serve her in death as I had in life, and that includes taking care of you. You need never worry again about getting home. Just make sure that you find Lakash's agent and bring Arden back."

Sheila hung her head for a moment before looking up. Her ears drooped as she reached out to put her paw on Thomas' chest. "I was all wrong about you," she said gently. "I hated you for something that was my own fault. I hope you can forgive me."

Thomas smiled and took her into his embrace. "That's OK, Miss Sheila. I never held any of the things you said or did against you. I knew it was just your love for Arden." He continued to hold her for a minute before he released her. "It's time for you to go back."

Sheila sniffed and wiped a tear from one eye. "Thank you, Thomas," she said as he led her over to the side of the dragon's neck. Beyond the scales she saw a shimmering image of her sleeping body.

She released Thomas' hand and stepped through. The last thing she heard before the darkness took her was his voice, echoing; "Your armor. Never remove your armor. Never..."

Chapter 3

Rest stop on the road to hell.

Castle Terindell.

Imagine old St. Nick on steroids. That's what this guy looked like. Standing almost seven feet tall, his white hair, beard and rosy cheeks looked like something you would see on a Christmas card. His large girth was covered in a finely tailored suit consisting of pinstriped pants, formal shirt, vest, tie, coat and a top hat. The look was rounded out with a long, thin, ebony colored walking stick, which was topped off with a gold dragon's head.

The large sorcerer watched as the portcullis of the castle was raised, timing his approach to allow him to pass beneath with plenty of room to spare. The Sorcerer Throckmorton P. Ruddygore was home.

Beyond the threshold of the castle stood a tall Imir. The elf stood nearly six feet tall with long, sharply pointed ears that framed his face. The yellowish tint to his skin and talon-like claws at the end of each hand marked him the member of a warrior race. He bowed before the large man. "Welcome back, sir," he said in a flat, emotionless tone of voice. The statement was a formality for the Imir, whose job it was to act as assistant and major domo to the sorcerer.

"Thank you, Poquah," the rotund man said. "It's good to be home." Side by side they made their way across the courtyard towards the main building.

"And was your trip productive?" the Imir asked as he fell in behind Ruddygore.

The large man stopped and faced the tall elf. "Things are afoot, Poquah," he said with a concerned look as he rubbed his beard. "The forces of hell have been stirred up by something going on over here recently and I haven't been able to find out why."

Poquah nodded gravely. "I presume that a divination will be in order, then." He said it more as a statement than a question as he anticipated the needs of his master.

Ruddygore nodded and continued inside. "Indeed. I have no choice but to call in some favors and find out just what is going on."

"I shall ready the summoning chamber while you prepare," the tall elf stated. Without waiting for any acknowledgement, Poquah turned down a side corridor, then into a stairwell that led down into the bowels of the castle. After numerous turns, the elf eventually arrived at a pair of large, ornately engraved iron doors. Poquah frowned at the closed doors for a moment. There was the faintest smell of brimstone in the air. That was not an uncommon thing, considering what the room was used for. Instead, he was puzzled at the fact that the smell hadn't dissipated by now. The last adept should have completed his exercises days ago. If someone was in there doing a summoning, they were doing it without the master's permission.

Concerned at the possibility that a lesser daemon may have gotten free, Poquah readied his defenses and pushed open the door. Within lay a darkened room. The only illumination was

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from the odd candle that remained lit around the perimeter of the room.

Taking a few paces into the room, Poquah spoke an incantation that should have ignited a series of torches that had been placed around the room. To his surprise, only the two torches at the far end of the room that were near a large, stone altar ignited, revealing the grizzly remains of a junior adept who was suspended above the altar by a series of chains and hooks.

Poquah hastily raised his defensive shields as he backed towards the door. The last thing the tall elf heard was the metallic clang of the two, huge steel doors slamming shut as the shadows engulfed him.

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Sheila

Three horses sat on edge of the lip of a shallow valley with a small stream running through it. The depression was only about twenty meters in depth and about fifty meters wide, but it was more than enough to contain the caravan of wagons which had setup camp there for the evening. The brightly colored wagons circled around a large bonfire made for an interesting site. Any thought by the duo that the wagons may have been hiding was immediately squashed by the amount of noise that the troop was creating. Music could clearly be heard coming from the encampment giving it every appearance of being a party on wheels.

"Gypsies." The painted mage had spoken the word like it was some sort of curse.

Sheila turned to the painted mage. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"They're common thieves and charlatans," he declared contemptuously.

Sheila smiled. "Sounds like my kind of people," she replied, spurring her horse forward. "Come on. It'll be fun!"

Ross raised his eyes and hands towards the sky in a silent prayer for deliverance before he, too, spurred his horse forward, following Sheila to the encampment.

As Sheila's horse neared the circle of wagons, a short, blond haired man stood and walked towards her. He was only about five feet tall and wore loose pants that resembled sweats and a vest. No shirt was apparent, though a number of tattoos on his chest and arms made it hard to tell that there was skin exposed from a distance. He could easily have been mistaken for a young man, but he carried himself with the self-assuredness of a man well traveled. As he approached, he shifted the lute he had been playing so that it hung from his back, giving him free access to the sword he wore.

"Hail and well met, fair traveler," he called out with a friendly smile on his face.

Sheila reined her horse to a stop a few feet in front of the man. "Hello," she replied. "I hope you don't mind, but I saw your fire and heard your song and thought I might join you."

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Amazingly enough, his smile grew even broader as he spread his arms wide. "Welcome, friend. We would be happy to have you join us this fine evening."

Sheila smiled back and nodded. "Great. I hope you don't mind if my friend joins us too," she said as she glanced over her shoulder towards Ross.

The smile faded from the blond mans face as Ross rode into the light, becoming fully illuminated for the first time. For several seconds he glared at Ross until Sheila spoke again.

"You don't mind, do you?" she asked.

His attention pulled from Ross by Sheila's question, the small man smiled up at Sheila again. "Certainly not. You are quite welcome to join us," he replied, his smile dimmed as he spoke to Ross. "Your friend, too. I am Jasper, the leader of this humble group of entertainers. Please, tether your horses and join us by the fire." Bowing, he swept his arms towards a row of horses that had been tied off to a rope that had been strung up between two wagons.

The pair directed their horses over to the line and dismounted, each tethering their animals to the rope. Sheila quickly began to remove her equipment from the horse, piling it on the ground by its front leg.

"Don't worry about that. I'll get it," Ross said as he began doing the same with his mount.

Sheila began undoing the saddlebags. "It's no problem. I'll do it."

Ross turned and put his hand on top of her paw, stopping her. "I said I'd do it." He paused and squeezed her hand. "You go and have a good time."

"No," Sheila replied with a smile, shrugging off his hand. "I'm not a cripple. I'm just pregnant. I'm not so far gone that I can't take care of my own horse."

"That's not the reason," he replied somewhat annoyed. "I'll take care of the saddles and bags. I want to ward them from prying fingers. Now take that pretty face of yours and go have some fun."

Sheila shot her companion a harsh look at his comment. "Ross! Be civil."

"I'm warning you, Sheila, these people are common thieves. If I were you, I'd be more worried about the gold you're carrying than anything else," he replied as he began removing items from Sheila's horse.

Sheila frowned and shook her head as she walked away. For some reason, Ross was getting grumpier and grumpier as they traveled. He was really beginning to become a total jerk. If he didn't lighten up pretty soon, she'd cut him loose at the next opportunity. The only reason she hadn't dumped him so far is because of magic. She didn't have any magical ability and in this world, that could get you killed, or worse.

Jasper rose from his seat around the fire as Sheila approached. "Ah, here she is. Everyone

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say hello to... um..." he paused to think for a second. "I beg your pardon, but your name sees to have slipped my mind."

Sheila flicked her ears in embarrassment. "I'm sorry," she replied. "That's because I didn't give it to you. My name is Sheila and my companion is Ross."

"Everyone, this is Sheila," Jasper said as he led her to a seat by the fire. "These people here are all members of the troop. Starting from your left we have Tika and Kamon," he gestured towards a female and male dwarf, "who do double duty as acrobats and any smithing work we need. Next in line are Taneal and Dawn, " this time he indicated twin human females, "who primarily serve to entertain with juggling and knife throwing, though they have *other* talents."

Hearing the last part, Taneal took the partially eaten roll from her plate and threw it at Jasper, who easily caught the missile while laughing. "Thanks," he replied, taking a bite of the morsel before continuing. "Next we have Ganadorn," he gestured to a huge, muscular human who waved back. "He does a strongman act as well as most of the really heavy lifting. He also doubles as a bouncer for Lady Cassandra," he waved to a small, shapely female who wore a very skimpy bikini style outfit made of fur, "who does a series of Akaman tribal dances, some of which can be quite erotic in nature. Next we have young Miss Alyas, who has joined our troop of recent. Her only talent so far is being a most excellent cook, but she is also well on her way to becoming quite accomplished at juggling. And to my immediate right is my wife, Pandora. That's not her real name, but it's the only one she answers to. She's a fortuneteller and also our primary source of magic support. Lastly is Drix, who seems to be absent."

He leaned back and put two fingers in his mouth before letting out a shrill whistle that made Sheila's ears lay flat. Seconds later a small flying creature standing about five inches high flew up to Jasper and hovered. "Knock it off, asshole. I'm not some dog that you just whistle up when you want something." The tiny female sprite looked for all practical purposes like Tinkerbell right down to the tiny dagger in her belt.

"Peace, Drix," Jasper said quietly. "We have a guest." He gestured towards Sheila bringing her to the sprite's attention for the first time.

"Whoops," Drix said as she moved over to examine Sheila. "Wow. I ain't never seen your likes before. Where did you come from?"

Sheila, fascinated by the tiny creature laughed. "Well I've never seen the likes of you before, either."

"Huh?" the little sprite looked confused. "You've got to be kidding. You're telling me that you've never seen a pixy before?"

Sheila shook her head. "Nope. They don't have your kind where I'm from."

"WHAT?" Drix shook her head in confusion. "You almost sound like someone from Earth Prime, not knowing about us pixies."

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"Well, I am from Earth, though I've never heard of this 'Earth Prime' that you're talking about," Sheila confessed.

"That's definitely bizarre," the sprite agreed. "So what are you doing way out here in the middle of nowhere?"

Sheila accepted a plate of food and a mug from Alyas. "Thank you," she said to Alyas before turning back to Drix. "My friend and I are on our way to the castle Terindell. I'm hoping to petition the Sorcerer Ruddygore for help."

"Friend?" Drix asked as she rose slightly and looked around.

"A painted mage," Jasper supplied. "He's taking care of their horses and protecting their supplies from prying fingers." A low murmur ran around the group at the news. Sheila winced at the fact that Ross had been overheard.

"You're traveling with a painted mage?" Drix asked incredulously. "Are you *nuts*?"

"Hey! He's my friend, OK?" Sheila replied defensively. "Besides, what do you have against painted mages?"

Drix darted closer to Sheila, causing her to flinch. "Honey, they don't have friends. They have expendable assets. Trust me. I've been traveling with bands like these for over a thousand years and I've never met a painted mage that didn't view everyone and everything as expendable in reaching their ultimate goal."

"And just what is their ultimate goal," Sheila asked in a quavering voice. Everyone kept warning her about him. Maybe it was time to ditch Ross at the next opportunity.

"Power. That's all they care about, power," Drix replied. "And from looking at you, you've got some pretty powerful friends."

"Huh?" Sheila grunted. "What are you talking about?"

"Are you kidding?" the sprite replied. "Look at all the magic you've got. You're carrying three magic swords that were forged of true steel, not to mention that wild outfit you're wearing."

Sheila looked down at the cured silk armor. Arden has been wearing it when he had shown up at the Arcanum. Although a couple of sorcerers had examined the armor, none, including Ross, had been able to ascertain exactly what functions the spells within it were; only that its manufacture was unlike anything they had ever seen before. "All of these belong to my mate. I know nothing about their powers or abilities."

Jasper looked up from his examination of the silk armor. "Mate? You're not talking about that painted mage, are you?"

Sheila shook her head. "No. My mate's name is Arden. He's the reason I'm traveling to Terindell. I need Ruddygore's help to locate him."

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"Yah, well I'd watch your back if I were you," Drix added. "And speaking of which, here he comes." Drix dropped low to the ground and made haste to clear the circle in the opposite direction from which Ross was coming.

Sheila glanced back over her shoulder and saw Ross approaching. She scooted aside to make room for him to sit. As he settled in, she took a bite of the stew that she had been handed. It tasted pleasant enough, but something was missing. After a couple of more bites she figured it out. There was no meat.

"Welcome to our gathering," Jasper said politely. "Would you like something to eat?"

"No, thank you," Ross replied. His tone was polite enough, but somehow carried a chill with it.

"Here." Sheila shoved her platter into Ross' hands. "Try it. It's not half bad."

"No, really, I'm not hungry," Ross replied, trying to hand it back.

Sheila put up a paw to block the platter. "You keep it. You'll like it. It's vegetarian."

"Oh," was all that Ross could reply as he sat the platter in his lap.

"Oh, no," Alyas cried out softly. "I didn't even think about that. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Sheila replied as she got up. "I've got plenty of dried meats in my pack. I'll just grab some."

Alyas grasped Sheila by the arm and began to drag her over towards the chuckwagon. "Not on your life. We have plenty of meats. I just didn't use any in the stew. You are our guest, after all."

Sheila relented and allowed the young girl to lead her over to their supplies cart. Inside, Alyas threw open a large wooden closet that held large pieces of meat on hangars. Pork, beef, lamb, and other stuff that Sheila couldn't readily identify were all hanging in what looked like a simple closet. "Um, is that fresh?" Sheila asked, sniffing the air.

"Well, we stocked up a couple of days ago, but the preservation spells should keep them fresh for another week or so without any problems," Alyas admitted. "You see anything you like?"

Sheila gave a small chuckle. It made sense that magic would be used for something like this. It's not like you could haul around enough ice to keep food from spoiling. "Sure. What have you got that would be easy to make?"

"I've got some steaks that I could grill up for you if you'd like," the girl responded lifting a large slab of meat from the locker.

Sheila's mouth began to water as she smiled. "That would be perfect."

"Great," Alyas replied as she led Sheila around the side of the wagon to where the smaller

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cooks fire was. "And while I'm cooking this up, you can tell me out you came to be out here in the middle of nowhere and why you've never seen a pixy before."

Sheila leaned back against the wagon and sighed. "It's a pretty long story. It all started back during a thunderstorm when I was coming back from a convention with my boss...."

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Ruddygore

The large sorcerer sat behind his desk and examined the pile of messages that had accumulated during his absence. He had already sorted through the inconsequential ones and was now looking at the remaining scrolls. One in particular had captured his attention when he had first seen it. It came from a country sorcerer down in Leander and had been sealed with a strong spell to prevent casual snooping by the carriers. With a practiced motion Ruddygore removed the protective spell, unrolled the scroll and began to read.

My most esteemed colleague.

I wish that this were a casual note to reminisce about the days of our youth; however that cannot be. I have recently encountered a most unique young woman. She claims to have come from another world. Normally I would have discounted her testimony except for a few vital facts.

First, she is not of any species in Husaquahr or on Earth Prime. Secondly, she is in possession of some of the most extraordinary magical equipment I have ever laid eyes on. Their manufacture is beyond anything I have ever seen. Her armor was created with a technique that wove the strand of the spell in with the threads of the silk at the time of its creation. Never have I seen anything like it. The last thing I must admit is not hard fact. In my readings of the stones, a name has repeatedly come forward: Arden. This female asked if I had any way of divining his location. Unfortunately, she was unable to inform me as to any specifics for his species. It appears that he has a tendency to change shape. Alas, I was unable to divine any information concerning him.

This alone wouldn't have been enough for me to write you so urgently, except for the fact that the young woman indicated that they were in this world to find you as part of a quest. She indicated that she had sent a message to you about her situation. Rather than have her get lost in the shuffle, I felt it best to notify you.

Her name is Sheila Vixen. I don't know why, but I do believe her when she says that it is of great import that you assist her.

In your service

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Yocham Andarko.

Ruddygore rapidly searched through the other dispatches that had awaited his attention, searching for one that had come from the same region or with the name Sheila Vixen. No such dispatch had arrived. There was the possibility that Poquah had read and discarded the communication; however, that was unlikely.

At the thought of Poquah, Ruddygore paused. It had been some time since the Imir had gone to prepare the summoning chamber. He should have been finished quite some time ago. Concerned, he stood and made his way towards the subbasement.

Something was amiss and his intuition was telling him that this Sheila Vixen and Arden were at the center of it.

Chapter 4

A deadly encounter

Sheila

Sheila sat on the log by the fire and chewed idly on a length of bone while she watched the twins juggle knives in time with Jasper's music. As the beat picked up, they continued to add more and more knives to the routine until it appeared that there was a shimmering wall of bronze as the blades flew between the pair.

Having successfully cracked open the bone, Sheila sucked out the marrow. Normally she wouldn't be caught dead doing something like that in public, but since she had become pregnant, marrow had been added to her list of oddball cravings. If she were back in civilization, the doctors would undoubtedly have given her dietary supplements that would have staved off the cravings.

She glanced over her shoulder to where Ross sat by their belongings. He was studying a book again. She had tried to get him to at least attempt to enjoy himself, but the mage simply would have none of it.

She looked back over just in time to see the twins ending their act by driving the knives into the soft ground, forming nice straight lines of blades. Impressed at their skill, Sheila gave an honest and enthusiastic round of applause for the pair's performance.

Jasper walked over to the log Sheila was sitting on, placed a foot up on it, then leaned his arms on the leg. "OK. You've seen all our tricks. Now how about yours?"

Sheila blinked in surprise. "Tricks?"

"Acts," Jasper clarified, plucking a couple of notes off of his instrument. "You told Alyas you were an entertainer before you became an adventurer. What kind of an act did you have?"

Sheila gave him a weak smile as she tried to think of a way to explain working in the blue film market. Finally she threw the entire concept out and settled for an honest, though incomplete answer. "I was an actress."

"Wonderful!" The smile on Jasper's face almost reached from ear to ear. "Maybe you'd be kind enough to give us a small sample of your work?"

Sheila grimaced and shook her head. "I'd really rather not," she replied, trying to hide her embarrassment. "All of the stories I did were contemporary to my people and wouldn't make any sense to you."

Jasper clapped his hands. "Ah! Something foreign!" He held his hand out to Sheila, offering to help her up. "We would be honored to hear some of it."

Sheila cringed as she accepted the hand up. She would have to think fast if she were going to come up with some dialog that had a little more class than "Hey, sailor. You new around

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here?"

Just as Sheila was about to try her hand at some Shakespeare, Lady Pandora rescued her. "Leave the girl alone, Jasper," she chided the young man. "She clearly doesn't feel comfortable performing for us tonight."

Lady Pandora took Sheila's arm and drew her away from the fire. The older woman had demonstrated a firm yet gentle grip, which contrasted with her apparent need of a cane to walk. "Come, my dear," she said in a soothing tone. "I think it's time that you and Lady Pandora had a talk about the future."

Soon they reached a wagon that was outlandishly decorated. The covering was made with a patchwork quilting of cloth swatches that covered the entire spectrum, though in a chaotic manner. It was garish thing to look at and was guaranteed to catch the eye of any passer by. Sheila helped the older woman up into the wagon, following closely behind. Inside she saw a small table with two chairs. Around the inside of the wagon, candles had been placed, giving the room a soft illumination.

"Sit," Lady Pandora directed, indicating the chair nearest the door as she took her seat in the other. "Welcome, Sheila Vixen. I have been anxiously awaiting our encounter."

"Huh?" Sheila grunted in surprise. "*Could this be Lakash's agent?*" she thought excitedly.

"Yes, child. I saw our meeting in the tea leaves weeks ago," she explained. "You are surrounded by turmoil and wish only to go home."

Sheila nodded, unimpressed by the woman's statement. She had said as much to Alyas. "So what now? You going to use your crystal ball to read my future?"

Lady Pandora's eyes narrowed as she examined Sheila for a second. "Do not mock that which you don't understand," she warned in a low voice. "There are many ways of seeking information from beyond the vale. Do not discount Lady Pandora's methods simply because they are strange to you."

Sheila laid her ears back reflexively at Lady Pandora's tone of voice. "I'm sorry," she hastily apologized. "I wasn't mocking you; I just wanted to know what came next."

The old fortuneteller sat back in her chair and watched Sheila for a second before she nodded. "Maybe Lady Pandora misjudged your question," she admitted. She opened a drawer and withdrew a large, shallow dish that was about two feet across, along with five smaller bowls and some bags. She set four of the small bowls in front of herself, and the large dish and an empty bowl by Sheila. Lady Pandora then opened each of the four bags and poured some stones into bowls, keeping the stones from one bag separated from the others. She then set the smaller bowls next to Sheila. "Take a small handful of stones from each bowl and place them in the empty bowl."

Sheila hesitantly dug her paw into the first bowl, unsure if she was doing it right. The stones were about the size of peanut M&M candies, and were off white in color. Still unsure as to what she was doing, she poured the stones into the bowl. As they left her hand, they began

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to glow slightly. She repeated the process with the other three sets of stones, filling the once empty bowl until it was almost full.

"Excellent. Now pour the stones into the larger bowl," Lady Pandora instructed as she set a shallow box on the table. The inside of the box was crisscrossed with mystic symbols, lines and diagrams.

As Sheila poured the glowing stones from the small bowl into the large dish and noticed that not only were they glowing brighter, but the each stone had also taken on a different color from the spectrum.

"Good. Now, pick up the large bowl and swirl the stones to mix them. Do not stop mixing them until I say so, at which time you are to spill them into the box." Lady Pandora waited for Sheila to nod in acknowledgement, pick up the bowl and begin to swirl it, mixing the stones. The woman then closed her eyes and began to slowly recite a chant over and over in time with the sound of the stones as they circled the dish. With each trip around the circumference of the dish, the stones glowed a little brighter.

After a minute or so, Sheila noticed that the stones were beginning to synchronize in their odd rolling pattern. She watched in amazement as the random undulations changed into a uniform rippling pattern as the stones finally attained harmony.

"Now, girl!" the fortuneteller ordered. "Pour the stones now, while they are in harmony!"

Sheila poured the stones into the large box that sat in front of Lady Pandora. As the stones entered the box, they continued to bounce and roll around while the fortuneteller chanted. Some of the stones bounced out of the box. Once they had left the box, the stones rapidly came to a stop. To Sheila's amazement, the wayward stones lost their color and glow as they melted away, leaving no trace of their passing.

Lady Pandora continued to chant, raising her voice and increasing the pace, sending the stones into a flurry of motion that was almost impossible for the eye to follow. With a loud clap of her hands, she brought the motion to an end. Each of the stones froze in air, then dropped, unmoving, to the surface of the box. The glow faded slightly from stone to stone, leaving a multihued array of lights that varied across the surface.

Sheila fidgeted nervously as the woman studied the pattern of stones. With each grunt, Sheila wanted to grab her and demand to know what she saw. After a moment, the woman leaned back in her chair and stared off into space. "What?" Sheila demanded. "*What did you see?*"

Lady Pandora blinked and stared at Sheila as if seeing her for the first time. "Never has Lady Pandora cast a reading of this magnitude," the woman replied, shaken by the experience.

"Tell me what you saw!" Sheila insisted, grabbing the edge of the table with both paws.

"I...I can not," she replied, looking at the board. "It's too complex... It's impossible."

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Sheila reached out and grabbed the old woman's arm. "Try, damn it. What does it say?"

Once again, Lady Pandora looked down at the stones. "You are in the center of a conflict that is beyond anything I have seen before." She gestured around the board. "Forces of good and evil are in conflict with forces that I have no name for. Each tries to influence your future." She paused for a second, staring at the board. "Your future..." The blood drained from her face. Lady Pandora looked as if she had seen a ghost.

"What about my future?" Sheila again demanded.

"I see death," the fortuneteller responded.

"My death?" Sheila demanded.

"No," Lady Pandora responded distractedly, caught up in the spell she had cast. A strange blue-green aura surrounded her. "Beware, for you will travel with the dead. A life sacrificed shall be reborn within the flames that do not burn. Your quest will destroy that which you seek to save and may bring Armageddon. Follow your heart and trust your instincts, for your spirit is good and will know the way. Hear this warning and heed it, lest all you hold precious shall be lost."

As she finished speaking, the aura around her faded. With a sigh, the woman slowly collapsed onto the board where the stones were already melting away. Sheila quickly moved around the table and checked the woman's pulse. Assured that she was still alive, Sheila lifted her up and laid her down on the bed at the far end of the wagon.

Assured that Lady Pandora was comfortable and not in any physical danger, Sheila made her way towards the door in the rear of the wagon. She paused as she was about to walk by the box and looked in. There was a single stone still in the box that was glowing brightly. Sheila sat down next to the box and stared at the stone, wondering why it hadn't faded away. She felt a moment of vertigo as she felt her perception rushing into the stone.

Ruddygore

The stout sorcerer stood before the closed iron doors and scowled. He knew for a fact that Poquah had entered but not left the room. There was absolutely no reason for the Imir to have sealed the entrance behind him, which meant only one thing: There was a demon within.

With a wave of his hand, the doors slammed open with a loud clang as they struck the wall to either side of the entrance. Ruddygore looked into the pitch-black room with a sight that was beyond that of normal mortals, and scowled even deeper than before. This was no minor creature that had taken roost. There was a very powerful demon in the room. Possibly even a ranking prince of Hell.

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"All right, demon," Ruddygore shouted. "Show yourself and let's get this over with."

"Oh, I don't think I want to do that quite yet," a quiet voice replied from the dark. "If I show myself, you'll just set about trying to banish me and that wouldn't do at all. No, it wouldn't do at all."

"It's up to you, demon," the fat man responded as he analyzed the spells in the room. "Your deception and camouflage spells are complex, but nothing I can't handle. You're only delaying the inevitable."

"I don't think you want to do that either," the hissing voice replied. "If you do, it will be the end of your pet elf."

"*So he's still alive,*" Ruddygore thought as he considered the situation. "And just what do you want in exchange for his life?"

"It's simple," the disembodied said. "I have a proposition for you. Listen to what I offer, and if you decline, then I will leave."

"Just like that?" Ruddygore asked incredulously. "You expect me to believe that?"

A small man walked out of the darkness, dragging the unconscious body of Poquah in his left hand. He was human in every way except for his eyes. Black vertical slit pupils on yellow irises, floating on a blood red orb. "Indeed I do," the creature replied with a smile, showing small, snakelike fangs.

Ruddygore gave an inward curse at what he saw. This was no normal demon. This was a divine creature, one of the original fallen angels. Only they could break the Rules of Husquahr, which forced all summoned demons to take on a hideous form. "All right, I'm listening."

The creature dropped the elf to the ground where it lay moaning. "My name is Lakash," he said, smiling at the look of shock on the sorcerer's face, "and I am in need of your services."

"How did you get here?" Ruddygore finally asked. "You're kind can't cross without a specific summoning."

Lakash smiled. "I know. I've been planning it for quite a while," he explained. "One of my agents infiltrated your ranks a long time ago, waiting for the right moment. He changed the name of one of the demons that you had assigned your students to practice summoning on."

"And the student? Where is he?"

Lakash sighed. "Dead, I'm afraid." He waved a hand, releasing the spells in the room that hid the carnage within. "I'm afraid that the boy wasn't too bright. I kept telling him to run along and fetch you, but he insisted on trying to banish me. After his third try I'm afraid I lost my patience."

Ruddygore looked at the remains of his former student and then frowned at Lakash. "What

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do you want?"

"Have you ever heard of a totem spirit by the name of Nanuk?" the demon asked.

"Not specifically. I've heard of spirit totems, though," Ruddygore admitted.

Lakash smiled and nodded. "Good. This one is a healing totem. One of the good guys, as it were," he said with a chuckle. "As it so happens, this totem's time for renewal has come and I am facilitating the event."

"You helping out the forces of good?" Ruddygore asked with a laugh. "Do you seriously expect me to believe that?"

Lakash shrugged. "I am not a creature of Hell, Ruddygore," Lakash declared "Nor am I a creature of Heaven any more. I fight to maintain the balance between good and evil. My goal is to prevent Armageddon at all costs."

Ruddygore gave the demon a sideways look. "Why?"

"Simple. I'm tired of the Almighty and his games. This goaround, I plan on making it last indefinitely."

"This goaround?" the sorcerer asked incredulously. "You mean that the battle between good and evil has happened before?"

Lakash laughed. "Thousands of times. Each time, he plays with the rules. This time though, I've thrown a wrench into the works." Lakash smiled, showing a set of teeth that Ruddygore would have preferred not to see. "This time I betrayed not only Heaven, but Hell as well. This time around, my goal is not to cause Armageddon, but to prevent it at all cost."

Ruddygore stroked his beard as he considered what he had just learned. It was far different from anything he had heard before. "And what does this have to do with the totem spirit?"

"Power," Lakash said. "By helping the totem spirit's agents to renew it, I will gain power."

"I see," Ruddygore responded, his mind churning over the facts. "And just what do you need from me?"

"You must assist Nanuk's agents in the completion of their quest. They will give you the specifics."

Ruddygore nodded. "And who are these agents?"

Lakash summoned up an image of Sheila. "This one is named Sheila Vixen. She is even now making her way to Terindell. The other one is named Arden. Unfortunately, I can't show you what he looks like yet as that's still to be determined."

"Sheila and Arden," Ruddygore said under his breath. "I received a message about them. This Sheila was searching for Arden."

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Lakash nodded again. "That's her."

"And you can't divine what this Arden looks like?" Ruddygore asked, confused at the demon's lack of information.

Lakash shook his head. "Regrettably, the damn fool got himself killed," Lakash complained. "I'm working on finding him a replacement body."

Ruddygore shook his head in consternation. "But... How are you maintaining his soul? Surely you can't have him in your realm. There wouldn't be any way for you to bring him across the barriers."

"His spirit is already in this world," Lakash replied, holding a hand up to cut off the sorcerer's next question. "I won't explain my methods, but I will say that with some luck, he should be in a new body within a week or two."

Ruddygore nodded. "And what do I get in return for helping you and your people out?"

Lakash laughed. "A bargain isn't a bargain unless both sides are compensated, eh?" he said with a touch of humor. "All right then. I'll give you a spell that is tailored to your precious ferry, which will let you cross the sea of dreams not only to Earth Prime, but any of the myriads of alternate realities. That should keep you occupied for a couple of thousand years."

The sorcerer stared at Lakash, stunned at his offer. "How can you offer me that kind of power? That's beyond even the most powerful demons of Hell."

Lakash gave another toothy smile. "Elementary, my dear sorcerer. My job during Creation was to forge the barriers between realities, as well as fashion the guardians that prevent anyone from crossing who aren't supposed to. My spell will act as a key to allow you to cross."

Ruddygore nodded absentmindedly again. "That explains the lamp," he commented. "I always wondered how you were able to forge a permanent link between the realm of the Dijin and the physical locale of the lamp."

Lakash gestured at Poquah, who appeared to be coming to. "If I were you, I'd take care of your elf. In the meantime, I must return to my realm. Remember, if they succeed, you get the spell. If they fail, you get nothing." With that, Lakash simply disappeared with a simple pop.

The large sorcerer contemplated Lakash's offer, weighing the pros and cons for a second before attending to the elf's welfare. It was tempting, almost too good to be true, but if the offer was valid then he couldn't afford to pass up the opportunity.

Sheila

Sheila found herself standing on a boat. She had a detached feeling, as if it

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were all a dream. Beside her stood a huge human with gray hair and beard who was dressed in a very fancy, formal outfit, complete with top hat. A sound caught her attention. It was the clang of metal-on-metal from a sword fight. As she looked over to the sound she saw Arden fighting another human on the beach of an island. She noticed that she and the fat man were standing at the ramp of a ferryboat watching the conflict.

Blow after blow rang out as Arden and the other man fought. The pace of their conflict was astounding. Their movements were so fast that she could barely follow their movements. The other man managed a grazing blow against Arden that caused him to reel away from combat and drop to his knees, holding his ribs with one hand.

"Now it ends," the other man said as he approached.

"BONZAI!" Arden shouted as he leapt into the air, driving his sword down with his weight. His attack failed to catch the other man off guard. Smiling at some private joke, the man braced his sword, allowing Arden to impale him as he, in return, impaled Arden.

Sheila screamed in horror at the sight.

Sheila's perception snapped back to the inside of the wagon. Shaken, she watched as the final stone lost its glow and melted into the wood. It had been a dream, some sort of illusion that had been left over from the reading. Who's to say that what she saw would have to come true. Deep down, she knew that it was a possibility. Arden was a berserker. He was more than capable of killing himself in an attack that would destroy his enemy.

The vixen stood and climbed out of the wagon, closing the door behind her. She glanced over at the fire for a second and watched the rest of the troop as they sat and chatted, before turning away. She didn't have to walk far to reach the lip of the small valley. Looking out at the night sky, she studied the stars, looking for something in them that would give her some kind of reassurance that things would work out.

A couple of hours passed before Ross noticed that Sheila was missing from around the fire. Using a small device that resembled a compass, he turned and headed in the direction it pointed until he spotted Sheila. She was still standing, looking out at the stars. Ross could clearly see from the way her tail and ears simply hung limp that something was bothering her. He was tempted to go ask her what was wrong, but decided not to. When she was ready, she would talk.

Ross took a quick look around to make sure there wasn't anything that could threaten her in the area before he headed back to his camp. It had been a long day and he was tired. Tomorrow, he would confront her about what happened tonight. Yes, in the morning, she would be more amiable to conversation.

Or so he hoped.

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Let the hunt begin

Sheila

Sheila heaved the saddlebags over the back of her horse and had begun to tie them to the saddle when Drix fluttered up next to her.

"Sheila," she said in her high-pitched voice, "Pandora's asking for you."

The vixen finished off the knot she was tying and then nodded to the pixie. "OK. I'll be right there," she replied as she started off towards the garishly decorated wagon.

Arriving at the back, she knocked on the door. Jasper's muffled voice called out to her, inviting her in. Sheila opened the door and climbed in, making sure to close the door behind her. Inside, she found that Lady Pandora was still lying on the bed, Jasper sitting beside her with a worried look on his face.

After a few moments, Jasper looked over at Sheila and stood. "Please, come and sit," he said, indicating the place on the bed that he had vacated.

Sheila sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at the woman. Lady Pandora seemed much older than she had before.

"Amanda," Jasper said quietly. "Sheila's here."

The old woman cracked open her eyes and looked around, focusing on Sheila. "There you are," she stated in a weak voice. "You weren't thinking of running off without giving old Pandora a chance to discuss your reading, were you?"

Sheila glanced up at Jasper's worried look, then turned back to the woman. "I didn't want to disturb your rest."

"Rest will come soon enough," the old woman said with a nod. "Soon enough I will have all the rest I shall ever need."

Jasper knelt by the bed, taking the woman's hand in his. "Don't talk like that, Amanda." Sheila could hear the pleading tone in his voice.

"Be still, my husband," Pandora said, giving his hand a little squeeze. "My magic has given me life far longer than any human should be allowed. Now that the time has come, I'm not going to fight it."

"But what will I do without you?" Jasper leaned closer. "You don't *have* to die."

Pandora smiled at her husband. "You'll do the same thing you did in the centuries before you met me. You'll go on with your troop, exploring the lands and meeting new people. Now hush while I talk to Sheila. We must finish our business."

Jasper gave Sheila a pained look, then rose and left the wagon, closing the door gently.

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"You'll have to forgive my husband," the woman said, taking Sheila's paw into her hand. "I have lasted far longer than any mortal has any right to, and he doesn't understand why I should die when my life could be extended yet again."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're saying," Sheila said, glancing at the door that Jasper went through before turning back. "Just how old is he?"

"He is ancient and yet a child at the same time," Pandora responded. "Jasper was brought to this world as a refugee from Earth Prime well over a thousand years ago." She paused and stared off into the distance for a moment, lost in the memories. "I met him almost two hundred years ago while I was on my way to be trained in the mystical arts." Again she smiled, her features softening. "Even then he led a carnival troop through the lands." Her gaze returned to Sheila. "We met not unlike the way you met us last night. It was a chance encounter that changed my life." Pandora breathed deeply and let out a long, wistful sigh. "After I completed my training, I traveled the lands until I again found him. We've been together ever since."

"Wow. Two hundred years," Sheila whispered, awestruck. "That's a long time to be with just one person." The concept was something that Sheila was having trouble wrapping her mind around.

Pandora's eyes narrowed as she watched the vixen. "That scares you, doesn't it?"

"Huh?" Sheila grunted. "What are you talking about?"

"Giving yourself to just one man," the woman commented. "The idea scares you, doesn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sheila replied, trying to dismiss the accusation.

"You search for the one you call your mate, yet I can see that the idea of being bound to only one man bothers you." Pandora looked hard and deep into Sheila's eyes, trapping the vixen in her gaze. "Yes, I see it. Why do you seek this man? Don't you love him?"

Sheila shuddered. "I'm not sure any more," she confessed. "I think I loved him once, but things have changed so fast. I'm not sure what I feel any more." She looked down at the fancy cured silk outfit that she wore and felt the amulet beneath the fabric. "All I am sure about is that the only way I'll ever get home is to find him."

"I see the wounds on your soul, child," the woman said quietly. "You have lost much in your travels and have led a difficult life. Yet the future I saw for you has not been written in stone. There is hope for you yet."

"The future," Sheila said distractedly before looking back at Pandora. "And just what kind of future do I have? All you talked about was Armageddon."

"I only saw the potential for Armageddon," Pandora replied. "You are a pawn who has now been elevated to a queen in the game of the gods. If you are successful in completing the task set out for you, you will return home." The old woman closed her eyes as she recalled

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the visions she had seen. "I have seen you and your child living happily in your old world. You will once again be amongst friends who will take good care of you."

"And Arden?" Sheila asked.

Pandora opened her eye. "Uncertain is his fate. He sits at the apex of events. I have seen his death many times over, as well as his triumphs, yet I am unable to see clearly which path he will take."

Sheila sat for a moment, staring at nothing in particular as she thought about what Pandora had said. "After you passed out," she said, looking back at the old woman, "I carried you to your bed and then sat down in your chair." As she paused, Pandora nodded, urging her on. "I looked back at the board and saw one remaining stone in the center of the case. It...did something to me. I saw something... A vision... I'm not sure what it was."

"That was the keystone," Pandora said with a nod. "It is always the last stone to fade."

"Is it...will it...the vision, come true?" Sheila asked shakily.

By reflex, Pandora almost gave an honest answer. Instead she settled for leaving Sheila some hope. "Only time will tell," Pandora said as she closed her eyes. "Only time will tell..."

Ross reigned in his horse to pace Sheila's mount. "Come on, Sheila. I can see that it's bothering you. I know something about these spells and what they can show you." He watched for any reaction as they continued to ride. Seeing that she wasn't going to say anything, Ross reached out and grabbed the rein up near the muzzle of Sheila's horse and pulled it to a stop, turning his mount to face her. "Damn it, Sheila!" he complained. "Why are you acting like this?"

Sheila looked up at him with narrowed eyes. "Why are you traveling with me?"

"What?" Ross blinked at the question. "Why do you think I'm here?" he challenged, the tone of his voice carefully neutral.

"I don't know," Sheila replied, cocking her head to one side. "Everyone says that I shouldn't trust you, that you only care about power and are just using me for something." She urged her horse forward a few steps so that she sat right next to Ross. "Is that true?"

The mage pursed his lips for a second as he considered her question. "I'm not using you," he replied. "Sure, I'm curious about you. You're a unique creature, something that I've never encountered before, and that intrigues me." He gave a small shrug and an offhand nod. "And I will admit that I'm interested in the magic you possess. It's like nothing I've ever seen."

Sheila gritted her teeth and looked away for a moment to compose herself. "And all that talk about loving me?" she asked through clenched fangs.

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"Umm.." Ross bit his lip for a second. "Ok. I'll admit, I didn't really mean that," he replied, hurrying on to explain, "but I meant everything else. I don't want to lose you, Sheila."

Sheila looked at Ross for a moment before she pulled the reins from his hands. "You never had me," she stated as she spurred her horse onwards.

Ross let out a sigh and turned to follow. He had a job to do. It would have been nice if she had cooperated, but that wasn't a requirement. It was time to lose the kid gloves and get down to business. Tonight he'd check in and verify his plans. The secret of that armor would be his.

Ruddygore

Ruddygore looked up at a knock at the door. "Enter," he called out.

The door opened, slightly allowing a bruised and battered Poquah to enter. "It's here." His voice, normally cold and impartial almost dripped with loathing.

Ruddygore nodded. "Show her in, please."

The tall elf opened the door and nodded to the person outside. A tall female entered, robed in a black, pleated leather cloak that extended down almost to her feet. Her hair and skin were jet black, broken only by the red glow of her eyes. Her ears, like Poquah's, were tall, pointed and angled backwards along the side of her head. A brief smile revealed the same sharp, pointed teeth common amongst the Imir, except for the canines, which were more than twice the normal length.

"Thanks, handsome," she said as she passed by the sorcerer's aide. The cape fluttered open to reveal a thin female body covered with a one-piece outfit which was covered with pockets. She reached out a clawed hand and cupped the male Imir's face. "When are you going to quit acting like an iceberg and have some fun with me?" she purred with an impish smile.

"When hell freezes over," Poquah snarled and left the room, closing the door behind him.

The female laughed and turned back to the large magician, who had watched the entire exchange with a small scowl. "What?" she asked innocently as she glided over to the chair across from him and sat.

"Hecate," he said with a sigh of exasperation, "why must you insist on such displays when you know good and well that he despises you?" Ruddygore pulled a large cigar from his humidor, stuck it in his mouth and sucked on it as the end burst into flames.

"Come on, Ruddy," she whined. "He needs a little loosening up. A good romp in the hay is just the way to do it, too. Lord knows the boy needs it." The smile faded as a sour look came over her face. "Unless.... No! Don't tell me he's one of *those* is he?"

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"Eh?" the sorcerer grunted, taken back by her question. "No, I doubt it. He simply does not approve of your existence."

"Hah! I guess he'll just have to live with it since I don't plan on kicking off any time soon," she replied, turning serious. "Now that the entertainment is over, what can I do for you?"

Ruddygore leaned back and steepled his fingers. "I need you to locate someone for me."

Hecate nodded. "No problem. It's what I do best." She reached out and flipped open the humidor, and removed a cigar before closing it. A brief smile visited her face as she sniffed the tobacco, though the smile's source may have been at the annoyed look the sorcerer had given her. She leaned back as Ruddygore had and stoked the cigar. "You have samples for me?"

"No," Ruddygore responded flatly.

"Whoa there, Junior," she said waving the cigar in front of her. "I'm a blood tracker, not a miracle worker. You know I can't find anyone without a sample."

"Unless?" the sorcerer asked.

Her eyebrows arched for a second at the question before slamming down into a serious scowl. "No! I'm not a demon hunter! I won't hunt down supernatural creatures!" She stabbed out the cigar in the ashtray and stood to leave.

"This isn't a supernatural creature," Ruddygore said hastily. "I will admit that she's from a world other than Earth Prime, but she's not supernatural." He paused and watched as the female sat back down. "She came here through a dimensional gateway. That alone will mark her in such a way that someone with your unique talents should be able to track her."

She eyed Ruddygore suspiciously. "What's the catch?"

The sorcerer sighed as he sat up straight. "She's wearing some form of physical material interwoven with magic. It's masking all traces of her. I've been unable to locate any hint of her existence, even though I know for a fact she's in our realm now. My hope is that you will be able to sense her when you get closer to her."

Hecate frowned as she considered the job. "My price has just doubled."

Ruddygore nodded. "Agreed. Find her within the month and I'll triple it," he replied, relieved that she had taken the job. "Last word I had about her indicated that she would be coming up from the southwest. I suggest that you try High Pothique, and head south from there." He summoned up an image of Sheila, similar to the one that Lakash had shown him. "This is who you're looking for. Her name is Sheila Vixen. If you locate her, make sure you let her know that you're working for me. I have it on good authority that she should be trying to make her way here, but I don't know what kind of resources or resistance she may run into."

"All right," Hecate replied standing. "What's so important about this critter?" she asked as

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she opened the door to the terrace and stepped out into the fresh air.

Ruddygore stood and followed her out, then stood leaning on the stone railing. "She has suddenly become a very critical piece in a game between heaven and hell that I just recently become aware of." He reached out and took hold of her arm. "This is important, Hecate. Please don't betray me again."

Hecate yanked her arm away from his grasp. "You know how I feel about the forces of hell," she snarled. The leather cape she wore suddenly billowed out above and behind her to reveal that it was, in fact, a large pair of demonic wings that had covered a sinuous, barbed tail. "I may not hunt daemons, but I'll never knowingly aid the forces of hell, either!" With that she launched off the stone terrace railing and glided out over the River of the Dancing Gods, occasionally flapping to gain altitude.

"That's what I'm counting on," Ruddygore said quietly to himself as he watched the hell-spawned Imir take flight.

Ross

Ross sat by the fire, reading a tome from his pack. On the other side, Sheila lay asleep. It had been a restless night for her. Every time he thought that she had finally fallen asleep, she had tossed and turned. It had been some time since her last movement, and the slow even rhythm of her breathing told him that she had finally slipped off to sleep.

He quietly stood and made his way over to the packhorse that carried his belongings. With exaggerated care he undid the protection spell that kept anyone from snooping in his possessions. From deep within a bag he withdrew a leather-bound object.

As he removed the mirror from its case, a sideways glance ensured that Sheila was still sound asleep. Taking the device in both hands he concentrated on activating it. A glow surrounded the mirror as the face took shape in its center.

"It's about time," the stern face in the mirror complained. "What in Probst's name is going on?"

Ross winced internally. "There's been a bit of a problem," he replied. "The locals have been warning her about our sect, and she's lost confidence in my sincerity."

"So what's the problem?" the face asked. "Just use a compulsion, but for Probst's sake be subtle."

This time Ross's wince was visible. "That's part of the problem," he said sheepishly. "I tried to hit her with a low-end compulsion. That damned armor reacted and blocked the spell."

A shocked face looked back out from the mirror. "What? I thought you said it couldn't block magic!"

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Ross nodded. "I know. That adept I paid to ambush her had no problem tying her up with a force spell," he answered. "I can only presume that the armor's ability to block magic is limited."

The face in the mirror frowned in thought. "All right, then. Just stay with her. If she decides to try to lose you, let her think she's succeeded. Just make sure you don't lose track of her."

Ross nodded "No problem. She's wearing an earring that I have keyed to a tracker. There's no way she can lose me." Ross then released the spell before replacing the mirror in his pack. A few seconds to secure the flap both physically and magically, and he was done. He then returned to his place by the fire and picked up his book. Sheila hadn't moved the entire time. Satisfied, he went back to reading.

In her bedroll, Sheila gritted her teeth and closed her slitted eyes. If that was the way they wanted to play, then she could play their game, too.

Chapter 6

Here comes the rain again

Splotch. That's the sound the horse's hoof made each time the horse took a step in the rain soddened mud. *Splurtch* was the sound it made as it came back out. It had been raining since early morning and only let up, once, around noon for a brief period. Ross had explained that it was the start of the monsoon season, and these storms could last for days without end. Whatever the reason, Sheila was not a happy camper. Although she had remained fairly dry under her rain slicker, her paws were definitely cold and wet.

This was not what she had envisioned when she started out on the trip. This was supposed to be a straightforward trip across the open plains and deserts of Leander. Nobody had said squat about storms, much less thunder and lightning.

To make things even worse, Ross was sitting there under some kind of spell that kept the rain off of him, reading his damn book and totally ignoring the inclement weather. He hadn't even bothered to keep up the pretense of being a nice guy by offering to do the same thing for Sheila. Instead he had simply looked after himself without offering to lift a finger to help her.

Occasionally, during the ride, the hairs on the back of Sheila's neck would stand up, giving her the sense that something was wrong, but each time she looked back at the mage he had his nose stuck in the book. After hearing him talk to his boss the night before, Sheila wouldn't have been surprised if the feeling hadn't been some warning that he was trying something. She'd have to do something about losing him, and soon.

The rain broke as the pair crested a small ridge, revealing a small town nestled in the valley below. Wood houses spread out along both sides of the river, which was now swollen with water. Even with the large amount of rain that had fallen, the river was nowhere near flood level. From the looks of the banks, it would appear that the town had taken efforts to ensure that no ordinary storm would result in any flooding. Should such a thing occur, the citizens could easily escape up the gradual slopes on either side of the valley and into the safety of the foothills.

Sheila rode a short distance into town before spotting a stable that suited her. The large, barn-like structure had one of the tall doors open to the weather, allowing riders to enter without having to dismount. Once inside Sheila climbed down as a tall, muscular human approached.

"Good day, sirs," he said, wiping his hands on the leather apron he wore. "And how may I assist you today?"

"It's Ma'am," Sheila said, pushing the hood back, "and I need my horse stabled."

The tall man took a step back. "By the gods," he muttered in shock before shaking it off. "Umm... Stabling fees are eight silver per night, plus feed."

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"Eight silver!" Sheila replied angrily, slinging the saddlebag over her shoulder as she tucked the bedroll under the same arm. "That's highway robbery." Her hand unconsciously rested on the hilt of the Tanto that she had tucked into the right hand side of her belt, contrary to the more-traditional system Arden had shown her.

"Well...umm...mind you that is for both horses," he said nervously at the thought of violence.

Sheila glanced back over her shoulder at Ross and his mount. "Screw that. Just my horse, fed and groomed."

The blacksmith wiped his hands nervously again on the apron. "All right, then. Five silver per night for stable, feed and grooming."

"Five silver?" Sheila spit, contemptuously. "Three silver and not a farthing more," she said angrily. "I'll be back in the morning, and if she's not been taken care of right, I'll be taking care of you...personally!"

Sheila turned and stormed out of the stables, leaving a rather shaken blacksmith staring at the retreating form. He had almost forgotten about her companion when Ross stopped next to him.

"I wouldn't push my luck with her, buddy. Her bite is as bad as her bark," he said in a conspiratorial tone as he followed her out. A smile graced his face. "*That was entertaining,*" he thought to himself. "*If the bad weather continued to hold, this trip might not be so boring.*"

Lightening framed Sheila as she stood in the doorway of the inn. A sudden downpour had caught her unawares as she had been crossing the street, drenching her in the process. Another flash followed by a clap of thunder outlined her body before she walked across the room to the innkeeper. Behind her, a trail of water and muddy footprints bore silent testimony to the raging storm outside.

"I want a room," she said in a low, flat tone of voice, "preferably on the second floor with a balcony."

The innkeeper was a bulky man standing maybe half a hand taller than Sheila. His face was scarred and pocked from years of combat. The once-proud Roman nose now sat crookedly on his face, declaring for all to see that at one time he had been a warrior who could take it as well as he could dish it out, and right now he didn't look at all pleased.

"We're not a kennel. No animals allowed," he replied, tossing the towel he held onto the bar. "I suggest you look elsewhere."

A low growl escaped Sheila's muzzle as she glared at the man. "What did you call me?" she asked in a quiet voice.

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The bouncer had slowly moved around the end of the bar and was cautiously trying to flank the vixen. He held a club about the size and shape of a baseball bat behind him in an attempt to prevent her from seeing it.

Sheila caught the movement out of the corner of her eye, and dropped the saddlebags and bedroll as she spun to face him. The Katana slipped half an inch out of its sheath as she bared her fangs and snarled at him. "That's far enough, asshole!"

The bouncer started to bring the club around to defend himself, but froze for a moment before dropping the weapon and slowly backing away.

Sheila spun back towards the barkeep and glared at him. "How about it, asshole? You were saying something about *animals*?"

The war axe that the bartender had picked up clattered to the floor as he stared at the creature before him. The moment the Katana's blade had been exposed, a red glow had spread from her armor to completely cover the angry vixen. Neither the innkeeper nor his bouncer, nor anyone else in the room, knew that Sheila was totally unaware of the effect. All they knew was that this was magic, and nobody wanted to screw with a mage, especially not one wandering around with swords to backup the magic.

"Nu-Nu-Nothing, " the innkeeper stuttered, trying to get the words out. "It was just a misunderstanding, that's all." He swallowed as his eyes locked onto one of the dragons that were embroidered into the silk armor she wore. He could have sworn that it had turned its head to look at him. "You're welcome to take any of the rooms, any one at all."

Sheila snapped the sword back in its sheath and picked up her belongings. "Just give me the fucking key."

The innkeeper hastily grabbed a key from the block of pigeonholes behind him. "It's up the stairs, last door on the right," he said putting the key on the bar. "That's six silver per night." He visibly flinched after stating the price, obviously worried that she might take offense.

Sheila scowled at him again. "That better include meals," she said sharply.

"Sure!" he agreed, nodding vigorously. "Meals included. Not a problem."

With a quick swipe of the paw, Sheila snatched the key off of the bar and tromped noisily up the stairs to her room. All eyes followed her progress to the eventual slam of the door once she had reached her destination.

A low chuckle caught the innkeeper's attention, making him notice Ross for the first time. The mage had made his way silently from the door to the bar that doubled for the main desk while Sheila was making her noisy trip to her room.

"What do you want?" the surly innkeeper snapped.

"Just a room, if you don't mind. Next to hers, if possible," Ross replied with a smile.

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"Yes," he thought to himself, *"this is going to be very entertaining."*

The desk wasn't too different from the one that Ruddygore had in his office. In fact, if one looked about the room, they would find that most of the books on the walls were of common interest to both owners. However the owner of this desk was quite the opposite of Ruddygore.

Standing barely five feet tall, the bald sorcerer sat behind his desk, pouring over some very ancient paperwork that had recently been brought up from the archives. When he had first learned from Ross of this creature, he had suspected that there was more than meets the eye. These documents proved him right. He was busy scribing notes when there came a knock at the door.

"Enter," he said absentmindedly.

A tall human woman entered, dressed in what appeared to be rabbit fur. Around her head she had a length of fairy-spun gold braid that held her long black hair in place, and prevented it from obscuring her vision. Her skin was paper white and decorated with an intricate series of tattoos that covered almost all of the exposed surface. A small feather dangled from one ear, the only form of decoration other than the headband.

"You sent for me, Master?" she said in a respectful voice.

"Yes, Kalla. Please sit down," he replied without looking up. For several minutes the sorcerer continued to write in his journal while the barbarian warrior sat patiently in the chair before him. Finally he put the pen down and looked up at the woman. "I have a job for you."

A brief smile visited her face. "And here I thought you had called me in to discuss tomorrow's lunch menu," she replied lightly.

"This is serious," the sorcerer growled. "We've got a problem, and I need you to ensure that things are handled properly."

"What is my mission?" she asked, all pretenses at humor or banter gone.

"Ross has discovered a creature, one not of Heaven or Hell, yet she is interdimensional in nature. She's also sporting enough magic on her to support a small army." He paused and scowled at a document before him. "I think Ross may be in over his head. You know him; he tends to be overconfident. I don't want to lose track of this creature."

Kalla gave a brief snort of derision. "Overconfident is an understatement. That idiot has trouble finding his dick when he needs to piss."

The man gave Kalla a sharp look. "Might I remind you that he is my son?" he said in a dangerous tone.

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"It doesn't change the fact that he's an incompetent fool," she replied calmly. "How many times did he get lost just going between classes at the academy because he had his nose stuck in some book? He's useless and you know it. It's time you stopped covering for him."

"Perhaps you're right," he admitted grudgingly. "That's why you're here. I have no doubt that she's going to slip his reins and try to make a break for Ruddygore's." From behind the desk he took out a large map and unrolled it on top of all the papers. "They're here," he said pointing to a spot, "about five days south of High Pothique, just west of the Dabesar River. I've arranged for some inclement weather to delay them. Apparently she's afraid of lightening. It should delay her for a few days, at least until Thurgarden realizes that someone's been messing with the weather in his back yard and takes steps to correct it."

"Right. If I push it, I should be able to get there in two, maybe three days, tops," Kalla replied studying the map.

"I would think more like five," the sorcerer replied. "The storm is dumping a ton of water on the area. You won't find it an easy trip."

Kalla gave the man a dangerous smile. "Don't even think about telling me my business, old man. I've been tracking prey through a lot worse terrain since before that young whelp of yours was out of diapers."

"Whatever," he replied, rolling the map back up. "Just get over there and make sure that you don't loose track of her. This is important to us. She's the key to the Chaos Gate, I'm sure of it. If everything goes right, Ruddygore will no longer be the only sorcerer who can travel between worlds."

Hecate was fighting some rather strong headwinds as she pushed her way southwest from Stormhold, in High Pothique. Having flown through the night from Terindell, she would normally have found a cave in the mountains and slept there. Unfortunately, she had sensed something that shouldn't be out there. There was something not of Husquahr or Earth to the southwest, and she needed to find out what. If it was Ruddygore's stray dog, she could expect a serious bonus for such a quick turnaround. If not, then it was best she find out what it was for future reference.

The sensation of 'wrongness' was strong enough now that she had a fairly decent idea of its direction and distance. A quick dive took her below the cloud level and providing a clear view of the surrounding terrain. Her magic sight showed told her immediately that this wasn't the quarry she was hunting.

Below, spread out for a huge distance in all directions, was a dead forest. Dead, to all that lacked the sight, that is. A dark magic permeated the trees, giving a ghastly glow. There was no doubt that something powerful resided down there, and right now Hecate didn't have time to deal with it. A quick look showed the ruins of what had once been a small castle or keep.

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From the center of the ruins strands of magic shot out, searching for her. With a curse, Hecate twisted and dodged the probing strands. All except one. It clipped her left wing as she twisted violently. All sensation left that appendage and she began to spiral down out of control. Even as she fought to level out, a swarm of creatures launched themselves from the keep, and headed in her direction.

"You won't get me that easy!" she shouted in defiance. Folding both wings back, she dived at the ground, reaching out with one hand. A subtle twist of her long fingers called forth a magic that only she could perform, and the fabric of reality tore itself apart before her. She dropped into the momentary rip, and with a blinding flash she was gone, leaving no trace of her passing.

From within the tower a tall, skeletal form wrapped in rotting cloths, stared for a long moment at the empty place where the intruder had escaped his grasp. He valued his privacy, and now someone had escaped to tell of his existence. He turned and strode purposefully from the room. Time to prepare for guests.

Sheila sat in her room and stared out at the lightening storm that raged beyond the walls. With each flash of lightning she flinched. A long time ago, she had told Zig Zag about her fear of lightning. Now she had to deal with it in a way she had never imagined.

The vixen straddled a chair, leaning on the back as she stared out at the dark clouds. Images half remembered showed themselves with each flash. Arden on the night he appeared in the middle of the road, shock and confusion on his face as the headlights hit him. His unconscious body as it lay in the ditch with the strobes from the EMT vehicles illuminating the scene with irregular pulses. Arden standing on top of the hill, firing at the helicopter that had been strafing them. Each image was a separate dream that haunted her as the thunder rumbled by.

"Why did you have to go and get yourself killed?" she said to nobody in particular.

"He had no choice," a voice said from behind.

Sheila turned and saw young Thomas sitting on the edge of the bed. "Thomas? Is that really you?"

"That depends on what you consider real," he replied with a smile. "You're sitting in a building on a world governed by magic, trying to bring Arden back from the dead."

"Yah, I guess you have a point," she replied with a small chuckle. The kid had a pretty good argument going for him. "What do you mean, he had no choice?"

Thomas stood and walked over to look out the window. "Arden is being pulled in a lot of different directions. There are so many conflicting forces trying to control him that he's almost out of control. In the end, though, he will make the final choice, alone. Nobody else will have a say."

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"If none of this is his choice, then what about me?" she asked, staring down at her paws.
"What about us?"

Thomas shrugged. "I don't know about that. I do know that Nanuk felt that you and he should be life mates, but I don't think she would have forced the issue. That's just not her style."

"What about you? What's your part in all of this?" she asked, looking up at the boy.

"My place?" he echoed contemplatively. "My place is to serve, Miss Sheila. Arden is my master, and I try to serve him as best I can."

"But you're dead!" she replied.

The young boy laughed. "So is Arden, but you don't see that stopping him!"

"Touché." Sheila sat for a second then looked back over at Thomas. "Will we be together after all this is over?"

Tomas shrugged. "I don't know, Miss Sheila. I'm not an oracle." He smiled at her as he sat on the windowsill, ignoring the pouring rain. "I will tell you this. What little I do know about the future, I'm pretty sure that you will get home."

A bright flash of lightening followed by an immediate clash of thunder caused Sheila to jerk upright in her chair. Now fully awake, she realized that the candle by the bed had burned out long ago. It had been a dream. But was it real? Would she really go home?

Only time would tell.

Chapter 7

Great Escapes

Sheila sat at a table near the fireplace, nursing a mug of hot, hard cider. For the last four days she had made this table hers, growling at anyone who dared to try and sit down. Although it didn't make the owner of the hotel very happy to loose spots at a table, he wasn't about to argue with a sword mage.

She glanced up from the fire to the large, polished silver platter that sat on top of the mantel. Its ornate etchings and engraved lettering were testimony to some royal schmuck liking the food here so much he sent the thing back as a gift. She snorted into her drink at that thought before taking another sip. If that guy came back today, he'd probably die from the shock. She had tasted better food at McDunny's. Still, the platter was handy in that it allowed her to watch the action at the bar behind her.

To any casual observer, Sheila appeared to simply sit and watch the fire. In fact, she was actually watching the goings on in the rest of the small inn, especially as it pertained to Ross. So far, each evening he would leave the bar and return to his room for a brief period. That's what Sheila was waiting for now. Sure enough, she watched him put his empty mug down, end his friendly conversation with a local and head up to his room.

A few minutes later Sheila stood up, knocking over her mug and holding her stomach. She gave the serving wench an angry growl as she walked by and muttered, "Damned humans. Probably trying to poison me again." She hastily made her way up the stairs while appearing to be in a hurry for obvious reasons.

Upon reaching the area near their rooms, Sheila carefully walked on the sections of floor that she knew wouldn't creak, allowing her to move silently to her door. She opened it just wide enough to slip in before closing it behind her and latching the lock. Sheila then took the shot glass that she had liberated from the bar and placed it between the wall and her ear in order to listen.

Ross was reporting in with his superiors. His report confirmed her suspicions. This wasn't just an early monsoon season. He was actually forcing it to rain like this.

"Now I've got you, you son of a bitch," she thought with grim satisfaction. Sheila listened to him for another few seconds, then tiptoed over to her bed, putting the shot glass down next to an empty bottle that she had brought up the night before. She then blew out the candle by the bed and closed her eyes.

Sleep wouldn't be forthcoming tonight, though. Her mind was running full speed making plans. *"OK girl, we've got him convinced that we're trapped,"* she thought, her mind filled with possibilities. *"Nobody wants to go near us, so they won't be banging on the door for breakfast. If we're going to do this, we do it at night, while that skin-headed prick thinks we're too afraid of our own shadow to go out in the rain. I may hate lightning, but right now I hate that bastard even more!"*

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Across the sea of dreams, on Earth prime...

Outside of town, high on the desert mesa, there sat a tall mound of dirt that everyone said was sacred to the Indians that had lived near there. The grid of streetlights and other illumination lent an eerie glow to the edge of the mesa when viewed from the middle. Numerous beer cans and bottles littered the dirt near the trail that led up to the mesa. People had been coming to the top of the mesa to drink beer and have a good time for decades. Tonight, the party was anything but celebratory.

The three boys on the plateau stood at points equally spaced around a summoning circle. Each of them stood within their own circle of protection. Around the group was a larger and more intricate containment circle. Evenly spaced around them were six torches that provided the light the biggest boy was using to read by. Standing just over six feet tall, the Hispanic-looking kid had the build of a football player, which was fortunate since he was a linebacker for the local high school. To his right another large boy stood unsteadily in his circle while occasionally taking a drink from a bottle of whisky. Opposite of the two a tall, gangly, nerdy-looking kid with glasses stood hugging an ancient, leather bound volume to his chest. He nervously pushed the glasses back up to the bridge of his nose as he watched.

The tall Hispanic boy stopped reading and turned angrily to the nerdy looking kid. "It's not working, Specks! Why isn't it working?" he demanded, shaking the hand-written notes at the small kid.

"It takes repetition, Tank. You have to say the spell over and over to summon a demon." He opened the book to a marked page and read. "Seven times must the words be spoke," he read haltingly, translating the old words in the book. "And seven times must you..."

"ENOUGH!" Tank interrupted. "If this doesn't work, I'm gonna make you wish you'd never been born."

"It'll work," the nerd whimpered.

Tank muttered something in Spanish before he resumed phonetically reading the ancient words that Specs had written for him. Just about the time he was ready to forget the entire idea and go kick the wimp's ass, Tank felt a rush of air. Before the trio, there was a blinding flash of light as the very fabric of space split open, spat forth a body and then sealed itself after the passage.

"No fuckin' way," Tank muttered as he watched the demonic form that lay on the ground before him. The demon's black leather wings and barbed tail were spread out, covering most of the summoning circle. Its ebony skin and hair made it almost invisible in the gloom of the night. Only the highlights from the flickering torches let them know for sure that there was anything there. A low groan escaped the prone figure.

"All right, dude!" the boy with the bottle said with a laugh as he took another swig. "You did it!"

"Yah, I did," Tank replied. "I did it," he repeated as he began to laugh. "What now, Specks?"

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What do I do now?"

"Huh?" Specks muttered as he looked up from the demon. "Umm. You summoned it. Now give it a command. Just remember, don't break the circle for any reason."

Tank laughed again. "Give it a command eh," he commented. "Ok, you. Rise. Stand before me. I command you." His command was obviously supposed to sound dramatic, but it failed miserably.

The ebony head looked up at him, its red eyes glowing in the dark. Despite Speck's warning Tank took a step backwards, almost breaking the circle. Slowly the creature rose to her feet. Now standing upright, Tank could see the shapely female form that was barely covered by a black leather outfit. She took a moment to survey the area around her before looking back at Tank.

Tank smiled again. "Good. Now kneel before me, bitch," he ordered.

Her eyes narrowed at the towering Mexican. "What did you call me?" she said in a dangerously low voice.

"I said 'on your knees, bitch'," Tank repeated, then began reading a passage from the paper in front of him, intoning the words with a loud, strong voice.

A brief flicker of pain visited her face before she glared at Tank. With a roar, she charged the tall boy, heedless of the circles. There was a bright flash of energy as she hit the rim of the summoning circle, and then she was through it. Tank's eyes flew open in terror as she slammed through the protection circle that he stood within. She then wrapped her left hand around his throat and lifted him from the ground. The papers, forgotten, fluttered to the ground as he clawed at her hand, choking.

"Nobody calls me bitch," she said angrily as she squeezed. "And just for your information, my name is *Hecate*." She snarled as she plunged her right hand into his chest and ripped out his heart. With a large smile she held it up where he could see it. "Thanks for the snack," she said before dropping him. As the muscle in her hand quivered and stopped beating, she casually tossed it aside.

"Oh, fuck!" the other large kid said as he dropped his bottle. He stumbled backwards out of the circle as Hecate turned to face him. "Keep away from me, you fucking bitch!"

Hecate shot across the summoning circle and slammed into the boy with all her might. Her right index finger was driven through his forehead and into his brain. With a sadistic smile, she watched his twitching form as it fell to the ground and flopped around. "You people just don't learn, do you?" she asked to the corpse as she licked the gore from her finger.

With a shake of her head, she turned to the last remaining boy. He stood confidently within his protective circle, clutching the ancient tome to his chest. She sauntered over to where he stood and looked him over. "So, what do we have here?" she asked out loud. Squatting, she examined the workmanship of his circle. "Very impressive. Unlike your friends, you did a good job."

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"Thanks. I warned those dipshits that they were screwing with forces they didn't understand," he replied flippantly. "They ignored my warning and paid the price for it."

Hecate stood and nodded. "Nice work. That circle could hold off a pretty powerful demon of hell," she admitted as she glanced around. "Unlike your friends' circles, or the summoning circle. It's almost like they were supposed to fail."

Specks laughed. "They were," he admitted, basking in the confused look that came from Hecate. "Those assholes forced me to show them how to summon a demon. I figured that if they wanted one so bad, it was the least I could do to let the demon have them in return."

"And after it had fed?" she asked, scowling at Specks. "You may be protected, but what about other people in the area?"

He was practically gloating. "Look at the outer ring. I think you'll find it more than sufficient for the power of the summoning."

Hecate strolled around the outer ring, examining the work. "Indeed, you're right," she admitted coming back over to where Specks stood. "But the big question is, what's going to protect your ass from me?" Sparks sputtered and flew from the point where she was probing the air in front of the boy with the claw at the end of her index finger.

Specks laughed again. "This ring is more than sufficient for anything short of a prince of hell."

Hecate plunged her hand through the ring and grabbed the boy by the front of his shirt and yanked him out of the protective circle.

"H-h-h-how d-d-d-did you d-d-do that?" he stammered.

"Here's a piece of news for you, boy," Hecate said with a broad, toothy smile that showed off the sharp fangs in her mouth. "I may be hell-spawned, but I'm no demon." She laughed as she dropped him to the ground.

"Oh god oh god oh god..." he muttered as he looked up into her glowing, red eyes.

Hecate took another look around before returning her attention to the boy. "Any last request before I take my leave?"

"L-l-last request?" he stuttered out, echoing her. Specks blinked a couple of times as he looked up at the demoness who was meticulously preening her claws. His eyes slid past the deadly hands and to the shapely body beyond. "W-well... OK." Again Specks swallowed while he screwed up his courage. "OK. Sleep with me," he stated.

"What?" Hecate asked, shocked at his audacity.

"Um...Sleep with me," he replied with a wide-eyed, somewhat insane look. "You know. Have sex with me. Hey. If a guy's gotta go, he might as well go with a bang, eh?"

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Hecate stared at him for a minute before she began to laugh. The more she looked at him between breaths, the harder she laughed, until finally the hell spawned collapsed to her knees, her arms wrapped around her ribs, trying to stop the pain from the laughter.

Seeing an opportunity to possibly escape, Specks leapt to his feet and began to run.

Behind him, Hecate looked up and while still laughing, stood. "Where do you think you're going?" she asked with a smile, still laughing slightly. When he didn't answer, she dug her clawed feet into the ground and took off after him.

Hearing the rustle of the leather wings, Specks glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the moon eclipsed by the flying form of Hecate. He had barely enough time for a brief scream before she was upon him.

Sheila walked down the street, staying under the awnings in order to try to stay dry. It was a good idea in theory, but in practice things didn't work out so well. A strong gust of wind, along with a quick shift in its direction, blew the rain around Sheila's rain slicker, dousing her legs and tail with cold water.

Reaching the end of the awnings, Sheila paused and looked out at the pouring rain as a bolt of lightning illuminated the sky. She had about a fifty foot dash in the pouring rain from the awnings to the open door of the livery. She let out a low growl as she hugged the hood of the slicker closer before making the mad dash through the mud.

She felt the hackles on the back of her neck rise, telling her that Ross was once again spying on her. This had been happening for days. It had only been recently that she had figured out what the source of the feeling was. Now that she could tell when he was spying on her, she could tailor her actions to fool him while he was watching. Good. She wouldn't have any trouble being surly and miserable with this stable master, though it would be inconvenient if Ross didn't get bored quickly.

The stable master hurried over to the cloaked figure to help with their wet things, but slid to stop when Sheila flicked the hood back revealing her face.

"Where's my horse?" she growled, while trying to wring the water out of her tail.

The tall, muscular man wiped his hands on the apron he wore. "He's stabled in the back, miss," he replied, gesturing with his head down a line of stalls. He led her towards the far end of the row where her horse apparently was being put up. "It's almost been a week since you came in. I was beginning to wonder if you'd abandoned your mare."

Sheila let out a snort of derision. "Not likely." She looked over the horse carefully. It was obviously being well fed and the grooming appeared to be acceptable. "Fine. It looks like I'll be here until the rain breaks. You have a problem with that?" She stood less than a pace away, hands on her hips, looking up at the large man.

He shook his head. "Not a problem, just so long as you pay your bill before you try to

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leave."

Sheila stopped and turned back to the man. "You trying to imply that I would skip out without paying you?"

He cocked an eyebrow while crossing his arms. "I don't know anything about you. I'm just telling you like it is. If you did try to skip out, you wouldn't be the first person to do that to me."

Sheila scowled for a second before nodding. "Yah. I guess I can see that." She turned and headed for the exit. As she neared, the feeling of being watched faded. She paused at the door before turning around and walking quickly back to the man. "OK. Listen up. I don't have much time to talk while I'm not being watched."

"Watched?"

"Yah. That creep that I rode into town with is following me. He's been magically spying on me while we were talking," she stated quickly while nervously looking around.

"So he is a painted mage," the man replied distractedly.

"Yes he is, and I plan on ditching him." Sheila paused for a second and looked around. "The trick is to figure a way to send him off on a false trail."

The tall man smiled. "I think I have a way, maybe. Do you know how he keeps track of you?"

Sheila nodded. "Yes. He's given me a couple of rings. I'm pretty sure that they're what he's using to track me."

"Good," the man replied. "Then they shouldn't be too hard to send out with the next courier, eh?"

"Courier?" Sheila echoed with a bit of a smile. "Yah. I guess that could work. When does the next one leave?"

"One is due in tonight. He'll sleep until dawn then ride out on a new horse. I should be able to get him to carry the rings for you." The man crossed his arms and looked thoughtful. "Yah. If you're lucky, he could keep the rings in motion for a long time by passing them off. That would sure mess up the trail." He stopped and looked back down at Sheila. "That's assuming that he's really watching for the rings and not something else."

Sheila leaned back against a post and thought about it. "That's all that he's given me. Everything else I bought myself."

"That doesn't mean he couldn't throw an enchantment on it," the man explained. "Heck, he could have a spell on those fancy clothes of yours, or the swords."

Sheila shook her head. "I don't think so. They were magical already. I don't know why, but I'm pretty sure he can't mess with them. As for everything else, I guess I'll be needing new

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tack and barding for my horse."

He nodded. "I'll see to it. In fact, I'll even give your horse to the courier. He'll drag it along to the next town." He paused before continuing. "You do realize that this is going to be expensive."

Sheila nodded. "Don't worry. I have gold." She dug into the pouch that she kept tucked under the kimono, pulled out five gold coins and handed them to the man. "I think this will get the ball rolling."

He looked at the odd denominations. They weren't from any country he was familiar with, but the weight told him they were indeed made of gold. "This will do for a start. When do you want to leave?"

Sheila started towards the door, followed by the man. "About three or four hours before dawn. Do you think you can have the horse ready for me to go then?"

He nodded. "Sure. I can get up a little early. I'll have everything ready for you."

Again Sheila stopped at the door, this time she turned and put a paw on his chest. "I'm sorry about how I've had to act. Thank you for your help."

"Don't worry about it," he said, giving her paw a reassuring pat. "I'd be in a bad mood if I had one of them following me around everywhere, too."

"Thanks," Sheila said as she flipped the hood back up over her head and ran out into the rain. For some reason the foul weather no longer seemed so oppressive

Chapter 8

Transitional States

Specs groaned as he woke up, shifting uncomfortably on the cold, hard dirt. On the horizon, the first glimmer of dawn had begun to illuminate the night's sky. Shivering, he sat up, again groaning while holding his head. "Oh man. I hope someone got the license number off that truck."

"It weren't no truck, kid," Hecate answered casually. She sat on the ground not far from the outer edge of the summoning circle, leaning on a rock. "That should teach you to be careful what you ask for. You might actually get it."

The young man hastily rearranged his glasses so that he could see properly and looked over at the demonic figure, which was chewing on one of his snack bars. "Holy shit!" he exclaimed, rolling to his knees. A small rock on the ground cased him to cry out as he rolled over onto it, forcing the sharp object into the unprotected skin of his knee. Looking down, Specs realized that he was buck-naked. In a panic, he began to search for his clothes.

"Relax, kid," Hecate said as she finished off the granola bar. "I got your stuff right here." She picked up a pile of clothes that had been covered by one wing and tossed them to the embarrassed young man. He hastily pulled out his boxer shorts to put them on, but paused when he saw their condition. They were shredded. "Sorry about that," Hecate said as she licked her fingers. "I was in a bit of a hurry."

Staring at the shredded shorts, the events from the previous night flooded into his head, reminding him of what happened. He had thought she was going to kill him when she tackled him, but instead she proceeded to strip him down, and in the process shred most of his clothes. He shuddered at the memory of what followed. The last thing he remembered was her sinking her fangs into his neck as he climaxed while she raped him. With a shaky hand he reached up to his neck and felt the still fresh wounds.

"Don't worry about those," Hecate said as she opened his book and began to flip through it. "They'll heal up pretty soon."

"What did you do to me?" he asked in a horse voice.

She paused and looked up at him. "Why, I just did what you asked for. You said you wanted to fuck me, didn't you?"

He blinked and shook his head. "That's not what I'm talking about. Why did you bite me?"

"Oh, that," she replied, dismissing his concerns. "I had a run-in with a mage on the other side, and to be honest, it took a lot out of me. Since the human spirit is at the peak of its power when you climax, I figured it wouldn't hurt if I siphoned off a little while you were at your peak"

"Y-you fed off of me?" Specs asked incredulously.

"Kind of," Hecate replied, standing. "It's like this," she said as she tossed the book down in

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front of him. "You've got the talent, kid. Some day, you're going to be one hell of a mage. The trick is getting trained." She squatted down in front of the boy and smiled again. "That's why I tagged you. You were all kinds of tasty fun last night. It's not often I get to mark a new apprentice, much less break in a virgin at that. You were *delicious*."

"Ap-pp-pprentice?" he stuttered, trying to make sense of what was happening.

"Yep. I had every intention of killing you last night for having the audacity to proposition me like that," she said, settling down on the dirt and crossing her legs. "Once I got a taste of you, though," she said, waving to the bite marks on his arms and chest, "I knew you were a virgin and had the potential to be a mage. That's when I decided that I had better plans for you."

"Look," Specs said, shaking his head. "I don't know anything about you, lady, and frankly, I don't want to. Most of all, I don't want to be your apprentice."

Hecate chuckled. "You don't have a choice, my boy. Now that you've tasted my bite, you're going to find your life will get far more interesting. And if you plan on surviving the experience, you're going to need me to teach you how."

"Jesus Christ, lady! What the fuck did you do to me? Turn me into a vampire or something?" Specks discarded the shredded shorts and began to struggle into his pants.

"Vampire?" Hecate asked, laughing in disbelief. "I'm no vampire and neither are you. Nor will you be."

Specks stood and picked up the rest of his possessions. "You're nuts, lady. You're fucking nuts. Just keep away from me. I'll manage on my own." He turned and hurriedly headed for a small cluster of vehicles parked at the edge of the plateau.

Hecate sat where she was and smiled at the retreating form. "Six weeks," she said to herself. "I give him six weeks, and then he'll be ready." She stood and stretched her arms and wings to their max, soaking up a little of the sun's first light. "Time to get to work. I'll take care of that mutt for Ruddygore, then come back for my new apprentice."

Heedless of the rough terrain, a rather beat up looking tan-colored VW Rabbit tore down the dirt trail that lead up to the mesa, bouncing precariously close to the edge at times. Behind it sat an open expanse empty of life, with nothing more than two empty cars to testify that anything had occurred there.

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Sheila sat at her usual table, nursing a mug of ale and waiting. It was a difficult thing to do, just sitting there, acting as if nothing was happening. It seemed like an eternity before she saw Ross go upstairs to make his nightly report with asshole central. She got another refill of her drink and waited for him to return. Once he was back with his buddies, Sheila forced herself to wait for a bit before going upstairs.

Reaching Ross's room, she paused and opened the door. A glance down at the end of the bar

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showed no unusual activity, so he may not have setup a trip wire spell. She snuck into the room and spotted his backpack that sat on the floor in the far corner. Drawing the Katana from its scabbard, she pointed the tip towards where she knew the mirror resided inside. With a quick, savage thrust, she drove the tip of the sword into the pack, striking the mirror. A small bolt of electricity shot up the blade of the sword, but dissipated as it hit the guard. She pulled the blade back an inch and was rewarded with the sound of broken glass shifting within. Again she struck the mirror, breaking it further, repeating the process until she was sure there wasn't any hope of using even a small shard.

Stepping out of the room, Sheila closed the door quietly behind her. Another quick glance down at the bar showed the usual cluster of locals chattering about whatever men chatter about. Sheila let out a small sigh of relief and headed to her room. She prepared for bed as she did every other night and climbed in to wait. Once she was sure Ross was asleep, she would make good her plan to escape.

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Kalla stopped her horse on a rise that looked out over the plains. Though thoroughly soaked, she appeared not to notice the pouring rain, almost as if it was beneath her to do so. She gazed out to the distant, dark horizon where she knew Ross and her target should be. If she didn't stop now, she could make the town by early morning. As much as she wanted to make camp and rest, her duty was to locate the target and ensure that it didn't escape. Until she could get a close look at the creature and get a taste of its spoor, there was still risk of it getting away.

With a grimace she urged her horse forward, into the gloom.

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Ross woke up with a start. There had been a creak out in the hallway. He listened closely, but heard no further movement. A simple gesture was enough to light the candle by his bed. He poured some water from a pitcher into a bowl setting next to it on the table. Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly as he centered himself. Oddly enough, the ripples in the water faded to nothing as his breath ended. He opened his eyes and cast a spell of scrying. A vision of Sheila's room appeared in the water, showing an empty bed. Another gesture of his hand sent the image flying through the door and down the hallway in the hotel. Reaching the end he sent it down the stairs where he saw one of the houseboys bringing in wood for the fire as part of his morning chores.

Tossing the bowl back onto the table. Ross hurriedly wrapped the bandages that gave him the illusion of having legs and permitted him to walk rather than floating everywhere. He opened the flap on his backpack and removed the padding that was used to protect his mirror. To his horror, he heard the shattered remnants as they clattered noisily within. He stared at the ruined remains of his most prized and important possession before discarding it angrily to the side. Snatching the pack up, he opened the shutters that covered the window and leapt out. A few feet from the ground he suddenly slowed, settling gently down onto the mud.

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Ross ran towards the stables. He gave a curse as he saw that the doors were open and the lights were on. He skidded around the corner and into the building where he saw the smith preparing Sheila's horse.

"Where is she?" Ross demanded

"Where is who?" the man replied, feigning ignorance.

The mage gestured with a hand, sending the large blacksmith flying into the air and pinning him against the wall. "The bitch that owns this horse! Where is she?" he again demanded.

"This isn't her horse," the smith replied as he gasped for breath.

Ross gestured again, slamming the man against the wall again. "Bull shit! I bought that horse for her! Now where is she?"

The smith shook his head. "She sold it to me, yesterday."

Again the big man was slammed against the wall. "The hell she did. I watched you two. She checked up on her horse than left."

"No. You're mistaken," the smith said groggily. "She stopped at the door and came back. Said she changed her mind and wanted to sell it."

Ross paused. *Damn it. I broke off my scry too soon. That bastard could be telling the truth!* "Then why are you saddling up the mount?"

The smith winced as he gasped for breath. "There's a courier who's heading out for Tasquahana in a little bit. He needs a fresh and rested mount. The spare one we keep for them is lame so I'm giving him this one instead."

Ross released the spell, dropping the man to the ground. "Get my horse ready to leave immediately," he ordered the large man. *Damn it! She may have snuck out of town, but she won't get far on foot.*

The smith picked himself up and stumbled past the mage, staggering into the workbench that was behind Ross. With a sudden motion, he grabbed a large piece of metal that was part of a wagon hitch-frame and brought it down on the back of the mage's head, dropping him like a sack of flour. Breathing hard, the man raised the metal bar again to finish his work, hesitated, then tossed it aside. He rushed back to his private quarters and threw open the trunk at the end of his bed. Dumping the contents haphazardly on the bed, he reached the bottom where he opened a secret compartment. Inside was a length of silver cord about three feet long.

Returning to the unconscious mage, the smith used the length of rope to tie his hands behind his back, ensuring that there was no way the man could reach the knot with his fingers. He then lifted the mage and tossed him over the saddle of Sheila's horse. With reins in hand, he led the horse towards the entrance, pausing only long enough to grab a length of heavy rope that was hanging on the wall.

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Outside, the rain had let up some and was now a light drizzle. He led the horse at a trot for the outskirts of town. After a short run, he came to a gnarled and twisted tree. The horse shied away from the tree nervously, trying to pull the reins from his grasp. Talking to the horse, he calmed it down and finally tethered it a short distance away.

Taking the length of rope, he rapidly began to fashion a noose on one end. Despite being wet, the knot slid easily along the rope. It was crude as such things went, but then again, he wasn't making it for show. A quick heave sent the loop over the outstretched limb and dangled down a bit. He let out enough rope so it would be about waste high for a man on horseback. The smith then secured the other end to the trunk itself.

Roughly handling the mage, he yanked him off the horse then heaved him back up on it upright. The cool rain, combined with the rough handling was beginning to bring the mage around. The smith led the horse over to the noose and slipped it over the awakening mages head, securing it to his neck.

"Wh-what's going on?" Ross asked, not quite aware of the situation. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded as he began to struggle with his bindings.

"It'll do no good for you to struggle, mage," the smith said in a harsh, cold voice. "You're bound with witchsilver cord, so don't go bothering yourself by trying to cast any spells as they'll only backfire on ya"

"What's all this about?" Ross asked, now aware of the rope around his neck. "Why are you doing this? Certainly it isn't for that bitch!"

The smith shook his head. "No, it's not for her. Look at the tree, mage," he said, pointing to the twisted trunk. "Look closely." A flash of lightening illuminated the scene showing the distorted image of a screaming girl imbedded into its surface. "That was my daughter."

"What's that got to do with me?" Ross asked, staring at the sight.

"When the Zombie King's army occupied these lands, one of your ilk, a painted mage, tried to take advantage of my daughter. When she refused him, he decided to make an example of her so that nobody in the town would think of opposing him in the future." The smith snarled as he looked up at the mage. "Now I'm going to hang you from that same tree as a warning to your kind never to do something like this again."

Before Ross could respond, the smith slapped the horse on its flank, sending the beast running. The mage was jerked from the saddle by the rope and began to flail about. The smith watched the spectacle for a minute as Ross's body continued to twitch. Only when all movement had ceased did he turn and walk back to town.

A brief flash of lightning illuminated the form of a woman sitting on a horse in the distance, observing the event as it unfolded. Once the smith had left, she rode down to where the mage slowly swung beneath the tree and stared at it for a bit.

"I always warned your father you were a screw up," Kalla said to the limp, dangling form. "But I never expected you to be so stupid as to get hung by some dip shit smith in the

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middle of nowhere."

Ross opened his eyes. "Whatever. Just cut me down so I can get back on that bitch's trail. I've got a score to settle with her." His body floated upwards slightly, allowing the rope to go slack.

"Do you have a physical sample for me?" Kalla asked, edging her horse closer.

"Of course I do!" Ross replied, angrily. "It's in my pack. Soon as I deal with that smith, I'll get the sample."

"I don't think so," Kalla replied, indulging herself in the look of shock and confusion on Ross's face.

"What the hell do you mean, you don't think so?" he demanded, squirming in his bonds again.

"You're a screw up, Ross. They should never have let you out of the academy," she explained. "If it hadn't been for daddy, you would have been nothing more than a practice sacrifice, and I think it's time that someone put this charade to an end."

"No! Wai---" Ross's cry ended in a strangled gurgle as Kalla drove the tip of her spirit lance through his heart. A look of astonished disbelief flittered over Ross's face before he died. His body, no longer supported by the spell that was woven into the bandages where his legs should be, dragged the limb of the tree significantly lower than during his apparent hanging.

Kalla sat on her horse and watched the body for a few moments, a small smile of satisfaction on her face. She wiped off the tip of the spear on Ross's shirt before turning her horse towards town. She needed to recover the physical sample from his belongings so that the hunt could begin.

Her mood significantly lightened, she smiled at the thought of letting the smith live, just to piss daddy off.

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Out of the frying pan

Sheila had ridden her new mount hard all day. Occasionally she would change the pace from a walk to a canter and occasionally a light run. As the horse tired, she would dismount and lead the animal, stopping for no other reason than to eat and relieve herself. Out in the middle of nowhere, she had come to the realization that it was just as easy to drop her drawers anywhere and cut loose. Being this far along in her pregnancy she was finding it difficult not to have to stop and pee every few hours. Combine that with the discomfort from riding, and she was truly one miserable vixen.

As Sheila remounted her horse for the umpteenth time that day, she saw something on the not to distant horizon that made her blood run cold. Sitting on a hill several miles away was another rider carrying some kind of staff or spear. The two riders stared at each other before the stranger urged her horse forward. Sheila, sensing trouble, turned her horse and kicked it into a run.

The setting sun gave the low, rolling hills an eerie look as it projected long, distorted shadows onto the ground. Off in the distance Sheila saw a large stretch of woods. The towering trees promised to make the chase a little more difficult for whoever was following her. Sheila glanced over her shoulder and saw that the stranger had closed the gap by almost a third. With a curse, Sheila turned towards the trees and urged her flagging horse onward.

A feeling of dread came over Sheila, as she got closer to the woods. Another glance over her shoulder showed that her pursuer was riding for all the rider was worth, and closing even faster than before. Sheila growled as she urged her horse onwards towards the forest. A small break in the tree line gave promise to a possible path or road. Angling her horse for the opening, she crouched down low in order to avoid any possible low hanging tree branches.

The sudden change as she crossed the outer boundary of the forest was startling. Where it had been a warm, sunny day, Sheila was now engulfed in a world of cold, shadows. Worse yet, her dread had only increased.

The path she followed made several sharp turns. Her meager riding skills were put to the test as she fought not to be thrown by the sudden twists and turns. One last turn and her horse broke out into a small open area with no obvious paths leading from it. Sheila spun her horse, cursing as she looked for a way out. That's when she heard it.

Groaning.

Not just one voice, but a mass of them. A moment later, to her horror, decayed and rotting bodies began to stumble from the forest. Some of them wore rusty chain or ragged leather armor while others had tatters of clothing. Her horse reared, almost throwing her to the ground. She hauled over on the reins, directing the horse towards the path they had taken to get here and kicked its ribs. The horse squealed in terror, then bolted forwards. Hands grasped at Sheila and the horse, as she burst through the closing circle of walking corpses. Just as the horse was about to reach the trail, Sheila saw more of these things blocking the

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way.

Again the horse reared, only this time rough hands grasped Sheila and pulled her from the horse. She tried to draw a weapon to defend herself as she heard the horse screaming and flailing about. The last thing she saw before she was knocked unconscious was her mount being devoured alive.

Kalla charged into the forest after her prey. She could smell the evil magic that engulfed the forest. Her spirit lance ready, she navigated her mount through the twisting maze of trees. In the distance, she could hear the high-pitched sounds of Sheila's horse. That's when she came around another corner and ran headlong into a line of walking corpses. Before she could react, her horse was pulled out from under her, sending her tumbling.

Weapon at the ready, she rolled to her feet and began to wade into the bodies around her. The magic of the lance was devastating. Each time it hit one of the animated corpses, there was a flash and the creature would fall. Even with all the speed and skill she could muster, Kalla was unable to save her horse. By the time she had fought her way to it, the creature was clearly dead.

More of the undead began to emerge from the surrounding forest, trying to trap the huntress. Realizing that there was no way she could recover her target, she began to fight her way back towards the outer edge of the forest. It was slow going, and by the time she had finally cleared the forest and left the walking dead behind, the sun had completely disappeared behind the horizon.

Kalla squatted on a small hill, not far from the forest as she tried to catch her breath. A tear rolled down her eye as she thought about the fate of her horse. He had been her steed for several years now and she had come to think of him as a partner. It was just one more reason for her to make whoever was in that forest pay for interrupting her hunt.

Sheila woke up to the realization that she was being carried. It was difficult to see without any torchlight, but she could tell that they were inside of some kind of building. Intricately carved stone masonry tiled the floor that she was being dragged across. A quick look at the two creatures that were carrying her showed that they were either unaware or unconcerned with the fact that she was awake.

Bringing her knees up as close to her chest as she could, she swung her feet out in front, planted them and pushed off, breaking their grasp. She stumbled for a step or two before recovering her balance. The creatures on the other hand, continued walking for several paces before it dawned on them that they were no longer carrying anything.

Sheila drew the wakazashi and tanto from her belt, surprised to still find them there. The glow from the blades provided her enough light to see for about ten or fifteen feet, clearly showing the two creatures that had taken a couple of more steps before realizing that they

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were no longer carrying anything. Slowly they turned and walked back towards Sheila.

As the first one came into range she struck out at it with the wakazashi, slashing it across the chest. A bright flare of magic was echoed by a loud moan as the creature stumbled, fell and then quickly decomposed, leaving nothing but dust behind. Again Sheila struck with the sword, reducing the second creature to dust.

With the wakazashi held high, Sheila surveyed as much of the room as she could see. Metal reflected from shuffling bodies that approached from behind her. Dozens of fresh bodies wearing armor and shields shuffled her way, each with a sword in its hand. Testing their response, Sheila made an attempt to slash one across its exposed face only to have the creature parry her attack with a casual motion of its shield, showing that these weren't going to be a pushover.

Sheila backpedaled, looking for another way out. Behind her, she saw a large, double door standing open. Mounted on the inside of the doors were brackets and swing-arms that were designed to easily bar the door. After sheathing her tanto, Sheila grabbed first one door, then the other, hastily pulling them closed. She then slammed the bars down across the doors, preventing them from being opened.

She leaned back against the door and glanced around the room she was in. Ornate tiles could be seen under the dust and grime on the floor. Tall, marble pillars were set off to either side of the doorway, climbing into the gloom overhead. She could barely make out the roof that was suspended some twenty or so feet overhead.

Cautiously she proceeded into the room, sweeping the sword from side to side, looking for any signs of trouble. When she was approximately twenty feet into the room, a strong voice spoke an odd sounding word. As it echoed around the chamber, torches on the wall burst into flames, illuminating the hall.

Set into cul-de-sacs around the outside of the room, were suits of armor with shield and sword. Dust and cobwebs hung from the immobile pieces of armor. At the far end, another thirty feet away, she saw a stone throne sitting on a low dais. Sitting on the throne was a frail-appearing mummy. The bandages and red cloak that swathed it were torn and rotted. What immediately raised Sheila's hackles was the life-like reflections the torchlight showed from its deep-set eyes. On the floor in front of the dais lay a figure in ornate armor. Standing near by were three suits of armor that remained motionless.

"Welcome, Sheila Vixen," the mummified creature said in a low and raspy voice.

"H-h-how d-d-do you know my name?" she asked, shaken by what she had seen.

The creature smiled showing a mouth full of sharpened teeth and a pair of fangs. "I have been---" It paused, as if searching for a word. "---Waiting for you."

"Waiting?" Sheila echoed. "Why were you waiting for me?"

Before the creature could answer, the armor that lay on the floor moaned and stirred. The mummified being waved to the three suits of armor, which hefted the prone form, standing

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it up between them. As the warrior struggled to his feet, he looked up at the figure on the dais. "Rathsmon!" he hissed as he struggled to free himself.

"Yesssss," Rathsmon hissed as a reply. "Welcome to my humble abode, cavalier." He rose from his dais and approached the struggling man. "Speaking of which. Just why have you come here?"

The man stopped struggling and spat at the shrouded form. "To kill you, of course!"

Rathsmon ignored the spittle that slowly soaked into the bandages around his face. "Such antagonism. What have I ever done to you?" he asked innocently of the warrior.

"What have you done?" the man echoed, outraged at the question. "How can you ask a question like that? All around you are the defiled bodies of those who you have killed."

The creature smiled. "That's not true. Some of these were dead before I ever came to this place"

"That doesn't matter!" the man shouted. "You are an abomination and must be destroyed." Again he began to struggle futile against the armored figures that held him captive.

"My dear, dear, cavalier," Rathsmon said with a honeyed voice. "Come now, surely you realize that you have no chance of killing me." He smiled again, rotating his face clockwise. "Are you so anxious to die? Aren't you going to beg for your life?"

"Never," the man spat out vehemently.

"I'll tell you what," Rathsmon said, straightening up and holding a finger before him. "If you swear to leave my lands in peace and never to return. I'll let you leave this place unharmed."

"Never!" the man replied again. "I'll never bargain with the likes of you!"

Sheila watched transfixed as Rathsmon returned to his throne. "That's too bad," he replied. The man cried out and stumbled forwards, freed from his captor's grasp, the hit of a short sword protruding from his back. He tried to reach backwards to grasp the hilt as he fell to his knees. A final, gurgling sound was soon accompanied by the clatter of armor as he once again fell flat on the ground. A puddle of blood slowly began to form under the body.

Rathsmon stepped down from the dais and knelt by the body. Placing his hand on the head, the corpse was engulfed in a black glow for a moment before he released it. As the creature returned to his throne, the corpse slowly climbed to its feet. From behind hit, the third armored figure walked up and withdrew the sword it had used to slay the man and sheathed the weapon.

"Now," Rathsmon said, settling himself in his seat, "where were we?"

"You monster," Sheila growled in a husky voice.

"Maybe. But I did give him a choice," he said, as he nodded to his newest subject. "I wasn't

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lying when I said I would let him go if he swore never to come back." He sighed and sounded a bit wistful. "I don't know why, but for some reason they never believe me."

"You'll not add me to your collection!" Sheila growled as she started to move forward. A red glow spread itself over her armor as she gripped the wakazashi with both paws.

"No, wait!" Rathsmoan cried out as his minions moved to intercept her.

With a savage stroke of the sword, Sheila's wakazashi slashed through the sword and armor of her first opponent. A flash of light and empty armor clattered to the ground. She dodged a blow from the second creature by squatting low and spinning. Her leg shot out as she came around, sweeping her heavy adversary off his feet, slamming the armored figure to the ground. Muscles flexed and she leapt over the fallen body to attack the next creature. The glow around her flared as she swung the sword, cleaving the shield and biting into decrepit flesh. Once again, there was a flash as empty armor clattered to the ground.

Her last adversary had no weapon, yet it stumbled mindlessly towards her, obeying unheard commands from its master. With an almost contemptuous stroke, she took its head, dropping the rapidly decaying body to the ground.

Sheila let out a rising growl as she charged Rathsmoan with the sword held high. She leapt into the air, timing her jump so that she would land on the dais within striking distance. Rathsmoan cried out in terror, holding his right hand out in a vain attempt to stop her attack. At the sight of his hand, Sheila pulled her swing, causing the sword to slash off a corner of Rathsmoan's throne as she deflected the blow.

In shock, she stared at the pattern, which had been branded into the leathery skin. It was the same pattern that she had seen on Arden's paw. Burned into the flesh of this creature was the laughing face of Lakash.

A bright flash and a peal of thunder split the night sky outside the forest. Though the low flying rain clouds still drifted overhead, they were not responsible for the disturbance. A brief opening in the fabric of space appeared, spit out the flying form of Hecate, and then vanished as quickly as it came.

Hecate circled high above the ground to get her bearings. She was back near the woods where she had been attacked, which was a good thing. She hadn't wanted to appear over the woods and risk another attack, and yet not appear so far that she would need to spend a lot of time traveling back to the place.

She slowly drifted towards the forest, reaching out with her inner senses. She tasted the unnatural sensation that she had encountered before. It was a wrongness that told her an unnatural creature existed there. Only there was a problem. She now sensed a second creature. This one wasn't unnatural, yet it clearly wasn't of this world.

Hecate glided to the ground near the forest and started to make her way in when she suddenly stopped. The forest was infested with creatures that she could barely perceive.

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They had no life force for her to taste, yet they were virtually everywhere. Making a hasty retreat, Hecate ran back out into the open and took flight again.

Once she was what she considered a safe distance away, she glided in a circle, as she tried to catch her breath. She had run into creatures like this before. The Zombie King had hundreds of thousands of lifeless, soulless bodies in his armor, and they had felt the same way. But Ruddygore had killed the Zombie King, or at least that was the story.

She looked around and spotted a good place to make camp for the night. Come dawn she would decide how to proceed.

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Neo-Genesis

Rathsmon looked down at the place where Sheila's Katana had sliced off a chunk of stone, then back up to Sheila's face for a second before focusing on the tip of the sword barely an inch away from his face. He tried to sink backwards into the stone throne, but failed miserably.

"How did you get that mark?" Sheila growled, edging the sword closer.

Holding both hands up at chest level, Rathsmon shifted his sight quickly back and forth between the tip of the sword and Sheila. "It happened when I made a wish while holding the amulet of Lakash."

Sheila pressed forward with the sword, causing Rathsmon to turn his head so as not to allow the blade to touch him. "And just what did you wish for, oh Lord of the Undead."

"Immortality!" Rathsmon blurted out, startling Sheila. "I wished for immortality. This is what I got."

"Immortality?" Sheila echoed as she pulled the sword back. "You mean you aren't some evil mage or some crap like that?"

Rathsmon relaxed a bit, putting his hands down. "Quite the contrary," he said, shaking his head. "In fact, before I became this, I was simply a humble monk. A researcher of holy texts and artifacts if you will."

Sheila laughed as she let her guard down some more. "Don't tell me. Someone brought you the amulet and asked you what it was. You researched it and found out that it granted wishes."

Nodding, the necromancer rose from his throne. "Indeed. Alas, temptation took me and I wished for immortality. This is obviously God's punishment for my sin." He gestured towards a door off to one side of the hall. "I have bode my time in this place, waiting for the opportunity to redeem myself."

Sheila followed him across the great hall and towards the door being held open by a zombie wearing fancy looking rags. "So how did you know who I was?"

She entered a room that was a combination library and laboratory. "I was contacted by the creature, Lakash. He informed me that if I performed one service for him, he would end my torment as one of the undead and restore me to life. Since it involved restoring someone to life as opposed to committing some horrendous atrocity, I agreed to help." He stopped at a table where a small, leather bound bundle sat. Unwrapping it, he revealed a circular ruby about three inches in diameter and approximately a quarter of an inch thick, glowing with an internal light. "And this is to be my salvation."

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"What is it?" Sheila asked, bending over to look at the gem. The soft, almost pulsating glow that surrounded it was somehow reassuring.

"It's a soul stone," Rathsmoan explained. "I was told to prepare this stone to capture the soul of someone important to Lakash who was in peril of dying."

Sheila's head snapped up with understanding. "Arden!"

Nodding, he folded the leather back over the gem. "Indeed. With this gem, we will be able to find a suitable replacement body for him."

Sheila cringed at the thought. "You're not planning on putting him in one of these walking corpses, are you?" She glanced around the room, shuddering at the sight of the living dead.

"Oh dear me, no," Rathsmoan said, handing her the small package. "His quest can not be completed unless he has a living body."

Sheila tucked the gem into a small pocket on the inside of her silks. "So what? We're going to go and evict someone from their body so that Arden can take it?" Sheila asked, scowling at the thought. "I don't think I like that idea."

Rathsmoan held up his hands and shook his head. "No, nothing like that," he stated as he began rooting around in a cabinet in the back. "Quite the opposite. Lakash has already instructed me as to where and how you will restore this person."

Sheila finally tucked her Katana away in its scabbard as she moved over towards where the necromancer stood. "And just what kind of body has Lakash found for him?"

With a small yell of success, Rathsmoan pulled a jade dagger out from within the contents of the rather cluttered cabinet. Proudly displaying the lethal looking weapon, he smiled at Sheila. "A most interesting question," he said with a twinkle in his eye. For the next five minutes he explained to Sheila exactly where she would find a replacement body and how she would do it.

Afterwards, Sheila sat and stared at the necromancer for some time before she shook her head in bemusement. "This is insane."

"Insane? How do you figure?" Rathsmoan's waved his hands as if to shoo away her objections. "It is the perfect solution. The body is in suspension, alive yet not alive at the same time. All it needs is a soul to break the spell, and you have that soul."

Sheila rubbed the bridge of her nose. "It's not that. You're asking me to put him into the body of a...a...."

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"A body, period." He sighed and thought for a second. "If it is so objectionable, then I'm sure that we can alter its shape using magic, to give it the illusion of something more palatable." Rathsmo took a step backwards as Sheila began to growl.

Clenching her fangs and fists, the growl rose to a full yell before cutting off sharply. "Fine! I don't give a damn any more." She stormed over by the window and gazed out over the forest. "I'm sick of all this *shit!* Whatever it takes. I don't care. Just as long as I get home. I'm sick and tired of jumping through hoops because of that bastard and his *fucking* quest."

For a moment, the necromancer started to reach out to her, but reconsidered. After a few moments, he turned and left the room and its sole occupant, giving her some privacy.

Specs groaned as he rolled over in bed. The sun had shifted in the early afternoon and a beam of light was now shining directly in his face. Covering his eyes with his arm, he tried to get back to sleep, but failed. Realizing that he wasn't going to get back to sleep, Specs threw the covers off and sat up in bed. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he half stumbled into the bathroom and proceeded to empty his bladder. To his relief, everything appeared intact down there. He then washed his hands and rinsed his face off. With one hand, he snatched the towel off the rack next to the sink and dried off his face.

Now awake, he examined himself in the mirror. The orange discoloration on his skin from where he had swabbed iodine to act as a disinfectant showed where the scars from the night before should be. That is, they should be there, but weren't. He grabbed a washcloth, soaked it under the faucet and then wiped down his skin. Where there should have been scabbed scars, there was only a faint if fuzzy line of fresh skin, but nothing like what should have been there. A quick check of the rest of his body confirmed that the wounds he had received the night before were all healed.

Shaking his head, he returned to his room and slipped on his glasses. His forehead creased as he looked around the room. The perspective was off. It was just like when he got new glasses with a different prescription. Things were still sharp, but they looked wrong. He slipped off the glasses and looked at them. They didn't look any different than the night before, but when he tried them again, the effect was the same.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and considered what had happened the night before as he absentmindedly toyed with the glasses. He remembered the outrageous demoness and what happened afterwards. With a shudder, he thought about the two bullies that had forced him to take them up there. They had demanded that he do something dangerous without knowing what they were

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dealing with, and they paid the price. He felt more than a little guilty and a definite sense of panic, since he'd left their bodies up on the mesa. The cops were bound to look for whoever else was up there with them. They'd come after him now. He'd wind up in jail for murder. Nobody was going to believe him.

At the sound of a distant siren, Specs looked up and out the window in panic. As the sound faded, he let out a sigh of relief and sat down again. A second later he looked back out the window again and then down to his glasses. The world outside was in perfect focus. Being nearsighted, all he should have seen was a fuzzy blur, but everything outside was sharp. Sharper even than they normally would be with his glasses.

He stood up and bolted into the bathroom. For the first time today, he looked at his face in the mirror. It was the same face he looked at every day, but his eyes were different. Rather than the hazel colored eyes that he was used to, he saw that his irises now had a golden tint to them. "Jesus Christ. What did she do to me?" he muttered to himself.

In a daze, he walked back to his room, closing the door behind him. He then flopped down on his bed and stared at the spackled ceiling, loosing himself in the pattern as his mind raced a mile a minute, trying to get a grasp on what had happened and was still happening. He wasn't sure what worried him most: The cops, or that thing that bit him.

"Oh man, am I screwed."

Sheila looked out at the sun that had not risen too far over the horizon. Despite being in what amounted to a haunted castle, she had slept rather well. The provisions from her horse had made a decent enough dinner and breakfast. Now all she had to do was wait for Rathsmo to finish up the "travel arrangements." With a low groan, she settled back down into the chair by the window. It really was getting to be a pain in the ass to stand up or walk any major distance. Her hips hurt, her back hurt, and worst of all, her tits hurt. They were beginning to swell with milk, and it was a real pain too. To top it off, she had the problem of needing to take a piss every hour or two, which wasn't going to make life any easier on the road.

After an hour, Rathsmo's head zombie appeared in the door and gestured for her to come with him. She followed the walking corpse down to the stables, occasionally fighting off the urge to gag from the smell of decay. Once in the stables, she saw a large, ornate carriage with a team of four skeletal horses. Up top rode a body that didn't look too recently deceased, which would drive the team of horses. Mounted on more decayed horses were six armored figures, one being the man she had watched die the previous day.

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"Ah, there you are," Rathsmoan said as he ambled over to Sheila. "I've arranged for you to travel in some comfort."

Sheila gave a humorless chuckle. "Oh yah, The Deadhead Express, right?"

Rathsmoan lead her towards the carriage. "I think you'll find that riding in this carriage will be far more comfortable than a saddle, especially as your escorts don't need to stop and rest." He opened the door and gestured inside. "I have had your provisions loaded as well as some jerky, cheese and other similar foods. All of them have been spelled to insure that they are free of any mold, disease or other contaminants."

Climbing partway into the carriage, Sheila took in the interior. It was rather plush, though faded with age. It had obviously been cleaned recently as there was no hint of dust inside. "All right," She said, climbing the rest of the way in.

Closing the door, Rathsmoan made sure that the latch was secured. He stepped up to the window that Sheila now leaned out of slightly. "I would ask a favor of you, if you would."

Sheila's brows furrowed at his statement and cocked one ear forward. "What kind of favor?"

Rathsmoan pulled out another wrapped package, only this time it was wrapped in black velvet. "I require you to transport this to the sorcerer Ruddygore," he said, handing it to Sheila. When she started to open it, he quickly stopped her. "You must not open the package or expose its contents to sunlight. If for some reason the contents fall out of the bag, you must never directly touch the object. To do so would be fatal. Use any cloth that is opaque to sunlight."

Examining the object with her paws, she got the impression that there was a small rock or gem about the size of a ping-pong ball inside. "All right," she agreed, tucking the object in a pocket. "I'll give it to Ruddygore."

"Thank you very much," Rathsmoan said, bowing to Sheila. "All of these men," he said, gesturing to the escort as well as the driver, "are under your command. Tell them what you want done and they will do it. Be careful though," he said with a smile. "They are simple minded beings and can easily be confused."

Sheila nodded, then yelled up to the driver, giving him directions. With the crack of a whip the driver screeched at the horses, setting them in motion. Sheila laid her ears back at the haunting sound of the horses as they cried out before moving.

This was going to be one hell of a ride.

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Hello, I must be going.

Sheila lay in bed, trapped in that narrow region between sleep and wakefulness. The smell of coffee from the kitchen tickled her nose, making her smile. As always, there was that one beam of light that the blinds could never keep out. It was the same one that would always shine directly into her eyes on the lazy mornings when she didn't wish to wake up. A small groan escaped her muzzle as she reached up to block the sun from her eyes. Slowly the world came into focus. Not the world that she was used to, with her bed, car and all the amenities, but rather the open wilderness with its grasses and a small fire pit, complete with an old tin coffee pot.

Disoriented, Sheila rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and looked again. The fire and coffee pot were still there, as was an odd looking metal gadget with bread sandwiched between wires, propped over the fire. On the far side of the pit sat something that startled Sheila fully awake.

Bolting upright, Sheila snatched up the scabbard that lay next to her bedroll and drew the sword. To her chagrin, the creature on the other side simply blew on the cup of coffee that it held before taking a sip. Casually sitting on the rock as if without a worry in the world, Hecate smiled as she savored the flavor of the coffee.

"Who the hell are you?" Sheila asked as she glanced around to see if there was anyone else. To her surprise, the undead guards she had placed were still standing in a circle around her fire, ignoring the newcomer.

Hecate took another sip and smiled. "Would you like some coffee?" She set her cup down and picked up an empty one while reaching for the pot. "It's quite good, you know. Earth prime stuff, not the garbage you get around here. Pure Colombian."

Sheila gave an annoyed growl. "I don't want any damn coffee. I want to know who the hell you are and what you're doing here!" Using the scabbard for leverage, Sheila shifted from a sitting to a kneeling position.

The demonic-looking Imir paused before pouring the coffee, then proceeded to fill the cup. She then sat the pot back on the fire while reaching through the flames to set the steaming cup down in front of Sheila. "Relax," She said, picking her cup up and taking another sip. "If I'd wanted to harm you, I would have done it while you were asleep."

A frown settled on Sheila face as she stared at Hecate. "That still doesn't explain who you are or why you're here."

The Imir sighed and leaned back against a large rock. "My name is Hecate," she explained in a tired voice. "As for why I'm here, I have been sent by the sorcerer Ruddygore to locate you and return you to him."

"Ruddygore?" Sheila echoed in surprise. "Since when does he give a damn about me?"

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The ebony woman shrugged. "I'd say that he's been looking ever since he discovered that you were in this realm." Taking another sip, Hecate shook her head. "All I know is that he doesn't call me in to track someone unless they're damn important, and he was in all kinds of a hurry to find you."

"Harrumph," Sheila grumbled as she sheathed the sword. "Yah, right. The son of a bitch can wait. I've got other things I need to do first."

"Hold on a second, there," Hecate said, with a half grin. "When the head of the Council of Mages wants to find someone, you don't just blow him off."

Sheila leaned forward and pointed her cup at Hecate. "The bastard knew where I was for three months, yet he let me rot there, so I'm not in any hurry to get to him now that *he* feels the need." She took another sip from her coffee. "I'm not some pet he can call whenever he wants me."

"Back off, lady," Hecate said with a sharp edge to her voice. "I happen to know for a fact that Ruddygore was over on Earth Prime until just recently. Now I don't know who's been feeding you a line of disinformation, but Ruddygore doesn't play those kinds of games." She swirled the coffee around the bottom of the cup before draining it. "Ruddy may not be a saint, but he's not the kind that would do or *not* do something unless there's a good reason."

"Oh, yah?" The vixen quickly threaded the three swords into the sash around her waste before standing up. "Well, give your master a message for me. I've got unfinished business that I need to take care of. Until then, he can just shove off."

The ebony Imir stood at the same time as Sheila. "Look, I don't know what you're trying to accomplish here, but the simple fact is that I've been ordered to track you down and take you back to Ruddygore. So why don't you just calm down, eat some breakfast and we'll start heading up towards Terindell afterwards."

"No," Sheila said, drawing the Katana. Ears flat against her skull, she scowled at Hecate. "I've been poked, prodded, misled, lied to, kidnapped, shot at and damn near killed a dozen times over in four different realities. I don't give a damn what Ruddygore wants or why. All I know is that I have pressing business that *doesn't* involve the sorcerer yet, and if you know what's good for you, you'll get out of my way."

Hecate hastily backed out of the way as Sheila stormed by. As the vixen passed one of the zombie guards, Sheila used the hilt of the sword to bang on its helmet. "Hey! Bone head!" she yelled to the armored figure. "Mount up. We're moving out." The circle of undead turned and made their way to their mounts and climbing into the saddle. Sheila, having sheathed the sword, paused before climbing all the way into the carriage. "Oh yah," she said to Hecate. "Thanks for the coffee." With that, she climbed inside and closed the door.

Hecate muttered a small curse as she watched the carriage pull away. "Whelp," she said, in a low voice as she poured some more coffee. "That didn't go so well." She took another sip of coffee as she watched the procession disappear around a corner and shook her head.

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A couple of dozen yards away from the hanging tree sat a freshly dug, shallow grave that had been recently covered over. The dark, fresh earth was piled high, framed by the lighter topsoil around the plot. The unmarked grave was just one of many in the field. Nobody cared who it was that had been buried there, or that their bodies would remain unmolested by scavengers. Already wild dogs were sniffing about the field, looking for new meat. A mangy mastiff discovered the new grave and began sniffing around the new dirt. Its brows furrowed, the dog laid its ears back and growled. Before its eyes, the ground heaved and shifted, soon to be pierced as a hand shot out from below, flinging a large pile of earth aside. The filthy, dirt encrusted hand withdrew into the ground and shoveled another pile of earth aside. Soon a shoulder emerged, followed by a head. A bald, tattooed head. The dog growled once, then ran off in terror.

Ross spat out a mouth full of soil as he brushed his face off. For the next few minutes, he gasped for air while resting in the shallow grave. Once he had caught his breath, the legless mage dragged his body out of the grave and onto the flat surface. He looked down at the simple shroud that he had been buried in. All of his possessions were gone. A stream of curses filled the night as his body floated into the air. Glaring at the town, he slowly floated in its direction. "First, I'll get my equipment back. Then I'll make that damn smith and the rest of this pathetic little town pay for what they did. Then, Kalla, you and that *bitch* will feel my wrath."

The team of undead horses nosily rumbled down the narrow trail that lead towards the base of the mountain. Inside, Sheila winced and gritted her teeth at each bounce as they enhanced her need to stop, yet again, to empty her bladder. She was relieved and annoyed at the same time as she felt the team of undead horses come to a halt. A low growl slipped past her lips as she struggled to an upright position and climbed out of the carriage. She took a moment to stretch her cramped muscles before walking around to the front of the procession.

"All right," she said to the lead rider. "What's the holdup?"

The corpse of the cavalier pointed at the path ahead. "Too narrow," it mumbled in a monotone.

Sheila looked at the narrow trail that wound its way up the backside of the mountain and frowned. The corpse might not be too bright, but in this case, it was right. There was no way that oversized luxury wagon was going to make it up the trail. Sheila let out a sigh of exasperation and turned back to the cavalier. "All right, then. Have your men transfer the supplies from the carriage to their horses." She looked around at the assembled horses and frowned before pointing to one that looked the least dilapidated. "I'll take his horse. Send him back with the carriage." She watched the cavalier as his brows furrowed in concentration. After a minute, he nodded and started to direct the other zombies to their tasks. Assured that he had gotten his instructions right, Sheila walked around to the back of the carriage.

"Hi," the cheerful voice of Hecate said, startling Sheila.

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"Aaaaah," the vixen cried out in surprise as she jumped back, hand on a sword. "God damn it! Don't do that to me!"

Hecate laughed and climbed down from the back of the carriage. "Are we a little jumpy?"

"Yes!" Sheila barked back. "No!" She gritted her fangs and growled. "What the hell do you expect? How would you react if a...uh...whatever you are popped out of nowhere and startled you?"

"Point taken," the ebony half-breed conceded while suppressing the urge to chuckle.

"And just what the hell are you doing on my carriage anyway?" Sheila challenged angrily. "I thought I told you to buzz off."

Hecate leaned casually against the wheel of the carriage and shrugged. "Well, I figured that once you're done with your business up here that you'd be ready to see Ruddygore." She flashed the annoyed vixen her best smile, showing the sharp, pointed teeth and fangs. "Besides, I'm not about to risk something happening to you now that I've tracked you down. Ruddygore would be a tad miffed if I did, and I've seen what can happen to a being when he gets miffed."

Sheila closed her eyes, slowly counted to ten, and then let the breath she was holding out in a long sigh. She looked up at the Imir and pursed her lips for a moment, then nodded. "Fine," she said in a terse voice. Walking over to the back of the carriage, she grabbed a bag and tossed it at Hecate who caught it casually. "If you're going to be hanging around, at least you can make yourself useful. Take that up front and put it on one of the horses."

"Yes ma'am," Hecate said with a smile and carried the bag up to the front of the column.

Sheila watched the back of the creature that had thrust itself into her company, then closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose. This was going to be a long trip.

Thomas was lost in thought as he walked towards the small hut that was Nanuk's. His eyes down, he paid no attention to the small discrepancies that had crept into the carefully crafted illusion that he maintained. Absentmindedly he entered the hut and sat down at the table, still lost in thought.

"What's wrong?" Nanuk said from her bed by the fire pit.

The fox looked up in surprise and blinked. "Huh?" He paused for a second while Nanuk's words sank in. "Oh. Nothing's wrong," he replied with a forced smile.

A long, slow sigh escaped Nanuk's lips. "Tell me, Thomas Livingston Bryant. Why is it that mortals insist on thinking they can lie to Nanuk in Nanuk's realm without Nanuk knowing?"

Thomas looked down at the ground, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Nanuk," he replied contritely.

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Nanuk rolled over onto her side, facing Thomas. "Now, tell me what is bothering you,"

The young fox idly dug the tip of one claw into the surface of the table for a second while he thought. "I'm worried about Miss Sheila," he finally admitted.

The large bear got a look of concern on her face. "In what way, boy?"

"Well," he started hesitantly, reluctant to voice his concerns. "I think the last remnants of the wish spell have worn off."

Nanuk lay back in her bed and nodded. "Ah. We expected this. Now we must see if Nanuk's work has paid off."

"Your work?" Thomas walked over next to the bed and squatted down beside Nanuk. "What are you talking about?"

"When the wish was made, Nanuk foresaw that Arden would need her support." She smiled a sly smile and looked at the young fox. "Nanuk played match maker. Nanuk tried to make both sides understand that the other would fill the empty spot in their heart. Nanuk hoped for love."

"But what about the spell?" Thomas asked excitedly. "How could you tell if they were falling in love for real when they had a love spell on them already?"

Nanuk shrugged and smiled again. "That was the challenge."

Thomas frowned and shook his head. "I don't know, Nanuk. She seems really pissed at him, now."

"And rightly so," Nanuk admitted. "She has been let down repeatedly and now must struggle on her own to bring back the man she loves."

"I don't know," Thomas reiterated with a shake of his head. "From the way she was talking, the only reason she's bringing him back is because she needs him to get home."

"We can only wait and see, Child," Nanuk replied. "As always, we wait."

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The sleeper has been awakened.

Sheila and Hecate sat opposite each other, sipping their coffee by the fire. At sundown, Sheila had decided to stop their third day's march up the mountain at a wide spot in the road. The undead guard had managed to scrounge up enough wood during the days travel for a decent fire. Together they sat, sipping coffee until Sheila suddenly asked, "Well?"

A startled Hecate looked up from her coffee, started to say something and then stopped. She bit her lip as she looked around, trying to think of something to say. Several times she started to speak, but stopped.

"Spit it out, damn it!" Sheila barked at the hell spawn.

Hecate stared at Sheila for a few seconds before shrugging. "It's an...ummm..." Looking for the right word, she chewed on her lip again and shrugged. "...interesting story."

"Interesting?" Sheila echoed. "I've just told you a story that I don't believe half of and I lived through it, and all you can say is that it's an interesting story?"

A weak smile graced Hecate's face as she shrugged once again. "Well, I suppose so. I think interesting sums it up nicely." She leaned forward and gave the vixen a genuine smile. "Remember. I live in a land of magic where all the stuff you've described happens on a daily basis." She took another sip of her coffee and waved the cup towards Sheila. "Hell, I've even been to Earth Prime, so the stuff you described there is nothing new to me either."

Sheila sighed as her body collapsed slightly in on itself. "I suppose your right," she reluctantly admitted. "This has just been one long nightmare for me."

Hecate nodded as she poured herself some more java. "Now, you said that you worked in the movies. Where you a star or just a character actress?"

A sly smile graced the vixen's muzzle as she cocked an ear in the Imir's direction. "That depends on who else was in the film." She held her cup out for a refill as her eyes took on a twinkle. "When Zig Zag was working, nobody got billing over her. Nobody."

"Huh. Sounds like a real prima donna if you asked me," Hecate said with a grunt, placing the pot back next to the fire. Her head shot up at the sound of Sheila laughing.

"Zig Zag is many things," Sheila explained, trying not to laugh, "but she's no prima donna." Taking a few moments to get rid of the trailing giggles, Sheila shook her head at the confused Imir. "You don't understand. Zig Zag's not just the boss. She's the biggest thing to hit the industry since video."

"Wait a minute! That doesn't sound right," a confused Hecate said. "What kind of person both owns a studio and acts? What the hell kind of movies do you guys shoot?"

Sheila's ears perked up. "Why, porno movies, of course."

For a moment, Hecate stayed completely motionless as if she hadn't heard Sheila's answer.

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Then, slowly, a smile grew on her face as she began to laugh. "All, right. I don't know why I didn't think of it," she admitted, her grin now as big as the fox's, "but I should have thought of that. It just didn't occur to me that animal species would be into that sort of thing." One look at Sheila's reaction to her statement made Hecate hastily added, "No offense intended. I just don't know what else to call your kind."

The vixen glared at Hecate for a few seconds, her lips pursed and her ears laid back, before she grudgingly nodded and relaxed. "I guess I should get used to being referred to as an animal." She looked down at the fire, her ears somewhat wilted. "Lord only knows, Arden had to put up with it."

"You said that you fell in love with him after your boss hit him with the car, right?" Hecate asked, her brow furrowed with thought. "Were you involved with anyone before he showed up?"

Sheila shook her head. "Not really," She admitted. "Oh, there was Rod. We work together. We tended to hang out after hours some time, but I'd broken up with him the week before."

"What happened?" Hecate was leaning forward again, listening intently.

"I caught the bastard cheating on me," Sheila replied tersely. "He stood me up for a date, and when I went to the club, I saw him with this drop-dead gorgeous cheetah."

"Ouch," Hecate said, wincing as she huddled before the fire. "What did you do?"

Sheila shrugged. "I confronted him the next day. Told him that until he got his priorities straight, he could fuck off."

"Yah. I know the feeling. It's never good when a man cheats on you," Hecate said solemnly.

"Oh, I didn't really care about that," Sheila said with a laugh. "It's the fact that the son of a bitch stood me up to be with a looker and didn't invite me in for a three way. I wouldn't have minded a piece of that ass." Sheila leaned forward and shot the Imir a predatory smile. "She definitely looked... /tasty/."

Hecate opened her mouth to say something, then quickly snapped it shut, having decided not to say anything. After a minute she chuckled again. "I guess you are a lot more human than I took you for."

Sheila gave her companion a sideways look. "I'm not sure if I should take that as a compliment."

"Hmmm," Hecate said, considering the conundrum. "Neither do I."

A flash of light off in the distance caught Sheila's eye. Setting down her cup, she stood and walked out of the circle of light created by the fire and watched the horizon. Hecate, curious as to what Sheila was doing, followed suit. A couple of minutes later a flash of lightning in the distance illuminated a storm front that was headed their way.

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"Oh man," Sheila moaned. "I hate lightning storms." She looked around and grimaced. "Damn. There's no place for cover around here."

Hecate frowned. "You don't know the half of it," she said as she studied the distant clouds. "That storm isn't natural. This isn't the season for it. There's an awful lot of magic being used to push that thing this way."

"Ross!" Sheila spit the name out like it was a curse. "That bastard knows I don't like lightning."

Hecate grabbed up what little provisions they had, dumping the coffee before stuffing the pot into the sack. "Grab your stuff. We've got to get moving."

Sheila shivered looking at the lightning, then turned and began to gather up her things. "What's going on? Where can we go?"

Hecate slung the heavy field pack over her back and picked up the sack of food before grabbing Sheila by the arm, dragging her up the mountain. "I know a cavern that we can take cover in. It will give us protection from the storm. It's not too far from here."

Giving the pack straps one last annoyed yank to adjust them, Sheila picked up the pace, catching up with Hecate. "What cave? Why the hell didn't you mention this thing before?"

Glancing back at the rapidly approaching storm front, Hecate cursed. "Because I didn't know what the hell you planned on doing up here," she griped, "and until you told me, I wasn't in any hurry to help you get anywhere."

"You bitch!" Sheila said. She never had a chance to complete her thought as Hecate spun around and grabbed her by the throat with one hand, choking the vixen.

"Don't ever call me that," the hell spawned said in a low, dangerous voice, "or I will kill you. Do you understand?" Her eyes bored into Sheila's brooking no argument. "I /will/ kill you!"

Sheila frantically pounded on Hecate's hand, trying to break the hold with no success. Her vision rimmed in red, she finally gasped out, "OK."

Hecate let go of the vixen and looked past her. "Now get a move on it. We don't have much time before that storm front gets here." Without a second glance, she turned and continued up the path.

Sheila glanced back over her shoulder at the storm and paused. The undead guard was still standing around fire. Using two fingers in her muzzle, she let out a shrill whistle. "Hey!" She yelled to the zombies. "Come on. Get your asses in gear! Let's go! Double time!" Without bothering to see if they followed, Sheila turned and started off after Hecate, cursing her pregnancy and its detrimental effects on her ability to walk fast.

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Hecate stopped about ten feet into the long, dark tunnel that led into the side of the mountain. It was a large tunnel, about ten feet wide and a good seven or eight feet high. The only delay had been removing a large boulder from the entrance. Fortunately, with the help of a little magic, it had been no real obstacle to the hell-spawned Imir. Presently, Sheila made her presence known as she stumbled her way into the cave, trailing a stream of curses.

"You're repeating yourself," Hecate remarked offhandedly as she summoned up a ball of light to see by.

Sheila stopped ranting and walked over to Hecate, now that she could see her in the dark. "What was that?"

"I said, you're repeating yourself," the Imir replied, turning towards the vixen. "If you're going to cuss someone out, then at least be a little creative about it. That was the fourth time you referred to him the same way. Here," She said, tossing the light to Sheila.

"Ack," Sheila cried out, dodging the light, which promptly vanished when it hit the ground. "What the hell was that?"

Hecate sighed and summoned up another sphere of light. "It's a Witch Light. Don't worry, it won't harm you, and unless you can see in the dark like I can, I think you'll need it." Again, she tossed the light to the vixen, only this time it was caught.

Holding the light high, Sheila moved a little further into the tunnel. "Wow this thing goes on for a bit, doesn't it?" She sniffed the air, taking in a good lung full and gagged. "My GOD! What's that smell?" Doubled over. Sheila was doing her best not to lose her dinner.

"Oh, that. That's just a dragon," the Imir replied offhandedly, as if everyone knew what a dragon smelled like. "Only it's quite stale. If I remember right, the dragon was defeated over 800 years ago.

Before Sheila could reply, there was a loud crack of lightning outside. Both women turned and watched as Sheila's undead guard started to amble around the corner. Another bright flash, immediately followed by a boom made both of them duck and cover their eyes, both to protect them from the flash as well as the falling dirt in the cave. Blinking away the spots, they looked back outside the tunnel and into the gloom. Lying on the ground, they both saw the littered remains of armor that had once been Sheila's guard.

"Son of a bitch," Sheila said, and then hastily added. "No offense," to Hecate.

"None taken," she replied with a worried look. "I suggest that we head deeper in. If this keeps up, he could bring the mouth of the cave down on us." Giving the roof a nervous look, the Imir started down the tunnel, farther into the cave.

"Wait a minute," the jumpy vixen said, latching onto Hecate's arm and preventing her from leaving. "I don't want to get trapped in this cave if that bastard collapses it!"

Snatching her arm away from Sheila, the Imir in turn grabbed the vixen's arm and started dragging her deeper. "It's either that or get your ass fried outside. Don't worry, I know of

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other exits to this place."

Presently the two emerged into a much larger cavern, one in which Sheila's small light wouldn't illuminate. The pair stopped a few feet in at which point Hecate muttered a spell, illuminating the center of the cavern.

"Holy SHIT!" Sheila exclaimed at the sight before her. Sitting in the middle of the room was what appeared to be a statue of a dragon. The statue was, nose to tail, roughly 100 meters in length, though its size was difficult to judge, as it was not stretched out. The wings, which were stretched out, rested limply on the floor. From tip to tip they covered over 50 meters. The twisted shape as it lay on the ground gave the illusion of having just fallen in battle, though the layers of dust that covered the creature showed that it was only an illusion. "What the fuck is that?" Sheila asked in awe.

"That," Hecate replied, not without a touch of awe in her voice, "is the last of the greater dragons. Or at least what's left of him."

Sheila took a hesitant step forward without noticing the bones that she had to kick out of the way. "That's Sha'kull?"

"Yep. That's him," the Imir answered.

"Is he dead?" Sheila asked as she began making her way over to him.

Hecate followed the vixen across the bone-strewn floor, trying not to step on anything. "Not exactly. The Sorcerer Ruddygore couldn't kill it outright, since it's something akin to a demigod, so he put it in a form of stasis. Hey!" the Imir said, her brow furrowed. "How did you know his name?"

Sheila continued forward towards the dragon, kicking bones out of her way. "It's the reason I had to come here."

"Shit," the hell spawn spat out as she increased her pace to catch up with Sheila. "What the hell are you planning to do?"

Sheila spun with the wakazashi and tanto drawn. "Back off," she commanded, causing the Imir to stumble to a halt. "I've got a quest of my own to fulfill and neither you or anyone else is going to stop me from accomplishing it."

"You're insane!" Hecate said, showing true fear. "You don't understand what your doing. If you free Sha'kull, he'll kill both of us and go on a rampage that will lay waste to the lands."

Sheila smiled and put the tanto away while still backing towards the dragon.. "I have no intention of freeing Sha'kull," she replied as she took an object out of her pocket. "I'm going to release the dragon all right, but Sha'kull won't be in charge."

Reaching the dragon, Sheila sheathed her wakazashi and withdrew the odd looking dagger that she had gotten from Rathsmon. Unfolding the cloth, she took the glowing crystal out and slid it into the bade the way he had shown her, clipping it down so it couldn't drop out.

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She glanced over towards Hecate who was slowly backing out of the ring of light, towards the tunnel they'd come in through. She turned back to what she was doing when she heard Hecate cry out in pain. Her head snapped back around to see Hecate stumble forwards a step, her hands wrapped around the shaft of a spear that protruded from her stomach. As the hell spawned sank to her knees, Sheila saw a tall human woman dressed in rabbit furs step up, put her foot on the Imir's back, and yank the spear out from her victim.

"Back away from the dragon," Kalla said, hefting her spear to throw it.

"No, please. You don't understand," Sheila pleaded.

"You're right. I don't understand, nor do I care," the huntress replied as she took aim. "Now back off."

Just before she was about to throw, her head snapped back with her eyes open in shock and surprise. Again her body jerked as her mouth tried to make a sound and failed. The tall woman turned slowly as she sank to the floor, revealing the haft of a stiletto stuck into her back about where her heart would be. Behind her stood Ross, the tattoos on his head glowing as he hovered above the floor. "How?" Kalla croaked out, leaning heavily on one arm.

"Father's got friends in hell," he replied with a chuckle. "You of all people should know that death isn't final for the likes of us."

Kalla tried to say something more, but failed as her arm collapsed, dropping her body to the floor.

Ross floated towards Sheila who stood with her back plastered against the dragon. As he approached, the light spell that Hecate had cast faded, leaving only the eery glowing runes on his skull for illumination as he floated towards her. A word of power created a much more subdued circle of light around Sheila as Ross floated near. "So, my pretty. I see you found your beau." A gesture with his hand snatched the dagger from Sheila's grasp and sent it flying to him. He examined it and the gem. "Too bad he won't be getting a new body just yet."

"Oh, I don't know about that," a raspy voice said behind Ross.

"What?" the startled sorcerer exclaimed as he caused the light to flare. A skeleton, the jaws sprouting fangs, cobbled together from bones that had been lying around the room lunged at him, passing through his defensive shields and sank its fangs into his throat. Ross let out a scream of horror as his body flailed out of control. For a minute, it quivered with spasms then the limbs slowly sank down, limp. After a minute of this, his body soon began to shrink in on itself as the organs, muscle and skin shrank and petrified. As this happened, the skeletal form seemed to take on skin, muscle and sinew of its own. When his corpse had been reduced to nothing but a gnarled knot of decrepit flesh did the skeletal form drop him.

"Ahhhh," it said, wiping the lips. "That hit the spot." Bending over, the form picked up the dagger that Ross had dropped. "Here, my dear. I believe you will need this." Taking a step

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forward, he held the dagger out to Sheila.

Sheila tried to press into the dragon in order to distance herself from the creature before her. "Who are you? What are you?"

The creature paused and gave a bit of a smile, though it caused the skin to split and peel. "Why, don't you recognize me?" the figure said with a chuckle. "Just how many walking corpses do you know?"

Sheila stopped trying to press herself into the dragon and blinked at the corpse. "Rathsmon?"

He nodded, holding the dagger out again. "In the flesh, as it were, my dear."

Sheila took the dagger and gave the necromancer a confused look. "I thought you couldn't leave your forest?"

"That's not quite true," he said with a small chuckle. "I couldn't leave the proximity of the source of my power. Nor could I, or one of my undead, transport it anywhere. However, a mortal such as yourself could easily carry it for me."

"The source of your power?" the vixen asked in a confused voice. For a moment she thought about it then smiled. "That other gem you gave me. That's it, isn't it?"

Rathsmon smiled and nodded. "Exactly."

"So you've been with us the entire time?" she asked, examining the dagger to ensure the gem was still properly placed.

"Indeed. I thought it best to come along as it were. Not only in case you needed help, but to ensure that I got the reward that was promised to me." He moved close to the stone dragon and placed a skeletal hand on it. The fact that it was a right hand on the left arm didn't seem to bother him much. "Ahhh, yes. I can still sense life within. This will work. You know what to do"

Sheila nodded nervously, holding the dagger. "Ya, I remember."

"Good," Rathsmon replied as he moved away. "I'm going to get some distance since I can't move quite as fast as you. Remember, in and out, quickly."

"Yah, right," Sheila muttered under her breath. "Like I'm in any condition to do the hundred yard dash." She walked along the neck of the stone dragon until she found what she needed near the head. A spot where one of the scales was missing, leaving a small opening, just big enough for the dagger.

Bracing herself, Sheila plunged the dagger in. A layer of stone and dust exploded from the dragon as it jerked back to life. Sheila almost lost her grip on the dagger as the neck rose into the air. Fortunately her weight was enough to pull the dagger free, dropping her a couple of feet to the ground. Scrambling to her feet she turned and ran from the dragon.

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The dragon, now freed from its imprisonment reared back, spread its wings and roared. The tail lashed out, destroying stalagmites and stalactites both as it whipped around the cavern. Crashing back down on its forelegs, it spotted the fleeing vixen. With one, clawed hand, it reached out, slamming it down in front of Sheila and blocking her path. Again the dragon roared before opening its mouth and striking at the hapless vixen.

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A victory of sorts.

A high-pitched scream of terror pierced the air as Sheila reflexively threw up her arms in response to the dragon's strike. Its long, sinuous neck straightened as the fanged mouth shot towards the hapless vixen. The dragon's head veered suddenly to the side as its body convulsed violently, sending the jaws slamming into the wall behind its intended victim. Stunned, the head arose slowly and shook itself, blinked twice, then screeched in agony as the entire body again convulsed violently, as if it were being electrocuted.

Rathsmon peeked his head around a corner of a tunnel and cursed at the sight of the vixen cowering with her head buried under her arms. He hobbled out as quickly as he could and grabbed her arm. Reflexively, Sheila tried to pull away until she saw who it was. "Get up, damn you! We've got to get out of here!" Rathsmon whispered in a horse voice.

"What have you done?" Hecate asked weakly as she propped herself up on one hand, the other holding her stomach. "What have you insane lunatics done?"

"Quit lounging around and help me out," Rathsmon urged as he tried to haul Sheila to her feet.

The Imir let out a combination low growl and groan as she got her knees under her. Snarling at the necromancer, she sat up, holding her stomach. "In case you hadn't noticed, *asshole*, I just got impaled! I need a few minutes to concentrate on regenerating."

Before Rathsmon could respond, the dragon's tail whipped around and struck a huge bolder, demolishing it and sending chunks of rock flying. One piece about the size of a small car passed in front of Hecate, missing her by little more than inches. For a moment she stared at the path of destruction it left on the ground before coming to rest against the wall. She then climbed hastily, if not painfully, to her feet. "On second thought, I'll do that outside."

"Glad you could join us," the necromancer quipped as he helped the Imir lift Sheila. "Now, I suggest that we make our way out of the cavern before we get hit by any debris." He gestured with his free hand and deflected a large stone that had been bouncing in their general direction.

"We could always crouch down and put up a shield to stop this crap," Hecate grunted as they moved towards one of the exit tunnels. Both glanced back at the sound of the dragon's tail slamming down into the granite, pulverizing several inches worth.

"I don't think so." Using both hands, Rathsmon grasped the vixen's belt to help encourage her along. All the while, she simply stared back towards the dragon, half-heartedly moving her feet as she was being dragged.

The trio proceeded down the large tunnel until they reached the mouth. Once outside, Hecate led the small group towards a cluster of rocks. Halfway there, Sheila unexpectedly jerked free of the two and drew the wakazashi.

"Whoa!" Rathsmon said, holding his hands up and backing away from the frazzled, sword-

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wielding vixen. "Calm down there, Sheila. We're all friends here, right?"

"What went wrong?" She demanded angrily. "Why the fuck did he just try to kill me?"

Hecate gave the vixen a nervous laugh. "You just stabbed a dragon in the neck with a weapon and you wonder why it's pissed off?" She, too, put her hands up and backed away a step as Sheila's glare shifted in her direction. "Wouldn't you be pissed?"

"Arden would never hurt me. NEVER!" Sheila shifted her gaze back over to Rathszmon. "So what went wrong? Why did he try to kill me?"

"It's not that simple," he replied, backing up another step. "I told you that it would take a while for him to fully win control of the body. He didn't strike at you; it was Sha'kull."

Hecate let her hands drop as she turned to the necromancer. "What are you talking about?" She shot the vixen a confused look. "What have you two nutcases done?"

Rathszmon shifted his attention between the two females that faced him. "It's all part of her quest to restore her lover and my chance to regain my humanity," he explained rapidly, wincing at the continued sound of destruction within the cave. "The stiletto she struck the dragon with had a soulstone in it that was spelled to release its occupant upon striking a target."

"A soulstone, eh?" the deamoness nodded as she thought about it. "And now your boy, what, Arden is it? Now he's fighting Sha'kull for control of the body, is that it?"

"Well...yes." He shot the glowering Imir a weak smile.

Hecate rubbed a spot on her forehead as she counted to ten. "You two FUCKUPS," she shouted, emphasizing the last word, "have just released a demigod---who, by the way, has sworn to lay waste to all of Husquahr---on the off-chance that her boyfriend will be able to possess its body?" She turned to the startled vixen and took a step forward. "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

Sheila let the sword tip drop and took a step forwards herself. "It wasn't my idea, God damn it! I just want to go home, and that bastard is the only hope I have to get out of this insane asylum!"

"Oh, right!" Hecate shouted back. "For your information, the only way you're likely to get out of this now is in a body bag!"

"Wait a minute!" Rathszmon said, pushing himself between the two women. "Wait!"

"WHAT?" the women yelled in stereo.

"Shhhhh," he said, holding a finger up to his leathery lips. "Listen." All three paused to listen.

"What? I don't hear anything?" Sheila said.

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"Exactly," Rathsmoan said, smiling. "I believe the battle is over. Now all we have to do is determine who won."

"I sure as hell ain't going in there," Hecate replied immediately, crossing her arms over her still-wounded stomach.

"I'll go," Sheila said, sheathing the wakazashi.

The Imir grabbed her arm, preventing the vixen from going back in. "Are you crazy? What if your boyfriend lost?"

Sheila pulled away and straightened her tunic. "Then I guess the dragon will kill me," she replied rather sourly. "If Arden lost then I have no way home, and I might as well be dead, anyway."

"What about your child?" Hecate asked, giving her swollen belly a concerned look.

"What about it?" Sheila replied before turning and walking back into the cave.

The demoness shook her head and sighed. "Now *that's* fucked."

Back inside the large cavern, Sheila took a deep breath and steeled herself to approach the dragon. It was sprawled out on the floor, lying on its back with its legs stuck up in the air. For a moment she was worried that the dragon was dead, but as she watched, it sucked in a lungfull of air and exhaled.

Slowly she picked her way over to the head, stopping about ten feet away. The entire time she had been in the room, the dragon had done nothing more than take the occasional deep breath of air. That was about to change. "Hey, you!" she shouted at the imposing form. "Wake up!"

Eyelids slowly opened, revealing a black pupil set in a yellow iris floating in a sea of red that was its eye, which was almost as large as Sheila. The iris expanded and contracted as the dragon focused its gaze on her. The two stood facing each other for several minutes before Sheila spoke again. "Well?" the vixen demanded. The dragon only blinked, and continued to gaze at her. "God damn it! Either kill me or talk to me. I don't have time to stand around and wait for you to make up your mind!"

"I could never hurt you."

The voice resonated within her skull, causing the vixen to grab her head for a moment. It wasn't a spoken word. It simply appeared within her mind and echoed painfully around for a moment. She looked up at the dragon, her face, ears and posture a conflicting picture of emotions that were playing out within her. "Arden?" she asked quietly. "Is that really you in there?"

The dragon blinked. *"Yes. It's me in here."*

Sheila visibly slumped as the tension left her body. "Thank God."

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"*Thank you for bringing me back.*" The large eye closed as Arden let out a long, slow, breath.

"Don't get the wrong idea, asshole," Sheila said, straightening up. "I didn't rescue your ass from that jewel because I wanted to. I did it because you're the only chance I have of getting home."

The eye opened again, only this time it was but a slit. "*What do you mean?*"

Sheila crossed her arms and scowled at the scaled creature. "I don't give a rat's ass about you or your quest any more. I'm sick and tired of jumping through hoops just because you've got some holy crusade going on." She took several steps backwards as the head suddenly rose from the ground. Twisting around, Arden rolled over on to his feet, and looked down on the vixen, who stood her ground, giving him a hard look in return. "That's right," she said, raising her voice. "You're not going to intimidate me any more. All I want now is to go home. To hell with you and your quest!"

The head dipped closer. "*What's gotten into you?*"

"What's gotten into me?" she repeated sarcastically. "I've just spent the last six months getting screwed over by some bald asshole who only pretended to help me locate you and contact Ruddygore. I've been chased, captured by an army of undead, stuck in the rain for days and almost killed while trying to stick you into that body." She spat on the ground then looked back up at him. "I think that gives me the right to be pissed."

"*Is that all?*" The head dipped a little lower forcing the vixen to back up despite her resolve. "*While you've been running around, interacting in the real world with people, I've been stuck in that fucking gem, alone, with nobody to talk to and nothing for company but my memories, shame and regrets.*"

Sheila put her hands on her hips and glared up at him defiantly. "You wouldn't have been stuck in that damn rock if you had shown even a little common sense. But NO, ve to go off and try to kill the prince in the middle of a bloody sorcerers' convention, and get yourself and MY BODY almost killed as a result!"

He turned his head away and closed his eyes, as if to deny her harsh words. "*Don't you think I know that?*" Arden opened his eyes and looked back down. "*Don't you think I haven't spent every moment of my time in that prison thinking about what I did and how wrong I was?*" Sheila's expression changed to something akin to embarresment as she looked away. "*Hasn't it occurred to you that while you were out there screwing Ross that I might have spent my time, locked away in a gem, thinking about what I had done?*"

Sheila's head had shot up at the mention of Ross. "How do you know about Ross?"

Now it was Arden's turn to look a little embarrassed. "*Maybe I overstated it when I said that I was alone.* The dragon gave a small shrug with its wings. "*I had a friend who dropped by once in a while to keep me up to date on the outside world.*" Again the head lowered to stare at Sheila. "*He told me everything.*"

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"Hey! What happened between me and Ross is none of your business," Sheila spat back defiantly. "You had no claim on me."

"*True. Of course I should have expected it.*" He reached up with a truehand to scratch at the spot where she had stabbed with the dagger. "*After all, Bjorn was barely cold before you seduced me again.*"

"You bastard!" she screamed. Reaching down, she picked up a long bone and threw it at his head. Arden didn't even flinch as it bounced off his jaw. "You know I couldn't control myself then, because I was in heat!"

"*Yes, I do. A fact you failed to point out to me, even after we had swapped bodies.*" He pointed a taloned finger at her chest. "*An act which, if you will remember, drove me to try to kill myself after it got me gang raped.*" The finger withdrew as he made a fist and rested his head on it. "*So, what's your excuse this time, humm? Somehow I don't think being pregnant was making you overly horny.*"

Sheila scowled at him, her ears pinned back and fangs barred in raw hatred. "Fucker," was her only parting comment before she turned and stormed from the room.

Arden slammed his fist down into the bones that lay scattered around the room and then absentmindedly began to plink them at the walls. "*Why in the hell did I just do that?*" he thought.

"It feels different, doesn't it," said a voice from the shadows. The figure of a short, mangy looking rabbit using a scythe for a walking stick strolled out of the shadows. "Not quite the same as when you were a man, eh?"

"*Oh, it's you.*" The dragon glanced at the newcomer before lying back down on the floor. "*Of course it does. I'm a bloody dragon now. Nothing feels the same.*"

"Including your anger?" the figure asked as it leaned on the scythe about fifteen feet from Arden's head.

"*Anger?*" The eye on that side of his head focused in on the rabbit.

"Yes, anger." It shifted the scythe in front of its face as it got more comfortable with the stance. "That's what you were feeling, wasn't it? Anger?"

Arden thought about it for a moment. "*I guess you're right, but it was so cold and calculating. I didn't even realize I was mad. I just wanted to strike out at her in some way.*"

The rabbit nodded. "That's the difference between men and dragons. A man is hot and passionate. His anger burns." He stepped forward and held a clenched fist up. "A dragon is cold and calculating. Its emotions are primal and more devious in their influence. Only your rage still burns hot. Remember that."

Arden gave a small nod. "*Thank you. I will.*" He shifted his head slightly towards the rabbit. "*No hard feelings I take it?*"

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"Eh?" the rabbit replied, confused for a moment. "No. You have friends in high places. Besides, I'm used to crap like this in my business, especially on worlds like this one with its screwed up rules." He gave the dragon a predatory grin. "Besides, you will be mine eventually. No matter how long you live as a dragon, the day will come when we meet again."

A small smile fluttered at the corner of the dragon's mouth. "*Glad to hear it.*"

A brief smile exposed the rabbit's yellowed and cracked teeth. "Now if you will excuse me, my duties call." He turned and walked towards the shadows, his scythe echoing in the chamber as it tapped on the floor.

"*Jack?*" Arden lifted his head and looked at the rabbit as he stopped. "*Thanks for stopping by while I was in the gem.*"

The rabbit gave a small nod and faded into the shadows, his staff echoing in the darkness long after he was gone.

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Blindsided

Rathsmon paced back and forth, occasionally pausing to look at the cave where he could hear Sheila arguing with the dragon. The simple fact that it hadn't burned her to a crisp when she reentered the lair was a positive sign, though the raised voice of the vixen didn't do much to reassure him of her continued existence. He glanced over at a dark colored boulder that was, in fact, the camouflaged Imir, busily regenerating her wounds.

The sound of bones being kicked brought his attention back to the cave, and to Sheila as she exited. The vixen looked pissed. With her hand on the hilt of her sword, she looked ready to kill. Rathsmon considered saying something to her, but the deadly gleam in her eye when she stormed by convinced him that discretion was the safest choice in the matter. He watched her for a minute before she rounded a corner and was out of sight. He was tempted to follow her and make sure she was all right, but having seen her in action he had no doubt she could take care of herself.

Turning back to the cave, Rathsmon pursed his mummified lips for a moment before walking towards the mouth of the tunnel. Cautiously he entered and made his way to the main chamber. Peeking around the corner, he could clearly see the dragon as it lay on the floor, its head propped up on one true-hand while the other idly flicked bits and pieces of bone across the room.

He paused to study the creature. When they had initially found it, the dragon had been frozen in a position where it was hunched over and its head was low to the ground after breathing. Now, sprawled out on the floor and relaxing, Rathsmon realized that his initial impression of the creature hadn't done it justice. The main body was close to sixty-five or seventy meters in length. Add another twenty meters for the neck and head, and you had a most formidable creature. Its bronze coloration tended to fade towards the belly, where it took on a gold tint. The wings were close to bronze along the leading edges, fading to gold then eventually just the barest hint of color on the trailing edges.

Unlike the lesser dragons he'd seen before, this one not only had the four legs with their grasping claws that would, in a pinch, be useful for grabbing something, but also had two true hands. While he watched, the dragon used a clawed digit on its right hand to scratch a spot between the double row of horns on the right side of its head. It then flicked a skull in Rathsmon's general direction.

Well? he heard, echoing in his head. *Are you going to stand there all day, staring, or are you going to come in?*

A startled expression fluttered over the mummified face before he recovered and stepped out of the tunnel and approached the dragon. "I didn't want to disturb you," he said, trying to act casual as another bone skipped by and ricocheted down the tunnel.

Now why in the world would you be bothering me? the disembodied voice asked as the dragon crossed his arms. *In fact, if it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't be here now.*

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Rathsmon straightened up and with a small, self-satisfied smile ambled over to the dragon's general vicinity. "Exactly." He found a relatively clean spot on the ground and sat down. "I'm glad you know about that. I was terribly afraid that you might not realize what was going on and react badly to your situation."

Oh, I was aware, all right, the dragon replied. *In fact, I specifically remember Sheila making the wish that brought us here and dying as we crossed the dimensional barrier.* He paused and tapped the bottom of his chin with a claw on his right index finger. *I fully expected to wind up in the after life, but then I found myself inside of that jewel of yours. Needless to say I was a bit startled at what had happened.*

"No doubt," the necromancer agreed. "Lakash didn't give me much warning. I hardly had time to find a gem of sufficient quality and prepare the ritual before the signal to summon you came. It was a close thing."

Yes, I imagine it was, the dragon agreed, nodding solemnly. *Then I remember you picking up the gem and wrapping it in a cloth.* He crossed his arms and looked back down at the sitting corpse with a somewhat inquisitive expression. *What was it called?*

Rathsmon gave the dragon a blank stare for a moment before the question registered. "Oh yes. The cloth. That was the Shroud of Modeska," he replied, taking care to pronounce the name correctly. "It was to prevent the gem from being located by scrying spells and the like."

The Shroud of Modeska, Arden parroted as he absorbed the knowledge. *That was a smart move, preventing it from being easily located with a spell,* he agreed while giving the proud corpse a nod. *After that, you took the gem and placed it in a small box. What was that for?*

"The box," Rathsmon repeated, while thinking back. "Oh yes, the box. That is the Chest of Dal Nakur. It blocks magic."

Arden cocked his head to the side as he gave Rathsmon a curious look. *Really? Why do that?*

"It's simple, really," he replied with a slight air of superiority. "The incantation that trapped your spirit in the gem was rushed. There was the possibility that you could break free if you could summon enough energy. Since that would have ruined everything, I thought it best to prevent that from happening."

Ahhhhh. I see, the dragon replied, nodding. *And then you placed the box in the back of an old cabinet and covered it up with other junk to hide it, right?*

Rathsmon nodded. "Right. We wouldn't want any thieves just..." The necromancer paused as a thought suddenly hit him. "Say, wait a minute. That spell should have kept you dormant."

Dormant? Arden replied with mock surprise. *Oh, I was far from dormant,* he stated as a low, rumbling sound echoed around the room. Rathsmon clambered quickly to his feet as the dragon glared at him. *It was quite the contrary, actually. From the moment you trapped*

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my spirit in that stone I was awake. Awake, aware and imprisoned. The dragon rose up on its rear legs and towered over the necromancer. For six months I was locked away in the back of that cabinet, unable to scry beyond the limits of the box and bereft of power to break free. For SIX months I was awake and alone in the dark with nothing to mark the passing of the time. For SIX MONTHS I was in a hell beyond your comprehension, trapped with nothing but my memories and regrets to haunt me! The forelegs came down on the ground with a resounding crash, pulverizing the scattered bones and rock beneath them. Oh yes. I remember you. And now I think it's time I properly thanked you....

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Sheila came barreling around the corner at, considering her current condition, was an all out run. She skidded to a stop outside the tunnel entrance and looked around, trying to figure out where Hecate was. After a moment of indecision, she drew the tanto and began to bang on the boulders. "Hey! Wake up!" she shouted as she continued to bang on the boulders. The last one shifted as she hit it.

"Hey!" a rather groggy Imir complained as she unfurled her wings. "Take it easy with that thing."

"Get up," Sheila urged, grabbing the hellspawned by her arm and lifting. "We've got to get out of here."

Hecate got to her feet and examined the wound in her stomach. It was well scarred over, but not entirely healed. She gingerly poked and prodded herself, occasionally wincing to verify just how much she had managed to heal. "So what's the big rush?" she asked, looking up at the vixen.

"We've got a small army coming up the mountain," Sheila replied as she nervously looked back the way she came. "We have maybe half an hour or so before they get here, tops."

"Ok, that's a rush," the Imir agreed. Together they began walking towards the tunnel. "Let's see if your boyfriend is up to winging it out of here. Otherwise, we're going to be in for some trouble."

The pair had just reached the mouth of the cave when they both froze in their tracks at the sound coming from within. It could be best described as a combination between a freight train, foghorn and a fire hose hitting a metal shed. The sound was followed closely by a bright orange and yellow glow that billowed rapidly towards them. Hecate let out a curse as she turned and grabbed Sheila. With the flick of her hand she reached beyond the vale of space and time, opened a rift to earth prime and tried to drag Sheila through it. Unfortunately their feet became tangled in the confusion, dragging them both to the ground.

Sheila still held the tanto in her right hand. Out of reflex she held it out and away from the pair as they fell. In almost perfect synchronization the two females let out a curse. Sheila closed her eyes and looked away while Hecate frantically tried to think of a spell that might save them from becoming charcoal. Her casting was interrupted by the bright glow of the tanto as the flames reached and passed over them. The sound of a waterfall buffeted them as

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the flames blew by, accelerated by the narrow confines of the tunnel. All the while, Sheila screamed in echo to the nightmare that surrounded them.

It only took a few seconds for the flames to diminish and disappear entirely, but that was nothing compared to the amount of air that Sheila was pushing out in her scream. Eventually she ran out of breath and inhaled for another yell before suddenly realizing that she could inhale. Opening her eyes, she saw that the two of them had remained untouched by the flames that had passed over them. It was then that she let out another screech and dropped the glowing dagger on the ground. She let out a long stream of curses concerning the dagger, its manufacture and what had just happened, all while holding her injured paw out in front of her. Hecate glanced at it and winced in sympathy at second and third degree burns that crisscrossed her palm and fingers. The pattern matched the one woven into the smoldering handle.

A rapid series of thumps that were more felt than heard preceded the appearance of a large dragonhead in the corridor. It didn't take more than a second for Arden to size up the situation. /Are you two all right?/

"Are we all right?" Sheila shouted back, angrily. "Pretty brilliant fucking time to think about our safety. You could have killed me!"

Actually, no. the dragon responded casually. *I couldn't have killed you with my breath.*

"Yah, right," she replied, kicking the smoldering tanto towards the dragon. "You're just lucky that I had your stupid sword drawn, that's all."

No. She's lucky you had it drawn, he again replied casually. *The armor you wear would have protected you from the breath. Or don't you think that Lakash would have taken that possibility into account when he created it for me?*

"OK. Fine. Be that way, Mr. Technicalities." She managed to climb to her feet with the assistance of Hecate. "That doesn't change the fact that I just burned the fuck out of my hand because of it."

Arden picked up the tiny weapon and held it lengthwise between his thumb and forefinger. *Sorry about that,* he replied, while scratching that spot on his head again. *I never did quite figure out how to divert the feedback from the shield spell when I enchanted it.* He held the claw of his right index finger out to Sheila at about her waist level. *Let me see your hand and I'll heal it.*

She pulled back from him while shooting him a dirty look. "Keep your grubby paws off of me," she exclaimed while turning away. "I don't need or /want/ anything from you. Especially not your pity or your help."

The dragon closed his eyes and let out a long, slow breath, then opened them and handed Hecate the dagger. *Please attend to her wound.*

Hecate took the dagger, which was quite warm to the touch still, though not intolerable and tucked it into her belt. "I think maybe we should hold off on the first aid for the moment and

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worry more about that army that's coming up the hill."

"Oh yah. That's right. They weren't too far from the entrance. They'll be here soon." Sheila looked back towards the side of the mountain expectantly, as if the army would come marching around the corner on cue. She then shot Arden a hard look and rather sarcastically asked, "OK. You're the Big Kahuna here. What do we do now?"

He gazed out past the end of the tunnel for a few moments while he thought. *You didn't happen to notice if they had any magic types, did you?*

"Sorry. I didn't really notice," Sheila pointed back the way she came. "Would you like me to go ask? Maybe I can get a list of what all they've got with them."

"They will," Hecate interrupting Arden's reply. "There's a rule that practically demands it."

Sheila shot the Imir a curious glance. "Rule?"

You're probably right, and I'm not up for any kind of fighting at the moment. The dragon started forward, forcing the women out of the tunnel by the very fact that there wasn't enough room for anything but the dragon in the tunnel. Once outside, Arden reared back and unfurled his wings, stretching them to work the kinks out before setting back down gently on the ground. *Climb on board and we'll get out of here.* He lowered one wing and knelt his foreleg to give them a way up.

Sheila stopped as Hecate was giving her a hand up and looked around. "Where's Rathsmo?" She jumped back down and started towards the tunnel. "We can't leave without him."

Arden shifted his wing, dipping it further against the ground to block her path. *Don't worry about him. He's back in his gem for now. If he wants to come out, he will.*

Hecate reached down and grabbed Sheila's arm. "Come on. He's telling the truth." She gave Sheila another tug to encourage her to climb up. "I can sense it. Now let's go. We've got to get out of here."

The vixen studied her companion's face for a moment before nodding and climbing up on to the back of the dragon. "If you guys are yanking my chain---" she muttered in an implied threat, not bothering to finish it. Together the two females climbed along the wing until they reached the dragon's neck. There they found a place between the ridges that would make a serviceable saddle.

The dragon started moving towards the edge of the cliff. *Ladies or whatever you are. This is your captain speaking. I'd like to thank you for flying Dragon Air, and I highly suggest that you hold on tight because here we go!* With that he spread his wings and dove off the cliff, plummeting down a good distance to pick up speed before he pulled out of the dive. Powerful muscles flexed, driving the wings down to give lift and speed.

Sheila was just beginning to think they might have gotten away when Arden was jolted to a stop as if he were anchored to the ground. Hecate wrapped her arms around Sheila as her

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momentum drove her into the vixen. She then used her wings to help stabilize them as the dragon furiously pumped its wings trying to gain altitude.

This isn't going to work. Hold on tight because this is going to get interesting. The dragon wheeled over and dove towards the army.

"Are you crazy? That's exactly what they want!" Hecate debated trying to pull away from the dragon, but decided it would be less dangerous to stay. "Can't you see the capture spell?"

Arden laughed. *Don't worry about it. I have a little surprise that will I think will break their concentration.* The gleeful tone sent a shiver down Hecate's spine. As he approached the mages, both of them could see the webbing of magic that would arrest his dive and essentially trap him. He let out a long stream of flame that was easily deflected by the mages' shield before he pulled out. All three grunted with strain as they ran into the magic netting that had been cast to catch him. To Hecate's amazement, however, the strands dissolved into nothingness, allowing Arden to distance himself from the mages. She glanced back at the mountain and saw that Arden's promised distraction had apparently been to trigger a mudslide, though she couldn't figure out how, since the earlier rain had been far too brief to loosen the side of the mountain like that.

Once they were safely out of range, Hecate shouted, "Hey! How did you cause that slide?"

A low, rumbling chuckle rolled out of Arden's maw, though they felt it more than they heard it. *That wasn't a slide.*

"Huh?" She took another look back at the small speck that had been a small army. "If it wasn't a mudslide, then what was it?"

I'm sure that if you put your mind to it, you can figure it out.

Hecate's mouth dropped open and she glanced back again before letting out a laugh. "You didn't!"

"He didn't what?" Sheila yelled against the wind.

"He took a dump on them," the ebony female replied, laughing. "He took a god damned dump on the bastards!"

"No shit?" Sheila asked in amazement.

Actually, there was a lot of it. More than enough to break the concentration of any mage, that's for sure. After all, who would expect a dragon to take a crap on them as he flew by?

The Imir shook her head and leaned close to Sheila. "Is he always this crazy?"

Sheila nodded. "You don't know the half of it," she said in a voice too low to be heard. "You don't even know the half of it."

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Pieces in motion

Sheila grinned at the sight and feel of the clouds as they skimmed the tops, occasionally trimming a puffy protrusion at its base. She squinted, not against the sunlight, but rather the intense wind that struck her face. The only drawbacks that she could find were the fact that it was cold air and there was no way to go to the bathroom in flight. The peak of the mountain lay far behind the fleeing trio and with it, any chance of a quick capture.

For an hour or so the dragon flew on, pumping his wings to maintain altitude and speed until they eventually broke past the cloud front. Below they could see the river valley that led from the misty mountains and High Pothique down eventually to the River of the Dancing Gods. They were now solidly within the borders of Hypboria, a country that neighbored both Marquewood and Valisandra, the home of Terinedell, where the sorcerer Ruddygore resided.

A quick look around verified that there wasn't anything else in the air near them that could possibly pose a threat. For the next few minutes Arden experimented with finding a comfortable way to glide while using a minimum of energy. Silently, with nothing more than the sound of the wind whipping by, the trio floated along a current of air as they followed the Ilmenbus river northeastward towards its joining point with the River of Sighs.

Staying low and hugging the neck of the dragon, Sheila did her best not to let the wind get the better of her. As she watched the panorama of land slowly scroll by, her thoughts were frequented by the horrific notion that it was a long way down if she were to fall off. She had no doubt that either Hecate or Arden would easily catch her if she were to fall, but that did nothing to quite the screaming, gibbering voice in the back of her head that kept saying "*You're going to FALL!*"

The feeling of the dragon shifting under both the women caused them to grab on for a better hold as he banked to the left and began a wide turn. Hecate looked around to see if there was anything in the air that could be causing a problem. Failing that, she looked down and noticed they were circling a large farm. "Hey! What's up?" she yelled forwards to the dragon.

I need to land and rest, came the reply inside her head. The dragon continued his circle until he was lined up with a large, open area of ground near the barn. He leveled out his glide and put down his four legs to help slow down, stalling out at the last second to come to a slightly bumpy if gentle landing next to the building. Dipping his left wing, he allowed both females to climb down.

Hecate slid down the leathery surface, landing lightly on her feet after hopping off the edge. "So why land here? Why not find a cave somewhere?" she asked as she turned to help Sheila down from the wing's edge.

I also need food. They have some cattle here. He pulled open the large barn door and peeked inside at the mostly empty building. There were a couple of stalls for horses, and a

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large hayloft that ran round the sides of the upper level, but otherwise it was mostly empty. Pulling his wings in tight, Arden slipped through the doorway and proceeded to coil himself in the middle of the barn. With a little bit of shoving here and there to move piles of hay, he managed to get his entire enormous length inside the large barn. There wasn't really any room to stretch, but he could go outside if he felt the need for that. *This will do nicely. Go to the owners and make the arrangements. Sheila has plenty of gold if you need it.*

Sheila put her hands on her hips and scowled at the scaly beast. "Oh I do, do I? And just how do you know that?"

Arden chuckled as he closed his eyes. *I'm a dragon, lady. I can smell the stuff.*

She shot Hecate an inquiring glance to confirm the dragon's claim. Hecate smiled and nodded before turning and walking towards the house. Sheila shook her head and followed the winged Imir up to the door. Hecate rapped loudly on the door then listened for any movement inside. After a few moments, she rapped on it again and waited. With no answer or signs of life, she pushed open the door and stepped inside.

"Do you think we should be doing this?" Sheila asked as she cautiously followed Hecate into the house while nervously looking about.

"We wouldn't have to do this," she replied then raised her voice to a shouting level, "if whoever lived here would have just answered the door." She continued into the house, checking into the rooms, verifying that they were empty.

Timidly, Sheila followed the Imir through the house. "How do you know anyone's home? Maybe they're all out doing chores."

"No," Hecate replied with a frown as they entered the kitchen. "They're here. I'm a tracker for a reason. I can smell them, just like your boyfriend outside can smell gold."

"He's not my boyfriend," the vixen replied tartly, "so quit saying that."

Hecate lifted the lid off of a pot of bubbling stew. "Yah, whatever," she replied before picking up a wooden spoon and taking a sip. She rolled the liquid around in her mouth for a second before digging around in one of her pouches and pulling out a few sprigs of herb, which she then stirred into the bubbling concoction before covering it back up.

Returning to the main living area, she sighed and looked around. "Now if I were some chicken livered, farmer, where would I hide?" Her eyes gazed around the room before settling on a rug with a wrinkle in it. Grasping one corner, she yanked the rug back revealing a trapdoor with a large iron ring into the top of it. "I'd hide in the basement, of course," she said to nobody in particular.

She grabbed the ring and heaved the thick wooden trapdoor open. Both the women could see a stairway leading down, under the house and into complete darkness. "All right. Whoever you are down there," Hecate shouted at the hole, "come on out now and I promise I won't hurt you." After a minute of waiting, Hecate scowled down at the hole and shouted again. "All right then. If you don't get your asses up here NOW, I swear that I'll cast a spell

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and turn you into slugs."

A few seconds later, they both heard the creaking of boards as someone cautiously made their way up the stairs. After a few moments, an older man's head with two hands held up appeared in the trapdoor. "Please don't hurt me. We'll give you anything you want. Just leave us alone," he pleaded to a scowling Hecate as he continued climbing out of the basement. Behind him, an older woman also made her way hastily up the stairs, followed by two boys.

Hecate shooed the four over to a corner before looking back downstairs and waited. After a minute she looked up at the man. "There are two more down there. Get them out here, now," she ordered in a flat, dangerous voice.

"*Please*," the man pleaded, "just take what you want and leave my family alone."

The demonic figure glanced down at the stairs before glaring at the man again. "Two virgin daughters. How interesting," she commented in the same, dangerous voice. "You know what they say about dragons and virgin women. Perhaps I won't turn them into slugs. Maybe I'll just feed him to our friend out there."

The man broke down and fell to his knees, crying. "*Please!* You can't do that. *Please*, I beg of you!"

"Then quit your blubbering and tell them to get their asses up here," Hecate ordered angrily.

The man shakily made his way to the stairs and called down for the two girls to come up. A minute later, two young women appeared, one in her teens the other just entering puberty. The father hastily gathered them to him and retreated back to where the rest of the family stood. "All, right," he said, standing between Hecate and the children, the young girl being held by her mother, "we're all here. Now please, just take what you want and go."

With one foot, Hecate flipped the trapdoor shut and crossed her arms. "Unfortunately it isn't going to be that easy," she replied casually as she swung a chair away from the table and sat down at it. "You see, we need a place to hole up overnight, and your farm is it. How much do you get for the cattle you have out there?"

The question threw the man off as he was expecting threats, not questions about his stock. He thought for a few seconds before replying, "They sell for five grains of gold in the market."

Hecate looked over to Sheila and held her hand out. "Give me the gold."

The vixen scowled at her companion before digging the pouch of gold out from around her neck and tossed it to the woman. "Don't spend it all in one place," she sarcastically commented as the Imir caught the sack of coins.

"Five grains each," Hecate repeated as she started counting out coins. "Each of these is about 8 grains in weight," she stated as she counted out five coins and tossed them towards the man, who instinctively tried to catch them. "That's enough to pay for five of your cows

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as well as compensating you for any trouble from our stay." She yanked the cords on the bag, cinching the sack closed before tossing it back to the vixen. "That also pays for dinner for my friend and me. Sleeping accommodations won't be a problem since we'll bed down in the barn."

Sheila watched, slack jawed as Hecate stood and replaced the chair before turning her back on the family and heading for the door. "Is that it?" she asked incredulously, following the Imir. "You just throw some gold at them and tell them what we're doing? Aren't you worried about them sneaking off or doing something stupid like trying to kill us in the night?"

The demonic female stopped at the door, took one look at the terrified family and laughed. "Are you kidding?" she rhetorically asked the vixen. "They're scared shitless of us. They know damn good and well if they try anything the best that will happen is that the dragon will just eat them." She turned and gave the family a wicked smile that showed every sharp, pointy tooth she had. "At least they better hope he eats them." With that, she let out a disturbing laugh that sent shivers down Sheila's spine.

The vixen glanced back at the terrified family one last time before following the Imir out. As the two walked towards the cattle pens, Sheila tried to decide what was worse: The fact that they had just bullied a family into letting them stay the night, or that Hecate's threat may not have been an idle one.

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Thomas sat beside Nanuk's fire, occasionally stirring the flames with a stick. He looked up at the polar bear who lay on the bed, and he sighed. "I don't know, Miss Nanuk. I don't feel right about going just yet." The look on his face was one of half pleading and half concern for his current mistress. "Who will take care of you when I'm gone?"

The old bear smiled, reached out and used her paw to ruffle the young fox's head-fur. "You have been a good caretaker, Thomas Livingston Bryant, and Nanuk is grateful for your service." She rolled over onto her back and got comfortable. "But you can no longer stay here. You must go."

"But, Nanuk, what if..." The young pup started, but was interrupted by the old female.

"No buts about it, Thomas. You know what will happen if you tarry here," she gave him a small smile. "You still have a destiny to follow. You must not loose site of that." Both their heads turned towards the door as they sensed a new presence entering Nanuk's domain. "He has come, child. Now is the time for you to go."

Thomas reluctantly got to his feet and started towards the door. He got half way to it before he stopped and gave Nanuk a long look, then he rushed to her bed and gave her a hug. "I'll miss you, Miss Nanuk."

Nanuk hugged the child before giving him a quick kiss on the head, then she shoved him away. "Now go, my child. Your destiny awaits."

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Half blinded by tears, he fled the hut and ran into the woods. Instinctively he knew where to find the creature he searched for. After a few seconds he came to a clearing where no snow fell, no tree or grass existed, no sound of life reached. All that was there, standing in the middle of an area of nothingness, was a tall, mangy-looking rabbit carrying a scythe. Thomas wiped the tears from his eyes as he approached the rabbit, stopping just before he crossed the line between Nanuk's realm and the nothingness. "So I guess this is it?" he asked timidly.

The rabbit nodded. "Come, Thomas," he said, holding out his hand. "We have a tight schedule if this is to happen. If you miss your chance, I will have to deliver you to your ultimate reward."

Thomas looked over his shoulder to the small hut and the curl of smoke that rose from it, then he took the rabbit's hand and stepped into the circle. "I'm ready," he said, refusing to look back as the two walked into the nothingness, leaving Nanuk's domain for good.

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The life of a slave wasn't as bad as some people thought. As long as you kept your master happy, and didn't get caught goofing off, then being the personal attendant for the master of the Painted Mages had its advantages. His master was currently involved in a summoning. Afterwards, he'd want to have some brandy, a cigar and to soak his feet while having his calves massaged. It was Cam's job to see that everything was ready by the time his master was finished with the resurrection of his son. Such a summoning would take hours giving Cam plenty of time to make sure his master's chambers were in order.

Using the key that was spelled to work only for him, Cam opened the door and carried the bucket of hot water into the room before closing the door. He turned towards his master's desk and dropped the bucket in surprise, spilling the scalding hot water all over himself, though he barely noticed. His master stood, looking out a window while smoking a cigar. "Master," he said, quickly, dropping painfully to his knees and bowing his head. "I did not expect the summoning to be completed already. I'm sorry for my failure and am ready for my punishment." Not hearing a response, Cam looked up to see his master take a drag from the cigar and exhaling. "Master?" he asked, concerned at the lack of response.

The bald necromancer turned and looked at his servant with eyes that didn't quite take in all they saw. "That's all right, Cam," he said before walking to the large padded chair and sitting down. Leaning back into the padded chair, he tilted it until it was at a forty-five degree angle.

Cam stood and hesitantly approached the necromancer. "Is everything all right, Master?" he asked with genuine concern. His master hadn't been the kindest of people, however he was far better than many of the other magicians who took great delight in making life a living horror for the slaves.

"No, Cam, it isn't," he replied, studying the smoldering end of his cigar as he rolled it in his fingers. "The resurrection was a failure."

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"But..." The boy was astonished by the news. "But how?" he asked. His master had never failed before.

The mage's head snapped around to scowl at the young slave before angrily snubbing out the cigar. "Because there was no soul to resurrect," he snarled. "Whoever or whatever killed him utterly destroyed his soul." Cam dropped to his knees in a reflex reaction to the harsh voice of his master and shivered at the thought of his wrath. "Get up, Cam," the man ordered. "You've made a mess. Clean it up then bring me some brandy. Bring me lots and lots of brandy." The man leaned back in his chair, then swiveled it around to look out the window. "And don't stop pouring until I pass out."

Cam hastily gathered up the bucket then opened the door. Before he could leave, the voice of his master stopped him. "Cam?"

"Yes, Master?" he replied after several attempts to swallow his heart, which had tried to leap out of his chest through his throat.

"Send for the Wyrms Lords."

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When making a human sacrifice to a dragon, only young, virginal females should be used. Anything else will enrage a dragon." Book of Rules, Volume II, Section 15: On the care and feeding of dragons.

Cam shivered, not so much from the early morning cold that chilled his bare feet, but from fear of his master. His master had consumed too much alcohol last night and would normally have preferred to sleep in. Unfortunately, it was Cam's duty to wake him. Steeling himself, he rapped sternly on the door. From beyond, he could make out the incoherent voice of his master. When he didn't hear a proper answer, the slave rapped again, this time much louder.

"By the gods," the slurred voice shouted from behind the door. After a moment the voice spoke again, only much lower. "What fool invites a slow death?"

"It's Cam, Master," the boy replied speaking clearly but not yelling. He had been through this before. "You ordered that I awaken you when the Wyrms Lords had arrived. They await your presence in the court, Master."

The slave flinched as the steel bound door shook in response to something hitting it. "Not so damn loud," the voice responded. "Take them to the main hall, feed them and tell them I'll be there presently."

Cam hurried off, glad to be away, while secretly hoping certain other slaves might have the dubious pleasure of encountering his master before the hangover spell took effect.

Teyah quietly moved around the room, packing the occasional item into the bag she carried. Older of the two girls, she was convinced that by using what magic she knew, she'd be able to reach her mentor in town, and with his help, return to free her family from these monsters. She carelessly snatched her herb kit from the table by her bed, knocking over a couple of bottles. The noise woke her sister.

"Teyah?" the younger girl asked as she sat up. "What are you doing?"

Teyah gestured towards her sister. "Go to sleep, Wendy," she said quietly while weaving a cantrip that put her sister back to sleep immediately. Her things gathered, Teyah made her way out of the house, avoiding the squeaky boards and clutter in the main room. Silently she slipped out the front door, latching it noiselessly behind her.

Outside, it was pitch dark. This was the time of the new moon. She would have nothing but starlight to work with. For anyone without magic, it would be a slow and dangerous trip to town, but for her a utilitarian spell helped illuminate the night. It was a simple spell that would let her see things by their warmth. It wasn't as good as true fairy sight, but it would be more than enough to get her to town while avoiding anything nasty in the forest.

Before crossing the wide-open field, she peeked around the corner of the house at the barn to ensure that it was still closed. She couldn't hear any sounds coming from the large

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building, but with the doors closed she would have to assume that they were inside, asleep.

She made her way northeast, towards town, while trying to keep the house between her and the barn. It would be a long run over the wide fields that her father would soon be plowing before she got to the safety of the woods on the other side. Fortunately, the low, rolling hills would help to hide her part of the way.

About half way down the first hill she tripped over something and fell, landing face first in the tall, dry grass. She muttered a few unlady-like words under her breath as she got back up and brushed the grass and dirt off her dress. Climbing back up the hill a short way, she looked to see what had tripped her up. It was hard to tell, but as she got close, it appeared to be a long log or a small tree that had somehow gotten out into the field. It wasn't until she was almost on top of it that she realized that it wasn't a log. Following the outline with her eyes, she spun a quick one hundred and eighty degrees, freezing at the sight of two huge glowing red and yellow eyes floating in the middle of the dragon's head silhouette.

Ahhh, the voice in her mind rumbled. I see my snack has arrived.

During the planning of her escape, Teyah had come up with several scenarios for what she would do if she had encountered the dragon. Unfortunately none of them would ever see the light of day. She passed out before ever she ever had the chance to act on them.

The Wyrms gave the impression of being something straight out of a Thousand and One Tales. Dressed in white silks and turbans, you would have a hard time mistaking them for anything else. Except for one, minor thing. They were all Dwarves. The tallest of them standing only four and a half feet tall and weighing more than a man five times his size, the dwarves were an unlikely compliment to the flight of dragons that were resting outside the castle walls. The seven men and one woman were currently stuffing them selves with various cold meats, breads and wine while waiting for their host to arrive.

They had demolished a goodly portion of a platter that had been intended originally to feed more than twenty men when the doors opened and their host arrived. The short man had a slightly harried look to him as he made his way to his seat and dropped into it. None of the dwarves had bothered to stop their gluttony at his entrance and he appeared not to take any offense at it, though he did snarl at a serving wench who was slow in bringing him a goblet of wine.

"So," the head dwarf muttered in the middle of a mouth full of bread, "what's so damn important you had us fly down here right away?" He chewed once and washed the contents of his mouth down with the remainder of the now empty goblet, which he slammed down in front of a servant who promptly refilled it.

"I need you to track down two females and bring them back to me, alive," the sorcerer replied, taking a large gulp of wine and wincing slightly.

The dwarf spit out the chunk of meat he was chewing. "What do we look like, baby sitters?"

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he demanded angrily. "Send your lackeys after them."

"I did," the sorcerer answered, watching the reflections as he swirled his wine. "They're both dead and neither can be reached in the afterlife for some reason."

Taking another large bite out of the mutton leg, the dwarf chewed the mass over into his left cheek before responding, "It still doesn't sound like a challenge to me."

"They have a wyrm with them," responded the sorcerer, still watching the reflections.

That set off a round of laughs with the dwarves beating the table with their mugs, slopping wine everywhere. "Only one? Come now, you can do better than that!"

"Yah," the female chipped in. "If you want our interest, then make it a challenge!"

A small smile quirked the corners of the mages mouth as he answered. "The wyrm is Sha'kull"

Half the dwarves spit out what they were eating or drinking in surprise as the other half choked on their food. "Sha'Kull?" the leader shouted as he stood up, losing height in the process. "Are you crazy? That beast would have killed anyone and anything that awakened it!"

"Nevertheless," the sorcerer said, draining his drink, then placing the empty goblet on the table, "the fact exists that forces from High Pothique were tipped that someone might try to wake the dragon. They sent an expeditionary force which saw the dragon escape with both females riding on its back."

"By the GODS!" the dwarf shouted, slamming his fist on the table before climbing back up into his chair. "If we were to hunt down the legendary Sha'Kull, why...."

"You would be heroes to your clan," the sorcerer completed for the dwarf, stroking the dwarf's ego. "Word of your great deed would spread around the world. They would speak your name for hundreds of generations. The Wyrms Lords of Kardak, who hunted down and killed that most terrible of wyrms, Sha'Kull."

A quick glance at his compatriots confirmed that they, too, wanted to take this hunt. "You want the females alive, eh?" he asked, considering what might be required.

"Yes." A gesture summoned up the images of Sheila and Hecate. "You know the demoness, but the other one is my prime concern. I'd like both of them if possible."

Excitement coursed through the room as the dwarves proceeded to pump their host for information about their targets, their history and where he thought they might be going. An hour later, eight well fed and quite ecstatic Wyrms Lords left to begin the pursuit of their prey. Back in the castle, the sorcerer picked up his goblet and smiled again as he watched the reflections in the swirling wine.

Arden lay in the field with his head at the top of a hill, looking up at the stars. Between his

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eyes, lying on the bridge of his snout was Teyah with her sack of items behind her head. "What about that one there?" she said, circling a star in the sky with a small, glowing band of magic that vanished after a few seconds.

I'm not sure about that one, the dragon answered shifting slightly to get a better view. *I think that's Cygnus, but I'm not sure. I'm not used to seeing so many stars.*

Teyah shifted slightly, getting comfortable on the ridged surface. "How can you not be used to seeing so many stars?"

Where I come from, there are great cities that never sleep, the dragon explained, thinking back to his home. *They are always well lit, putting out enough light to make the horizon glow. There is so much light that even miles away from town, it is still enough to keep you from seeing all the stars.*

"Wow," Teyah said, half in awe and half in sympathy. "I'm sure glad nothing around here gives off that much light."

The two of them lay there for the longest time. Arden had almost drifted off to sleep when Teyah spoke again. "Hey, Arden?"

Uh huh? the groggy dragon responded.

Teyah rolled over to look the dragon in the left eye. "Why were you out here instead of in the barn?"

Waking up a little, Arden took a deep breath before responding. *Have you ever been blind?* Teyah shook her head. *Imagine being in a place where you were absolutely blind. Not only that, but there was no sound, touch, taste or smell.* He paused to let it sink in. *Not even the feeling of your heart beating. Nothing at all to keep you sane.*

Teyah shivered though there was no breeze. "That sounds absolutely horrible."

It was, Arden replied, looking back up at the stars. *That's why I was out here. Being cooped up in the barn without any light to speak of reminded me of that time.* Again, Arden closed his eyes and started to drift off to sleep, only to be pulled back from the abyss.

"Hey, Arden?" Teyah said again.

Yes? he answered, sounding slightly annoyed and not bothering to open his eyes.

"I'm glad you decided not to eat me," she said with a smile as she rolled over onto her back.

So am I, the dragon responded. *but if you don't let me go to sleep, I might change my mind.*

Teyah froze at the annoyed sound to the dragons voice until she eventually realized that he was quietly laughing. "A dragon with a sense of humor," she thought in amazement. "Who'd of thought?"

"Myron Jacobs?"

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"Yah?" Specks turned out of reflex at the mention of his name to see a man in his mid thirties, dressed in an off the rack suit, a mediocre haircut and a five o'clock shadow.

"Detective Peterson," he said by way of introduction, flipping open a small leather wallet with a badge and a picture ID. "Can I have a few minutes of your time?"

Specks looked around the parking lot, noting that there wasn't anyone near. "Sure. What can I do for you?"

The cop flipped open a notepad and asked, "Where were you on Friday night around midnight or so?"

"I, uh, I was at home, watching the Creature Feature on TV." Specks replied, nervously.

"Uh huh," the cop grunted, looking over the tops of his glasses before making a note. "So you weren't anywhere near Indian Mesa out east of town that night?"

"The Mesa? Um, no.," Specks replied, trying to stay calm. "I mean, I've been up there and all, but not on Friday."

"Uh huh," the cop grunted, again while looking over the top of his glasses and then making a note. "So you wouldn't know anything about what happened to one, Jose Jaeger aka 'The Tank' and one Antonio Caducei aka 'The Stallion' then, right?"

Specks arched his eyebrows in mock surprise. "Tank and The Stallion? No. Why? Did something happen?" He prayed to the gods above that the cop was buying his act.

"Uh, yah," the cop replied, peering over his glasses again. "So, do you have any witnesses that can say you were at home that night?"

"No," Specks said, shaking his head. "I was all alone. Why?"

"Ooooh kay," the cop replied, drawing out the word flipping shut the notepad and tucking it into his pocket. "I think we probably should go back down to the station and discuss this further."

"Um, am I under arrest?" the boy asked before checking his watch. "I'm supposed to be at work in ten minutes and the manager gets really pissed off if I don't show up on time."

The cop reached out and grabbed Specks by the arm and held on with a firm if not almost painful grip. "I said I think you should come with me. We'll make sure and square it with your manager."

Specks felt a surge of something coursing through his body. It felt like the fight-or-flight reflex one has with adrenalin, only different. "Let go of me," he commanded in a low, rumbling voice that echoed inside the cop's head. He was surprised when the slack jawed cop let go of his arm and stood there, staring at him with a strange, blank look.

"My god, what's happening," Specks thought in amazement. "Did I just do that?" He concentrated on the feeling again and spoke to the cop in the same voice. "We don't need to

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go back to the station. I'm not your man. It must have been someone else. I'm not a suspect any more."

For a minute, the cop just stood there, before Specks snapped his fingers in front of the cop, breaking the trance. The man winced and rubbed his nose before looking back over at the boy. "What was I saying?"

"Something about making a mistake?" Specks prompted, hoping he wasn't digging a hole here.

"Oh, right," the cop said, shaking his head to clear it. "Yah, I'm sorry to have bothered you, but you know how it is. We have to follow all the leads."

Specks nodded solemnly, trying with all his will power not to smile. "I understand completely. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to be late for work."

The cop waved him on. "Don't worry about it. Thanks for your time."

"Good luck catching the guy who did it." Specks said, trying not to laugh as he jogged towards the mall.

The cop took one last, long look at the boy before shaking his head, returning to his car and driving away. Unseen to both of them, a small, oriental-looking gentleman leaned against a light post not too far away, writing on a small note pad of his own. He smiled as he finished his notes. The boy was progressing faster than expected. Hecate may have finally found "The One".

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Someone else's problem.

Sheila and Hecate both jumped at the sound of hammering on the barn door. "Open up in there!" came a loud, angry shout. They both recognized it as the man who owned the farm. "Damn it, I said open up!" he shouted again, continuing to bang on the door with some hard object.

Hecate hefted a nearby block of rock salt and threw it at the door, shattering the white projectile while also achieving her immediate goal: Getting the farmer to stop his incessant banging. Hecate unbarred the door and opened it. Before she could say anything, the farmer pushed past her.

"Where is she?" he demanded, looking around. "What did you do with her?" The infuriated farmer pointed the axe he was holding at Hecate and repeated his demand. "What did you people do with her?"

Hecate rolled her eyes and leaned against the door. "Do with who?" she asked in a bored tone of voice.

"Don't play the fool with me," the man responded angrily. "My daughter, Teyah. What did you people do with her?" He took a step towards Hecate and raised the axe threateningly. His expression changed from anger to surprise as the axe was suddenly yanked from his hands and turned in the air as if held by an unseen person, menacing him.

Hecate gestured slightly with her fingers, controlling the axe, using it to herd the man against the main barn doors, which were still closed and barred. "Look, asshole. We didn't do anything with your girl."

"Maybe you didn't," the man conceded then nodded at the sleeping dragon, "but what's to say it didn't do something?"

"You best be careful," Hecate stated in a low, dangerous voice. She moved closer until she was almost touching the man and leaned over to whisper into his ear. "Dragons can be cranky when they don't get their beauty rest. You wouldn't like him if he was cranky." She glanced over at the dragon before smiling at the man. "No, I wouldn't want to be the one who wakes him up."

"Enough of this shit," Sheila growled as she picked up a pitchfork. "HEY! Asshole! Wake up!" Seeing no reaction from the dragon, Sheila hefted the pitchfork and threw it like a spear. Nobody was more surprised than she was when it passed through the dragon and hit something unseen on the other side. "What the fuck?" The confused vixen started to move towards the dragon but froze when its eyes opened. The lips moved in an unnatural way, creating the image of a smile as the body faded away, leaving nothing but a toothy Cheshire cat's grin behind which faded a few seconds later as the last remnants of the spell disappeared. "That son of a bitch snuck out on us."

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The farmer snarled at Hecate. "Where's my daughter?"

All three heads turned towards the side door at the sound of a new voice. "I'm right here." Teyah stood just inside the doorway and frowned at her father. "Why are you bothering these people?"

The father's anger shifted towards his errant daughter. "Where the hell were you? Do you have any idea how worried your mother and I have been?"

Teyah rolled her eyes and let out an exaggerated sigh. "Daddy," she drawled, "I was just checking the wards on the north pasture. It looks like they may be back."

The expression on her father changed from anger to concern. "The wolves are back? Did they get any of the herd?"

"Nope. It looks like the wards held." She moved over to her father and took his arm in one hand while gesturing with the other. "Now let's stop bothering these nice people and go get you some breakfast, ok?"

Her father blinked a couple of times and smiled. "You're right. Breakfast sounds like a good idea right about now." The two of them walked to the man sized door. Teyah whispered something to her father who nodded in reply before he left. She then turned to the two other females in the barn. "Arden asked me to tell you that he'll be back in a little while."

Sheila scowled at the girl. "You were out last night with Arden, weren't you?" She sniffed a few times and pursed her lips. "Don't try to deny it. I can smell his stench on you."

"Why should I deny it?" the young apprentice asked, somewhat confused. "We had a nice time last night." She smiled and twirled a strand of hair around her finger absently as she remembered the night. "He's certainly not what I expected from a dragon."

Sheila's paw gripped the handle of the sword so hard the leather creaked. "What the hell were you two doing out there last night?" she demanded in a low, growling voice.

Teyah took a step back, startled at the vixen's hostility. "Nothing. We just talked, that's all."

"Yah, right," Sheila growled. "You listen to me and you listen close. Stay away from him or you're going to have more trouble than you could ever imagine."

Hecate stepped between Sheila and the girl. "Take it easy," she said, trying to calm

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the vixen down. "Think about it; what the hell could he do with her anyway?"

Sheila glowered at the Imir. "Stay out of this," she hissed between clinched fangs. Her armor, sensing her anger, began to glow slightly as combat spells came alive. Both Hecate and Teyah backed away from Sheila as an unspoken fear hit them. "You don't know him. He's trouble. If either of you have the sense God gave a rock, you'll stay away from him." Teyah dodged to the side as the vixen stormed past her and out of the barn.

The young woman looked over at the shaken Imir and shivered. "Whoa," she whispered under her breath.

Hecate moved next to Teyah to watch Sheila's retreating form. "Yah, whoa."

Dawn rose behind the eight dragons and their riders, illuminating their backs and the ocean that they were currently flying over. On the horizon was a sinister mist that blanketed the tall cliffs, marking the boundary between land and sea. Within the hour the eight made land fall. Rather than land and rest, they pushed inland for several more hours until a large city could be seen in the distance, scaling the side of a mountain and covering it completely. Around the mountain flew a large number of dragons, wyverns, rocs and other creatures of ill temper. They made their way to a large landing area just on the outskirts of town and set down. People rushed out from the buildings surrounding the mews as if waiting for those very riders and began to tend to the dragons' needs as their weary riders dismounted and made their way slowly into the buildings.

The lead dwarf was greeted by a squat, fat human who was almost short enough to be considered a dwarf himself in human terms. "Ahh, my friends. You have returned. What may Pasqual do for you today?"

"We need transport to Hypborea," the exhausted dwarf said as he dropped into a well-padded chair.

"But what could you possibly need transport for" the fat human asked. "You have dragons. Simply fly there."

The dwarf shook his head and waved off the question. "We're pursuing a prey who moves almost as fast as we do, and he's got a good head start." He accepted a goblet of wine from a servant and knocked it back. "That's why we need transport. I think you know what kind of transport I'm talking about, too."

The fat human frowned and nodded. "That will take a most powerful ally to

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accomplish and it won't be without its price."

"I know the price," the dwarf grumbled. "You just get someone strong enough to send eight full grown dragons half way across Husaquahr and I'll work the deal with him." A glance at the hesitant Pasqual made the dwarf chuckle. "Don't worry. You'll get a hefty finders fee for hooking me up with him."

Reassured of a profit, the fat man smiled. "Excellent. When would you like to leave?"

"Tonight," the dwarf said, downing another flagon of wine. "Tomorrow at the latest. We just need to give our mounts a bit of rest before we transit. After we're in Hypborea they can get the proper rest they need."

"Very well," Pasqual agreed. "I'll see to it. When you're ready, the servants will show you to your rooms." The trader bowed several times as he backed out of the room, closing the door behind him. As he made his way down the hall, his form shifted as he grew to his full height. He paused at a window that looked out at the courtyard where the dragons sat, and he smiled. His perfect physical beauty was only slightly marred by the two, small horns that protruded from his forehead. "Yes," he thought, "they'll bargain and get more than they ever expected. Of course one must expect such things when dealing with a prince of hell."

A small chuckle echoed down the hallway as the demon who called himself Pablo went to prepare for the evenings casting.

Teyah walked towards the barn, fingering a silver bracelet in her hand as she went. The double doors were wide open allowing her to walk right in. One quick glance showed that nobody was in the barn. She turned to leave when she heard a familiar voice in her head. *Hey, Snack. What's up?* Confused, she looked around, only this time she spotted the dragon sitting in the middle of the barn with a smug look on it's face.

"How did you do that?" she asked in awe. "I've never seen an invisibility spell that worked so flawlessly."

Why to you say it was an invisibility spell? the dragon asked in a smug fashion as he rest his chin on his palms and smiled.

"Because I couldn't see you. The barn was completely empty," Teyah replied, somewhat annoyed at the smug tone to the dragon's voice.

Arden chuckled. *But I wasn't invisible. Invisibility is a hard thing to accomplish. I used a much better spell. One that a rather brilliant mind from my world thought*

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up.

Before Teyah could answer, she was interrupted by Sheila's voice as the vixen came around the corner. "Hey, you!" the vixen barked. "Where is he?"

Teyah glanced into the barn only to see the dragon waving one true hand and both hand-feet as he held a finger of his other true hand in front of his mouth to signal that Teyah shouldn't say anything about him. "How should I know?" she fired back. "I'm not your dragon's keeper."

Sheila glanced into the barn then back at the girl. "Oh yah? Then why are you out here?" she interrogated, scowling at the girl suspiciously.

"Mother sent me," she replied flatly. "She's made up a pot of stew and said to tell you and your friend that you can come have some any time you feel hungry."

"Oh," the vixen replied somewhat sheepishly. "Umm... Thanks." Sheila glanced into the barn the back at the girl before walking towards the house. Several times she stopped, and looked at the barn before shaking her head and continuing inside.

Teyah smiled and laughed as she went into the barn. "How did you do that? You were in plain sight!"

The dragon smiled for a second and considered letting the girl sweat but decided not to. *It's a simple spell. It works on the fact that people really don't pay attention to things around them.*

"Huh?" the girl grunted. "I don't get it."

Arden lowered his head down and turned his head so he could see the girl easier with one eye. *When you go into town, do you pay attention to every little thing that everyone is doing? Can you tell me exactly what everyone was wearing, carrying or doing at the time?*

"Not really," she replied, considering what he had said. "I can think of a few people that I talked to, but other than them, I can't say.."

Exactly! the dragon replied. *Anything that you aren't currently interacting with isn't your problem. It's someone else's problem. That's what my spell does. It simply sends a very strong message to the person's subconscious that I'm not what they're looking for, and that they don't need to be bothered with me any more than you'd worry about a frog by the roadside.*

Teyah's brows furrowed as she considered his explanation. "But she was looking for you. Why did it still work?"

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It almost didn't, Arden replied. You notice how she kept looking back? Her subconscious kept saying "Yes, there's a dragon there, but it's not the one you care about" while another part of her mind said, "That's not right!" That's why she kept looking back. The spell isn't invisibility, but it's almost as good.

"Somebody else's problem," Teyah repeated with a smile. "That's a neat concept. Can you teach it to me? I could sure use a spell like that."

Arden frowned and shook his head. *Our magics aren't compatible. I'm afraid that it would be decades if not longer before you ever got to the level where you could manipulate the kind of magic I do. However, if you think about it, I'm sure you'll come up with your own version of the spell sooner or later.*

Teyah nodded and forced a smile. "I suppose so," she replied. It was then she remembered the bracelet that she had brought him and pulled out the silver band. "Oh, here's what you asked for. Daddy gave me this when I became an apprentice."

Arden took the tiny hoop as she slipped it over the end of a proffered claw. *Excellent. I'll give it back to you in the morning.*

"What do you want it for, anyway?" she asked as she watched the dragon examine the circlet.

You'll find out. Just a little something for an up and coming apprentice. He smiled and nodded towards the house. *You'd better get back before Sheila gets curious about why you didn't come back for dinner.*

"What's the deal with her?" Teyah asked, glancing towards the house to make sure nobody was around. "She's got some serious problems where you're concerned."

The dragon closed his eyes and sighed. *It's a long story. The short of it is that she's not from this world, the child she's carrying is mine and she's had a pretty rough time of it in this world for the last six months while I was dead.*

Teyah stared at the dragon slack jawed for several seconds before she shook her head. "You're going to have to give me ALL the details. You obviously left some of the finer points out last night."

We'll see. Now go eat and I'll see you again tonight.

Arden watched the girl head back to the house. He then looked down at the tiny circlet on the end of one claw tip. He gestured with a free hand and the band of silver floated up into the air and hovered there. Using both hands, he began casting an intricate spell that had separate threads coming from each hand creating a synchronous spell that slowly reshaped the band. It would take some time to complete the spell he had conceived for her, and then a little more to add the new

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spell he had thought of during their conversation. Once he was done, it would be a keepsake that should ensure that she fulfilled the destiny he had foreseen in his meditations last night.

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Betrayal

The eight dwarves and their mounts waited in the courtyard of Pasqual's Hacienda and Emporium of Bizarre Goods. The sun was just setting on the group of travelers as they were preparing for their journey. From within the building came a tall, darkly tanned man, two small horns protruding from under the curly mop of hair that covered his head. He greeted the group with a broad, toothy smile. "Ahhh, here you are, on time and ready to go. It's so pleasant to deal with people who know their business."

"Enough of the niceties," the gruff leader of the dwarves rumbled. "What's the charge?"

"No charge," the daemon replied pleasantly. "Just a service."

The dwarf frowned at the daemon. He didn't like the sound of that. "What kind of service?"

"A most simple one, considering the prey that you hunt," the daemon replied, pulling out an ornate dagger. "I want you to use this dagger to finish off the dragon."

The dwarf took the dagger and examined it. "And how the hell am I supposed to do that? It would take forever to kill a dragon with a toy like this."

"Quite the contrary," the daemon replied, clasping his hands behind his back. "Simply stab the dragon in the head or neck with that dagger and it will be slain instantly."

"Why?" the dwarf asked, squinting sideways at the daemon out of one eye.

The daemon shook a finger at the dwarf. "That question will cost you if you really want the answer. Is it all that important?"

"Nah," the dwarf replied, shaking his head. "As long as the damn thing dies, I don't care. Are you ready to transport us now?"

"Almost," the daemon replied, drawing a bag out of his jacket pocket. "These were sent by your patron. They're summoning spheres. Simply invoke one, then throw it at a person. Whoever it strikes will be transported back to your patron's enclave."

"All right," the dwarf acknowledged as he accepted the bag of spheres that resembled crystal marbles. "Now can we go?"

"Indeed. You know the drill. Either touch me or touch someone who is touching me and I'll transport you to Hypborea as promised." The daemon stood with his hands out. Two dwarves acted as conduits to their dragons which had refused to touch the daemon directly. Each dragon then stretched its wings out to touch an adjacent dragon, and in that way all the dragons linked themselves and their riders to the daemon. There was a brief flash of light that left the daemon standing alone in the courtyard. He smiled and whistled a lively tune as he walked back into the hacienda.

Over a thousand miles away, eight dragons and their riders appeared in an open field not far from the River of the Dancing Gods.

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"All right, gang. Let's rest up for the night. Tomorrow we'll head south and try to find our target." The group quickly began setting up camp, eager for morning to come and the hunt it would bring.

Hecate enjoyed the feel of the cool evening air as she flew low over the surrounding forest, checking the perimeter. Below, she saw the network of strands that made up the warding spells Teyah had mentioned that morning. Her circuit of the land complete, she headed back to the barn where she hoped the dragon would be. He had been missing all day and she was more than just a little worried. She landed without a sound a few feet from the door and went in. Though there were no lights on, she had no difficulty seeing the interior of the building, and determining that it was empty. "Damn, where the hell can he be?" she muttered in a low, annoyed voice.

I'm right here

The hell-spawned Imir jumped almost a foot into the air at the sound of the dragons voice reverberating in her head. "Son of a BITCH!" she exclaimed, now seeing the huge, serpentine form that was coiled up in the barn, its wings occasionally brushing the walls as it breathed. "Where the hell did you come from?"

I've been right here all day, the dragon commented, returning its attention to the small, glowing band of silver that was suspended between its two true-hands.

"How did you do that?" Hecate asked, then took a couple of steps forward, studying the silver band. "And what are you doing to that bracelet?"

I have a rather nice camouflage spell that kept me hidden, the dragon replied. *As for this bracelet, I'm enchanting it.*

"No shit," the Imir commented. She moved in close to try to make sense of the magic that was being cast, but failed miserably. "What in hell's name are you doing to that bracelet? You've got enough mana in that thing to start a small war!"

The dragon continued to concentrate on his work. *I'm quite aware of that fact, thank you.*

Hecate frowned at the recalcitrant dragon and nibbled on her lip. "What aren't you telling me?"

The glow faded from the bracelet as Arden finished the final spell. What had been an ordinary looking silver bracelet now appeared as a stylized winged snake that was eating its own tail. *There are a lot of things I'm not telling you*, he replied, allowing the bracelet to slip down onto one of his claws. *Ask me about this later and maybe I'll answer then.*

Sheila interrupted Hecate's answer when she entered the barn. "When the hell did you get back?" she snarled at the dragon.

"The cheeky bastard's been in here all the time," Hecate replied. "Only he's had a

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camouflage spell up that hid him."

"Hiding, huh? That's something I guess you're good at," the vixen snapped at the dragon. "What were you hiding from?"

Your yapping voice, Arden replied angrily. The only way I can get a little peace and quiet is when you're not around.

Sheila gapped at the dragon slack jawed. "You *fucking* asshole! Where do you get off talking to me like that?" She glared at the wyrm lying in the middle of the barn as she gripped the handle of the Katana.

You know what? I think it's time you got your beauty sleep. God knows you need some, the dragon sarcastically replied while gesturing.

"Oh no you..." Sheila's protest was cut off in as she fell asleep under the spell that Arden had cast. Her sleeping form floated the few feet over to a pile of hay and settled gently onto it.

"How in the hell did you do that?" Hecate asked, a stunned expression on her face.

Arden gave her a confused look. *What are you talking about? It was a simple sleep spell.*

"That's not what I'm talking about," she said, shaking a finger at the dragon. "How did you get it past that outfit she's wearing? Ever time I try that, the damn thing blocked the spell."

Oh, the dragon replied, somewhat sheepishly, that armor was made for me. That's why it let my spell through. By default it will try to protect whoever's wearing it, but only I can really control it.

"Really?" Hecate replied, looking the armor over again. "I thought you said you were a guy."

I am, and was originally.

The Imir shook her head and smiled. "Then you had to have one hell of a chest for a guy from the looks of that outfit. That thing wasn't tailored for anyone packing a meat snake."

It wasn't. It was tailored for Sheila's body.

"Huh?" Hecate grunted in confusion. "But you just said it was made for you."

I did, the dragon replied with a smirk. Now if you'll excuse me, I must go and meet with Teyah. The dragon opened the large double doors and managed to extract himself from the cramped barn without knocking anything down. Behind him, the somewhat perplexed Imir shook her head at a though. "Nah," she grunted as she watched the retreating dragon.

Arden studied the circlet that sat on his claw. He had tried to think of every thing that could

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possibly happen and take it into account, but there were never any guarantee in situations like this. The brief thought about what he was doing worked its way forward, but he shoved it down hard. There were times when he could afford a conscience and this wasn't one of them. He put all of that out of his mind as Teyah came over the hill and waved.

Hello, Snack. Any problems getting away from your father?

"Nope, no problem at all," she replied smiling as she spread a blanket out on the grass then sat down on it.

Did you use your magic to distract him again? the dragon asked in a chiding voice.

Teyah gave the dragon a look of shock and outrage. "How could you possibly think I'd do something like that?"

Arden laughed. *Are you kidding? I've seen the triggers you've got on him to keep him distracted.*

The girl let out a lively laugh. "That obvious, eh? I guess I'll have to hide them better," she replied sprawling out on the blanket.

That comes with experience, the dragon replied. He then held out his true-hand with the circlet on the claw for the girl. *Here. I've finished the enchantment. Put it on.*

Teyah stood and removed the silver object. It was way to big to fit on her arm, and too small to wear on her head. She looked up at the dragon curiously. "What do I do with it?"

Put it over your wrist and say "Hello!" to it.

Teyah smiled, slipped the large hoop over her right wrist and said "Hello" to the object. The eyes on the snake opened, and it contracted so that it fit firmly on her arm. The sudden motion startled her, but she smiled as she felt it settle in on her arm. It had become warm, almost as if alive and the feel of it when she stroked the band was almost surreal. "Wow! What does it do?"

It has several functions, but most importantly its to protect you. Tell me, Teyah, have you ever heard the phrase, "Death before dishonor"?

Teyah looked thoughtful for a second then shook her head. "I've heard phrases like it, but not that one, why?"

It's something from my world. It's a motto that I have lived and died by. Teyah, would you consider death a better alternative then to spend the rest of your life and maybe eternity serving hell?

"I... I guess so," she replied, looking confused. "Why are you asking this stuff?"

The dragon sighed. *I've given you something very powerful. I just wanted to make sure that you were the kind of person who would fight evil rather than serve it.*

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"Oh," Teyah said in a small voice. "I suppose I can understand that." She looked up at the dragon with large, serious eyes. "I'll try to do the best I can. I won't let you down."

Good. The dragon relaxed and spread out, covering a goodly portion of the open field. *So, do you like the design?*

"Oh, yes," the girl said with a broad smile. "It feels almost like it's alive."

It is, in a sense, the dragon replied, leaning his head on one hand. *I've bound a guardian spirit to it. It will try to keep you safe.*

"A guardian spirit?" she echoed, looking at the band in awe. "Wow! I've heard of enchanted items with spirits in them, but I've never heard of someone making one so quickly and without all kinds of special things to help them."

The dragon nodded slightly. *Generally that's true, but that spirit isn't the normal kind you'd find here. It's a guardian dragon. As a rule you'd never be able to bind one to an object like that, but I have a special talent where they're involved.*

"Wow!" the girl repeated, even more impressed before beaming another smile back up at the dragon. "How can I ever thank you?"

You don't have to. It was an honor to make that for you and you honor me by accepting it. The dragon looked off at the first stars that were beginning to show in the night sky. "I only hope you will some day forgive me for it," he thought.

The dwarves were sitting around their campfire eating stew when their leader suddenly winced and, reaching into his shirt, pulled out a crystal, which hung on a leather band around his neck. The crystal pulsed with a dark, red color.

"Your master calls," the dwarfish woman taunted as she consumed her meal.

"He's not my master," the leader snarled. "He's our employer, and I'd advise you to keep that in mind the next time you decide to buy some pretty bauble." Despite his protest, he did stop his meal and dig out a silver bowl from his pack. It was covered in runes and symbols. He took his water skin and dumped some into the bowl, then muttered something that caused the liquid to cloud. The face of the painted mage appeared in the bowl. "What do you want now?" the dwarf demanded.

"I have news of your prey," the mage replied. "However, if you're not interested, I suppose I can give it to someone else."

"No, no," the dwarf replied hastily, swallowing the bit of food in his mouth. "Where is it?"

"There's a farm approximately 100 leagues due south of you. I've detected signs that the dragon is there." The mage smiled. "That shouldn't take you too long to reach."

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"No, it shouldn't at all," the dwarf replied with a broad smile. "We'll take off before dawn. That will put us over the target at first light. The wrym won't stand a chance."

"That's what I'm counting on," the mage replied before his image faded.

"Good news," the dwarf said to his small group. "He's located the target. We'll leave before dawn to get it."

"About damn time," one of the others commented. "I thought we'd never get around to killing anything."

"Don't worry," the female replied. "There will be enough action tomorrow. Even enough for you, Thumper."

Wendy woke up with a start and sat up. "Who's there?" she asked. The lamp next to her bed ignited, giving the room a soft glow. Startled by the light, she let out a small gasp, then another one at the sight of the man standing in the doorway.

"Wendy," he said with a serious tone, his voice almost hypnotic. "You must leave tonight, right now in fact. You must go to town and do not return. Find the Magus there and tell him you're Teyah's sister and that you need refuge. He will take you in."

"Wh..who are you?" the girl stuttered.

"I'm your guardian angel," the man said. He gestured towards a bag with the girl's belongings in it that sat at the foot of the bed. "Everything is packed that you will need. You must go now. Go, and be safe." With those words, he faded from view.

Wendy shivered then looked at the bag. A glance around the room showed that many of her possessions had been packed, as well as some clothes. She got up and quickly dressed. She'd ask Teyah about the odd man. On her way out, she grabbed the bag without thinking about it. As she left the house, she headed east towards town. Teyah would be at the Magus's house. That's where she would find her sister.

One the hill behind the house, the dragon looked at the form of the young girl that was quickly vanishing into the distance. With a sigh, he turned and slowly made his way back to the barn. Events were moving too rapidly. Much too rapidly.

The flight of dragons made its way due south, towards its intended target. The early morning sun was just peeking over the horizon, illuminating the beasts from below. Most of the landscape was still in the long shadows of the early morning dawn, semi-hidden from view by the flying octet. Off to the right, one of the dragons roared and veered slightly to the east, losing altitude. A moment later the rest of the flight fell into formation behind the dragon that had now taken over the lead. Within minutes they could see the wide opening in the forest, which marked a large farm. Its plowed fields and grazing cattle showed no signs

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of anything amiss. By the spread-out single story home stood a large barn, a barn big enough to hold a good sized dragon if the beast were of a mind to fit in such a confined place.

The lead dwarf signaled to two other dragons, which then peeled off and homed in on the barn while the rest of the group proceeded to circle the farm, watching for anything amiss from above or below. The first dragon skimmed at ground level at high speed, aiming directly for the barn. At the last moment it pulled up, though it dragged its tail, smashing through the wall and roof of the barn. The second dragon pulled up to a hover seconds behind the first dragon's attack and released a torrent of flame into the building, igniting the contents. A combination of furnace-like heat, expanding air and combustible dust igniting, caused the barn to literally explode. The second dragon made a hasty retreat as the others circled overhead, looking to see what might come out of the destruction, but nothing emerged. Soon it became apparent that the building had, in fact, been empty.

The lead dwarf let out a stream of curses that were lost to the wind, while sending hand signals to the other dragon riders. Four of them spread out to search for any people or faerie in the area that they could interrogate, while the other four landed by the house. A quick search of the house brought out the mother and father, while one of the four outriders herded Teyah back to the house with his mount.

Once all the other riders had signaled that the coast was clear, the leader dismounted and approached the family. "Where are they?" he demanded of the father.

"I don't know," the man replied nervously, shivering in the early morning's nippy air.

The dwarf backhanded the man and repeated his demand. "I asked you where they are; now answer me."

"I swear to God that I don't know," the man pleaded then quickly continued as the dwarf drew his hand back again. "It was in the barn last night. If it's not there now, then I don't know where it went. Please, we don't know anything. We had no choice in the matter. They would have killed us."

"Hmm" the dwarf rumbled as he considered the man's words. The female dwarf approached and whispered something in his ear. "There are two beds in the girl's room," he stated. "Where's the other one?"

Each of the three family members looked at each other, unsure what to say, then Teyah piped up with an answer. "If you must know, she died this last winter. A sickness took her that the apothecary couldn't cure."

The lead dwarf glanced at the female dwarf, who studied the girl for a moment, then shrugged. He frowned at the three as he considered what to do. The female dwarf again whispered something in his ear that caused an eyebrow to creep up on his forehead. "A virgin mage, you say?"

Thumper let out a laugh. "Virgin, eh? In that case I got first dibs on her."

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"Shadup," the leader barked. "His baldness will pay handsomely for the likes of her, and he's going to have more of a chance at finding out what information she knows about the dragon. From what I've been told by the witch, she reeks of the thing's magic, though she can't spot it on the girl."

"Please, not my daughter," the father started but his objection was cut off as Thumper clobbered him from behind. The lead dwarf took out one of the crystal marbles and muttered something at it that caused it to begin glowing. He then threw the sphere at the terrified girl who vanished in a flash of light. The brightly glowing sphere then shot straight up into the air, made a hard turn and rocketed off over the horizon to the southeast.

The leader walked up to the now sobbing mother and grabbed her chin in his hand and yanked it up, forcing her to look at him. "Are you sure you don't know something about the dragon that I might be interested in?"

"P..Pl..Please," the woman sobbed, stuttering the words. "We don't know anything. I swear."

"Too bad," the dwarf replied, releasing her. He looked up at Thumper, who had an annoyed look on his face. "Kill them. Feed the livestock to the dragons. Then raze the farm to the ground before we leave. We'll blame it on our prey."

"That's more like it," Thumper said with manic glee. He grabbed man by the hair and dragged him vertical, pinning one arm behind his back. "Guess that means you and the missy get some of my personal attention." His laugh sent shivers down of both the humans' backs as well as a few of the dwarves'. The female dwarf and two others led the dragons towards the stockyards to feed them. Thumper was good at what he did, but that didn't mean the other dwarves had to like his hobbies.

Teyah screamed as the sphere hit her. She found herself inside the sphere, hurtling over the early morning landscape at a speed that was almost beyond imagine. "Mother! Father!" she cried out in despair, knowing they couldn't hear her. She cried and slammed her fists into the side of the sphere time and time again until she dropped from exhaustion.

Curled up in a ball on the floor of the sphere, the crying girl looked at the bracelet she wore. "And where the hell where you?" she demanded of it. "Why didn't you protect me?"

The eyes of the flying snake flashed with a ruby light and she found herself standing back in the field by her house. "You got me out!" she exclaimed to the bracelet, only it wasn't there.

"You're not free," a voice said behind her. Teyah spun to see a tall human with close-cropped hair wearing the same odd clothing that the wolf woman had worn. "This is an illusion."

Teyah stared at the man for a moment. The voice sounded familiar but she couldn't quite place it. "Who are you?"

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The man smiled at her and stepped closer. "I'm Arden, or at least this is how I once looked," he replied.

"You!" she shouted angrily. "You abandoned us to those...those...MONSTERS!" Her rage beat at the illusion of Arden, almost striking him like a physical force. The image winced.

"Your parents would have died even if I had stayed," he replied quietly. "I'm sorry that I couldn't save them. I have done all I can for you and your sister."

"My sister?" she echoed, suddenly remembering the fact that she was missing. "Where is she? What did you do to her?" She tried to grab the illusion, but her hand passed through it.

"She's safe. I sent her to be with your mentor," he explained in a quiet, calming voice. "She should be there shortly after morning. I'm sorry that I couldn't save you too, but they wouldn't have believed that both of you were dead."

Teyah stared at him in shock. "Your spells made me say that? How did you know?"

Arden knelt, bringing his head down to just below her level. "The first night I met you I had a vision of things to come, and the possible outcomes from them. The best path that I saw was the one I chose. It saved your sister's life and might very well save your soul."

"Save my soul?" she echoed again, her mind still in shock with all that had happened.

"That's right, your soul," he replied, nodding seriously. "The people that you are being sent to serve the powers of hell. They will enslave you and sacrifice your soul to a daemon, removing any chance that you'd ever have for redemption."

She hugged herself, suddenly cold despite the warm environment of the illusion. "How can I possibly save myself? I'm no match for them."

Arden pursed his lips and sighed. "There are two ways, both involve the bracelet that you still wear in the real world. You can willingly offer it to them in trade for your freedom and guaranteed safe passage to anywhere. They'll honor the bargain since the secrets in that amulet are worth more than your soul would ever be."

"What's the other way?" she asked, dreading the answer.

"I asked once if you would die before serving the forces of hell." Arden paused as if to gather his thoughts. "That's exactly what you must do. The phrase I gave you, Death before Dishonor, is the key. Say that and you will surrender your life to the bracelet and in doing so, destroy the people who are ultimately responsible for destroying your family."

Teyah's face was a combat zone of conflicting emotions. Fear, anger, grief and shock all fought for control, with none of them being the clear winner. "---And killing your enemies at the same time. How noble of you," she spat venomously.

Arden nodded. "In one sense, yes, thought they are only tools in the service of hell. Hell is pulling their strings, and it's someone in hell who's convinced them to go after us. Your

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family is just a casualty of war." He scooted closer to the girl on his knee. "Every person has at least one chance to do something big, something important in their life. It's in the rules. This is your chance. You can give them the bracelet and let them win, or you can fight back and take your revenge."

"Right. A revenge that will send my soul to hell," she replied coldly. "Or haven't you forgotten that suicide is a sin?"

"Normally, yes," Arden replied. "However, sacrificing yourself to save others isn't. It's all in the intent. Besides, I've made arrangements that will insure that your soul doesn't go to hell, and at great expense, too."

Teyah thought about their conversation, weighing all the options. She was angry at him for doing this to her. He had known that she would /never/ give the bracelet over to servants of hell, no matter what the reward. That only left her one way out. "How can I trust you when you say I won't go to hell? You've deceived me so far," she said quietly and in an oddly calm voice.

"I give my word of honor, Teyah," Arden replied. "I swear on my honor that your soul won't go to hell. I swear it." He looked away for a moment, then shook his head. "Our time is up. Do the right thing."

The next thing Teyah knew there was a shattering noise and she was lying on a cold stone floor. Hands grabbed her by the arms, hauling her to her feet. Though she struggled, she found that she was unable to resist them. They had cast a spell causing her to lose all control. Within seconds she had been stripped of all possessions and stood naked in the center of a summoning circle, unable to move or even look around. For some reason thought, they had missed the circlet. She could feel its strange warmth on her wrist and that was somehow comforting.

"Well, well, well," a voice said from off to her left. After a second a short, bald man with a complex tattoo pattern on his skull moved around in front of her. "I see that the dogs we sent out have fetched back quite a prize." He smiled at the girl, causing a small whimper to escape her lips. "Don't worry, my dear. Nobody's going to abuse you here. You're far too valuable for that. Now why don't you tell me about the dragon and his companions?"

Teyah found that she was able to move her head. A quick glance around showed at least four other people in the room wearing dark burgundy robes similar to the one the man in front of her wore, only theirs weren't as ornate. "Why don't you go piss up a rope," she replied with what bravado she had.

The man waved a hand causing her to fall painfully to her knees before him, leaving her looking slightly up at him. "That wasn't very nice. You can talk willingly or we can force the information from you. I don't think you'd enjoy the latter of the two options, my dear."

Teyah hung her head for a moment, blinking at the tears that suddenly made it hard to see. "This is it," she thought. "Do I make them the offer, or do I end it all." A small sob escaped her as she thought about her parents. "That damn dragon better have not lied to me or I'll

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hunt him down from the pits of hell. "She looked back up at the man and replied, "I have only one answer for that."

"Oh?" the mage replied, cupping his chin in one hand. "And what's that?"

"Death before dishonor," Teyah replied.

"Eh?" The mage looked startled. "What?"

A soft glow enveloped Teyah's body and her eyes changed. The hazel irises took on the aspect of a dragon's eye, glowing red in the dim light of the room. "Sudal ap Fadar, I have a message for you," she said.

The master of the painted mages gaped at the girl in front of him. "How had she known that name?" he thought in horror.

Teyah's voice shifted into a low, rumbling voice, similar to that heard when the dragon spoke. "Your son was an asshole and an idiot. If he was any indication of the quality of your blood line, then I'd say it's getting pretty damn thin. I just can't figure how come you haven't been replaced."

"Who are you?" Sudal asked, stumbling back from the glowing apparition before him. Glowing wasn't the word since she was getting brighter with each passing second.

"Haven't you figured it out? I'm the dragon, you brainless bastard. You've fucked with me and mine for the last time. Now feel the wrath of the dragon!" Her mouth opened in a scream that was beyond this world. Each second more and more voices joined the unholy chorus, bringing everyone in the room to their knees from the sound. One last voice, Teyah's own, true voice joined the cacophony for an instant before her body exploded in a shower of dust revealing a gaping hole in the middle of the air.

Sudal recovered first and recognized what had happened. "It's a gate!" he shouted to the acolytes, just now getting back to their feet. "Seal it, now!" Before anyone could act, a flood of flying serpent spirits, daemons by any other name, although these were not of hell, flooded from the gate. Magic flew as the mages worked to seal the gate and cut off the flow of otherworldly creatures emanating from it.

Sudal completed the invocation and closed the rift, stopping the flood of tiny creatures. It was then that he realized that he was the only human still alive in the room. A swarm of the creatures hovered outside the summoning circle that he now stood in. There was no barrier stopping them, they simply weren't attacking. Sudal brought up all the magical defenses that were embedded in the various items he wore. He took a quick look around at the hundred or so creatures that were trapped in the room with him and cursed the demon that had talked him into pursuing the bitch and her dragon.

Out in the courtyard of the enclave, heads turned as explosions decimated the upper levels of the master's tower, where the leader of their cult held court. Swarms of flying creatures could be seen wreaking havoc on the building, destroying the tower layer by layer. The

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stunned expressions on the acolytes and sorcerers turned into one of horror and panic as the swarm turned its attention to the rest of the enclave, starting with the courtyard.

Thirty leagues due east of what used to be a farm Arden's wings beat long strokes in the early morning air, driving them forward. Off in the distance could be seen the River of the Dancing Gods. The great dragon turned and began following the river north. By now the sun was well up in the sky, clearly showing the landscape below. There was a lone hill, almost a mountain that jutted up from the terrain near the river. It was completely incongruous with the surrounding terrain. He let himself slip into a glide and angled his path over the forest opposite the river from the mountain.

Hecate. Take Sheila and hide in the forest. Once everything's clear, head north to Tyrendel. Don't let anyone see you, and for God's sake, don't go out in the open for any reason! he directed to the Imir.

"What's going on?" Hecate shouted back.

In reply, Arden rolled over onto his back, forcing the Imir to grab the now hysterical vixen and glide down into the forest. Their combined weight was far more than Hecate could carry for any distance. He then turned and followed the river a bit in both directions, before turning toward the stone outcropping and landing in plain sight on top.

Hecate managed a relatively soft landing despite carrying someone that massed almost twice her weight. She steadied Sheila until the vixen wrenched herself from the Imir's grasp.

"What the fuck does he think he's doing?" she demanded. "First he wakes us up in the middle of the night now he just dumps us off without warning. And what the hell is he doing up on top of that rock in plain sight? What the HELL is going on here?"

The Imir winced at the amount of volume that the enraged vixen was managing to put out. Hecate hastily cast a spell that would dampen the sound around them and keep Sheila from letting the entire forest and anyone else in the area know exactly where they were. She then looked up at the dragon and shook her head. "I hope you know what you're doing," she thought with a mental sigh.

Alone on the peak, Arden spread his wings and soaked in the sun. He tried to relax a little, knowing that soon enough the eight would pick up his scent and follow. There was no way he'd be able to outrun them. He only hoped his plan would work the way he had foreseen; otherwise he was going to be screwed.

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Like clockwork

“What the hell is going on here?” the stout dwarf asked as he picked his way through the maze of body parts that covered the small, fenced in enclosure as well as the ground around it. Amidst the carnage lay the remains of four dragons. Three of them appeared to have exploded while the other appeared to have been literally cut to ribbons by something that resembled a monstrous cross between an arachnid and a cow. In the distance, one wounded dragon looked wearily back at the pen as it lay on the ground. Overhead, the remainder of the dragons circled. “What the hell happened here?” the dwarf demanded as he reached two dwarves standing next to one of the corpses.

The female dwarf started to speak but was interrupted by her companion. “Fucking magic. That’s what happened,” he replied as he wiped the blood and gore off of his axe onto the wing of a dead dragon.

“Magic?” the leader echoed, incredulously. He turned to the female. “And where the hell were you, witch?”

“I was right here,” she replied, scowling back at the small man. “If I hadn’t been, we would have lost the other over there, too.” She gave a quick nod of her head towards the injured dragon that lay over in the field.

“And why didn’t you spot the spell to begin with?” the man demanded between clenched teeth as he took a half step towards the woman.

“I checked them for spells, damn it!” She waved one hand at the carnage around them. “All they had on them was a basic warding spell. It was the kind of crap that you’d teach an apprentice. It shouldn’t have had this kind of power.”

“No shit it shouldn’t have had this kind of power!” he replied as he kicked a chunk of meat away from his foot. “What the hell do we pay you for? You’re supposed to spot this kind of crap before it can hit us.”

The air literally crackled around her as she stepped forward, pressing the leader and forcing him to back up. “Listen to me, asshole. Nobody said anything about me having to go up against a full-fledged sorcerer. Whoever cast that spell was definitely no acolyte, or even an initiate.” She reached down and snatched up part of a cow’s head. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to disguise a spell that can reduce a cow to this level? Do you have any idea what kind of power it takes to do *that* to a dragon?” A quick nod toward the dragon, which had clearly been gutted from the inside-out, punctuated her question. “I hired on to handle medium-threat magic. This kind of spell is way beyond me.”

The leader swallowed a couple of times as what she said sank in before his expression firmed up again. “No. I don’t think so,” he replied slowly, looking at the carnage. “A true sorcerer would have stood his ground. He wouldn’t be playing pansy assed games like this.” He gave the witch a hash look. “We’re going to kill that damn dragon and

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you're going to help us." Turning to the rest of the dwarves, he began to shout directions. "Call the other dragons back. Gather up whatever you can salvage off the dead ones. We take flight immediately" Again he turned towards the witch and pointed at her. "You better not screw up again."

As the woman watched her employer walk away, she made a conscious effort to relax. "You better not screw up yourself, asshole, or you may be my coven's next sacrifice."

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Teyah knelt on the cold, stone floor and whimpered. The last thing she remembered was an indescribable burning pain in side of her, then nothing until now. "You can get up now." The oddly soothing yet somehow hollow voice got her attention. Teyah turned her head to look at a tall, mangy-looking rabbit-morph that was carrying a scythe. "Don't worry. You're quite dead now. Nothing can hurt you any more. At least not permanently anyway."

Teyah looked at the hand that the rabbit held out to her and after a moment's consideration, took it. "Who are you?" she asked after standing up. She glanced around then looked back at the rabbit. "Come to think of it, where am I?"

"I am Jack," he replied, leading her to away from an arch that was filled with scintillating colors. "As for where you are, this is the Orpheus gate. You, my dear, are in hell."

"WHAT?" she shouted, yanking her arm from his grasp, "That son of a bitch! That bastard promised me that I wouldn't go to hell." Enraged, she clenched her fists and shouted towards the gate. "You lying bastard, I'll get you for this!"

"Are you through?" Jack asked quietly, almost nonchalantly.

"Oh, I haven't even begun," she snarled, her face red with rage. The girl then began a long stream of curses that were descriptive of Arden's parentage, personal preferences, moral character, habits and anything else that came to mind.

He sighed and leaned on his scythe. "Let me know when you're finished so I can see about getting you out of here."

Teyah stopped in mid rant and shot the rabbit a sidewise glance. "What? What do you mean?"

"I mean as in extricating you from hell." He reached out and gently took her arm, leading her away from the gate. "Unfortunately, the gate you entered through is one way. The place where you died had a large number of spells that were designed to ensure that anyone who died would have their soul sent to hell whether that should be their proper destination or not." After a short walk, they reached a small, somewhat dilapidated

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building. Jack opened the door and led Teyah inside. “You will be safe here as long as you do not leave. I will come back for you when it’s time.”

She gave him a confused look as he started to close the door. “When it’s time? I thought you said you were going to get me out of here!”

“Indeed,” Jack said, pausing. “As soon as our mutual acquaintance completes his side of the bargain I’ll be glad to escort you out of hell. In the meanwhile I suggest you try to make yourself comfortable.” He started to close the door again, but stopped. “And remember, don’t leave. Don’t even open the door. It’s not safe for the likes of you.” With that he exited, pulling the door closed behind him with an audible click.

Teyah examined her new surroundings, taking them in. The place looked as bad inside as it had from outside. She crossed her arms and hugged herself as if suddenly cold. “What did I ever do to deserve this?” she asked nobody in particular before looking up at the ceiling. “You better get me out of this, or I’m going to find a way back, and you won’t like what I’ll do to you.”

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Sheila leaned against a tree, panting. “Wait! I need to take a break. I’m not built for this kind of crap any more.” She pressed her back against the tree and slid slowly down to a sitting position while holding onto her belly. “I had to be out of my mind, letting myself get knocked up.”

Hecate moved a little bit to the east, so that she stood by the tree line and looked south before coming back over to sit by the vixen. “Don’t beat yourself up over it. You didn’t know what was going to happen to you.”

“Oh, it’s not that!” she replied hastily. “Well, I guess it is, a little,” she admitted after a moment, “but that’s not why I’m pissed. I can’t believe that I let myself fall for such an asshole. I thought I was a better judge of men.” Sheila squirmed a little to get more comfortable. “Speaking of assholes, what’s he doing now?”

“Still perched up on the rock, sunning himself.” The ebony female took a couple of strips of dried beef and handed one to Sheila. Tearing off a piece, she chewed on it in silence for a little bit. “The thing I don’t get is why he threw us off and told us to head north without him. What does he think he’s going to accomplish?”

Sheila viciously tore off a chunk of meat and chewed it while talking. “Knowing him,” she said before taking a quick drink from Hecate’s water skin, “he’s going to make some heroic stand against overwhelming odds and get himself killed in a glorious fashion.” She finished chewing the meat and swallowed. “Leaving me in the lurch, again, and once again proving what a fuckup he is.”

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The Imir simply shook her head and continued to eat her lunch as she studied the vixen. “Now I know what they mean by a complete bitch,” she thought while frowning slightly. “Come on, let’s go,” Hecate said giving the vixen a hand up. “We can’t stay around here all day.” She turned to continue northward but paused when Sheila didn’t follow. The vixen instead walked over to the edge of the forest. “What do you think you’re doing?” Hecate hissed as she ran after Sheila.

“Look at him,” the vixen snarled, “just sitting there, sunning himself like some oversized statue.” Sheila squinted towards the distant dragon then frowned and mumbled, “Just like a statue.”

“Come on,” Hecate hissed, grabbing at the vixen’s arm. “Someone might see you.”

Sheila yanked her arm away. “No, wait. Look.” She nodded towards the dragon as she concentrated on it. “It doesn’t look right.” She leaned against the tree as she studied the view. “I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s just something not right there.”

Hecate glanced around quickly to verify that they weren’t being watched then joined her companion in studying the distant form. “Yah,” she replied slowly, drawing the word out. “Now that you mention it, something doesn’t look right there.” She shifted her sight and studied the view using her magic sight. After a few moments her eyes widened. “Son of a bitch.”

The vixen’s head snapped around towards the demoness. “What?” she demanded before looking back at the dragon. “What do you see?”

“It’s an illusion,” Hecate answered, studying the skies and surroundings, “like the one back in the barn, only this one’s got substance.”

“If that’s an illusion, then where the hell did he go?” Sheila asked, looking to the Imir for enlightenment. “And why did he dump us if he was just going to setup a decoy?” She turned and looked back towards the false visage. “What the hell is he doing?”

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The flight of four dragons flew in a V formation with the injured dragon lagging behind on the right, relying on the slipstream from the other dragons to allow it to keep up. Onboard, the witch concentrated on the healing incantation that she maintained even as they traveled, speeding the dragons recovery. It would still be too injured to fight directly, but that was perfect for her needs. The last thing she wanted to contend with was a dragon trying to charge in for an attack while she attempted to counter the magic of a sorcerer.

At the front of the flight, the leader of the group watched a small talisman that the witch had given him, taking direction from the small arrow that looked reminiscent of a compass. They broke through the last bit of clouds giving them an unobstructed view to

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the horizon. The dwarf smiled as he spotted their target, its back towards them and its wings spread to soak in the sun. His smile quickly faded as he assessed the situation. Something was wrong and he couldn't quite put his finger on it. It was too convenient, too easy, too obvious, and he didn't like it. He looked over at the witch who was also studying their target. After a few minutes she looked up and shrugged. The dwarf's curse was lost on the wind as he turned to Thumper and signaled him to attack.

The lone dragon pumped its wings, gaining some altitude before entering into a steep dive. The wind screamed, leather and scale creaked as the dragon pulled out. It opened its mouth and let out a terrifying screech just as it passed over the target, snapping its tail downwards. Rock exploded outwards as the tail passed through the illusion and slammed into the granite that made up the mountain. A screech of a different kind left Thumper's mount as it gained altitude. Its long, sinuous tail had been grievously damaged by the impact, impairing its ability to act as a rudder for the wyrm.

A shadow passed over the lead dwarf dragon as a huge dragon dove on the formation with the sun behind him, hiding his presence. The three dragons banked, trying to avoid their attacker but were only partially successful. The middle dragon vanished from the formation as a creature three times its size slammed into it with razor sharp claws extended. The two remaining dwarves looked on in horror as their companion dragon plummeted bonelessly towards the ground. Below them the tops of trees swayed and snapped from the force of the air as their opponent struggled to pull out of the dive.

The witch turned in her seat and reached for the mass of clouds behind her. Calling on the forces of nature, she began to twist the power contained in the gentle clouds, turning them dark and angry. She watched as the great wyrm pulled out of his dive, climbing up to near their level and then turning towards them. She gave the clouds a vicious twist with her hand, forcing a bolt of lightning to strike the great dragon. Stunned for a moment, it fell towards the ground before recovering.

She swallowed as its eyes locked on her. The glowing red orbs burned into her, promising death as it pumped its wings to attack. So intent was she that she hadn't noticed her employer breaking high. His dragon dove, towards the great wyrm in an attack. The difference in altitude wasn't enough to allow him to build much speed but that wouldn't matter. The differences in their speed as they approached nearly head on would be sufficient to make up for the shallow dive.

A rumbling roar split the air as the wyrm opened its mouth and spat a ball of fire at his attacker. The dwarf rubbed a rune on his saddle, confident in the magic's ability to protect him and his mount from the fire. As they flew through the flames untouched he smiled. "This beast isn't so smart after all," he thought, gloating for a moment before he realized that the dragon wasn't where he expected it. Rather than trying to dodge to either side, the great wyrm had pulled up vertically, stalling in mid air. Now it was the dwarf's turn to panic as he pulled on the reins of his mount, commanding it to roll into a dive. The mighty claws of the elder wyrm passed within inches of the lesser dragon, missing its target. A scream of agony left the great wyrm as the tail of the smaller dragon

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whip-snapped into its exposed belly, slicing a short length open. The two mighty beasts separated, each going in the opposite direction while trying to maneuver for position over the other.

Climbing for altitude, the great wyrm demonstrated that though it may not be as fast as its smaller foe, it had the strength to out climb it, at least in the short term. As it turned towards its foe, a blue glow surrounded it for a moment, then it seemed to split into two identical creatures. They drifted apart as they continued to approach the now confused dwarf who was trying to figure out which to go for. If he chose wrong, it would cost him his life. As the dwarf was about to break off his attack a bright flash of light struck both dragons. It didn't affect the one on the left, but the one on the right vanished, giving the dwarf a clear view of his target. The wyrm snarled at the witch before turning back to his opponent.

As the two converged over the river, the dwarf commanded his dragon to break off the attack, staying out of the wyrm's claw or tail range. Confused, the elder wyrm cautiously turned to follow the dwarf. The pursuit was cut short when Thumper's dragon slammed into the greater wyrm's back, tearing large gashes as it shot past. The wyrm screamed and dropped towards the treetops, barely pulling out before hitting the dense forest. Behind him, the lead dwarf's dragon dove in an attack. Its claws out, it clearly intended to do the same thing its companion had done to the great wyrm. The dwarf snarled in rage at the elder wyrm as it rolled over onto its back. The two dragons slammed into each other and began to grapple in the air. Locked together, they fell towards the river, striking the surface and sending a huge wave up over the banks of the river.

Wings flailed, claw and tooth flashed as the two dragons fought in the water, a medium that was not native to either creature. Thumper directed his dragon to dive again, in hopes of saving his leader. It was obvious to anyone who watched that the greater dragon would soon destroy the smaller one, though it would pay dearly for it. His dragon pulled out of its dive mere feet over the water. Its claws prepared to strike the elder wyrm as it passed over, the lesser dragon never saw the tentacles that shot out of the water. Bone snapped as one wing struck the thick cords of flesh, severing the tentacles. Unable to fly, the lesser dragon skipped across the water like a stone, plowing into the other two dragons and submerging all three. A few seconds later, all three dragons struggled back to the surface as they tried to get out of the water. More and more tentacles came out of the water, wrapping themselves around the three combatants. There was one last screech as all three wyrms were yanked under the water by some unseen foe.

The witch circled a safe distance above the muddy river looking for some sign of life. After a minute or so, small bits of packs and supplies began to surface in the river near where the dragons had been sucked under. It wasn't until she saw part of a wing surface then sink again did she turn her mount away from the river and headed northward towards Terinedell and the vixen's probable path. A small smile crossed her face as she relaxed in the saddle. Half of their contract had been fulfilled. The dragon was dead. That meant that as the sole survivor of the company, she would get the entire purse once

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she captured the vixen. She began to laugh as she thought of ways to spend the prize money, and she didn't stop laughing for some time.

===

Sheila and Hecate stood by the tree line after the battle and watched the last dragon fly away. The vixen turned to her companion and snorted. "See," she grunted. "I told you that asshole was going to get himself killed." She then turned and walked back into the forest, towards the trail that led north, muttering obscenities under her breath as she went.

Hecate watched the vixen for a moment before looking back at the river. "Never assume someone's dead until you see the corpse," she muttered, "and even then you can't be too sure." She turned and jogged into the forest to catch up with the vixen.

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"A short segue" or "I'll smell you later"

The water that had flooded the east bank of the Dancing Gods after the dragons splashed down slowly drained back into the river. From under the muck and mud a small mound heaved upwards then split apart to reveal a dwarf that had been buried by the flood. After taking a moment to scrape the mud off of his face and out of his eyes, the dwarf climbed slowly to his feet. He watched as bits and pieces of dragons and the supplies they had carried floated to the surface, and then drifted slowly down stream.

A wave of defeat sucked the strength from him, driving him to his knees as he watched the tumultuous surface of the river slowly settle back to its prior calm state and hide the lethal cluster of tentacles far below. His eyes drifted to the tree line on the far side of the river and a shock ran through him as he spotted both the bitch and her escort standing at the edge of the forest. Frantic, he scanned the skies to see if the witch was still around. A smile split the grime on his face when he spotted her. With some effort, he managed to dig out a small metal mirror and clean enough muck off of it so that it would reflect light. Using the sun and the mirror, he tried to signal to the receding rider, however he failed to get her attention. He hastily shoved the mirror back in his pocket as he looked back over towards the trees just in time to see the black, bat winged female turn and run into the forest.

He muttered a few choice curses as he stood and started to make his way north. As an afterthought he checked the leather strap around his neck and found that the compass the Witch had created was still intact. As he held it steady he was delighted to find that it pointing in the direction of the opposite shore, and the pointer was slowly moving north.

Breaking into a light jog, he hummed a tune to himself as he made for the forest on his side of the river. He still had a way to track the bitch down as well as a pocket full of summoning stones with which to secure her return. He had never failed to fulfill a contract, and wasn't going to start now. Once he had the bitch contained in a summoning stone, he'd renegotiate his deal with that bastard mage to cover his losses.

The hunt was still on.

In the remains of his tower the master of the painted mages tried to find a comfortable position as he leaned back in the chair behind a rather charred desk and propped his feet up. He was bloodied and wounded from the fight with the dragon spirits, but they had failed to kill him. His magic had been able to heal many of the minor wounds he had, however it couldn't repair the massive burns to his left side. Even now, the regenerative spells were working to heal him, but it would be weeks if not longer before he was back to full health.

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"Cam!" he bellowed, then cursed as he remembered that his personal slave had been killed when the spirit wyrms had broken free of the summoning circle. "Tor!" he bellowed, wincing at the strain on his ribs. A gnome wearing an intricate collar ran into the room through a large hole in the bottom of the door.

"Yes, Master?" the small gnome asked, kneeling before his new owner. Standing just over a foot high, the miniature human had a beard and pointed hat, exactly as one would expect to see on a post card.

The mage shifted again, trying to find a comfortable way to rest his arm. "Get me a brandy. A large brandy." The terrified gnome quickly scrambled to find a way to fill his master's wish, since the remaining supply of liquor was well out of easy reach.

A chuckle from off to the mages' right where the wall was partially destroyed diverted his attention. "The mighty Sudal reduced to using a gnome for his personal slave." The tall, thin man who spoke leaned casually against the wall as he chewed on a spice stick. His bald head was covered in tattoos similar to that of Sudal, though they were of a completely different pattern. "Looks like you bit off more than you could chew."

Sudal frowned. "You're mighty brave today, Tomak. Thinking of trying to challenging me while I'm injured?"

The newcomer laughed and made his way to a chair next to the desk. "Quite the opposite," he replied while spinning the chair around and straddling it. "Even wounded like you are, I couldn't defeat you and we both know it."

"Then what do you want?" the elder sorcerer asked, squinting at his visitor. Tomak was far too confident right now. He had to be up to something.

"Me?" the young mage asked, feigning surprise. "I don't want anything. I'm just a messenger." He leaned forward and got an overly sympathetic look on his face. "I'm afraid that I'm the bearer of bad news."

"If you don't quit wasting my time, you're going to be the late bearer of bad news." Dropping his feet to the floor, Sudal winced as he sat straight up.

Tomak sat back and held his hands up for a second to calm the old mage down. "The council has met and held a vote."

"How the hell can they hold a vote without me?" Sudal demanded with a snarl. "Who the hell do they think they are?"

"It was a unanimous vote," the young man continued, ignoring the outburst, "and I do mean unanimous." Again he leaned forwards, all traces of his mocking tone gone. "You are to cease and desist in your actions concerning the vixen, the dragon and

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Hecate."

"Oh, I am, am I?" he snarled again as he stood. "And if I don't?"

"If you don't, they will confront you as one, Sudal." The young man stood and took a step back. "You may be able to defeat any of us alone, but you can't defeat the entire council if they move against you as a unified force."

Sudal stood, trembling with rage, staring at the other man as he fought the urge to destroy him right then and there. Finally he was able to spit out a single word.

"Why?"

"Because the Prince of Darkness himself is involved."

The shock of the statement broke through his rage and was accompanied by the sound of shattering glass as the gnome dropped the decanter of brandy. Several times, his mouth worked as he started to speak, but each time he stopped. "Lucifer is involved? How? Why weren't we warned?"

Tomak shook his head. "As far as I can understand, there's a pretty serious power play going on in hell, and it involves her. She's a pawn in a game that's a hell of a lot bigger than just Earth Prime and Husaquahr. My sources won't give me any details, just that we need to butt out if we don't want to find our selves shoveling shit for eternity. "

Sudal dropped back into his chair, wincing but not really noticing the pain from his wounds. "That bastard Shovak," the sorcerer mumbled. "When I get my hands on that fucking daemon, I'm going to rip him a new asshole."

Tomak walked to the wall and paused before stepping through. "No more attempts, Sudal. The council...and hell," he added as an afterthought, "has spoken." He watched as the old mage nodded, speechless. The young mage then stepped through the hole in the wall and made his way down the corridor.

Back in the room, the sorcerer turned his chair to look out what had been a window at the distant horizon. "I may not be able to make any more attempts," he mused as he leaned back in the chair, "but that doesn't mean that I have to recall the dogs I've already set to the task." He glanced down at the gnome who shivered with fear as it held a large, half filled tumbler in two hands up for his master. Taking the drink, Sudal watched the play of light on the alcohol as he swirled it in the glass. "This may just be my ticket to the upper echelons of hell."

"Here's to a dragon hunt and bonuses promised," he said as a toast, then drained the glass.

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The river parted as the head of a dwarf emerged, walking against the current along the east riverbed towards shore. Thumper's wet form reached the relatively dry grass by the side of the river, then bent forward and began to heave, emptying the contents of both his lungs and stomach. After several minutes, the pale dwarf stood up and wiped his mouth. Looking down at himself, he frowned. "Fucking dwarf. God, I hate dwarfs," the small man ranted angrily. "Stumpy legs, puny hands, pudgy fingers and generally all around pathetic."

He stood in the sun drip-drying for a little while, occasionally muttering a curse and shaking his head. Eventually he let out a sigh, turned and walked north along the forest, glancing occasionally towards the opposite bank. As he went, he took inventory of the contents of his pockets. Amongst all the items he had, the most interesting was a compass that hung around his neck. The pointer was aimed towards the forest on the opposite side of the river, ahead of his position and tip was slowly tracking upstream.

"Interesting," he commented to himself as he tucked the item back under his tunic. "Whelp, I better get it in gear or I'll never catch up with those two."

Whistling a light ditty, the Rathsmen tucked his hands in his pockets and started out on what he had no doubt would be a very long walk.

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Death of a Short Order Cook

Sheila leaned heavily against a tree. "I've got to stop and rest again." She held onto a small branch as she leaned forward slightly, propping herself up with her other hand against her knee. After a few seconds, she straightened up and then stretched her back while rubbing the base of her spine with her paws. "If I don't, my back's going to give out," she complained to her companion.

"Go ahead and grab a seat on that rock. We're going to wait here for a while anyway," Hecate replied as she stepped away from the vixen and looked around.

The vixen plopped herself down on a large rock with a grunt and groaned. "God, my feet are killing me. How much farther do we have to go?"

Hecate finished surveying the surrounding area and walked back over to where the vixen sat. "It's half a day's walk to the ferry where we can cross," she replied, sitting down next to Sheila. Another groan from the pregnant vixen prompted her to continue. "Don't worry. I've no doubt a wagon will be along soon. We'll be able to hire someone to give us a lift."

Sheila looked up and took in their immediate surroundings for the first time. Hecate had led them to a wagon trail through the woods. "Um, not to question your competence, but do you really think we're going to be able to get a ride?" She cocked an ear and an eyebrow in the elf's direction and gave a small shake of her head. "Even if one does, will it be safe? Neither one of us will be hard to recognize."

"No problem," the Imir responded, standing again. She grabbed the edges of her wings and rapped them around herself like a cloak. Closing her eyes, her shape shifted somewhat as Sheila watched. The black leather wings rippled and changed, taking on the appearance of an ordinary brown riding cloak. Hecate's shape also shifted so that rather than showing her true half demonic form, she resembled a fair skinned elf maiden, similar to what one would have expected from a Tolkien novel. Opening her eyes, she gave the vixen a pleasant smile. "See, nobody will ever recognize me."

"That's all nice and well for you, but what about me?" She waived her hands over the cured silk outfit that she wore, resting one hand in a sword. "This getup isn't going to make me very inconspicuous, and that's not to take into account the fact that I don't look human." She cocked her head to one side and gave a half smile. "Not unless you're planning on using that little trick on me."

Hecate shook her head. "Nope. I'm afraid that it's not safe to use that kind of magic on you while you're pregnant. It could have some rather..." She bit her lip for a moment trying to think of the word and then continued, "undesirable side effects on the unborn."

'Right, so how are you going to hide my identity?" Sheila demanded, crossing her

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arms.

"No problem," the elf replied, again sitting down next to her traveling companion. "This road is used primarily by traders. No doubt whoever comes by will have goods for sale. We'll get you a large traveling cloak to cover that outfit and your head as well as a pair of boots for your feet. That should make you anonymous enough for now."

"That's assuming we can even get them to stop," she replied, now massaging one foot with the other.

Hecate laughed. "Oh, they'll stop all right." She gave the vixen a smile that sent a shiver down her back. "Ve haf vays uff makking dem shtop."

"PETERSON!" The shout originated from a small, glassed in room that looked out over the main squad room. Detective Peterson winced at the shrill voice. He took a deep breath before making his way over to the office. "Yes, Captain?" The black man behind the desk looked up and glared at detective Peterson. His eyes gave the impression of someone who was perpetually tired and aggravated. His close-cropped salt and pepper hair perched above a face that had seen a fair amount of punishment while its owner was on the street.

"God damn it, Peterson! Where the hell is that Jacobs kid you were supposed to be bringing in? " The captain glanced down at his watch before shooting Peterson another hard look. "It's been over three hours since I sent you out to pickup the little shit! Why are you still hanging around here?"

Peterson did his best not to flinch. He was used to his bosses tirades, but that didn't make the volume any lower and they tended to leave his ears ringing. "I talked to the kid," he replied causing his boss's eyebrows to rise, "and I don't think he has anything to do with it."

His boss blinked a few times as he digested what was just said. "You don't think he had anything to do with it?" the man asked quietly. A large, ham sized fist slammed down on the solid wooden desk, causing most of the items on top to bounce around for a few seconds. "What the hell do you mean, he had nothing to do with it?" His face flushed dark purple as he stood up. "We've got his god damn clothes at the crime scene. We have people who saw him and the victims together the night before. Just how in God's name do you figure he didn't have anything to do with it?"

This time Peterson couldn't help but flinch this time. "I dunno, boss," he replied with a weak shrug. "I just don't feel this kid did it."

"You-don't-feel?" The words were spaced out in such a way that they almost had a

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physical impact. "Are you off your God damn rocker, Peterson?" The captain glanced past Peterson and into the squad room, then yelled, "JACKSON! In here NOW!" A blond detective in kakis and a polo shirt stepped into the small room and paused. One glance at the captain and the other detective in the room made him take a step away from his co-worker. "Jackson. I want you and Peterson to go track down that Jacobs kid and bring his ass in here NOW!"

Jackson glanced at Peterson then back to his boss. "Sure thing, Captain," he replied before grabbing Peterson and dragging him out of the office. "What the hell's going on, Dick? Since when do you need help picking up some punk kid?"

Peterson shook his head as he grabbed his coat from the back of his desk chair. "I don't know, Gunter. I don't know why, but I'm convinced this kid didn't do it."

"Are you nuts?" the blond man whispered as they made their way past a couple of uniformed cops in the hallway. "We've got this kid dead to rights. There's no doubt he's the one responsible."

"I know, I know..." the older detective replied, pausing in the hall to rub his forehead. "Something in my head keeps telling me that he's not the one."

"If it's not him, then who?" his partner demanded. "Come on, Dick! Think about it. Some students saw Tank and the others with the kid after school. We've got his tire tracks at the scene of the crime plus some of his clothes. What more proof do you need?"

"That's what I keep telling myself, but it just doesn't register." Dick gave his head a quick shake. "It's like there's this voice screaming in the back of my head, arguing with me every time I think about it."

"It ain't for us to decide if he's innocent or guilty," Peterson responded, taking the older detective by the arm and leading him down the hall. "It's our job to bring him in and let the courts figure it out."

Dick gave his head another quick shake then shrugged off his partner's hand. "Right. No more screwing around. Let's go pick the kid up and then we'll worry about it."

"Wait up!" Sheila called out to the slender elf she had been following. Putting one hand on a large rock, she turned and sat gently down on it. "I can't go any farther."

Hecate paused and looked back at the pregnant vixen that sat on a rock and was using one foot to massage the other. Letting out a sigh, she glanced around and took note of their situation. After not seeing any wagons for the better part of the day, they had decided to hoof it to town only the ferry was farther down the road than

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Hecate had initially thought. That or all these delays to give her ward a break made it seem like the trip was going to take forever. "All right. Go ahead and rest a bit." She took a quick look at the sky before shaking her head. "It's going to get dark soon. We should find a place off the side of the road where we can set up camp for the night."

"Great," the vixen replied with a sarcastic snarl. "You go find a good place for us to camp and I'll just sit here and see if I can keep my feet from trying to explode."

Pursing her lips, Hecate glowered at the vixen, biting off a caustic remark before it could escape. "The bitch is worth a lot of money," she thought, "Kill her and it'll all be for nothing." That same refrain ran through her head repeatedly as she turned to look for a suitable camping spot. About ten minutes later, she returned to the vixen who was leaning against a tree with both hands under her swollen belly. "All right. I've found us a good place," she informed her companion in a flat voice. "Assuming you can manage another twenty five or so yards."

"Hey!" Sheila snapped, groaning as she forced herself to her feet. "I'm not the one who's been saying 'Just a little further' for the last three hours!"

"No," the elf replied, putting both hands on her hips. "You're the one saying 'I need to stop' every five minutes for a fifteen minute break!"

"Fine!" Sheila yelled. "We'll make camp, then in the morning you can go get a buggy to come and pick me up!"

"With what?" Hecate snapped. "Just how much gold do you think I have?"

Sheila reached inside her top and pulled out the remainder of the gold Arden had gotten for her Kimono and threw it at Hecate. "There. That should be more than enough to rent a horse and buggy."

The elf hefted the bag. Though it only held a third of its original contents, it still had a considerable amount of gold. Reaching in, she took out one of the coins and smelled it. By reflex, she wrinkled her nose at the odd scent before taking a good look at it. It wasn't from any kingdom or province that she'd ever seen. A quick bite on it confirmed by the taste that it wasn't a gold that was native to Husaquahr.

"That's real gold," Sheila growled, misinterpreting Hecate's actions. "I wouldn't try to pass off phony gold."

"It's not that," Hecate replied in a distracted tone as she looked at other coinage in the pouch, "This stuff has an odd flavor to it. It's not from Husaquahr and any money changer with talent is going to know that."

Leaning against a tree, the vixen gave her companion a confused look. "Yah, so?"

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"So," Hecate replied, digging out half a dozen of the gold coins, "that makes this stuff rare, which mean's it's worth more." She cinched the sack closed and tossed it back to the vixen. "I'll bet the money changers have been paying you straight up, haven't they?"

Sheila's ears wilted as she nodded. "Yah, they have." It had never occurred to her that the coinage might be more valuable than just its value as raw gold.

Hecate tucked the cash into a small pocket inside of her belt. "Don't sweat it," she replied giving the vixen a hand. "Live and learn. In the morning, I'll go get a buggy and give both our feet a rest."

Myron stormed away from the Big Bun Burger Barn with both fists clenched. He'd taken enough crap from his boss for a lifetime, and didn't need to take any more. Besides, it wasn't like he needed that stupid job anyway. It was just a way to pick up a little extra cash, something that Mom or Dad would give him if he asked.

Exiting the food court, he started to make his way down the mall towards where he'd parked when he spotted the cop who'd tried to arrest him, and it didn't look like the cop was on a shopping trip. About the same time, the cop spotted him. Flipping back the corner of his coat, the cop put his hand on the grip of his pistol. Myron turned to head towards the other end of the mall, but there was another cop coming from that direction, although that one didn't appear to have spotted him.

Panicking, Myron looked around and saw one of the access corridors that were used to move trash and supplies between the different retailers. He bolted towards the door, slamming his way through it. Behind him, he could hear the cops shouting something between themselves, then the tap and squeak of shoes on the tiles as someone pursued him. Dodging down the minor maze of the back halls, Myron hit the outside door with enough force to snap the restraining chain and smash the knob into the outer brick wall of the building. A quick leap down from the loading dock was the only thing to slow his flight as he stretched his long legs and started pumping them for distance.

"What the hell happened?" he thought as he dodged a car in the parking lot. "Whatever I did to that cop must have only been temporary. That or he was just yanking my chain." As the cars thinned out towards the outer edge of the parking lot, he glanced over to see the two cops in hot pursuit. They weren't closing, but neither was he opening up any distance between them. One of them even looked like he was talking into a small radio.

Coming to the edge of the parking lot, Myron stopped next to a large, enclosed bus stop as traffic sped by. He turned to run down the sidewalk but a yell stopped him.

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"FREEZE!"

He put his hands up and turned around to see both cops gasping for breath and pointing guns at him. "Wait a.." he started to say, but was interrupted by the older cop.

"Shut up!" the man yelled, almost sounding enraged. Closing on the boy, the man held his service revolver with both hands. "Just shut the fuck up!"

"Ok" Myron said, and flinched when the cop cocked his gun.

"No! Not a fucking syllable, do you hear me?" The cop screamed with a wild look to his eye. People in the enclosed bus stop stared at what was happening.

"Jesus, Dick!" the younger detective said in a horse voice. "Calm down, man."

"No!" the man replied. "He's dangerous. You don't understand." He took a couple of stuttered steps forwards and growled. "He's got to be stopped."

Myron swallowed as he watched the unhinged cop close on him with what appeared murderous intent. Unconsciously he took a step backwards only to find that he had stepped off the curb. His arms windmilled as he fell backwards onto the hot asphalt. Before anyone could move, the bark of air brakes along with the hoarse screeching and stuttering of large sliding tires filled the air. Myron's head snapped towards the huge, heavily loaded dump truck that was trying to stop, but obviously wouldn't make it in time. Both detectives watched helplessly as the truck skidded over the helpless boy and stopped several yards past. More tire squealing followed as first a full sized car skidded into the back of the dump truck, and then a pickup truck rear-ended the car. More tires screeched, but the other drivers managed to avoid the accident.

"Aw, shit!" Peterson spat as he ran up to the road. Looking down where the boy had been, he couldn't see any signs of him. Kneeling, he got a clear view under the dump truck, and he still couldn't see anything. About that time the driver of the truck came around the front, babbling. "Oh my god! I couldn't stop, man! He just stepped out in front of me! It wasn't my fault! I couldn't stop!"

Dick came up next to his partner and stared down at the rubber skid marks and the lack of blood or anything else to indicate the truck had hit someone. "Where did he go?"

Myron cowered on the ground with his hands over his head for a few seconds until he realized that the truck didn't hit him. Sitting up, he looked around. Everything looked like it was in a black and white movie. "What the hell?" he asked, standing

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up. A crowd had gathered around the accident scene, and the cops were searching the area, looking for something.

"What the hell, am I dead?" Reaching out, he tried to touch the truck, but his hand passed right through it. The same thing happened when he tried to touch the people. "Oh man, " he said, shaking with a sudden feeling of cold, "I'm dead." His curiosity got the better of him, and he began to search around for his body. At least he'd be able to see how he went out. After a few minutes of futile searching, he scratched his head trying to figure out what was going on.

About that time he saw something go zipping across the parking lot, flying just above head level. It wouldn't have attracted his attention, except it had a yellow glow and left a kind of contrail behind it. Setting off at a run, Myron chased after the small object, barely keeping up with it. It took a little bit to get used to, but he quickly adapted to the idea of being able to run through just about anything, though he did have to worry about stumbling because of terrain. The first fall was a painful one that taught him a quick lesson about watching his feet as well as the creature he was chasing. It also convinced him that he wasn't dead, after all you shouldn't skin your hands and bleed if you're dead, right?

Eventually he made his way to one of the larger parks in town. He had lost track of his quarry, but the occasional glimmer of gold floating in the air gave him a trail to follow. Making his way through the dense wooded area he came upon an opening where he saw something that made him freeze in his tracks. Nestled in the trees, linking them together across the limbs and branches was a small city filled with four-inch high creatures that fluttered about. Stunned at the sight, he just stood there, staring until a shrill scream broke the trance.

"Intruder!"

Sheila lay on her back with her feet propped up on a log. She'd been relaxing like that for the last five minutes while Hecate was out rounding up some good firewood, and her feet were almost beginning to feel normal. The snap of a twig made her look around. "Back already?" She froze as the tip of a sword came down over her snout to stop next to her neck. From above her head a medium sized human stepped forward, the sword held casually in one hand. His dusky complexion combined with the mottled, dark clothes, made him difficult to see without the light from a campfire.

"You must be the bitch," he said with a chuckle. "Tracking you down wasn't nearly as difficult as I was told. Now why don't you be a good little doggy and get rid of those nasty swords." The man watched as she picked up each of the three weapons that lay next to her and flung them away. "Good," he complimented as he removed the sword from her throat. "Nice to see that you can follow directions. Now stand up.

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We've got a bit of walking to do."

Sheila was about to roll over when the sound of a meaty thwack startled her. A spray of hot liquid that covered her followed the gurgling sound that came from the man. He jerked twice and fell backwards to the ground. Sheila rolled towards the swords, snatching one from its scabbard as she tried to climb to her feet. "Who's there?" she demanded, spinning around at any sound. "What do you want?"

"Put the sword away, Sheila," a deep voice said. Sheila spun towards another man this time a tall one wearing nothing but a sleeveless shirt, some kind of bandoleer over his shoulder, a kilt and roman style sandals. In his right hand he held a huge sword that looked like it was something out of a video game. The other held a small ball of light that cast an eerie glow over him. She could see that his face and arms were covered with scars. It looked like some time in the distant past someone or something had flayed long strips of skin from his body. His long, salt and pepper hair was tied off in the back with a simple leather strap to keep it out of his face. The only other thing that Sheila noticed was the piercing grey eyes that almost glowed with an inner light. As she watched, he took the sword and stabbed the body at his feet through the heart. For a moment, the sword glowed a deep purple color that resembled a black light.

"Who are you?" Sheila asked, holding her sword in both hands the way she had been taught, but secretly wishing Hecate were there to deal with this guy.

"Who I am is of no importance," he replied, looking around. "Where's the demon?"

"Demon?" Sheila backed up a little, wanting to distance herself from not only the man with the sword, but the corpse that lay at his feet. "What demon?"

The man frowned at her for a moment. "The one you've been traveling with. Where is she?"

"Oh, her," the vixen looked around wondering the same thing. "She's getting some firewood. No doubt she'll be back any second, so I wouldn't try anything if I were you."

"Getting firewood?" He echoed incredulously. "Damn sloppy way to guard someone." He swung the sword up and over his left shoulder, at which point she heard a click. When his hand came away, the sword remained on his back.

Now that he'd put the sword away, Sheila relaxed a little, though she still kept the tip of her katana pointed directly at the man. "That may be, but it still doesn't tell me who you are."

"It wasn't supposed to. " He bent and lifted the corpse by its belt, holding it to the

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side. "Tell her there's a bounty on both your heads; you alive and her dead."

The light vanished leaving Sheila momentarily blinded. By the time her night sight returned, there was no sign of the guy. Sheila sat on the log she had been propping her feet up on, her sword still in hand, and stayed there until Hecate returned.

"Sorry I took so long. Hard to find any decent wood," the Imir explained while dumping a majority of it in the rock circle. The burst of flames was a welcome sight, driving the shadows well back to the tree line. Hecate finished arranging the logs in the fire, then stood up while clapping her hands to get rid of any bark and soil. The smile on her face disappeared once she spotted Sheila. "What the hell happened here?"

"Oh, nothing much," the vixen replied after a few seconds of awkward silence. "Some guy tried to kidnap me, then some other guy came out of nowhere and killed him, took the body and left."

Hecate made her way around the fire to stand near the vixen, but not too close. "I guess that would explain why you're covered in blood."

"Yep," came the terse reply.

"Umm," the elf squatted down so she was eye to eye with the vixen. "How about taking those off so we can get you cleaned up?"

"Can't,"

"Can't?" the elf echoed, cocking an eyebrow at Sheila.

"Yep," the vixen replied, sticking to monosyllabic answers. "Not that I didn't try, mind you. It's just that this damn armor won't let me take it off."

Hecate cocked an eyebrow at her companion. "What happens when you try?"

Sheila shrugged. "I just can't. As much as I want to get out of this damn thing, it won't let me. It's like I'm fighting my own body for control if I try to take it off." She closed her eyes for a moment and let out a long breath. "That asshole, Arden is responsible for this too. I just know it. Bastard!"

"Hey, it's OK." Hecate took the sword from Sheila and put it back in the scabbard that lay at their feet. "No sweat. We don't need to get you out of the armor to clean you up. I can do that with a simple cantrip." The Imir made a couple of gestures in Sheila's direction, removing the blood that had splattered in her hair and on her face. She then tried to do the same thing to the armor, but suddenly found herself sitting flat on her butt next to the fire. The armor had reacted to her spell. "What the hell?"

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Sheila looked down at the bloodstained armor and pursed her lips. "Perfect. Just fucking perfect," she commented aloud. "If ever there was a time when I really need a bath, and here I'm trapped by my own clothes---and it's all that asshole's fault." She looked up at Hecate with eyes that sent a cold chill down the elf's back. "If he isn't dead now, he will be next time I see him."

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Good help is hard to find

The rhythmic sound of the horse's hooves probably would have put Hecate to sleep if it hadn't been for the way the carriage tended to bounce every time it hit a rock or a hole in the road. Streamers of early morning light were beginning to filter their way down through the heavy canopy of leaves that covered the road. One glance at the scrawny horse sent a small wave of anger through her as she remembered dealing with the stable master. Once she'd returned to town and dumped the dog at the local hotel, that stable master was going to learn the error of his ways.

Her train of thought was broken by a small electric tingle she felt on her chest. Reaching inside her tunic, she pulled out a large, thin cream-colored medallion. As she watched, a symbol appeared on the surface, only to fade a way after a moment to quickly be followed by another. Soon the stream of symbols began to repeat. She ran her finger around the edge of the medallion, causing it to turn bronze in color then scratched a symbol onto the surface and watched it fade. Once it was gone completely, she ran her finger around the edge again, returning it to its original cream color.

After tucking the medallion back into her tunic she glanced over her shoulder at Sheila who was curled up on the rear bench, asleep. A small smile crossed the elfin face as she chuckled and turned back around to watch the road. She had been unable to calm the vixen down for most of the night. Finally, near morning, she'd given up and flown to town to rent a buggy from the local stables. Unfortunately her day hadn't gotten any better at that point. The owner of the stables was annoyed at being roused before dawn and refused to rent the horse and buggy, insisting instead that the elf pay for it. Hecate had been dreading the ride back to town with a bitchy vixen sitting next to her, but her luck had finally turned as she had found Sheila sound asleep by the small fire. Getting her into the buggy had been a bit of a challenge; however she had fallen asleep almost as soon as she sprawled out on the seat, leaving Hecate with a quiet and relaxing ride back to town.

Propping a foot up on the railing for support, the elf slouched on the bench slightly and watched the mosaic of light as it played through the leaves. The message she had received on the medallion was disturbing. It would also put a crimp in her plans, though not enough to seriously delay them. At least she hoped not. The first thing she'd have to do would be to get the vixen tucked away in the inn. Then she'd be able to deal with the problem over on earth prime.

In a small, run down house near the fishing docks, the female dwarf witch sat at a table topped with several candles, vials, powders, the odd dish or two and a couple of fine brushes. She paused for a second and examined the vial in front of her. The dark blue color of the liquid inside showed that the seal created by the cork was airtight. Taking a brush from the table, she dipped the tip in one of the small bowls then carefully drained off the excess dye. Very carefully she inscribed on the vial a series

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of glyphs and rules of power that would preserve the contents until the seal was broken. Once the vial was marked, she placed it in a holder for the ink to dry. Setting the brush back down on the table, she leaned back and stretched her arms over her head. "Don't you think it's about time you stopped lurking around back there? I'd like to get this business settled as fast as possible." She dropped her arms and turned towards the shadows at the far end of the room.

A thick, dusky man in black silently slipped from the shadows. "How did you know I was back there?" he inquired as he took a seat opposite the dwarf.

"Oh, you were quiet enough," she readily admitted, then picked up another vial along with a brush and began to draw symbols on it. "But you broke two trip strands I had set up to watch for your approach." She glanced up at him and snorted. "I'd also get a refund for whoever sold you those glyphs of misdirection, hiding and distraction."

The man looked down at the ornate amulet he wore around his neck and sighed. "And he came with such a good recommendation, too." The man removed the amulet and dropped it into his pocket. "Are you almost done with the potions?"

"Two more," she replied slowly as she finished a rather intricate glyph, "then we let them dry. After that, they're all yours." She glanced up at him again. "You're clear about our bargain?"

He nodded to the witch. "I find this fox bitch that you want, drug her and bring her to you. In return I get to keep the unused potions as payment."

The witch finished off the vial with a small flourish and placed it in the rack next to the others, then picked up the last one. "Exactly. The potion is only viable for fifteen minutes once you open it, then it will become inert and undetectable. You must make sure that it's mixed into whatever the target drinks, and that they consumes it within that time frame."

He picked up one of the completed vials and watched as the glyphs slowly faded from sight, leaving a slightly etched look to the surface where it had been painted. "How long will it take for the potion to knock her out?"

"Within minutes," the witch stated, placing the final vial in the holder. "The effects will last for anywhere from an hour to over a day depending on how much of it the target drinks."

Replacing the vial into the rack, he lifted them and carefully stood up, ensuring he didn't disturb the writing. "Excellent. If you're correct and the bitch is in the town, I'll hear about it. I should have her for you within the next day or two."

"Remember," the woman grumbled in a dangerous tone, "if you are caught, I didn't make those for you, and if you try to rat me out I'll make sure you live whatever's left

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of your short life in a great deal of pain."

"You wound me," the man replied, placing his hand over his heart. "I'm a professional. I would never betray the confidentiality of my clients."

Her eyes narrowed into a thin line matching that of her lips. "See that you don't."

Hecate reached around behind her with the horsewhip and lightly gave Sheila's feet a couple of whacks, waking the sleepy vixen. "Hey!" she objected, pulling her legs up to avoid further abuse to her feet. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"We're almost to town," the elf replied turning back around towards the front.

Sheila sat up and ran a hand through her hair. "So what? Would it have killed you to let me sleep until we got to the hotel?" Her mouth stretched open as she yawned, showing a muzzle full of sharp fangs and teeth. "Hey!" she spat as a heavy robe hit her in the face.

"Put that on," Hecate directed without looking back. "I need to have you fully covered with the hood up."

"Yah, yah. Whatever," the vixen muttered as she unfolded the robe and then proceeded to put it on. Once she got the belt tied off, she pulled the hood up over her head and immediately growled. "How the hell am I supposed to see anything out of this? The opening in the hood is like a foot from my face!"

The Imir laughed. "That's the point, lady. If you can't see others' faces, then they can't see yours, and especially not that long snout of yours."

"This damn fabric also makes my ears itch," she complained, rubbing her ears through the fabric. "I'm going to go nuts if I have to wear this for very long."

Hecate sighed and counted to ten. "You won't have to wear it for long. We're almost to the hotel. Once we're inside, I'll get you up to our room where you can loose the robe and go back to sleep, ok?"

The vixen continued to scratch various body parts through the heavy robe. "Whatever."

A few minutes later Hecate stopped in front of a large, three story building. "This is it," she announced climbing down out of the buggy.

Sheila made her way down out of the rear of the carriage then paused to lift up the end of the hood and look at the building. "It's not much to look at," she commented

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as Hecate took her arm to lead her in.

"As the case may be," the now fair haired and skinned elf replied, "It's conveniently close to the edge of town, the rooms are decently sized and they've got a kitchen that will send food up to the room if we ask for it." Slowly she led the vixen up the stairs and into the inn. Inside, there was a young man sweeping the floors. "Hey, boy!" she called to the young man, getting his attention. "Take our horse and buggy down to the stables and have them cared for."

The young man frowned at the elf. "I ain't your boy, long ears," he griped, spitting on the floor. "You want your horse taken care of, do it your own damn self."

Hecate snarled and waved a hand in his direction, sending him flying against the wall where he hung, pinned to its surface spread-eagle. She then led Sheila up to the room that she had rented on her earlier trip into town. The room was at the head of the stairs immediately to the left. Off to the right, a balcony ran the length of the building to a second set of stairs that went up to the third floor. Along the balcony there were ten other rooms, with an eleventh on the opposite end of the balcony facing theirs. Using the key she'd gotten earlier, Hecate led Sheila inside and lit the oil lamp to illuminate the room. "Here you go. I think you'll find this to be a welcome change."

Sheila hastily undid the belt of her robe and shucked the heavy material, tossing it over the arm of a chair as she looked around. "Oh my god," she exclaimed with a grin. "This looks like something out of the old west!" In the room there was a large four-post bed with a hanging canopy. Against one wall was a wood chest of drawers with an ornate mirror hanging above it, a washbasin and large pitcher of water sitting on top. Two chairs and a small table sat over by the window. There was also a small armoire to hang clothes in against the wall with the chest of drawers. Sheila walked over to the bed and probed it with her hands. "This can't be real," she said as she half collapsed and half jumped onto the bed and resting on her back. "A real fucking bed! I'd almost forgotten what one felt like!"

"Right," the elf replied, making an intricate hand motion over the windows before she closed the drapes. "I think you'll be comfortable here while I go take care of business. We should only be in town for a day or two then we'll no doubt be able to make good time with that horse and buggy since you won't have to walk."

"Day or two," the vixen mumbled already half asleep. "Yah, I could do with a day or two of this. Take your time." She waved a limp-wristed hand in Hecate's general direction, then rolled over and curled up into a ball before falling quickly asleep.

Hecate dropped the spare key to the room on the dresser and put out the lamp before making her way out to the balcony. She chuckled as she locked the door thinking, "Damn, if I'd known that getting her into a decent bed would shut her up, I would have summoned one up on the trail." Down the stairs she saw the innkeeper

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worriedly wringing his hands at the sight of the boy on the wall. She sighed and walked over to the kid. "You ready to reconsider your smart-ass attitude, Junior?"

"Kiss my ass, long ears," he spat back. "I ain't afraid of you. You screw with me and my uncle will take you apart."

Hecate cocked a brow at the innkeeper. "I hope he isn't referring to you."

The innkeeper frowned. "No. He's talking about my brother," the man said angrily. "He's a ranking sorcerer, so I wouldn't suggest you screw with him. Now release the boy!"

"Let's get something straight here, breeder," she hissed in a quiet, dangerous voice that carried unspoken threats. "I'm not afraid of any sorcerer below the rank of council member, and unless you and this walking sack of shit you call a son want to spend the rest of your life with your faces looking like horse manure, I suggest that both of you keep your 'long ear' comments to yourself." She turned to the kid and snapped a finger, dropping him to the floor. "As for you, if you don't get your ass in gear *NOW* I'm going to remove you from the breeding pool in such a way it's going to take more than just a 'ranking sorcerer' to put you right. Do you understand me?"

The kid snarled and glanced over at his father who gave a brief nod. He muttered, "Bitch," under his breath, then went outside to take care of the horse and buggy. His father stood his ground, glaring at the elf. "I don't care who you are, lady. You don't come in here and order me or my boy around. I suggest that you check your attitude at the door if you intend to stay here."

"For the rate I'm paying, you and your boy should be kissing my elfin ass," she replied stepping up to the man and invading his personal space. "I'm a very easy going person, but when the hired help start thinking that they're better than the person with the gold, I think it's time to put things in perspective. Now let me reiterate. My friend upstairs is to be kept happy no matter what she wants. If I come back and find out that you've given her a hard time, or anything's happened to upset her, I'm going to lay a curse on you and this flea bitten hotel that will make sure that even swamp rats won't want to move in. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yah, you've made your self clear," the man replied, not flinching at her intimidation tactics.

"Good," Hecate smiled and reached into a pocket on her vest pulling out a couple of gold coins. "Here, this will cover any tab she wants to run. Give the kid two silver for dealing with the horses. I have some errands to run." She handed the coins to the man and walked out the building, feeling his eyes burning a hole in her back the entire way.

"Humans can be so damn irritating sometimes," she thought as she paused on the

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steps, "I wonder what kind of piss-ant mage he's got for a brother? Guess I'll find out soon enough."

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Female Troubles

Sheila stretched her body for a second or two before curling back up on the large bed. For the first time since coming to this world, she'd slept soundly, in comfort and without the nightmares that usually haunted her. Lazily she rubbed the sleep from her eyes before looking around the room. A glance out the window showed the sun low on the horizon. Disoriented by her surroundings, she wondered if she'd slept the day away or all the way through until morning.

Another quick stretching session backed by a large yawn interrupted her train of thought as she luxuriated in the pleasant feel of the soft sheets and comfortable bed. She would have been satisfied to laze about in bed indefinitely if her bladder hadn't demanded attention. Grunting and groaning with the effort, she maneuvered her legs over the side of the bed and sat up. Taking in the room fully for the first time, she saw that there was an ornate chest of drawers with a mirror back that had a basin, pitcher that probably contained water and a towel sitting on it. A small table sat next to the window with two fancy looking chairs next to it. On the table were her three swords, which she hadn't remembered putting there, along with a brass key. There was also a large armoire and what appeared to be an oversized gym bag on the floor.

She heaved herself off the bed and walked over to the gym bag and gave it a glance. Prominently stitched into the side was the name "Sheila" in large letters. "Well, well, well," Sheila muttered as she picked up the bag and set it on the bed. "Somehow I don't think you came from one of the locals." She unzipped the bag noting that the leather tab on the zipper had the Nike logo. Inside she found several pairs of loose fitting pants, some pull over shirts and a couple of what appeared to be maternity dresses. Although all of the items looked to be of modern manufacture, they were made to resemble clothes that someone would wear around here. She also found a large, hooded robe that felt like it would be a heck of a lot more comfortable than what Hecate had given her in the buggy.

Another twinge reminded Sheila that she really needed to relieve herself. Putting on the robe, she used the silk sash from her gi as the belt so that she would be able to properly tuck in the swords. A quick flip of the hood completed the dressing process, hiding her muzzle. She examined the effect in the mirror and was impressed. Even though the hood wasn't that deep, it created plenty of shadows to hide her face. Unfortunately, as with the other cloak, it also tended to make her ears itch, though not nearly as badly.

Taking the brass key from the table, she examined the lock on the door. A simple flip-latch locked the handle. Opening the door, she played with the key and lock, making sure she knew how it would work. Satisfied she understood the mechanism, she flipped the latch and then pulled the door shut behind her, rattling it once the latch hand clicked to ensure it was actually secure.

Now standing at the top of the stairs, she looked over the inn. There were several more doors on this level with a railing that looked down into the commons. The railing extended half the length of the hall, where it ended in a wall where rooms appeared to start. She walked down the hallway noting the symbols on the doors. Her key had one

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that matched her room, and from the way they progressed, she assumed they were a form of numbering. At the far end of the hall, there were two doors with pictures on them that told Sheila they were just what she was looking for. Trying the one on the right, she found it was unlocked. Slipping in, she locked the door then quickly relieved herself. Overhead there was a chain with a grip, just like something out of an old Saturday Evening Post. Giving it a quick pull, she was rewarded by the sound of rushing water and the feel of cool air under her. "I'll be damned. Working indoor toilets," she muttered as she finished straightening the layers of clothes. "Who would have thought it in this place."

Making her way back to the stairs, Sheila headed down to the commons. Although the entry area had a few benches and a fireplace, she could easily see that there was a much larger room towards the far end of the inn where people had gathered. As she crossed the open area, she noticed the man behind the counter frowning in her direction. She considered finding out what his problem was, but her stomach quickly vetoed it as the smell of cooked meat drifted by. Inside the room she saw a dozen or so circular tables scattered around in a pattern that optimized seating while making life miserable for the staff. Sheila picked one over in the far corner that although it was near a window it was situated so that nobody would be able to sneak up behind her. Arden may have been an asshole, but he had managed to drum some sense into her about watching her back.

Within a couple of minutes after sitting down, one of the waitresses came over. "Welcome, stranger. What can I get for you tonight?"

Keeping the lip of the hood relatively low, Sheila spoke in a husky voice, "I'd like a pint of ale and something to eat. What are you serving tonight?"

"We have chabak stew, ox steaks and some roast chicken for the mains. We've also got some various greens and other vegetables on the side if you like 'em." Sheila had the feeling that the waitress would be popping gum right now if she had it. "Personally, I like the chabak stew the best. It's what Gordy's best at making."

"Chabak stew, eh?" the vixen muttered. "What the heck is a chabak?"

"What's a chabak?" The waitress looked a little taken back by the question. "I guess you ain't from around here, are you. Chabak are big lizards that live up in the foothills. Some of the farmers use 'em for draft animals. They can be kind of tough, but Gordy really knows how to fix 'em up. You should try some, I'll bet you like it."

"Right," Sheila grunted. "OK. I'll have the stew and a pint of ale. Bring me out some bread and cheese, too, while you're at it."

"Yessir," the waitress responded cheerfully and zigzagged off towards the back. After a few minutes, she returned with a tray and transferred the food off onto the table. "That'll be six silver, please."

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Sheila took her room key out and set it on the table. “Put it on my room.”

The waitress let out a small gasp as she saw the key. “Oh, dear,” she said quietly as she took a step back. “So you’re the one.”

“I’m the one what?” the vixen growled.

“Umm. You’re the one that came in this morning.” She swallowed before continuing. “Whatever you need, you just let us know. Anything at all. Just say the word.”

Taking a taste of the stew, Sheila nodded. “Hey, this is good,” she commented quietly, taking another bite. “Not bad at all,” she nodded to the waitress, “If I need anything else, I’ll let you know.” She watched the waitress make a hasty retreat to the kitchen and thought about it. Having people skitter in fear wasn’t anything new to her, only she’d never had them do it before they’d pissed her off. The rest of the time spent eating the stew was devoted to wondering just why the hell everyone was already afraid of her.

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Teyah stood by the smashed-in doorway to the house where Jack had left her. Her clothes were ripped and torn in places, and in her right hand she held a large, wooden stick that glowed with an odd white light. Scattered around here were the bodies of various creatures that had once been living souls, but had since been reduced to their base essence. A large mass of people and creatures made a semi-circle outside the house, watching and cheering on the carnage.

“All right, which of you losers wants to be next, huh?” Panting heavily from the exertion, she held the stick like a baseball bat, menacing the crowd. “Well? Either come get some or leave me the hell alone!”

Along the edge, you’d see someone get pushed forward, only to skitter back into the anonymity of the crowd. Suddenly she heard the name Shakul begin ricocheting through the crowd. Slowly the scattered exclamations transformed themselves into a chant as people repeated the name over and over, stomping to the beat of the name. The fact that they all were now looking away from Teyah was enough to unnerve her. Anxiously she waited for whatever was coming. The first indication that something was happening was when she saw pieces of bodies flying. The crowd tried to split and make way for the enormous, fleshy monstrosity that was making its way towards Teyah’s house, but pressure from the outside inward prevented it. The mob reveled as Shakul continued to sweep the mob from his path, the claws on his hands slicing everyone in his way into small chunks and scattering them. Soon the creature broke through the outer edge of the mass of dead souls and paused to look at her.

Standing easily twelve feet tall, it was a brutish lump of flesh, all muscles with virtually no head to speak of. Its mouth was filled with sharp teeth, framed by two large tusks that

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jutted up from the lower jaw and two beady little red eyes perched over a pug nose. The creature laid back its head and roared, sending a wave of putrid air over Teyah and making her gag. On its shoulder, a tiny form cackled. "See, Shakul? See? Mikos tell you true. Pretty, pretty, pretty. Shakul like?"

The hulking creature brushed the small, cackling form off its shoulder with one hand, then stepped towards Teyah, crushing its miniscule sidekick and reducing it to a smear. "Shakul like pretty," it announced in a barely understandable grunt. "Shakul eat pretty."

'Aw, shit,' Teyah said quietly taking a step backwards. "Hey now, big guy. How about we just talk about this, eh?"

"Shakul no talk!" the creature said, reaching forward for the girl. Her stick flashed out, striking the hand with an audible crack that made the creature howl. It yanked its wounded hand back, shaking it.

"This is not going to be pretty," Teyah muttered. Looking around, she tried to find some way out; unfortunately the corner of the building that had insured nobody was going to sneak up on her now prevented her from escaping. Resigned to having to fight, she pumped her remaining mana into the stick, causing it to glow brightly.

Although Shakul wasn't the most intelligent of demons in the underworld, it was smart enough to learn from pain. It wasn't used to being on the receiving end of pain, and was not at all enamored with the experience. Reaching out to the side, it grasped a telephone pole from the ground, snapping its base and hefted it like a baseball bat. "Shakul SMASH!" it announce, swinging the pole overhead at Teyah. The young girl dove to the side, narrowly avoiding the pole. Wood splintered and flew as the top four or five feet of the poll snapped off, sending shards flying. Teyah rolled to her feet and squared up in time to avoid yet another swing by Shakul, only to trip over a chunk of wood lying on the ground. She started to roll over as she felt something rip itself free from her right wrist.

Once back on her feet she turned, ready to dodge Shakul, but instead watched as the creature tried to swat a small form that was buzzing around his head. A tiny flying serpent spat a small ball of fire, catching Shakul squarely in the face, sending the creature reeling. The small snake then seemed to change and grow as it flew up and away from the group before then banking back towards the mob taking on the appearance of a rather formidable looking dragon with silver and gray scales. The mob scattered as enormous gout of flame shot from the dragon's mouth, carving a path of incendiary destruction through the crowd, including Shakul. Unlike the other creatures in the crowd, Shakul was not consumed by the fire but merely wounded.

Again the dragon banked and made another pass, its flame burning a swath through the crowd. This time, Shakul leapt out of the way, landing on several spectators just outside the corridor of flame. The dragon's attack was not to be so easily avoided as its tail lashed out to the side, slicing through Shakul's knee and dropping the creature to the ground. Leathery wings creaked and popped as the dragon pivoted hard, turning around

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in a mere couple of body-lengths. Before the giant creature could recover from the dragon's attack, the wyrm struck it from behind with all four clawed legs, driving it into the ground. A terrible roar drove the remaining spectators from the area as it proceeded to shred the body of the mighty demon.

Confident that the demon wouldn't be making a quick recovery, the dragon casually approached Teyah who stood with the stick hanging loose in her hands, a look of utter defeat on her face. "If you're going to kill me, go ahead and get it over with," she stated in a resigned tone of voice.

"Now why in heavens name would I want to kill you after going to all the trouble of saving you?" the dragon asked before making itself comfortable on the ground near her.

The girl blinked a few times then looked at her wrist, realizing that the charm wasn't there any more. "You're the guardian dragon!"

"Brilliant deduction," the dragon replied. "Simply awe-inspiring powers of reasoning. No wonder you humans are masters of all you survey."

Teyah threw the stick at the dragon with an inarticulate shout. The glowing stick simply bounced off the creature, its magic designed to harm an entirely different manner of entity. "God damn dragons!" She shouted towards what she assumed were the heavens before looking back at the one in front of her. "First I get one that's all sweetness and light while it secretly sets me up to be a human booby trap, getting my family killed off, and now I get one that's got a God damn superiority complex."

Before the dragon could reply a hollow, rasping voice intruded. "Would the two of you mind keeping it down?" Both heads turned towards the ratty looking rabbit carrying a scythe. "The last thing we need is to have *him* take an interest."

"You!" Teyah growled, pointing at Jack. "Where the hell have you been? You said I'd be safe here."

Jack sighed and leaned on his scythe. "I've been working, and if you hadn't opened the door, nobody would have been any threat to you."

Teyah rolled her eyes and threw her hands up in the air. "Nice of you to tell me now. How was I supposed to know? Some asshole bangs on the door claiming to be you, what was I supposed to do?"

"Ignore it," the rabbit calmly replied. "However, that's all a moot point." He turned towards the dragon. "Would you mind making yourself a little less conspicuous so that we can get out of here?"

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The dragon exhaled, shrinking in size until it was once again a small, winged snake. With a visible flash of its scales, it flew towards Teyah, wrapping itself around her wrist. “And I was just getting comfortable,” it sighed in a voice that now matched its size.

“Am I really getting out of this hell-hole now?” Teyah asked as she followed the rabbit away from the carnage.

”Indeed,” Jack replied, picking up the pace some. “Your patron has delivered on his end of the bargain and now I will deliver on mine.”

The young magi smiled as her pace quickened. “So I’m finally going to heaven?”

Jack let out a bark of laughter that broke the girls mood. “Heaven?” he echoed in disbelief. “No, my dear. I’m afraid you don’t qualify for heaven. However, I will be delivering you to some place considerably better than where you were destined.”

“That son of a bitch,” Teyah muttered. “He said I’d go to heaven when this was all done.”

“No, he didn’t,” the tiny dragon interjected. “He promised that your ultimate destination wouldn’t be hell, and it isn’t.”

Jack stopped in front of a glowing blue sphere. “Here is where we part company.”

“What’s on the other side?” Teyah asked warily while eyeing the sphere.

“I don’t know,” Jack replied. “I’m not permitted to enter. This portal connects with many different realms.”

“Wait a minute,” she demanded, “I am not getting into that sphere unless I know where I’m going to wind up.”

A derisive snort left Jack’s snout. “As you wish. Either enter the sphere, or you will be trapped in hell forever. The choice is yours.” With that he turned and walked away, fading into the shadows.

“Crap.” Teyah put her hands on her hips and studied the sphere for a minute before shaking her head. “Aw, nuts,” she said as she took a running leap into the unknown.

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About Friggen Time!

It was a firestorm. The small grove of trees in the public park, which the pixies had made their home for hundreds of years, was completely engulfed in flames, both magical and non. Hecate stumbled from the fire, singed and covered in soot. A small oriental gentleman darted out from the shadows and helped her away from the maelstrom.

Once they were well clear of the fire and any remaining faerie in the area, they paused to rest. "Are you all right, Mistress?"

Hecate leaned sat heavily on the ground. "Yah, I'll be fine, Benny," she replied, taking a few deep breaths. "I just need to catch my breath."

"What happened in there, Mistress?" He glanced back at the roaring fire, looking for any pursuit. "Are we at war with the Fae Na'Djol?"

She shook her head and joined him in watching the fire. "No, not us. Not directly anyway," she commented, frowning. "They threatened to kill the kid. He overreacted."

"Overreacted?" he asked, arching a brow at her. "He did this? He's the one that started a firestorm in a magically protected grove?" There was disbelief mixed with some horror both on his face and in his voice.

Hecate smiled and a twinkle gleamed in her eye as she glanced over at her aide. "Yah, great isn't it?" she asked with a chuckle. "This kid's got to be the one. And to think he wasn't even a candidate."

"This isn't right, Mistress," Benny argued, "He's progressing too fast. He's becoming too dangerous. We should destroy him now, before he is a threat to all of us." He glanced around and lowered his voice. "We must stop him before he catches the attention of the celestials."

The demon's head snapped around to look at the man. "Never!" she growled angrily. "I'm not about to destroy someone who could be the key to my ascension, even if it does risk a run in with the celestial host."

Flinching at Hecate's tone, he took a step back and dropped to his knee. "Yes, Mistress," he replied, head bowed deeply.

Hecate turned back to the fire and sighed. "Right now he's out there somewhere, scared and hurt." She turned back to the man. "Your job is to find him. Become his friend. Get him out of the Fae's realm, back to the real world and off the street. Keep him hidden and start his training. I don't want him causing any more trouble. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Mistress," the man once again replied. "I am to find him, return him to the real world and then train him while in hiding. I will do as you command, Mistress."

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“Good, now go. I don’t want to risk him running into any other Fae.” Hecate watched her henchman disappear into the night. This kid was going to be the key to her ascension, and she wasn’t going to let Heaven or Hell stand in the way of pulling it off.

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A cool breeze wound its way through the town, brushing past Sheila’s cloak as she made her way down the boardwalk that lined the main thoroughfare. The directions given to her by the waitress had been quite simple. As she came to the expected intersection, Sheila saw her destination off to the right, across the muddy street. The building was well illuminated with frosted glass windows and a large chimney that billowed thick, black smoke into the evening air. Although she couldn’t read the sign, the silhouette of a person bathing in a tub made the meaning of the sign clear enough.

Crossing the street, Sheila did her best to avoid the muddy ruts and stuck to the somewhat drier highpoints. Quickly stepping up onto the porch of the building, she glanced around at the few pedestrians out, not really sure what she was looking for. The loud crash of someone being thrown through swinging doors caught her attention. On the opposite corner there stood a large bar where a rather rowdy dispute between two men had been taken outside. She watched for a few seconds as the inebriated combatants proceeded to pound each other even more senseless than they were before the fight started. With a derisive snort, she turned and entered the bathhouse. The interior gave a homey and warm feeling to it. Polished wood furnishings glowed amidst the lamps that were strategically placed to give the room a pleasant glow without feeling harsh. Padded chairs and a sofa were placed in a comfortable pattern allowing those waiting to bathe to converse should they desire, without forcing unwanted intimacy on them.

A young girl with platinum blond hair came out from behind a curtain and gave Sheila a practiced smile. “Welcome to our bathhouse. My name is Jade. How may I help you this evening?” As she closed the gap, Sheila noticed that the tips of pointed ears peeked out from the hair that cascaded over the girl’s shoulders.

“Do you have any private baths?” Sheila asked, keeping her voice low and husky.

The girl nodded. “Yes, we do. We have several different services. Would you be interested in hearing what we offer?”

The hooded vixen shook her head, “That won’t be necessary. I simply need a large tub, plenty of hot water, shampoo and not to be bothered.”

“As you wish,” Jade replied with a curt nod. “All of our baths have a virtually unlimited supply of hot water, though it is metered. Soaps and towels are likewise provided in any quantity you wish, though you will be billed by how much you use. We require a three silver deposit before the bath, please.”

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Sheila frowned to herself and reached inside the cloak to the small bag that hung around her neck. Withdrawing a gold piece she flipped it to the girl. “You can give me my change when I’m done.”

The girl deftly caught the coin and bowed. “If you will follow me, I’ll take you to your bathing room.” She turned and led Sheila through the curtains and down a long hallway to an intersection. Turning left, she led Sheila past several large doors to one near the rear of the building. With a practiced flourish she opened the door and ushered Sheila into a rather ornate-looking room. There was an old style tub like Sheila remembered seeing in European movies, with a small table sitting next to it. Over the tub were two chains with rings on them; one round and one triangular, along with a thin, silky looking rope that ended in a ball. The rings controlled valves, which led to a spigot at the end of the tub. The rough, tiled floor tilted slightly towards what appeared to be a drain in the center of the room, which conveniently sat under the drain hole for the tub. Along one side of the room were a number of jars, each filled to a marked line that had different colored liquids in them. There were also several large folded towels on a shelf over an ornately carved bench.

The girl waved to the colored bottles. “The bottles on the bottom are scented oils. The ones on the shelf above them are various types of soaps.” She pressed on what Sheila had assumed was simple paneling, causing it to spring open. “Under here we have sponges, brushes and other grooming utensils. Over here,” she said, moving over to the bench, “Are towels for when you are finished with your bath. The rings over the tub control the flow of hot and cold water. The round is for cold while the triangle is for hot water. Don’t worry about overflowing the tub as the water will drain away quickly.” She moved to a door in the back of the room and paused. “Please make yourself comfortable and I’ll be right back with some wine. Should you require anything until then, please ring for me by pulling on the white cord.”

Sheila examined the valves and noticed that the hot chain for the hot water opened both valves. A quick touch of the pipes told her that whoever had designed the setup knew what they were doing. Pulling on the triangle, she watched as water spurted out. The hot water pipe gurgled and pattered for a second before it began to belch steaming hot water. A quick dip of her fingers confirmed that even with an equal amount of cool water flowing in, it would be way too hot for her taste. She filled the tub about half way before using the cold water to lower the overall temperature. When the tub was approximately two thirds full, the vixen was satisfied with the temperature of the bath and turned the water off.

“Now for the moment of truth,” she muttered to herself, undoing the silk sash around her robe and removing the swords, setting them on the table by the bath. Shedding the cloak and sash, she bundled them together and placed them on the bench. It had occurred to her at dinner that she’d been unable to undo the sash the other night in the forest. Somehow the armor had prevented it. When she got dressed this afternoon, it hadn’t balked at her removing the sash at all. If her luck were to hold out, she’d be able to get out of the cured silks and into a decent bath, something she’d wanted to do desperately

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for over a week now. Holding her breath, she peeled open the top and slid it off her shoulders, letting out a long breath of relief as the material slid easily over her hands. She quickly rolled it up and placed it next to the robe, followed a few moments later by the pants.

Now wearing nothing but the fur she'd been born with, the amulet and a bag of coins, she walked back over to the tub. Removing the bag, she placed it on the table by the swords. For a moment she considered doing the same with the amulet, but something inside of her balked at the idea. She then went over to the oils and examined them, opening each and smelling it before moving on to the next. After selecting an oil that smelled strongly of lilacs, she examined the soaps. Some were oddly coarse while others had a greasy feel to them. She finally settled on one that had a neutral feel to it, though it did have an odd greenish tint. A quick test of it on her hand in water showed that it left the fur reasonably clean, and when dried, didn't strip away quite all the oil. She grimaced at the memory of her first bath in this world, and the soap that she'd been forced to use. It had left her skin dry and itchy. Worse yet, it made her fur stiff, coarse-feeling and brittle. She'd never felt so miserable after a bath in her life before that time, and she wasn't anxious to repeat the experience.

Pouring a couple of ounces of the lilac scented oil into the water, she stirred it with a hand before climbing awkwardly in. Her bulging stomach made it difficult to climb into the tub without feeling like she was doing some kind of acrobatic exercise. Letting herself sink all the way into the water, she found that she could almost submerge herself entirely if she tried. She let out a sigh of relief as the warm water worked its way past her fur and into her muscles. "Oh yah," she moaned with a lopsided grin, "This is just what the doctor ordered."

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The dusky man was almost invisible as he stood in the shadows cast by the buildings that framed the alley. White teeth made a ghostly appearance on the man's face as he watched the vixen enter the bathhouse. Her cloak may have fooled some people, but she couldn't hide the fur on her hands. It hadn't taken him much time at all to find out where she was staying, and following her had been almost painfully easy. Though she had been careful to check her back fairly regularly, Shelia had walked almost a straight line to the bathhouse, giving even the most naive person an easy mark.

Glancing around to ensure he wasn't being watched, the man crossed the street and slipped into the alley beside the bathhouse. Taking great care to be stealthy, he made his way around to a door on the backside of the building. The limited light from the moon wasn't enough to illuminate the alley, but that didn't bother him in the least. He quickly checked the door to ensure that there were no magical traps or mechanical alarms before picking the simple lock. Within seconds he slipped inside the building, latching the door behind him.

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The inside of the building where he entered was fairly well lit, though not as well furnished as the public areas. The employees used these back corridors to move between rooms and tend to the patrons' needs without having to pass through the public areas. He knew that this was their off-season and the only person who was likely to be working would be the young elf, Jade, and possibly the owner, Madam Luskan. However, Madam Luskan was getting a bit old and the odds were that she'd be upstairs in her room, relaxing, while Jade dealt with the few visitors that the establishment might get this late in the evening.

Carefully he listened to the sounds in the building, and he heard a noise back in the kitchen area. Moving silently, he made his way to the kitchen area and peeked in to see who was there. Sure enough, Jade was preparing a tray with a bottle of wine, a glass and some cheeses. As she started to fold the cloth back around the cheese, he stepped into the doorway and cleared his throat, causing the startled girl to gasp and spin around in his direction.

"Damn it, Jarad, what the hell do you think you're doing scaring me like that?" she demanded, clenching both fists and scowling at the man. "And just what do you think you're doing in here. You know that the old lady would have a fit if she saw you back here!"

"Calm down, beautiful," he soothed with a disarming smile. "I've come to make you an offer you can't resist."

She frowned at the man, her expression clearly showing her doubt. "And just what do you think you have that I want enough to risk getting sold?"

Jarad took out a pouch the size of his fist and tossed it to her. "That good enough?"

Jade caught the heavy sack, surprised at its weight. When she opened the top and looked in, she was momentarily stunned at the amount of gold within. A few seconds later she yanked the string closed and threw it back at him. "That's too much. I don't know what you want, but I don't want any part of it. That much money can only mean a world of trouble for me, and I don't need any."

"Easy, beautiful," the man said, again soothing her with his voice. "It's not like I want you to kill someone. I just need you to slip your latest customer a potion, then look the other way while I carry her out of here. I followed her all the way here and nobody saw her come in. If anyone asks about her, you can deny ever seeing her." He took her hand and put the pouch of gold into it. "With this much money, you'll finally be able to buy your freedom. How long have you been saving for that day?"

The elf looked down at the bag, then back up at the man. "You're sure nobody saw her come in here? I don't need a soothsayer snooping around and asking questions. If she's worth this much, then someone's going to come looking for her."

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He smiled again. “She’s all alone. Nobody is with her or around to ask where she went. It’s perfectly safe. Trust me.”

“I’m going to regret this,” she grumbled as she tucked the bag into her robe. “Where’s the potion?”

“That’s my girl,” he cooed as he handed her a vial. “Just pour this into her wine and stir it before you give it to her. She has to drink it within fifteen minutes of the time you open the vial or it loses its effect.”

Jade nodded and held the vial in both hands before carefully putting it down on the counter. “All right. Wait by the back door and I’ll come get you after I’ve dropped off the platter.”

“Perfect. And maybe when this is all over, you and I can go out to celebrate.” He moved closer, wrapping his arms around her. “I’m sure we’ll be able to find something fun to do to commemorate your newly-bought freedom.”

“Yah, yah,” she replied, pushing him away. “You may have bought my services for this little escapade, but that doesn’t mean that I’m going to jump into the sack with you.”

He gave her a light laugh as he held his arms out. “Can’t blame a guy for trying.” He turned and left the room.

“Sure I can,” she grumbled as she returned her attention to the platter. Putting the cheese away, she dug out a container of hard bread wafers and put some on the platter. Even though they’d never be eaten, she still had to keep up appearances. With a practiced motion she used a corkscrew to open the bottle, smelling the cork to make sure the wine hadn’t turned. She then examined the vial that lay next to the platter. It had a simple wax seal that broke away cleanly when she applied pressure to the sides. Being careful not to spill it, she poured it into the wine, making sure the entire contents were emptied into the bottle before dropping the empty vial and wax seal into her robe for disposal later. She then capped the wine and gently shook it to mix the potion into the drink. Satisfied, she put the bottle back down on the platter, which she then slid off onto one hand, balancing it as she moved.

It only took a few moments to reach the door where the customer was, but it felt like an eternity. She had to resist the urge to rush, knowing there was a time limit. It wouldn’t do for her to drop the tray or have some other mishap that would render the potion useless. Pausing at the door, she knocked gently twice before entering. In the tub she saw a dog’s face, framed by long red hair sticking out of the soapy water. She shook off the initial shock of seeing the customer then quickly put on her practiced smile, walked over to the table next to the tub and placed the wine bottle, glass and plate with the cheese and bread on the table. She then poured some wine from the bottle into the glass, filling it about two thirds of the way before replacing the bottle. “Is there anything else I can get for you?”

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Sheila's eyes cracked open and peered at the girl for a moment before closing. "No, I'm fine for now. I'll ring if I need anything."

"Then please enjoy your bath and the wine with our compliments." Jade bowed and walked out the door, closing it quietly behind her.

Sheila wiggled her head around a bit to get a little more comfortable as she relaxed in the tepid water. A few minutes later, she reached up and pulled on the triangle chain, pouring more hot water in to the tub. Foam and soap slopped over the sides as the tub overflowed. Sheila fought the urge to stop the water from overflowing until the bath was once again hot almost to the point of steaming. She relaxed, panting somewhat to relieve the excess heat. After a moment of this, she sat up and reached over to pick up the glass.

"I wouldn't drink that if I were you."

The voice came from a man sitting on the bench in the room, startling Sheila so that she dropped the glass. She grabbed at the hilt of her katana for a second before recognizing the man as the one from the woods the day before. "What the fuck do you want?"

He leaned back and crossed his legs, relaxing. "I'm just here to make sure you don't do something stupid, like drinking the wine."

Sheila growled something incomprehensible as she put the sword back on the table. "I didn't ask for you to be my body guard, and I certainly didn't ask for you to scare the shit out of me while I'm trying to relax." She reached over and picked up the wine bottle, cautiously smelling it. "Why shouldn't I drink this?" she grumbled, scowling at the man. "I don't smell anything wrong with it."

"She slipped a Micky into the wine to knock you out." He stood and walked over to the bath, took the bottle from her and dumped it out onto the floor before tossing it into the far corner of the room where it shattered. He then leaned over, resting his hands on the edge of the tub and causing Sheila to sink down into the water out of reflex. "You know, I wasn't kidding when I said there was a contract out on your empty head. There are some very bad people chasing you, and the last thing you need to be doing is wandering around alone." He straightened up and looked around, frowning. "Speaking of which, where's that demon you've been hanging out with?"

Annoyed at the man's condescending attitude, Sheila put her arms on the sides of the tub and started to climb out. "How the hell should I know?" she barked in an angry voice, standing outside the tub and placing it between her and the stranger. "So what's your stake in all of this?" He turned and walked over to the towels, grabbing a stack of them before walking back over to Sheila. She snatched one from his hand when he offered it, but didn't bother thanking him. "Well? What's the story?"

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He sighed and paused for a few seconds as she started drying off. “Not too long ago I made a mistake,” he paused and looked down at the towels rather than her. “Actually, it was a series of mistakes, all of which were rather stupid.” He looked back up at her and watched her for a moment. “This is part of the payback for those mistakes. My job is to get you to the Sorcerer Ruddygore, and I don’t plan on letting anything interfere with that.” He handed Sheila another towel as she discarded the now-wet one and continued drying. “Until you’re safe in Castle Terindell, I’m going to keep a close eye on you.”

“So you know Ruddygore?” she asked, not bothering to look up from her job of drying a leg.

“Only by reputation and through stories,” he replied. “Here, let me help you with that.” Tossing all but one of the remaining towels on the table, he walked around behind Sheila and began to vigorously rub her back, working the water out of her fur.

Sheila tossed the towel she was using aside and got another towel, turning her head to look at the man. “Don’t get any funny ideas while you’re back there,” she warned before starting to dry her other leg. “Since you’re going to be around for a while, how about telling me your name?”

“My name?” he echoed, pausing for a moment. “Call me Mori.” Finished with her back, he got a fresh towel and proceeded to dry her tail.

Sheila also grabbed another towel and began working over her hair more thoroughly than before while glancing around to watch him dry her tail. “You’re not bad at that. You deal with my kind of folk where you come from?”

His head shot up for a second before he resumed drying. “No, not where I come from, though I’ve run into a few like yourself in my travels.”

Sheila’s continued drying her hair as she studied his badly scared face. He looked familiar, but she couldn’t place it. She had an eye for patterns, and for the life of her she couldn’t remember where she’d seen those scars before. After a minute she turned around and continued to dry her hair.

Once she was relatively dry, Sheila walked over to the bench and got dressed. She would occasionally glance over at Mori to try and gauge his expression. As she tied the silk sash around the cloak she decided that, although he was watching her, he wasn’t studying her, nor did he appear to be all that curious about her, which in turn made her wonder just who the hell he was. She recovered her three blades and tucked them into the sash before turning for the door through which she entered.

“No,” Mori said, gesturing towards the back door. “You don’t want to be seen leaving. It’s best that we go out the back door.”

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Sheila nodded and headed for the service exit to the room. She turned right, following Mori's suggestion and headed for the back of the building. As she came around the final corner, she stumbled to a stop in shock at what she saw. A thin, dusky man about her height was pinned to a large timber that supported the walls by a long dagger through his throat. At his feet, the garments that she remembered Jade was wearing were lying on the floor, surrounded by a stain that resembled blood. "What the hell happened here?"

Mori pushed past her and unlocked the back door. "He was here to capture you for the bounty. She was the one who spiked your drink."

"So you just killed them?" Sheila demanded in a shrill voice.

"Would you rather I kissed them?" Mori challenged sarcastically in a loud, harsh whisper.

"You can't just go around killing people, damn it!" Sheila argued, stepping around the clothes on the floor as well as the stain. "You're going to get me into trouble."

Peeking his head out the door and surveying the alley, Mori then stepped out, holding the door until Sheila was through before closing and latching it. "Don't worry. Nobody's going to track this back to you. Even if someone does try to cause trouble, I'll handle it."

"By killing them?" She followed him to the end of the alley where he checked to see if anyone was watching. "Is that your only solution? To kill someone?"

He sighed and counted to ten before answering. "In this case, yes. I couldn't let him live to report, nor could I allow the elf to live, since she might have talked, too."

Sheila grabbed his sleeve as he started to turn and yanked him back around. "I don't care about him, but she was just a girl. How could you?"

"Girl?" he parroted incredulously. "She was an elf, probably thousands of years old. Now shut up and stop worrying about what happened back there. I have to get you back to the hotel without being spotted."

The vixen chewed on her lip for a second before nodding. "All right, what do you want me to do?"

Giving the street another quick check he nodded. "Just try to concentrate on not being noticed." He paused for a second as he thought, then shook his head. "Try repeating to yourself that nobody can see you or something. Just make it your intent not to be noticed."

"Huh?" Her brows furrowed as she tried to figure out what he wanted. "What's that going to do?"

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Mori did a quick double take before shaking his head again. “Your armor senses your emotions, and on some level your desires. If you’re afraid it tries to protect you. If you’re angry with someone it reacts. In this case you need to want to be unnoticed. Hopefully, it will sense that and respond appropriately.”

His words stunned her. No wonder it wouldn’t let her disrobe in the forest. She had been terrified. If she’d taken off the armor, she’d have no protection. It also explained why she got such wild reactions from people when they pissed her off. As she thought about it, something popped into her head that demanded attention. “Hey, how do you know so much about this armor?”

He rolled his eyes toward the heavens and mouthed something before looking at her. “I’ve been watching you. It’s easy for anyone who can see magic to watch the armor respond to your moods. Your weapons do that too, or hadn’t you noticed?” He grabbed her arm and checked the street again. “Now, if you can just save the questions for later, I think it’s best that we got away from this building.

Sheila allowed him to lead her from alley to alley, away from the building. Behind them, unseen, the darkness shifted as the shadowy form of Rathsmon the dwarf came into view. He smiled and checked his compass to verify it was still tracking the pair properly before tucking it back into his vest. Whistling a light ditty, he walked away from the bathhouse, taking his time as he strolled after the duo.

Chapter 25

The eye of the storm.

Sheila managed to cross the distance from the entrance to her room without stomping, though she did slam the door closed behind her. She was half way through removing the katana's scabbard from the sash around her waist when she heard a knock at the door. "Who is it?" she asked, putting the sword back in her belt and keeping a ready hand on the hilt. The answer came by way of another knock on the door. Annoyed, she drew the wakazashi with her right hand while opening the door cautiously with her left. To her surprise, she saw nobody outside. Stepping out into the hall, she looked down the stairs and toward the far end of the rooms but saw nobody. Muttering a few choice expletives under her breath, she walked back to the room while sheathing the sword, then locking the door behind her. As she turned to put the key on the nearby table she was surprised to see Mori lying on the bed. "How in hell did you get in here?"

"You just opened the door and let me in," he replied, fluffing the pillows under his head. "Nice bed. I'd forgotten how comfortable sleeping on a real bed could be. A person could get used to this."

"You know, that sounds like a good idea," Sheila replied, unlocking the door. "I'm sure they'll be glad to rent you a room of your own." She opened the door a bit and held it for him. "Now get out."

He swung his feet off the bed and stood in a single motion. "Maybe in a minute. First we need to talk." Pushing the door shut, he gave Sheila a patronizing smile while waving her to the bed. He leaned against the door as she sat on the bed and glared at him with her arms crossed. "Tomorrow, I'm going to get you out of here." He announced. "Be ready to leave first thing in the morning."

"Oh no!" the vixen stated standing up. "I'm not going anywhere with you. Hecate told me to stay here and that's what I'm going to do."

"Uh huh. She also told you to stay in the room, didn't she?" He stepped towards Sheila, forcing her to back up slightly. "In fact, I seriously doubt she told you to go wandering around town looking for a bath."

"Hey!" the vixen shouted, poking the clawed tip of a finger into his chest, "I'm an adult. I can make my own decisions and take care of myself. I never asked you to get involved and I'm sure as hell not going to do anything just because you say so."

Mori smacked his hand against his forehead. "Christ on a crutch, lady! Are you that fucking dense?" He paused to gather his thoughts while taking a deep breath. "You have a contract out for your capture. You know this for a fact since there have been two attempts already."

"How do I know you didn't set them up?" she demanded with a smug look. "You wouldn't be the first person to do that to me." Mori stared at her with his mouth hanging open in shock. Sheila sat down on the bed and leaned back against the pillows. "Hecate said I'm supposed to stay here, and I'm not moving until she comes back!"

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He let out a long breath and nodded. “All right, if that’s the way you want to play it. Just don’t cry to me if someone snatches your furry ass while I’m not looking.

Sheila gave a nonchalant shrug. “Fine by me.”

As Mori was about to close the door, he paused. “Don’t forget to lock it.” There was a quiet click as the latch took hold. Sheila quickly locked the door then climbed back on the bed. Rather than trying to go to sleep right away, she simply lay there, worrying about why the guy seemed so familiar.

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A loud knock at the door brought Sheila fully awake. She had been lounging in bed, watching the beams of light coming in through the shutters shift as the morning broke. She ponderously rolled over and sat up. “Who is it?”

“Hecate,” the familiar voice came from the other side of the door. “Now let me in.”

Sheila, still somewhat paranoid due to events of the prior evening, drew the wakazashi before unlocking the door.

When it opened, she saw the demoness standing on the other side. Hecate slipped in and closed the door, locking it behind her. “Get dressed quick. I want to take off before everyone wakes up.”

“Why? What’s the rush?” the vixen asked, sheathing the sword before getting dressed.

Hecate peeked out the window, watching activities in the streets. “I heard a couple of the local militia talking about two people being murdered last night at a bath. Apparently there was a foreign gold coin in the till that they think may have been paid by the killer.” She turned from the window and looked toward Sheila. “They were also talking about a tub full of hair that they think came from some weird animal. Does that sound like anyone you know?” Sheila winced for a second as she heard the part about the hair. “That’s what I thought. What happened?” the ebony woman demanded.

“You remember that guy who saved me in the woods the other night? Scar face?” She paused in tying the sash around her waste to make sure her companion nodded. “Well he showed up last night. Told me that there was a contract to abduct me and that they’d paid off the bathhouse attendant to drug my drink. He killed them, not me.”

Hecate spat out a few choice curses. “What the hell were you doing at a bath house? Didn’t I tell you to stay here?”

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“Hey!” Sheila barked defensively. “I needed a serious bath, OK? Besides, all I have is his word that they were trying something. For all I know, they were just innocent bystanders whom he whacked just to get at me.”

The look of surprise and shock on Hecate’s face went unnoticed, as Sheila was busy slipping her swords into the belt. The demoness picked up the cloak and tossed it to Sheila before gathering up the gym bag. “Well, whatever happened, we don’t want to hang around here. I’ve got the buggy out back so let’s get moving.”

Sheila put the robe on before unlocking the door. The two made their way quietly down the stairs. Hecate tugged on Sheila’s robe and led her through the dining area and kitchen to a door leading out the back. Behind the building, Sheila saw their buggy parked and climbed in. The demoness went around to the back and opened the lid to the small storage trunk on the back. She was about to toss in the gym bag when she saw the small dwarf, lying inside on his back, smiling and waving at her. Frozen with indecision for a minute, the woman finally threw the bag at the dwarf, then dropped the lid as if nothing had happened. She then climbed into the front of the buggy and got them rolling down the alleyway, towards the edge of the city. After several nervous moments when they drove past several of the local militia who were wandering about, they came to the edge of town. Hecate urged the horse into a fast trot to get them away from town as quickly as possible.

Hidden under her hood, Sheila watched the town with interest as they made their escape. The one thing that she noticed most was the fact that none of the militia looked at all interested in anything going on. Shortly after they’d gotten out of town she quietly drew the katana and placed the tip squarely in the middle of Hecate’s back. “All right, the game’s over. How about telling me who you are and what’s going on?”

Hecate stiffened at the touch of the tip, and then chuckled. “You figured it out, eh?” she said without an apparent worry. “That was a might bit quicker than I had expected.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” the angry vixen growled, shoving a little on the sword. “Now who the hell are you?”

“Gah!” the stranger cried out as the tip punctured her skin. There was a sizzling sound coming from the wound, as if the sword were red hot. “Take it easy with that pig sticker, will you?” The black color faded from her skin, as the body quickly shifted its shape to reveal Mori sitting in the front bench. “You know, if you’re not careful, you could really hurt someone with that thing. So, what tipped you off?”

“It seemed just a little too convenient,” Sheila stated, letting up on the pressure of the sword a little. “You were urging me to get away as soon as possible, then low and behold, Hecate, the one person I said I would go with, shows up. Not to mention this business about the militia. They weren’t looking for anyone; just minding their own business.”

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“Pretty good,” Mori agreed. “Only the general militia won’t be the ones hunting you for murder. They have a special tracking squad that does that kind of stuff. Fortunately, as long as you keep those fancy duds on, they shouldn’t be able to locate you with magical means.”

Sheila frowned and looked back towards town. “That’s because all they’ll need to do is go to the hotel, which is where you’re going to take me right now.” She twisted the tip a little to emphasize who was now the real driver.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Sheila.” Mori slowly shook his head. “Much as I’d like to, if I take you back there will be a lot more blood spilled. It’s better this way. Besides, you want to get to Ruddygore don’t you?”

“God damn it!” Sheila yelled. “I’m not going anywhere with you. Now turn this damn thing around and take me back to town!”

“I’m sorry,” Mori said, quietly. “But there’s no turning back now. If you want to return to town, you’ll have to kill me.” Sheila sat there, half leaning on the sword, ready to shove it through him, while the other half of her was shocked that she’d even think it. “What’s the matter? Can’t stab someone in the back?”

“Shit!” the vixen barked, pulling the sword back and returning it to the scabbard. “You better not be fucking with me, asshole, or I will take you apart for real.”

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Sheila had finally found a relatively comfortable way to lie on the bench seat by using her rolled up cloak like a pillow. It wasn’t all that much better than sitting up, but at least she didn’t feel the urge to take a piss every five minutes. She’d almost dozed off when she heard Mori call out to the horse while stopping the buggy. Her curiosity was piqued as she felt the buggy rock from his dismount. Sitting up, she looked around. “What’s going on?” she asked, leaning on the back of the front bench.

“End of the road,” Mori said, checking the horse and its harness. “This is where we catch the ferry across the river.” He took a moment to look out over the river and to the shore on the far side, well over a mile away. “It looks like we’ll be here for a while, so if you need to use the facilities, now would be a good time.”

Grunting and groaning several times, Sheila managed to extract herself from the back of the buggy without having to ask for a hand. She stretched for a minute, trying to get rid of the stiffness from lying in one position too long. A glance at the local area showed the road didn’t actually end here; it continued along the river. However, the fork they took off of the main road did terminate at a wooden doc that extended a short distance out into the water. Although there was a fair amount of low brush and the like, she didn’t see any buildings. “What facilities?” she asked, already dreading the answer.

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“Pick a bush.” He looked around for a moment before returning to the horse. “Far as I can see, they’re all unoccupied, though I could be mistaken.”

“Great... and not a roll of paper in sight.” Sheila shook her head and wandered off into the brush in search of a suitable place to relieve herself.

Mori casually walked around the back of the buggy, careful to make sure that the vixen wasn’t paying close attention. He popped open the lid on the trunk and leaned against the lip and frowned at its occupant. “So that was you outside of the bathhouse last night, wasn’t it?”

The dwarf adjusted the gym bag so he could lean on it. “Indeed. I was worried I might have trouble tracking you; however the former owner provided me with a compass that seems to be able to do the trick.” He reached into his shirt and pulled out the small object he’d used to track them. “At first I thought it was tracking the female, but I couldn’t figure out how they’d managed to get a lock on her. Once I saw you, it became obvious they were keyed on you. The opposition doesn’t realize that you’re the one they’re tracking, do they?”

“No they don’t,” the man replied, checking to see that Sheila was still occupied. “As far as I can tell, the only magically active one is the female, and she’s more of a toy master than a full spell caster. So far she hasn’t been able to pierce my illusions.”

Rathsmon nodded, deep in thought. “Mind if I ask a question?”

“Sure,” Mori gave the dwarf a sly smile. “Just don’t count on me answering it.”

“Sheila doesn’t know, does she?” the necromancer nodded in Sheila’s general direction. “When are you planning on telling her?”

“Eventually, but not soon.” Mori let out a long breath. “As Mori, I’m just another player in the game. She’s got no history. If she knew I was Arden, then all that old baggage would get tossed into the mix. I had enough of her attitude when she knew who I was. With me as Mori, she’s a lot less obnoxious.”

“Oh, yes. Her attitude.” The dwarf chewed on a thumb for a second. “I certainly hope you realize why she’s being so difficult.”

Mori nodded. “The spell?” He paused for the small nod from Rathsmon. “Yah, I know about it. In a way, it’s partly my fault. It’s not something I can handle, but it will be taken care of soon.”

“Oh?” The look of surprise on the small man’s face faded as he furiously thought. “You don’t think Ruddygore is going to get rid of it, do you? I’m afraid that spell is beyond even his power.”

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The human pursed his lips and nodded slowly. "Yah, I know. I've already made arrangements with someone who can remove the enchantment. As soon as I've held up my end of the bargain, they'll hold up theirs." He glanced towards the bush. "She's done. Stay down and don't give away your presence. I'd have a hell of a time explaining who you are and how Mori knows about you." Closing the lid, Mori dogged the catch and hurried around to the front of the carriage so as to be leaning casually against it when Sheila returned.

"You know," she said, sitting on the step to the buggy, "the only real advantage you guys have on us is the ability to take a piss standing up."

"Naw, I disagree," Mori said, half sitting and half leaning on the wheel. "We don't have to worry about getting pregnant."

"That's not an advantage," she grumbled with a frown. Bending sideways, she reached down and plucked a long straw of grass from the ground then stuck it into her mouth to chew on. "That was just my stupidity. I'm the only one to blame for," she paused gesturing at her enlarged abdomen, searching for a word, "this."

"Really?" He cocked an eyebrow at the vixen before also picking up a blade of grass and chewing on it. "So I suppose you had the guy chained to the bed, then? Last time I checked it was usually a cooperative effort."

"Oh no. No, he was cooperative if a little hesitant at the time." She leaned back and chewed on the grass for a few seconds before continuing. "He didn't know I was in heat. I'd told him I was on the pill so there wasn't anything to worry about. Sure, there were other ways I could have gotten around getting pregnant, but I didn't take them."

The grass spun as he chewed on it. "So you wanted his kid, but without him knowing about it?" Sheila simply nodded. Mori pursed his lips and shifted the grass around for a second as he thought. "Why not just tell the guy you wanted to have his kid? Why lie to him?"

Sheila looked down and shrugged. "It's kind of complicated."

"We have time," he stated flatly, glancing out at the river and still not seeing the ferry.

Sheila shot him a hard look for a second before frowning and looking away. There was a hard look on her face that softened as she spoke. "He had to go. The only reason he was staying around was because of something I had. Something he didn't know I had, but needed. If I'd told him that I'd wanted a kid by him, the big lug would have insisted on staying."

"And that's something I take it you didn't want?" he asked cautiously while squatting down to be at her level.

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“Oh no,” she replied, shaking her head and spitting out the grass. “No, I would have loved to have had him stay with me, even though he is a know-it-all and attracts more trouble than a ninety-percent-off sale at the Shoe Bazarre.”

“So if you wanted him to stay, why not tell him?” He shook his head and laughed. “No wonder guys are going nuts trying to figure women out.”

“It’s not like that.” She looked down at the end of the sash around her waist and began to twist it between her fingers. “He’s on a quest. It’s very important to him. If he stayed with me, he’d have to give up any hope of completing that quest, or ever getting home.”

“Did it ever occur to you that if you had told him, he might have come back to you after completing the quest?” Mori shifted so he faced Sheila. “If this guy loved you as much as you’re saying, don’t you think he’d choose to come back to you rather than going home?”

“Maybe,” her face got hard again, “but it doesn’t matter.” She stood up and brushed the grass and leaves off of her clothes. “The asshole is dead so it’s a moot point.” Her head snapped around as she heard a bark of laughter from Mori, who had also stood up. “What’s so funny?”

“This guy of yours. He’s on a quest, right?” There was a gleam in his eye as he gave her a big smile. It annoyed the hell out of the vixen. “Something of epic proportions, I assume?”

Sheila nodded. “I suppose you could say that.”

He chuckled again and continued to chew on the blade of grass. “You obviously don’t know anything about how things work here. This is a world ruled by magic. The only laws are those created by a council of sorcerers whose whims can become law with the stroke of a pen.” He spat the grass out and wiped his mouth. “There are thousands and thousands of rules. They cover everything from what people have to wear to even the effects of gravity. There are even ones that are about quests, very special rules for special quests. Specifically there are rules that state anyone who’s on an epic quest always has a way to cheat death. There may be a cost associated with it, but if he’s willing to take the risk he’ll be offered a way out.” Reaching down, he picked up another blade of grass and started chewing on it. “Odds are, your boy is still alive.” The confused look on the vixen’s face made him chuckle. He turned and casually walked away from the carriage, taking in the fresh air and sunshine.

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We had to destroy the village to save the village.
- *Unknown Lieutenant during the Vietnam War*

"Stupid bimbos..." The disgruntled voice came from the back seat as their buggy pulled away from the docs. "I can't believe you paid them."

Mori turned to look back at her, resting one arm on the seatback. "You're kidding me, right? It's their ferry. They do all the work. It's only fair that they get paid to do it."

"That's not the point," the vixen said, crossing her arms over her swollen belly. "It's how much you paid. It's goddamn highway robbery! You paid them more than I've spent in the last month!"

"Actually it's more like fairy robbery," he quipped, turning back around to watch the road. "But you're crazy if you think I'm going to argue with them over it. She had a good point when she said we could go a week out of our way to cross up north, or pay to cross here."

"Yah, well... maybe," Sheila grumpily conceded, squirming a little to get comfortable again. "How much longer before we reach town?"

Mori closed his eyes for a second and appeared to be lost in thought. When he opened them again, he frowned. "Another couple of hours and we'll be to a place we can stop for the night."

"Oh man," she groaned, squirming some more. "You better stop again, then. I need to use a bush." Once the buggy was completely stopped, Sheila climbed down. "Damn fairy ferry took forever," she complained before rushing off into the thick underbrush.

Mori climbed down from the buggy and went around to the back and opened up the trunk. "Get out," he ordered the dwarf.

"Are we there yet?" Rathsmon asked, climbing out of the buggy. "This doesn't look like civilization.

"I know. I'm going to put in at the Begly Enclave tonight," he explained, lashing down the lid again. "I'll be able to get Sheila in, but not you."

"Wait a second," the dwarf said, frowning at the tall man. "You've got to be nuts going in there. I've heard about those people from my contacts down below. They've made a pretty ugly pact with Hukkath."

Mori sighed and nodded. "I know. I know." Mori rubbed the bridge of his nose looking very tired. "That's why I'm going there." He glanced off towards Sheila to verify she was still occupied. "I'm going on his behalf to fulfill a bargain I made with

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someone by doing him a favor."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Rathsmo replied, visibly shuddering. "Especially since you're taking Sheila in there."

"Don't worry about it," the tall man reiterated. "I'm going as Hukkath's agent so they dare not do anything to me. Nor will either Sheila or I be affected by the curse. I've got Hukkath's word on that." Mori glanced towards Sheila. "Quick. Lose yourself in the bush. She's coming back. We'll meet up with you in the next town." He watched as the dower-looking dwarf practically dove into the bushes, then went back around to the side of the buggy and waited on Sheila. "Everything come out OK?" he asked with a smirk.

"Cute," came the terse reply as she hauled herself up into the buggy without any aid. Behind her, Mori chuckled then climbed up into the front seat, taking the reins. The pair were moving again seconds later.

A couple of hours down the road, Sheila's attention snapped back to the present as the buggy bounced off the main road and off onto a side trail which wasn't as well traveled. Soon they came around a curve where she spotted signs of civilization that quickly turned into a small town. The forest thinned out and abruptly stopped about one hundred feet from the nearest building. On closer inspection, Sheila noticed that there was a stripe of dead grass and dirt, about three or four feet thick, that ran right at the edge of the clearing. Just outside of the clearing there was a large wooden sign with a huge skull and cross bones on it, and a hand pointing down towards a row of white stones that ran across the road. As they got closer, they could see some sort of wall that was nearly invisible. Only the slightest of shimmering gave away the fact that it was there. Mori stopped the buggy a few feet from the sign and climbed down.

"What's going on?" Sheila asked, climbing down after him. "And what's with the big sign?"

"It's a warning not to cross the line," he replied walking over to the sign. "I'd advise you not to try crossing the line, or the spell that protects this place will kill you." Upon reaching the sign he rang a small bell that hung underneath, and then returned to the horses and waited.

A few minutes later a large man wearing leather armor and a long sword by his side walked out to near where the two were waiting. "What do you want?"

"We need a room for the night," Mori tersely replied.

The man laughed. "You'll not find one here. I suggest you go back to the main road and continue on up to Yamesh."

Before the man could turn around, Mori stopped him. "I have business in this town. I

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suggest that you open the barrier."

"Business?" the man said, giving a derisive snort. "What sort of business?"

Mori frowned at the man and pursed his lips for a moment before replying. "I am Hukkath's agent."

"You?" The man scoffed, 'Hukkath's agent? Right. If you were Hukkath's agent, you wouldn't need me to open the barrier."

"All right then. If you insist." Mori reached over his shoulder and drew his two-handed blade. Almost casually he stabbed it across the line of rocks where it struck an invisible wall, leaving a trail of sparks along the length of the blade until it was half way through. He then turned the blade like a key in a lock, causing a visible ripple in the air as a large arch opened in the wall, a static discharge ran up and down the inside of the arch. "Now, do I have to open you up as well to gain admission, or do you want to go tell your boss that Hukkath's agent has arrived?"

The blood drained from the man's face as he watched the barrier open up for the stranger. "I..I'm sorry," he stuttered, taking a step back. "I didn't realize, my lord. We get so many people claiming... Please, come this way and I'll take you to the mayor."

'Who's this Hukkath character," Sheila asked as they followed the man into town.

"I'll explain later," Mori replied leading the horse through the barrier. Once they were all past, it snapped shut behind them, once again leaving only the slightest shimmering to show that anything was there. "Right now I think you'd much rather that I get you to a room with a comfortable bed and a bath."

The vixen frowned at Mori. "You're just trying to distract me."

"Is it working?" He asked with a smile, ignoring her scowl.

Sheila gave a derisive grunt. "Not really, but I won't complain about being comfortable for a night, assuming that you don't wind up killing anyone in the process."

Mori's expression changed for a moment as he looked like he was going to say something, but the emotion vanished as did any attempt on his part to speak. Instead, he simply followed the man into town and up to a large house near the center. As they approached he saw a rather tall, pale skinned man with short, curly, blond hair come out. His clothing was far better than that of the few other people they'd seen in town and his leather shoes and belt shone. He held out his hand as the trio stopped in front of him. "Greeting's. I'm Mayor Begly. I assume that you're the representative

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that our patron has sent?"

Taking the man's hand, Mori gave it a firm handshake. "Yes. I am Mori, Judge of the Contract." He turned and gestured to the vixen. "This is Sheila, my traveling companion. She is under my protection while we are here. I will require a comfortable bed and private room for her while we're here, as well as a bath."

"I see no problem with that," the mayor replied with a practiced smile. "We have a bedroom in my house that will work perfectly. I'm sure we can also arrange for a bath for the young lady." He turned the practiced smile on Sheila's unhappy face, and then turned quickly back to Mori. "How long will you be gracing our humble town?"

"I have pressing business elsewhere," Mori replied tersely. "The sooner I get this over with the better."

"Fine," the mayor turned to the man in leathers. "Loren, take care of their buggy, then let everyone know that we will be having a town meeting after sundown. Everyone must attend, including the children."

"Yes, Lord Mayor," the man replied, bowing before quickly withdrawing and taking the horse and buggy with him.

"If you'll follow me inside," the mayor stated, opening the door for them, "I think we can see to getting you settled in." Once they trio had entered the house, Begly raised his voice, "Katrina, we have company."

A few moments later, a young woman came out from a rear portion of the house, wiping her hands on an apron. Her head was covered with a scarf, hiding all but a few wisps of brown hair. The only thing about her that appeared at all ornate was the small gold ring, which pierced the split of her nostrils. She gave the two strangers a quick glance, lingering on the vixen before bowing to the master of the house. "How may I be of service?"

"Show these people to the spare bedroom, then draw a bath for the young lady." He turned and smiled to the pair. "Please go with Katrina. She will see to your needs. I must prepare for the judging." A look of almost pure glee crossed his face. "This is a most exciting time. Most exciting." He shared another smile with everyone before marching out the front door.

"Please," Katrina said, getting their attention again. "If you will follow me, I'll show you to your room."

"Room or rooms?" Sheila asked behind the girl.

Katrina paused by a door and frowned. "We only have one spare room," the girl explained opening the door and leading them in. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience. I

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will find my master and see if he can make arrangements elsewhere."

"That won't be needed," Mori said, interrupting the conversation. "I will sleep in the chair in the corner." He gestured to an ornate if not over-padded chair that sat in the corner, an ottoman pushed up next to it.

For a moment the girl's glance wavered between the two, trying to figure out what to do, before finally bowing. "As you wish, my lord. I will prepare that bath for you now, miss. If you need anything," she reached out and gently moved a silk cord which dangled from the ceiling, "simply pull this cord." Again she bowed before stepping outside the room and closing the door.

"What do you think you're doing, telling her you'll sleep in here?" Sheila asked, her voice dripping with anger. "I don't want you or anyone else in my room when I sleep, do you understand me?"

"Clear as a bell," Mori replied, sitting down on the ottoman. "I don't plan on sleeping in here anyway."

Sheila's anger changed to curiosity. "Oh?"

"I don't need to sleep," he replied, laying backwards and stretching out. "However I wasn't about to tell her that. It's none of her business."

"Fine, you don't sleep in here," the vixen replied, kicking his feet. "That doesn't mean you can lounge around in here either. I want to try and take a nap before that bath's ready, so if you don't mind, how about making yourself scarce?"

"Fine by me," he said sitting up then standing. "I should probably supervise the preparations for tonight anyway."

"What preparations?" Sheila asked, sitting down on the bed. "I remember you saying something about being a judge. What was all that about?"

Mori shook his head. "It's nothing for you to worry about. A contract was made a decade ago. I'm here to judge if these people have kept their end of the bargain." He stepped out of the room, re-closing the door behind him and blocking any further questions Sheila might have had.

"What the hell could he be judging," Sheila asked herself as she lay down on the bed, trying to find a comfortable position. "Damn it, I hate it when people act all mysterious like that."

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The vixen sat before the mirror as the last rays of the setting sun streamed into the

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window. She was using a silver brush on her long hair, working the few remaining tangles out of it as it dried. The bath had been luxurious and something she was beginning to get used to. A knock at the door broke her train of thought. "Yes?" she called out.

The door opened to reveal the young girl. "I must now go to the town meeting. If you need anything, please help yourself. The kitchen is in the rear-most part of the house. Please be careful of the stove as it is still quite hot."

"What's with this town meeting?" Sheila asked, putting down the brush and straightening her silks as she stood. "What's it about?"

"I do not know, miss," the girl replied with a shrug. "All I know is that my master has ordered everyone in town to attend the meeting, even the children. There are to be no exceptions."

Sheila chewed on her lower lip for a second. "In that case, maybe I should go too."

"I don't think so," the girl replied slowly, thinking about it. "If you were to come, I'm sure my master would have informed me. Since he said to make sure you were comfortable before I left, I would think that you were supposed to stay here."

"Harrump," the vixen grunted as she finished sticking the scabbards into her belt. "In that case, I think that I should go."

The girl looked like she wanted to argue, but then gave a small bow. "As you wish."

Together the two walked from the house a short distance to a large building that looked like it could have been a warehouse. As they arrived at the door, Sheila saw that there were about thirty or so adults seated in folding wooden chairs that faced a low stage. On the stage sat a long row of benches, on which sat all the children who fidgeted, chattered and occasionally poked each other as children were wont to do. Behind the rows of folded chairs, Sheila saw another thirty or so feet of open space and then what appeared to be sacks of grain and unmarked crates resting against the back wall. In the middle of that open space sat about a dozen or so chairs arranged in a small cluster. Sheila's guess was that the place did double duty as a town hall, recreation center and warehouse.

"What are you doing here?" Mori's angry voice caused her head to snap around. "You should be back in your room."

"I came to watch the town meeting," Sheila replied bracing herself for an argument.

"This is no place for you. You should go back to your room." He took her arm and tried to move her outside. "This doesn't concern you. You shouldn't be in here."

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"No!" the vixen barked, planting her feet and holding her ground. "This does involve me. You dragged me away from Hecate and into this town. I'm not going to go hide in my room just because you said so."

"God damn it...." Mori paused, closing his eyes and counting to ten. "Sheila, I know that you're curious about what's happening here, but please understand when I say that it's not something you want to be a part of, I really do mean that you do *not* want to be here."

"I'll make my mind up about where I do and don't want to be," she replied, jerking her arm away from him. "Now if you don't mind, I'm going to go sit down."

"Sheila, please," Mori pleaded, stopping her. "I'm asking you---no, I'm *begging* you. Please don't stay here."

Sheila was surprised at the pleading look that was on his face. For a moment, she considered going back to the room, but squashed that idea. "No. You dragged me into this, now you're going to have to put up with me."

The expression on Mori's face changed from pleading to a harsh mask that was unreadable. "As you wish," he replied in a flat, monotone voice. "If you'll follow me, there is seating in the back where you and the others who are not directly involved in the proceedings will sit." He led her to the cluster of chairs in the back of the room. When they got closer, Sheila saw that a pentagram and circle had been drawn around the seats. "Do not step on the lines or any of the lettering." He said, directing her to a chair in the front. Sheila gave him a nervous glance then made her way carefully to the chair where she sat down.

Mori then went back to the entrance where the mayor was standing. "Is everyone here?"

"All here and accounted for," the mayor cheerfully replied, closing the door. He then walked up onto the platform with Mori following close behind. Standing in the middle of the stage, he glanced on an ornate symbol that hung on the wall before turning back to face the audience. "Friends, we are gathered here tonight for the judging of our contract with the Sorcerer Hukkath. This is Mori, the Judge of the Contract. Please give him a warm welcome." He gave a polite clap along with the rest of the townsfolk before sitting down on a chair at the end of the stage.

Mori nodded to the townsfolk, his face still a blank mask. "I am the eye, voice and arm of Hukkath. It has been ten years since the founding of your town, and I am here to make sure that you are following the bargain made at its founding to the letter. First though, I must ask some of you to go sit inside the circle I have drawn in the back of the room. Anyone here who is a slave, please go to the circle. Any child who is not first born, go to the back of the room." The last was directed to the children sitting on the bench. The announcement caused a bit of a stir in the room and

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amongst the children. Half a dozen got up and walked to the back of the room with a dejected look, feeling left out. Mori went to a crib on the end of the row, picked it up and took it to the eldest boy and handed it to him. "You are to sit in the back with this child."

"But I'm first born!" The boy looked from Mori to the mayor who sat in the first row. "I'm first born!"

"I know," Mori replied. "I must still ask you to go to the back. All will be explained."

The boy took the basket and made his way to the back, with Mori following closely. On the way, Mori pointed to one couple and asked them to join the circle also. The murmur of discussion in the room increased as he checked the circle. Once he returned to the front of the room, one of the people stood and spoke. "Why were they sent to the back? Why do you only choose from the first born?"

"Why only the first born?" Mori echoed incredulously. He glanced over at the mayor who only continued to smile at everyone. "You don't know?" His question took the townsman by surprise, and the man sat down when Mori waved to him. Mori walked around behind the bench, touching each child on the head as he passed them. With the touch, each child's eyes glazed over and they got a dreamy smile on their faces. "You weren't told about the bargain that was made with Hukkath?"

Someone from the front row spoke up. "We know that he agreed to protect this village and make it prosper. In return there would be a choosing for the most suitable candidates to enter into his service."

Mori paused before putting his hand on the head of the youngest boy who smiled up at him. With a touch, the boy joined his companions under Mori's spell. "Enter into his service," Mori said with a low voice to the mayor. "That was quite clever wording."

"Thank you," Mayor Begly replied, his grin growing slightly wider.

"Yes, I suppose you could say your children were to enter into his service," he stated walking around to where Hukkath's symbol hung on the wall. "You are all fools, though, for not questioning such a bargain."

The same man stood back up "What do you mean by that?" he demanded. "What does he mean?" he demanded of the mayor.

"You are all fools and idiots," Mori said in a low, angry voice. "Have you no idea what the true bargain was?" He paused to look at the group. His angry stare had a physical presence to it that forced the man back down. "Hukkath isn't a sorcerer; he's one of the demon princes of Hell, and your bargain was to sacrifice your children's souls to his service, and in return your town would prosper without risk of danger or

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harm from the outside!"

There was a stunned silence that was broken by an almost simultaneous scream of denial as all the adults tried to stand, but found they couldn't move. Mori looked down at the line of children under his spell who were blissfully unaware of what was going on or would soon happen. "Dear God, forgive me." He raised his hand and uttered a single word: "Shiboo!"

Sheila jumped out of her chair and tried to run towards the platform, but ran into an invisible barrier that had been created by the circle that Mori had drawn. She watched horrified as the entire row of children slumped and fell to the floor with the stroke of that spoken word. Her shouts mingled with the rest of the crowd's horror and outrage, echoing around in the wooden building and beating on the occupants with a surreal force. The only person who was neither surprised nor horrified by what had happened was the mayor whose smile had evolved into a smug, sadistic look.

Mori walked back out to stand under Hukkath's symbol that hung on the wall above head height. "Quiet!" His voice thundered in the room and had with it a spell that demanded compliance. "You people disgust me," he said in a low, angry voice. "Each and every one of you knows that nothing comes without a price." He looked down at the bodies strewn in front of the bench. "And something this powerful never comes without a price that should never be paid."

He glared at the crowd then turned to the mayor. "As mayor of this town it was your duty to see that the rules were followed. Only married couples, single people with their own children and slaves were to take residence here. You yourself broke that rule."

The mayor tried to stand, but found he too couldn't move. "What are you talking about? I followed the rule! Everyone here is a slave, single parent or married couple! Everyone!"

"All except you," Mori said quietly.

The mayor looked stunned, then angry. "No! That's my son in the back," he pointed to the tall boy who Mori had handed the basket to. "He is my son. He's my first born!"

Mori shook his head. "He's your wife's son, but not yours. Since your wife is dead and never came here, that means that he is here in breach of the contract." Mori gave the shocked man a sadistic smile. "You can thank Harriman the Smith for that."

His face once again hardened as he turned towards the crowd. "As judge of this contract, I declare you to be in breach of contract and the price owed to Hukkath is now due!" He drew his sword, turned and smashed it against the symbol on the wall.

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There was a bright flash of light as both the sword and the symbol were destroyed, sending glowing embers ricocheting around the room. People screamed in agony as the bolts of light passed through them, growing brighter as they ripped the person's soul from their body.

Everyone inside the circle cringed as shards of light bounced off the invisible barrier and continued on their way, searching for a live body. After a minute of this, Mori held the hilt of his sword out causing all of the shards to reform into the blade, a blade that glowed with a hellish light. He then casually slung it over his shoulder and clipped it into the holder.

Sheila and the others looked out in horror at the gruesome sight before them. Where there had once been more than thirty people, there was now a mangled pile of splintered wood and shredded bodies. Mori walked around the growing pool of blood, creating a clean path with a wave of his hand. He stopped just outside the ring and looked at Sheila. "Are you satisfied? I didn't want you to have to see this, but you wouldn't give me any choice."

"You monster!" She spat. "They were only children! How could you?"

Mori used the tip of his shoe to break the outer ring, destroying the spell that created the barrier. "I had no choice. You heard what I said. They made a deal with a demon and I was here to collect the price. I'm not the bad guy here."

"Not the bad guy?" It was the son of the mayor who spoke up. "You've killed all of my friends. You killed my father!"

Mori gave the boy such a scathing look that the child was forced to backup a step for fear of his life. "Your father was an evil man who tricked others into selling their children's souls for his benefit."

"You could have walked away," Sheila argued. "You didn't have to kill anyone. You didn't have to kill *everyone*."

"If I didn't, someone else would." Mori's face softened slightly as he let some of the anger fade. "The only person in here who had defaulted on their bargain was his father. Everyone else hadn't. If I hadn't done what I just did, someone else would have come along behind me and harvested those children's souls."

"So it's better that you harvested them instead?" the boy shouted, tears rolling down his eyes. The others in the group stayed motionless, not wishing to draw attention to themselves.

"I didn't harvest them," Mori said in a quiet voice. "Or didn't you notice that they were already dead when I destroyed the emblem?"

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"But... but... you killed them, we saw it." Katrina had found her voice and stepped forward. "You said something and they all just dropped to the floor."

Mori nodded gravely. "Yes, I killed them, but I didn't harvest them," he explained. "Their souls will most likely go to purgatory and then get recycled for another chance. Unlike Hell, Heaven doesn't keep innocent souls to use for its own purposes. They're given another chance at life." He took a step towards the stunned vixen. "Don't you understand, Sheila?" he asked in a pleading voice. "It was the only way I could save them."

"I...I don't know," Sheila slowly replied. "I just don't know about any of this. Maybe you did do the best thing, maybe not. All we have is your word for it." She looked around, trembling. "I...I just don't know." She glanced at the others before making her way towards the exit. Mori held his hand up, stopping the others from following her out.

"What do you want now?" the boy asked.

Mori gestured for Katrina to step forward. "Take the ring in her nose. She's your property now." The boy did so. Mori then turned to the couple. "You've had no children, so I have no claim on your souls. As long as you never produce children, you'll be safe from Hukkath." The two looked each other and nodded. "Since I'm sure you'd like to have children of your own, I'm trusting that you'll care for these." The half a dozen children looked nervously at the two adults.

"We'll do the best we can," the man replied nervously.

"This village is no longer under the protection of Hukkath. When I destroyed his emblem, I also destroyed the barrier. If I were you, I'd load up some wagons with anything you can carry and move along to the next village." With that, he turned from the group of survivors and walked out of the building. Outside, Mori looked up at the stars for a second, trying to put what had happened in the warehouse behind him. He was still staring at the stars when the couple and the kids left the building.

An hour later, he turned and began heading towards the mayor's house. He got about half way there when he suddenly grunted and doubled over in pain. "Not now!" he muttered over and over as he collapsed to his knees. "Not now, goddamn it!" A few seconds later, the pain subsided, leaving him panting and sweating. He unsteadily got to his feet and stumbled to a post on the porch of the mayor's house and leaned against it. "Just a little longer," he whispered with his eyes closed. "Get her to Ruddygore. Once she's safe with him, I can deal with this."

It took several minutes for him to recover his composure and enter the house. Sheila had closed and bolted her door, which was fine with him. He took a chair and pulled it up to the wall next to the door, sat down and leaned backwards. Hukkath was going to be pissed about not getting the kids' souls, but that was something that he'd

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deal with when the time came. Slowly he became aware of the quiet sound of Sheila crying in the other room. He leaned his head back against the wall and stared at the ceiling as the first tear began its trek down his face.

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Undesirable secrets shall, whenever possible, be made known at an inopportune time. –
Book of Rules, V153 s113(d)

Sheila sat at the makeup table, staring into the mirror. She wasn't really seeing her reflection. Instead she was haunted by the events of the prior night. Shaking her head to break free of the memory, she took a good look at herself in the mirror. The silks were as bright and colorful as always. Oddly enough, she'd gotten used to seeing herself with the swords tucked into her side that it felt wrong to be without them. Reaching around behind her head, she untied the leather strap that held her hair in a loose ponytail. Slowly, she worked the mass of hair out with her fingers, frowning at the image. "I look like some kind of unkempt, mangy mutt you'd see on the street around here," she grumbled picking up a brush from the table. Mechanically she began to brush her hair out, fighting with the tangles that had inevitably managed to make themselves at home.

"Are you hungry yet?" Mori's voice asked from the door. He watched as her head snapped around to look at him before turning back. The look she'd given him wasn't encouraging. "You need to eat something before we go," he commented, walking over by the table. "You are eating for two, remember? You really should eat something."

"I'm not hungry," came the vixen's terse reply as she struggled with a knot, trying to ignore him.

"Here," he said, reaching for the brush, "let me give you a hand with that."

Sheila stood and moved quickly away from him. "I don't need any help from you. In fact, I don't need anything from you. Why don't you run off and find someone to kill and leave me alone."

The man's scarred face scowled at her. "Take it easy, lady. I was just trying to be helpful."

"I don't want your help," she spat back, her fists clenched in anger. "I don't want to have anything to do with a... a... *monster* like you!"

Mori turned away for a minute and hung his head before looking back. "I never wanted you to see that. You have to believe me. I tried to warn you."

"I'm glad I saw it," she snarled at him. "Otherwise I wouldn't have known what you really are, a murderer!"

Anger flared in his eyes as he snarled at her, "They deserved what they got and don't you ever think any differently." The words had a surreal force behind them as if she could feel his anger. "I'm not the monster here, they were!"

"Those children didn't deserve to die!" She shouted, throwing the silver hairbrush at him. He twitched his head to the side allowing it to fly by, smashing into the mirror. "You murdered them and for all I know, you're going to murder me, too!"

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He stormed across the room towards her, his face a mask of rage. In defense, Sheila drew the wakazashi and held it out, keeping him at length. “I told you already, I did the best I could for them. Their souls would have been forfeit if I hadn’t done what I did.”

“So you say,” she replied with a low growl.

Mori glared at her for the better part of a minute before regaining his composure. “There’s food on the table in the main room. I’m going to go hitch up the buggy and get it loaded. We’ll be leaving in an hour. I suggest that you get yourself ready to go.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” she stated, keeping the tip of the sword pointed at him.

“Oh?” he asked, his face now an unreadable mask. His right hand shot up, grabbing the blade around the top and preventing her from moving the tip more than an inch in any direction. “Understand this. You’re coming with me if I have to pick you up by the scruff of your neck and carry you. If need be, I’ll hogtie you in the back of the buggy.” He stepped past the tip of the blade so that he was looking down at her, a scant few inches separating their faces. “Have I made myself clear?”

For the first time since meeting him, Sheila felt an all-encompassing fear penetrating the ever-present anger and resentment she felt. She gave a microscopic nod and said, “Perfectly.”

“Good,” he replied, releasing the sword. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.” He turned and walked towards the door without an apparent second thought to the sword that Sheila still held.

She watched him leave the room, torn between the terror she felt and the anger that was goading her into using the sword. A full five minutes after he’d left, she shakily managed to put the sword back into the scabbard before sitting down again in front of the mirror. She looked at her distorted image in the broken mirror, the crisscrossed spider web lines of the shattered glass giving a surreal image in return, and she wondered again just what the hell she’d gotten herself into.

Mori carried half a dozen large, leather sacks from the main house out to the buggy that he’d parked in front of the house. Each of the bags clinked with the sounds of coins as he dropped them at the rear of the buggy. Picking them up one at a time, he spent several seconds casting a spell on them, before placing them into the luggage compartment. After placing the last bag in the buggy, he returned inside to find Sheila sitting at the table, mechanically eating some meat, cheese and bread.

He walked passed the table, making sure to go around the far end, entered the study and went down the stairs in the center of the floor to the cellar. The earthen basement under the house was unlit, but that didn’t bother him. He made his way to the large vault that

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stood open, its door wrenched from the hinges and leaning against the far wall. Inside he picked up the last bags of gold and carried them up. The stairs leading to the study groaned at the weight, threatening to buckle and snap, but managed to survive his passage. Once outside, he again repeated the spell on all but one bag. The last bag he took over to the wagons, which the survivors of the town were loading up with clothes, some furniture, keepsakes and whatever valuables they could scrounge.

Approaching the lead wagon he walked up to the man who was tying down some furniture so it wouldn't shift. "Here", Mori said, hefting the bag into the wagon, which lurched at the sudden addition of weight, "there's over five hundred gold coins in there. That, combined with whatever you take, should give you a good head start on buying some land and building a homestead."

"Wow," the man replied, opening the top to look at the gold. "Where did that come from?"

"The mayor's vault," Mori replied. "He was hoarding the money he claimed that you people had to pay in tribute."

"If that's true, then where's the rest of it?" came a young man's voice. Mori turned to see the mayor's son. "That money belongs to us, so where is it?"

"That money is forfeit along with everything else in this town, including their lives," he replied turning to face the young man fully. "Of course, if you think you can take it away from me, you're welcome to take your best shot." He drew the glowing, black sword from his back and casually rest the blade on his shoulder. "Assuming you want to join your father and the rest of the people from this town."

The raw emotions of rage and hate were there for anyone to see in the boy's eyes. For an instant it looked like he might actually try to jump the man, but the moment passed. "No," he replied looking down. "There's no way I could defeat you."

"Smart kid," Mori rhetorically replied. He turned back to the man, "Make sure you take everything you want. There won't be anything left of this place after you leave."

The man nervously looked around and swallowed before nodding. "We'll be done and ready to go in about fifteen minutes."

Mori gave the kid one last glance before returning to the buggy. He opened the luggage compartment and scooped out a hand full of gold and began to pop the coins into his mouth the way a person eats peanuts, chewing on them briefly before swallowing them. Occasionally he'd reach back in and pull out another handful, eating them as he watched the remnants of the town finish loading up their wagons. He gave them a brief nod as the two wagons rolled towards the town gates and beyond with the children in back of the wagons, watching their only home as they left it for the last time.

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Once they were out of sight, he turned and entered the house looking for Sheila. She was sitting again in front of the mirror, staring at it. “You ready to go?” Slowly, the vixen turned and looked at Mori then back at the mirror. “If you want, go ahead and take the brush and stuff. It’s not like anyone will ever come back for it.”

Sheila stood and picked up one of the silver candlesticks that sat on the table and walked over to Mori. “You lying bastard,” she said before hitting him in the face with it, dropping him to the ground.

“What the hell was that for?” he snarled at her, holding the side of his face as he stood backup. “Where do you get off hitting me?” he demanded with a snarl.

Rather than be intimidated by him, she stood her ground. “You lying sack of shit,” she replied. “All this time, you’ve been feeding me a line of bull and now you dare to stand there and ask why I hit you?”

”What?” His anger changed to that of confusion. “What the hell are you talking about? I haven’t lied to you!”

“Oh yah?” the vixen replied calmly. “Then what’s your name?”

“My name?” The question took him back. “You know what my name is.”

She nodded and tossed the candlestick away. “Sure I do, *Arden*,” she replied, emphasizing his name. “I couldn’t understand where I’d seen you before until I looked in the mirror.” She turned and walked back over and sat down in front of the shattered mirror. “I was just staring at myself in the mirror when it hit me, I’d seen your face every day when I looked in the mirror. I’d worn that body. I just couldn’t recognize it for the scars.” She reached out and traced one of the cracks, leaving a small trail of blood behind. “Until I saw this.” She turned and glowered at him. “You fucking bastard. Where do you get off lying to me about who you were?”

“I didn’t lie,” he answered sitting down on the bed. “Mori’s the name I went by for years when I was in Japan. It was my public cover.”

“This isn’t Japan, damn it!” she yelled back at him. “All that crap you fed me on the road about being on this quest to save your lover from a spell. That was all bullshit and you know it.”

“No it isn’t,” he replied in a quiet voice looking down at the ground. “It’s true. Every word of it’s true, Sheila.” He looked up at her with tired, haunted eyes. “You’re under a spell that’s making you more angry and full of rage and hate every day.”

Now it was Sheila’s turn to be confused. “Bullshit! What spell?”

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“Remember when I told you that my wish had an aspect of it that made you love me?” He watched for a nod from her. “It was unfair to you. I wanted you to love me for me, not because of a spell. The spell created a link between us so that any emotions would be reflected back as love. It’s why even though we argued there was something always driving us to make up.”

“Are you serious?” the vixen asked, leaning forward slightly. “You’re not screwing with me, are you?”

Arden shook his head. “No, I’m not. I swear to God as my witness that this is the truth.”

“I don’t understand, if this spell is supposed to make me love you, why is it making me so god damn angry all the time?” The confusion in her voice was beginning to give way to the rage again. “What the fuck did you do?” she demanded.

“It’s not what I did. It’s what Lucifer did,” he replied somewhat sheepishly. “He came to me shortly after we’d switched bodies and told me about the spell. He wanted to screw up Lakash’s plans. Breaking the spell would do that. If you were truly destined to be mine, then love would win out. It wasn’t fair to make you love me because of a spell, so I agreed to have him break it.”

“That doesn’t explain why I feel like I’m on permanent PMS here,” she snarled under her breath. “If he broke it, then there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“No. There wouldn’t be a problem if he removed the spell,” he paused to let that sink in. “What he did was to break the spell, as in alter its functionality so that it no longer worked as a love spell. Instead, it worked to try and split us apart.”

“Great! You stupid idiotic moron!” She stood and stamped over to where her bag was and picked it up. “You of all people trust the fucking lord of lies to do you a favor and not screw you over in the process. Some god damned guardian you turned out to be.”

”I’m not a guardian, damn it!” He shouted as he stood, causing her to flinch. “I was never trained to be a guardian. My entire life has been about killing people. Do you understand what I’m saying?” He walked up and grabbed the front of her silks. “My job has been to look people in the eye as I stick the knife in. Up close or at two thousand yards, my job is to kill people, not guard them.” He let go of her clothes. “Not until now anyway.” The anger drained as the weight of all the events crashed down on him at once. “That’s why I couldn’t save Bjorn. That’s why I couldn’t do anything as long as I had to protect you. I didn’t know how, and frankly, I’m not all that much better now.” He looked at her with pained eyes. “I’m trying the best I can, all right? That’s all I can do.”

Sheila studied him for a long moment as a storm of conflicting emotions raged within her. Finally she nodded to him. “All right, I think I can deal with it.” She let out a long sigh and rubbed the bridge of her muzzle. “At least now I know why I’ve been so

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damned moody.” She frowned at him and growled, “The least you could have done was told me before now.”

“Like you told me about being in heat?” He replied, his voice devoid of any sarcasm or venom.

The vixen winced and nodded. “Touché.” She shook her head and glanced over at the broken mirror. “Let’s hope that crap about seven years bad luck isn’t for real.” Turning from the mirror, she made her way to the buggy.

“Like it could get any worse?” He asked as he followed her out of the room.

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Team Spirit

Sheila was half way into the buggy when she suddenly backed up, fanning the air in front of her. "Good lord!" she exclaimed in a nasal voice as she clenched a paw over her snout. "Whad's dat a'ful smel?"

"Smell?" the man next to her echoed, pausing to take a sniff of air, "Oh, that. That's just the mess over in the warehouse."

The vixen's brows furrowed as she looked over to the large building. "Mess?" She looked back at Arden with a quizzical look. "Wha' mess?"

"The corpses, my dear," He replied, offering her a hand back up into the buggy. "They're starting to rot."

"Don't you think you should burry them or something?" she asked, unclamping her snout and trying to breathe only through her mouth, but grimacing at the smell that managed to sneak in each time she took a breath. "I mean, they don't really deserve to be left out for the scavengers. They may have been stupid, but come on!"

Arden got an annoyed look on his face as he studied the vixen. Sheila could almost see the cogs turning over in his head. A few breaths later, he nodded. "All right. I'll do it. Not because they deserve it, but because you asked me to."

"Do what?" Sheila asked, now desperately using a corner of her cloak to try and act as a filter. "And how come you aren't bothered by the smell?"

"I'm a dragon, remember?" As he talked, he helped her up into the buggy. "This kind of carnage actually smells rather appetizing to me." He laughed at the horrified look that the vixen gave him. "And no, I'm not going to go have lunch in there." Walking around to the back of the buggy, he put Sheila's gym bag into the trunk, then sealed it with a quick glyph. Arden took a moment to survey the town, ensuring that the others had left, before he walked over to the center of the village and stood by the well. For a moment he appeared to be simply standing there with his eyes closed, as if resting, but soon he opened them and began to gesture at the buildings, waving his arms and hands in an intricate motion that reminded Sheila of an odd dance. After completing a circle, he stopped and returned to the buggy and took the reins. He then walked the buggy past the stone circle that marked the border of the town.

"Stay here," he told Sheila as he walked back to the doorway of the warehouse. As she watched, he inhaled a tremendous breath of air, and then gave a terrible yell that shook the ground around him. A stream of flame billowed from his mouth, filling the inside of the wooden structure, causing it to burst into flames. Almost as quickly as the flames began to spread to the outside of the building, they began to leap from rooftop to rooftop until the entire village was engulfed in an inferno. Casually,

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ignoring the raging fire around him and the tremendous, unnatural heat generated by his spell, Arden walked back to the buggy and climbed in. Taking the reins in hand, he turned around to look at Sheila and asked, "Is that good enough?"

Tearing her eyes away from the holocaust, she looked at him and nodded. "Yah. That's good enough."

"I should certainly hope so," he replied with a crooked smile, turning around. With a snap of the reins the horse began to trot down the road, following the curves without any apparent input from the driver. Once they reached the main road he turned right to continue on towards the northwest, following the River of the Dancing Gods, though somewhat at a distance.

Bored of watching the scenery slowly scroll by, Sheila noticed Arden occasionally reaching into a bag, removing something, and then popping it into his mouth. "What are you eating?"

He glanced back with a smile and shook his head. "Nothing you'd want to eat."

"Oh?" she replied, her ire rising at his offhanded tone. "And just who are you to decide that?"

Chuckling, he reached into the bag and tossed a gold coin back to the vixen. Her brow furrowed as she looked at the coin. "Are you kidding me?" she said, leaning forward to verify he was actually eating the coins. "You're eating gold?"

"Yep," he replied, tossing another one in. Sheila could hear a low sizzling sound as he chewed on the rare metal. "Why do you think dragons hoard gold? You don't think we do it out of greed, do you?"

"Well," she paused and thought about the question. "I guess I never really thought about it before. I don't suppose dragons spend their gold at Monkey Wards, do they?"

Popping another coin into his mouth, he smiled and shook his head. "Nope. Dragons need gold to survive. It's a very important mineral to us. Without a regular supply of the stuff, we'd suffer all kinds of nasty problems."

"Hmm. Guess you learn something new every day." The vixen flipped the gold coin over a couple of times, looking at the image before biting the soft metal. There was no way she would ever chew on one like he was doing, soft though the metal was. Her attention snapped back to Arden as he suddenly made a retching sound and spit out a chunk of metal. "What's wrong?"

"God damn it," He complained, continuing to spit for several seconds, trying to clear the taste from his mouth. "Someone put copper into the bag. God that stuff is

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revolting."

Sheila leaned back and chuckled at his discomfort.

"What the hell do you mean, you can't find him?" Hecate demanded.

Benny fought not to backup in the face of the demoness' rage. "We searched both the fae and the real world. There's no sign of him."

"That's un acceptable!" she shouted, glaring at the half dozen acolytes who knelt behind her aide. "I want that little shit found, and I want him found NOW! The last thing I need is to have one of the celestials getting hold of him."

"Mistress," came the voice of a very tall, gaunt, ebony-skinned man with a smoothly shaven head. "There is one other possibility."

Hecate's brows furrowed as she glared at the man. "What other possibility?"

"I believe the World Mage may have him," he replied, bracing himself for her response.

"No!" Benny shouted, glaring at the man. "We have no proof it was him!"

"QUIET!" Hecate shouted, cowering both men. "Why do you say it was the World Mage?" she demanded from the dark-skinned man.

"I can't be sure, Mistress," he replied, bowing again. "I was tracking his scent and it dead-ended in the side of a hill. I'm not positive but I think I saw the residue of a portal."

The demoness frowned at the man. "So? How do you know he didn't somehow open a portal to the planes?"

"The aura was green, Mistress," the man replied, wincing in anticipation of her reaction.

Hecate's eyes flared with power as a momentary wave of anger washed over her, but the rage faded quickly as she let out a long, slow breath that was almost a sigh. "All right. Maybe that bastard does have him." She rubbed her chin as she surveyed the men before her. "There's nothing we can do about it until we find out where he is. Besides, I have some urgent business back in Husquahar." She turned to her aide and began snapping orders. "Organize search teams. I want all of the fae on our side digging for info about him. Tell them to be discreet. Promise them whatever you need to in return for info on where he is." She frowned at the group and growled, "I

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want that brat found."

Arden leaned back against the buckboard seat and popped a few more coins into his mouth as he waited for Sheila to finish relieving herself behind the bushes. He glanced over and sat up as she waddled up to the buggy, and climbed aboard. Unlike every other time she'd gotten into the buggy, Sheila plopped herself down in the front seat, rather than the back. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked in a miffed tone of voice.

"I'm sitting up here so you can teach me how to drive this thing," she responded as if stating a fact of nature.

"And why should I teach you how to drive a horse and buggy when you're supposed to be hiding in the back?" He shook his head and sighed. "The idea is for you to keep out of sight, Sheila. You can't do that by sitting up front."

"Look," she snarled back, her anger unchecked, "I'm not going to get screwed next time you decide to pull a vanishing act. I want to know how to drive this stupid thing so I can take off if something happens."

The snide remark died before ever leaving his lips. Nodding, he handed the reins over to her. "You're right," he said by way of an apology. "I should be teaching you how to survive around here, even if it is only for a couple of days." Over the course of the next fifteen minutes he walked the vixen through the basics of controlling the horse and how not to ruin the horse by sending it conflicting signals. "All right," he grunted, leaning back to munch on some more coins, "now you know how to drive. Anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," she replied, propping her feet up against the front rail. "You keep talking about all the fancy magic in these swords and the outfit. How about explaining some of it?"

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Well, the suit you know. Simply concentrate on what you need from it. Concealment, strength, protection, whatever it is you need, it will try and sense what you want and respond accordingly."

Sheila gave him sideways look and cocked an ear in his direction, "So you mean that there's not a set number of things it can do?" She let out a low whistle and gave a small shake of the head. "That's gotta be one hell of a spell."

"Well, not exactly," he replied somewhat sheepishly. "Actually, Lakash made the armor for me, and it's not a spell that does all that."

"Not a spell?" Sheila responded, stopping the buggy. "If it's not a spell, then just

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what the hell is it?"

Arden cleared his throat and gave her a cockeyed smile. "It's sort of got a mind of it's own."

"WHAT?" the vixen demanded in a shrill voice.

"The armor has been imbued with the spirit of a guardian dragon," he replied quickly, trying to calm her down. "It's not exactly sentient, not really. It's about as smart as a well trained dog, maybe. It senses your mood and tries to accommodate whatever you need."

The vixen scowled at him and growled in a low voice. "So what' you're saying is that I'm wearing some kind of haunted armor?"

"Well, not haunted, exactly," he replied, wincing. "Haunting implies a soul is involved. The spirit is a construct. Really, you're overreacting about this. I mean, it's not like it ever tried to take control of you or anything, right?"

"What about the night it wouldn't let me take it off?" She crossed her arms and scowled at him. "The night that you splattered some poor bastard's blood all over me?"

"Well, it didn't possess you," he replied, inching back a little. "It just prevented you from taking it off while you were afraid. You were scared and it was doing the only thing it knew to do to keep you safe. Really. Think about it. It's saved your life a couple of times." He chewed on his lip for a second then smiled. "Remember when you were outside the cave and I roasted Rathsmon? You drew the tanto as the flames washed over you? The tanto protected you because you drew it and you drew it because the armor knew you needed it to protect you from the flames."

Sheila glanced away as she remembered the moment, then nodded, unfolding her arms. "Ok. I'll give you that one. All right, I'll put up with the haunted armor. Now what about the swords?"

"Ahh," he said with a smile, "The swords. The tanto is loaded to the hilt with protection spells. The wakazashi and katana are both loaded with different elemental attacks." He paused for a second, his smile fading to a forced grimace. "And, um, well, when I made them, I did the same thing as Lakash and imbued them with a spirit, though they're nowhere as powerful as the one Lakash created."

For several seconds she just stared at him, unmoving before closing her eyes and shaking her head. Turning back forward, she picked up the reins and gave them a flick to get the horse moving. It was several minutes before she spoke again. "You realize that I'm going to have nightmares about this crap now, right?"

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He gave her a quirky smile and chuckled. "Think of them all as a team, kind of like a football team and you're the coach." His smile grew as she gave him a sideways look that betrayed her confusion. "Hey, at least you'll never have to worry about a lack of team spirit."

It would take several days for the bruise on his arm to fade.

"Where is she?" The man behind the counter in the lobby of the hotel flinched at the sound of Hecate's voice as she yelled. Moments later, Hecate, again in the guise of an elf came down the stairs, taking them three steps at a time. She stomped over to the desk, reached out and grabbed the man by his tabard and hauled him half way over the counter. "Where the hell is she?" she demanded again.

"Where is who?" the man shot back, trying to keep his composure.

"The woman at the top of the stairs, first door on the left," the elf replied, snarling at the man. "Where did she go?"

"She left yesterday morning." He replied hastily, swallowing his fear. "She snuck out without paying."

"What?" a stunned Hecate replied, letting go of the man. "Was anyone with her?"

The man straightened up his tunic before replying. "Yes. My daughter saw a rather evil looking faery with her at the time. She said that your friend looked almost eager to go with her."

"An evil faery?" Hecate parroted to herself. Looking back up at the man, she scowled. "What did this faery look like?"

"Well," he said, clearing his throat. "She had ebony skin. Black wings on her back, like a bat or a gargoyle, and a long, sinuous tale that ended in a barb. The face reminded her of an Imir."

Hecate allowed her image to shift back to her natural form. "You mean like this?"

The startled man took a step backwards. "By the gods," he muttered, making a sign to protect him from evil. "Yes."

"Son of a bitch," she replied, turning towards the door.

"Wait!" the man called out, stopping her before she had taken three steps. "What about the bill?"

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Hecate started to cast a spell, but stopped herself short of the actual invocation. She reached into a pocket, took out a large coin and threw it at the man. "There. That'll cover your bill." She then turned and stomped out of the building before he could object. Out on the street, shocked passers by steered clear of her as she made her way out to into the middle of the road. Spreading her wings wide, she leapt into the sky, gaining altitude as she slowly circled around the town. "All right, damn it. Where are you?" She muttered, reaching out with her senses. After making several circles, she let out a stream of curses as she headed in a generally northern direction, hoping the faint tingle she'd gotten wasn't a false trail.

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The spirit hits the fan.

The meandering road that the carriage had been following for the last couple of days had recently widened into something approaching a proper two-lane road. More and more, Sheila had to guide their horse around pedestrian traffic that was going either towards or coming from the town ahead. As they crest the hill, she got her first look at a real city. Multiple concentric walls circled the central castle, each standing over a hundred feet tall with gates you could drive a 747 Jumbo Jet through. The gentle rolling hills that surrounded the town were covered with a criss-cross of fields, each growing a different product. Half dozen or so other roads made their way from the distant woods in all directions, leading to the city.

Sheila let out a low whistle as she took in the sight. "Now that's one hell of a town," she commented Arden who was reclining in the seat next to her. "I wonder how many people it holds?"

"Close to half a million, give or take a few," he said without opening his eyes. "This is the capital for the region. There's a king up in that castle and Ruddygore is his sorcerer."

The vixen nodded. "So Ruddygore's going to be up there?"

Arden sat up straight and stretched his arms and back before answering her. "Nope. He's about four days to the west of here."

"WHAT?" she demanded, muzzle agape. "Damn it! We just came from that direction!"

"Yep," the man replied, unfazed by her reaction. "And we'll be going back that direction once we're done here."

"What the hell is so important about this place that we had to come here when we're supposed to be going to Ruddygore's?"

"There's a High Priest of Suffok here that we need to see," he replied with a small grin. "Or have you forgotten that I want to get that curse off of you."

The vixen cocked an ear back as she thought about his reply. "Yah...well... Couldn't Ruddygore get rid of it? He is supposed to be this all powerful magic guy."

Arden shrugged. "He probably could have. But I didn't want to risk having to haggle with him for the service." Before Sheila could reply, he continued. "And yes, I know we have to deal with him about getting home, but that bargain has already been struck by Lakash."

"Harrumph," Sheila grunted, frowning as she gave up on the argument for the moment. "Won't you still have to work out some kind of deal with this priest, or is he

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going to do it for free?"

"That," he replied, pausing for a moment, "is the twenty four dollar question, actually. It's not so much if he'll do it, but for how much. At least all he'll want is gold."

Arden threaded the buggy's path through the meandering streets of the bustling city, towards a large ivory colored temple. As they got closer, Sheila had to lean out slightly so as to be able to look up at the details of the gothic building.

"Man, this looks like one of those old churches over in Europe," the vixen commented, squinting up to see the top of the building that seemed to touch the sky. "I'll bet a lot of people went hungry to build that thing."

"Probably," Arden replied, turning the buggy onto a drive that passed under a huge portcullis that guarded the entrance to the grounds. "If there's one constant in the universe it's that big churches don't get that way without stepping on the little guy."

"Huh," she replied with a sigh. "And here I thought that religions like this were the good guys."

"They are," he replied, pulling the buggy to a stop in front of the ornate double doors. "This is it."

As the pair climbed out of the buggy, a young acolyte came to give Sheila a hand. Arden walked around to offer his hand also. After a minute, an elderly man with a well-trimmed gray beard and just a wisp of gray hair on his head came down the steps. His long, silver and white robe brushed the ground as he glided down the steps. He came to a stop about five feet from the pair and bowed. "My name is Jarad. I believe that you two must be the Arden and Sheila that we have been expecting."

"Indeed," Arden replied, bowing in return. "I'm glad to see that my communication made it. You understand our needs?"

The old man nodded. "Indeed. However, to determine if we can help, we must examine the spell that is bound to her." He paused for a moment while he looked Sheila over. His brow furrowed and a frown crept over his mouth. "That is some most extraordinary clothing she is wearing. Unfortunately, I'm unable to get a good look at the curse with it on." He waved a hand towards the door and nodded to Sheila. "If you will please accompany me inside, I'll be better able to examine the spell away from prying eyes."

Arden nodded to Sheila. "It's OK. Go with him."

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"You're not coming?" She asked, glancing nervously at the old man and the church.

"I can't, Sheila," Arden replied with a frown. "There are rules that I have to obey and one of them says I can't go into that building." He smiled then reached out and cupped her cheek in his hand. "It'll be OK. Trust me."

"Yah, how many times have I heard that before," she muttered before turning back to the priest. "All right. Lead on, McDuck."

Hecate skimmed low over the trees as she approached the small town. Ahead, she sensed something that she thought just might be Sheila. The armor that the vixen wore was damned good at hiding its presence, but Hecate had been around it long enough to sniff out its weaknesses. Gliding on the night air, she found a suitable darkened alley that gave her enough room to come in for a silent landing. Once on the ground, she concentrated on her appearance, once more becoming a fair skinned elf.

Exiting the alleyway, she turned to get her bearings on her sixth sense. After a few moments she made up her mind and proceeded deeper into town, walking casually along the boardwalk. Occasionally she would nod a greeting to someone going the other way as people went about their business. Glancing around as she walked, she was stunned to see one of the dwarfs that had been hunting them earlier come out of a bar. The dwarf glanced about, appearing to pay no attention to the elf before turning and walking away from her.

Without missing a step, Hecate continued down the street, taking no special notice of the dwarf until half a dozen streets later, he turned off of the main thoroughfare. She casually crossed the street at that intersection and followed him until he turned into an alley. As she passed the alley, she saw his shadowed form turning right to pass behind the building she was in front of. Picking up her pace slightly, she went to the next alley and turned down it, gathering the shadows around her. Taking great care, she quickly navigated the length of the alley without a sound. Once at the corner of the building, she peeked in all directions, looking for the dwarf. "Since he didn't cross the alley here, he must have gone into one of these two buildings," she thought, stepping out into the alley.

Picking the door on the right at random, she was about to check it for spells when a voice interrupted her. "Well, well , well," a gruff, gravelly voice muttered, coming from the shadows. Moments later the dwarf she'd been following stepped out from behind a couple of barrels. "If it isn't the great huntress, Hecate," he observed with a chuckle.

Wary of a trap, Hecate drew her sword and glanced around before taking a close look at the chuckling dwarf. She was about to speak when a realization hit her.

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"What the... Rathsmo?"

The dwarf bowed with a flourish. "At your service." He leaned back against a barrel and smiled. "I was wondering when you would show up."

"Where's the Vixen?" the elf demanded, sheathing her sword.

"Sheila?" Rathsmo asked, glancing idly around. "She's not here at the moment."

"What? She's not here!" The Imir reached out and grabbed the small dwarf and hauled him up to her level. "Where the hell is she and why aren't you guarding her?"

"Put me down," the small man demanded in a dangerous tone. Their eyes locked in a brief contest of wills before the elf dropped him to the ground. "That's better," he replied, straightening his clothes. "You could have damaged my threads."

"To hell with your threads," she growled in angry voice. "Where's the bitch?"

Rathsmo stepped over to the barrels again where he proceeded to use a small crate to climb up and sit down on one, putting him closer to eye level with the elf. "You know, you should really learn to relax. You're going to burst a blood vessel one of these days if you keep going off like that." His hands shot up in defense as the elf took an angry step towards him. "All right. Take it easy. She's in the capital right now getting that curse removed."

"You let her go to the capital alone?" Her tail lashed out, striking a crate, shattering it and sending shards flying down the alley. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"It wasn't my decision," he replied with a shrug. "Arden's with her. He told me to wait for them here and act as a decoy for the other hunters."

Hecate paused to study the dwarf. "Arden sent you here as a decoy? Damn it! So I've been tracking you all along?"

"Yep. He cast a spell on me before we split up. He also fixed her armor so it won't be so easy to track. As it is, the other hunters are here waiting for Sheila to stick her muzzle out of hiding, only they don't quite know she's not here yet." He gave the Imir a smug smile that showed off a set of crooked teeth. "And now that you're here, everyone will be sure that the vixen is around which means that you get decoy duty now."

"Oh no!" she said, waving her hands at the idea. "I am not going to be playing decoy. I'm going to go and make sure that my prize is safe. I don't trust Arden not to screw up again and lose her."

Rathsmo let out a long sigh. "He didn't screw up. He's been playing the odds since

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she stuck him in the dragon." He frowned and shrugged. "He knew there was no way he could beat the other dragon riders, and he needed a distraction. He took most of them out at the farm by booby-trapping the cattle. The ones he didn't kill, he fooled into thinking that he was dead after he went into the river."

"All right then," Hecate replied, leaning against a large crate. "If he's been planning this, then why not let us in on it, and where the hell has he been?"

"First of all, he needed you both to think that he was dead. Not just act that way, but really believe it." He let out a bit of an evil chuckle and shook his head. "He was counting on Sheila complaining about his incompetence with great volume and vigor." He smiled as Hecate nodded. "As for where he's been. He was the guy who saved Sheila in the forest while you went to get firewood."

"Wait a minute," the elf interrupted, leaning forward slightly. "From Sheila's description, the guy that saved her had a soul sword. How did Arden wind up with one of those?"

Again, Rathsmoan shrugged. "I don't know. All I know is that it had Hukkath's glyph on it, and he used it to clean out a town that was in default on a bargain."

"Hukkath?" the ebony woman muttered to herself. "What the hell was he doing dealing with Hukkath?"

"I don't know. It has something to do with some sort of deal so that hell would release the soul of a friend of his." The dwarf jumped down from the barrel and brushed his rear off. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to be getting back, or the other dwarves will miss me."

Hecate looked down and cocked an eye at the small man. "They don't know that the body's been possessed?"

"Nope," he said with a gleeful smile. "And unless I screw up completely, they won't." He leaned towards her and whispered in a conspiratorial voice, "You'd be amazed at the things I can do with a really fresh body."

"Great." She sat back and crossed her arms as the dwarf waddled away into the dark. "I'm stuck here acting as decoy while a wild card protects my investment. He better not lose her or I'll be dining on dragon."

Arden stood up as the priest and Sheila exited the cathedral. He met them at the base of the stairs. "Is the curse gone?" he asked, glancing at a rather unhappy vixen.

"I'm afraid that we can not remove the curse," Jarad replied in a sorrowful voice.

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"There were unexpected complications that put the spell beyond our reach."

"Unexpected complications?" the tall man parroted angrily. "What the hell are you talking about? It's a simple disrupted love spell, for Christ's sake."

"I'm sorry. We can't help you," the priest replied, turning to return to the building.

Arden grabbed his arm. "Wait a minute. I'll double the fee. Hell, I'll triple it." He scowled at the man. "Price is no object."

"I'm sorry," the man repeated, pulling his arm away from Arden. "We simply are unable to affect the curse."

Closing his eyes and counting to ten, the tall warrior took a deep breath to calm down. "Fine," he said opening his eyes again. "Then tell me, where there's a coven around here that can handle a high end summoning?"

"Eh?" the priest grunted in surprise. "A coven? Which kind, white or black?"

Arden's face became a mask of stone. "Black."

The priest frowned for a moment before answering. "Turn right at the street and go to the first main road that crosses it. Turn left and you'll see a temple for the Sisterhood of the Snake." He then turned and quickly walked back into the temple without saying another word.

"What where you talking about?" Sheila asked as she was helped into the buggy. "What's this about a black coven?"

"It's time for me to call in a debt," he replied, climbing into the other side. "I'm going to have to summon up a rather high level demon of Hell and that's going to take some high class facilities with a good stock of the proper reagents to do it."

The vixen nodded as they turned on to the street. "And you don't expect to have any trouble with this demon?"

"Quite the contrary," He replied with a grim tone. "In fact, I'll probably have to go to extremes to get him to hold up his end of it." He gave her a dangerous, predatory smile. "It should be very... entertaining."

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Pushed to the breaking point.

Arden helped Sheila climb down from the buggy, which he'd parked in front of the Sisterhood of the Snake's temple. The large, ebony-bricked structure resembled that of a huge, coiled cobra with its head reared over eighty feet in the air. Each scale of the exterior was actually a handcrafted brick as large as a man's head. Sheila looked up at the towering structure and shivered. "If you think I'm going in there, you're nuts," she commented, taking a firm hold on the buggy. "I do NOT like snakes!" she declared with a wide-eyed shake of her head.

A snort of derision from Arden brought a scowl from the upset vixen. "You won't have to worry about any snakes," he replied, placating her as he gently convinced her hand to release the buggy. "They keep them safely tucked away. Besides, what I need won't involve any reptiles so you don't need to worry about it."

He made his way around to the trunk of the buggy as Sheila stared at the building with a mixture of awe and fear. After removing the protective spell on the trunk, he began to remove a bag of gold, then doubled over in pain. Hearing his cry, Sheila rushed to the rear of the buggy. "Arden! Are you all right?"

She reached out to touch him, but recoiled as he snapped at her, yelling, "Don't touch me!" She took a step back, horrified as the skin on his body rippled and shifted as if unknown shapes were moving underneath. Her hand covered her mouth and stared in horror as she watched the kneeling form clutch at his stomach and growl like some hideous animal.

"Not now," he mumbled under his breath, between spasms of pain. "I will not give in. Not now!" After several minutes of this, the attack faded, leaving him on his hands and knees, panting. After a few moments had passed, he climbed to his feet and brushed himself off. Then he again reached inside the trunk and grabbed two sacks of gold, dropping them on the ground before again sealing the trunk with a spell.

"What the hell was that?" Sheila demanded, stepping closer to the buggy.

"Eh?" he grunted before picking up the bags and holding them up. "Why, they're bags of gold."

"That's not what I meant," she replied, starting to hit him but stopping herself before the blow could land and nervously letting her arm drop back to her side. "What the hell was that...that...fit you just had?"

"Oh. That," he replied, glancing away, not wanting to meet her eyes. "It's nothing that concerns you. Now come on," he directed, herding her towards the door, "I want to get this taken care of and get out of town before it gets too late."

Sheila shoved hard against him, pushing his arm away. "No, God damn it!" she

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barked, backing away a step. "I'm not moving from this spot until you explain what happened." She crossed her arms and glared at him as he stared back for over a minute. "Well? Are you going to drop this bullshit machismo attitude and tell me what's going on?"

Arden frowned for a moment before simply stating, "No." He then turned and made his way into the building.

Slack jawed, Sheila stared after him for a moment before snapping her mouth shut. "I swear to God," she muttered, starting after him. "One of these days I'm personally going to kill that asshole." She pushed her way past the doors and into the darkness beyond where she got a sudden feeling of closeness, like the walls were pressing near, even though the foyer was quite spacious. On the other side of the room she saw Arden in a heated discussion with a woman behind the counter. Human and with long, strawberry blond hair that hung in a pair of braids, she wore what looked to be a shirt made of snakeskin as well as a headband of the same shimmering material. As Sheila approached she could hear them talking.

"I don't care how much gold you have," the woman replied. "We're not about to rent out our facilities to any asshole that comes wandering in, no matter how rich."

"Obviously, I don't think you have a grasp of the situation," Arden replied with an annoyed snarl. "How about you go and get someone with a clue so I can take care of my business and get out of here."

The witch bristled at the insult. "Listen, asshole. If you don't want to find yourself turned into a toad and fed to one of the snakes, I'd suggest you hold your tongue."

"Take your best shot, witch," he replied, glaring at the young woman behind the counter.

Before anything else could happen, a strong, matronly voice echoed through the room. "Enough!" The word and the power behind it was enough to get the attention of all three people in the room, though Arden was last to turn and look, making sure it wasn't a ruse. Standing inside an archway, which was decorated in an intricate pattern of runes and symbols, was an elderly lady. Her long, gray hair flowed over her shoulders and down the back of the thick cloak she wore. A long, twisted cane with the head of a snake at the top was gripped in the fingers of an ancient hand, supporting a body that appeared both frail and powerful at the same time. The eyes that looked out from within the wrinkled and weathered face shone with an inner fire.

The young girl behind the counter looked back at Arden with a smug smile that betrayed her contempt for him and her expectations for something nasty to happen. The look faded when the old woman barked a series of foreign words to her that sent

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the girl scuttling from the room, bowing and scraping as she made a hasty retreat.

"I'm sorry about that," the old woman muttered in a now frail voice. "I'm afraid that Seline has never had much in the way of common sense." The sound of her stick striking the floor echoed as she crabbed over to where the pair stood. An evil sounding cackle floated up as she examined the duo. "So this is the mighty Arden," she said, eyeing the man from top to bottom. Her eyes switched to Sheila, causing the vixen's hackles to rise. "And you must be Sheila," she continued, trailing off with a small cackle at the vixen's reaction. "The two of you weren't unexpected." She looked back over at Arden. "I hope Seline didn't cause you much of a problem."

"Not in the least," the man replied as an evil smile spread across his face. "In fact, she was about to provide me with some stress relief. That is, until you interrupted."

The old woman again gave out a cackle that set Sheila's nerves on edge. "As I suspected," she replied, pounding the floor with her stick. "And as much as I would have enjoyed watching it, I'm afraid it wouldn't have been good for morale." She sighed and shook her head. "I also can't afford to lose apprentices, no matter how stupid or naive they may be. But enough of that! What's this about you wanting to use our facilities?"

"I require a large room, suitable for a class five summoning, preferably with a black granite floor, though onyx will suffice." He paused, and then added as an afterthought, "Oh, I also will require a significant number of unusual reagents for the summoning as well as five members of your coven."

The old woman gave him a look of disbelief before letting out a round of laughter. "You're kidding, right?" she finally asked, getting the laughter under control. "How do you expect to pass through the arch? This is a coven you know. No man may cross through the arch, not even a member of the council."

"Why don't you let me worry about that," he smugly replied. "Just invite me in as is required by the rules, and I'll worry about getting past the arch."

The old woman studied him long and hard for several minutes, examining him with her witch sight. "You may be powerful, but I don't see how you're going to cross the threshold." She shook her head and walked back to the arch. "All right then, you are invited into the Coven of the Sisterhood of the Snake. Enter, if you can."

Arden took Sheila's arm and shepherded her to the arch, directing her through before he himself stepped across. For a moment the old woman stared at the arch in disbelief. "Well I'll be damned," she muttered, stepping across the arch again. "I'm going to have to have a talk with Xef'ans'mladatroy about this. No man will ever cross my ass..."

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The room that they had been led to was cavernous. Over forty feet across, the black granite floor was covered in a myriad of designs, the largest of which was a six pointed Star of David. Within each point of the star, there sat a circle with concentric rings containing an intricate pattern of runes within the rings that had been painted on the floor with molten platinum, silver and gold. The star itself consisted of a chalk line that was almost a foot thick. Inside the line had been hand brushed a repeating series of symbols using fresh blood, the source of which Arden hadn't bothered to ask. Lastly, in the center of the hexagon that lay at the heart of the star, Arden kneeled as he finished the lettering on a triple concentric ring. As he inched around the circle, he moved a platter that contained three kettles under which small fires burned, each containing a molten metal: Platinum, gold and silver.

Soon a Nubian woman entered the room pushing a cart with several large bottles on it. "This is all the mercury I could get a hold of. Will it do?" she asked, parking the cart just outside of the star.

Arden looked up at the cart then nodded before returning to his work. "That will do. The preparations will soon be complete. Please summon your sisters and the vixen."

"Yes, my lord," the woman replied, bowing before leaving the room.

With great care, Arden continued to write in a very ornamental yet fluid script until he had linked the last character of the last word to the first word he had drawn in such a way that the script was perfectly spaced and unbroken. He studied his handiwork and nodded. To an outsider, there would be virtually no way to tell where he had started working and where he had stopped. He lifted the tray with the melting pots and carefully made his way to the cart, making sure not to disturb anything as he crossed the complex patterns. He then lifted a large glass container that held almost a gallon of mercury. Going to each of the rings in the outer stars, he poured the mercury onto the inner ring. Rather than simply pooling, as one would expect, the liquid metal instead followed the chalk in a circle, beading slightly. Repeating the process, he was able to complete two more circles before having to get another jar. The last jar he used on the inner ring of the center circle, milking the container for every drop, before returning it to the cart.

The original witch that he had argued with in the foyer had appeared and started to push the cart back when he stopped her. Taking the kettle with the molten gold, he put it to his lips and chugged the contents down the same way a redneck in a bar would chug a pitcher of beer. "Yeouch!" The yell echoed around the room, as he put the kettle back on the cart and began to fan his mouth while hyperventilating. Beads of sweat broke out on his skin as he smiled towards the girl who stood in shock, staring at him. "Oh, man! What a rush!" He let out a laugh as his gold colored tongue scraped a rapidly cooling drip of gold from the corner of his mouth, enjoying the stunned look on the girls face. "That's a bit hotter than I expected, but it definitely hit the spot." He snapped his fingers in front of her face, breaking the shock. "You can

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get rid of that stuff now."

"Y...Y...Yes, my lord," she stuttered before racing out of the room with the cart.

"Now I understand," came the rickety voice of the old woman from behind him. Turning, he saw the old lady standing next to the tip of the star. "You hid your aura quite nicely earlier, but you couldn't hide the flare when you drank the gold." She ambled towards him, making sure not to touch the pattern on the floor. "You are a wyrm. That's how you got by my gate. Somehow you've conscripted the body of a wyrm and are hiding it under that shell of humanity."

Arden smiled and gave her a deep, court bow. "Guilty as charged."

"This is a very interesting pattern you have," the old woman said, waving her stick in the general area of the star. "I recognize some of the runes and symbology, but I've never seen them combined in this way."

"Don't kid a kidder," he snorted in reply. "You recognize all but the inner circle of runes and how I'm intending to use them. By the same token, you know that I'm not just some adept who's out to try something stupid, either."

The old woman grunted while nodding. "So the rumors are true. You've been trained by one of the celestial host." She squinted up at him as she stepped forward, to stand just inches from his chest. "There are also rumors that you're going to trigger the apocalypse. Is that true?"

"And what if it is true?" he shot back, crossing his arms.

"Don't get cheeky with me, boy," She replied, shaking the head of the stick at him. "You may be some celestial's favorite plaything, but your powers are nothing compared to mine."

Arden's expression hardened as he looked down at the old lady. His eyes shifted and changed, showing the red and yellow eyes as he slowly released his full powers. The old woman staggered back a step as she watched the transformation in his eyes, posture and the very aura of his soul. "You have no idea what powers I can call upon," As quickly as the power had gathered, it faded with his eyes returning to normal, though the hard expression remained, framing a wicked grin. "If you wish to observe, find a corner and don't interrupt, otherwise leave." He then turned and began to direct the five young women who stood by the door to various circles, ignoring the old woman who, after taking a few moments to recover her composure made her way over to a chair in the corner and sat down.

Once all the women were in place, Arden led Sheila over to the last circle in star tip that pointed to the north. "Remove your armor and swords, then give them all to

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me."

"What?" Sheila demanded, looking around. "You want me to strip down in here? Now?"

"Yah. Just think of it as if you were shooting some weird scene for one of Zig Zag's movies." He took the armor and swords, tucking the swords into his belt before helping Sheila into the circle.

Setting the clothes outside the star, he went to each small ring and touched the circle of mercury. There was a small flash as the mercury became a razor thin wall that stood maybe five or six inches in height around each person, its sides covered in a mirror image of the runes that had been drawn outside the ring. Finally, he stepped inside the center of the main circle and for the last time, surveyed his work. Satisfied that there were no errors, he took the large, black sword from his back and stabbed it tip-first into the granite, sinking it almost half a meter into the rock.

The old witch in the corner cried out in shock at the damage, but stifled any objection. "Considering how much he's paid for this, I can afford to replace the damn floor," she rationalized.

Stepping over the two inner rings of the central circle, Arden stood in the largest circle of them all that almost touched the insides of the hexagram. He reached out and touched the inner ring of mercury, again muttering a spell that caused the mercury to change, this time into a hard, squared-off ring rather than the tall, thin wall the others had. He then took a moment's pause to breathe, centering himself before surveying everyone in the room. "Now listen closely," he said, glancing at each member of the coven. "If anyone of you speaks, or tries to break their circle, I will kill you." The five women glanced about, looking eventually towards the mistress of the coven who only gave a small nod. Seeing that all the women understood, Arden nodded. "Then let us begin."

Positioning himself next to where Sheila stood, he used his hands to draw a pattern in the air while chanting and at the same time he taking a step. With each step, he drew a new symbol, chanting a different word, keeping a very precise tempo to his work. Every six steps took him to a point adjacent of one of the circles. Barely pausing for a breath, he'd continue to chant as he walked the outer circle over and over, repeating the chant. As he worked, the torches in the room fluttered and died. At the same time, the inner ring of metal began to glow brighter and brighter with a hellish light that flung bent, macabre shadows against the walls.

After close to an hour of this Arden stopped and turned towards the center of the circle. "God damn it! Quit fucking around already," he shouted, his words echoing from the walls of the room as well as eerily from the circle in the center. "I don't have all day to waste on this. I know you've heard the summons. The portal is open."

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Now get off your lazy ass before I do something you won't like."

Around the circle, the members of the coven glanced nervously at each other, unsure about what was happening. Sheila, who had long ago sat down to take a load off of her feet simply rolled her eyes at the man.

"Fine," Arden spat, taking up his position again. This time, his chant changed. There were no gestures, simply one syllable for each step. "Coh-tah-meh-chi-vel-loh..." By the tenth syllable, the ring erupted in a fountain of flame, which was contained by the ring of mercury.

"All right, damn it!" a very annoyed voice came from the pillar of flame which vanished to leave a small, well dressed man with a ruddy complexion, dark hair, a black suite, ebony walking cane and dark gray fedora on his head. "Just what's so God damned important?"

"Lucifer!" The word echoed as an almost unanimous whisper from the women in the circle. The old witch in the corner stood in shock and stared in shock at the last thing she ever expected to see show up.

"You know damn good and well what's so important," Arden replied angrily, scowling down at the small man. "You made this mess, so don't act all innocent just because I'm making you clean it up."

The handsome and dapper visage cracked as the Prince of Darkness got angry. "Bullshit! Who do you think you are, using that name, especially where others can hear?" He stepped up to the ring, but stopped just short of the metal band, frowning. "And where the hell did you hear that name anyway? I'm going to kill whoever let that out."

Arden gave the small man a smug grin. "Nobody actually told me," he replied, crossing his arm. "You see, after you-know-who had Rathsmon stick me in the gem, I had a lot of time on my hands. He couldn't keep my soul from dropping down to you without rebuilding our link, tenuous though it may have been. Lots of time and access to his memories gave your name." He leaned forwards slightly, careful not to break the plane of the circle of mercury. "Yours and everyone else's."

"Son of a bitch," the small, swarthy man, grumbled. "I don't give a fuck about you or your problems. I've got business to attend to and right now you aren't a priority. And if you even think of spreading my name around, I'll kill you personally, rules or no rules!" With that, he slammed his cane down on the floor, causing another ball of flame to appear which rapidly faded to reveal the small man still standing in the circle with a confused look on his face. "What the fuck?"

"Take a close look," Arden replied with a large, shit-eating grin. "Names aren't all I picked out of his memories. That gate's a one-way door. You're not going anywhere

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until I say so."

Lucifer looked up, glaring at the tall man, his eyes a pair of red, burning embers. "And just how long do you think this chickenshit circle can hold me?"

"It doesn't have to hold you long," the tall man replied confidently. "I'd say it's good for an hour, twenty minutes easily, though I won't need more than fifteen." He drew his katana and began to walk casually around the circle. "Take a good look at the star. It's the Seal of Solomon, though somewhat modified."

The small man quickly walked around the inner circle, studying the star and all the inscriptions before he stopped and smiled. "You sorry son of a bitch. Don't you know it takes six virgins for that to work?"

Arden propped the back of his blade on his shoulder as he continued to walk. "Are you kidding? Why do you think I drew it?" He stopped and put the tip of the sword on the floor, then leaned on it with both hands, using it like a cane. "Imagine how I felt, going into a black coven and discovering that they were all virgins? I mean, talk about falling into the shit and coming up smelling roses. What were the odds? But then again, you like your wives to be virgins, don't you?" He glanced over at the old lady who sat in the corner. "Interesting concept. Nuns are married to Jesus." He turned back to Lucifer with a large grin. "Who would have expected the head of each coven to be married to you."

"That may be true," Lucifer replied as he hooked a thumb towards Sheila, "but the bitch isn't a virgin. Or have you forgotten about the bald fuck that Rathsmon offed?"

"True, true. She may not be a virgin," he said, strolling over to where the vixen now stood. "However, the unborn child she carries is." He turned and glared at the small man, his expression now a hard mask. "How hard do you think it would be for me to force the kid out without killing her?"

"No!" Sheila yelled, as she stumbled backwards, trying to get away only to find that she was trapped within the circle.

The small man laughed. "There's no way you'd do that." He crossed his arms and smiled. "I know you. You're too much of a goody two shoes for that. That's why Nanuk chose you."

"Nanuk?" The tall man shouted angrily. "You think I give a fuck about her any more?" His face twisted into a snarl as he shook his fist at the small man. "All you people have managed to do is destroy my life. You've taken every God damned thing I've loved and managed to destroy it or twist it around so much that I can't stand it any more." He dropped his arm and glared at Lucifer. "No more. I'm tired of being everyone's puppet. I want my life back, and to hell with all of you."

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"I don't think you'd do it," the dapper devil replied, calling what he believed to be Arden's bluff.

"Take a good look, Luci," the tall man replied with a sneer. "Look at my soul. Go beyond the masks and barriers and look at it!" He slammed the tip of the sword down onto the rock, striking sparks. "It's split, right down the middle. Two halves, light and dark, orbiting each other, connected but separate, just like you fucking wanted!" The mask shattered as rage exploded from his face. "You did this to me! You and Nanuk! You wanted your fucking tool! You wanted someone who could be as evil and nasty as the situation called for and yet still have a conscience that would prevent him from running amok! Well congratulations. You helped to make me a monster, and by God I'm going to make you pay in return. If that means sacrificing one innocent life to accomplish it, then so be it!"

Lucifer's expression slowly gave way to a smile. "You know, I think you actually would do that, wouldn't you." He nodded. "I've spent a lot of time, tweaking people like you, but you're the first one who's actually managed to survive the process."

Arden sheathed the katana before looking back down at the devil. "Don't be too proud of yourself. You may have helped to create this monster, but you don't by any means control it."

The small man nodded. "Fine, I concede to your incredible master plan. Now can we get down to specifics here, please? I have an appointment with someone who wants to become a US senator and is very interested in my backing." He checked his watch and sighed. "You've got fifteen minutes, then I've got to go, but first get rid of the sisters. I won't have your threat hanging over my head."

"I have three tasks for you. If you give me your word that you'll do them, then I'll get rid of the sisters," the tall man replied, again drawing the katana.

A sigh of exasperation burst from Lucifer's lips. "Fine. You have my word that I will fulfil three tasks for you. Now can we get to it?" Arden walked over to the nearest sister and raised his sword over his head in both hands to strike but before he could do so, Lucifer stopped him. "I meant to send them out of the room, damn it. Not to kill them."

"Just like I meant for you to remove the spell on Sheila eight months ago, not just break it?" Arden asked in return, still holding the sword over his head, ready to strike.

"All right, all right," the small man replied, throwing his hands up. "Point taken. No need to go whacking perfectly good minions just because you're annoyed with me."

Arden's gaze shifted from the devil to the witch who had her back pressed against the invisible inner circle of the ring she was trapped in, trying to avoid the reach of his

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blade. Arden lowered the sword and touched the tip against the wall of mercury, which silently collapsed, spilling the woman on her back. He walked around the circle repeating the process for each circle, except for the one with Sheila in it. He paused in front of her circle, to gaze emotionless at her, taking in the look of utter hatred that was on her face. He then turned to verify that the five Sisters of the Snake had left the room before breaking the master circle. "First, I want you to remove all magical spells from Sheila, starting with the curse."

"Huh?" Lucifer looked confused for a moment. "Why do you need me to do that? You should be able to handle that. It's almost kids stuff."

"Don't you think I've tried?" the large man replied angrily, stepping up so his face was next to the devil. "Every time I start working on the spells the damn patterns shift. Strands fade and new ones appear. I haven't a fucking clue what's going on!"

"Strands fade?" the small man replied looking confused as he studied the spell. "Fuck me," he replied, smacking his palm against his face and causing Arden to back up in confusions. "Didn't Lakash teach you anything?"

"He spent a lot of time teaching me magic," the big man replied looking somewhat uncomfortable. "There're techniques that I know he left out because I studied them while I was in the stone, but nothing that covers this."

"That's not what I'm talking about," Lucifer said, rubbing his temples. "He didn't even teach you how to look at magic."

"Of course he did!" the tall man declared, looking around. "I can shift my sight and see magic whenever I want."

"This is not my job," the small man muttered waving his hands in a pattern. As Arden watched, he saw a rainbow of magical color appeared in the air. "All right. You see the pattern?" He glanced at the tall man who nodded. "Ok... Show me the range of colors that you can see."

Confused for a moment, Arden concentrated then pointed to both ends of the pattern that denoted the low and high end of the scale that he could see. "There, and there."

Lucifer muttered under his breath for the better part of a minute before taking a deep breath and shaking his head. "All right, time for advanced magic one-oh-one. What you're seeing is just the middle of the spectrum. That's crap that most any fairy or mortal can see. You, however, are directly connected to a celestial and thus should be able to see way beyond those bounds. Just relax, let yourself go and try to see beyond the colors."

Arden gave the small man a dubious look before closing his eyes and breathing to re-center himself. He then opened his eyes and gazed at the pattern, both concentrating

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and relaxing at the same time.

"That's right," the small man directed, walking around Arden, studying him. "Let yourself go. Follow the pattern of the strands. Go beyond the visible and into the invisible. Reach out not with your eyes or your mind, but with your very soul."

Arden's eyes got wide as he began to see more and more of the pattern. Parts that he had been unable to perceive before began glowing with a vibrancy he'd never experienced before. "I see it! Holy shit! I can see it!"

"Good," Lucifer replied with an honest smile. "Now, look over at Sheila and remove the spells." The tall man shifted his gaze to look at Sheila. As she watched his eyes darted back and forth over her body as if following some invisible series of dots. After a few seconds though, his pupils dilated and the sword dropped from his hand to clatter against the floor. Lucifer chuckled as he watched Arden begin to drool.

"What did you do to him?" Sheila demanded, now afraid for what might happen to her.

"Oh, I didn't do anything," the small man replied, wandering over to her. Absentmindedly, he reached out with a shod foot and touched the mercury barrier, which collapsed. "He's just in information overload right now." He looked back over at Arden and smiled. "You know, you're lucky you have a guy that loves you the way he does."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Sheila demanded, stepping back from the small man. "He threatened to kill our kid! What kind of psycho does that?"

"Bah," the small grunted, dismissing her accusation with a wave. "That was an idle threat. If he'd tried to do that, he'd wind up destroying himself."

"But," Sheila paused glancing back and forth between the two men, "you said that you believed he would."

The devil laughed. "There's a reason they call me the Prince of Lies, sweetheart." He looked back over at Arden and got a very contented smile. "Nope. He's capable of some really nasty shit," arched his eyebrows a couple of times and gave the vixen a toothy smile before continuing, "but doing that would violate his personal principles. His spirit may be divided into the perfect ying and yang, but such an action would tear them apart completely and destroy him in the process." He glanced back over at Sheila, looking not unlike a proud father. "No. He's becoming the perfect tool to accomplish what we need. He still needs a little work around the edges still, but it won't be long now."

"And what kind of tool is that?" the vixen growled. "What kind of sadistic plan are

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you working on now?"

Lucifer waved a finger at the vixen. "Now, now. That would be telling. However I will say that although I approve of it, he won't be my tool" He turned back to Arden for a minute and watched a long strand of drool drip to the floor where it began to eat away at the stone surface. "Well, much as I'd love to hang around here, I'm afraid I have to go. When he snaps out of it, tell him he knows how to get a hold of me."

"Hey! What about the spells?" Sheila crossed her arms and frowned at the small man. "You said that you would take care of it. You gave your word."

"Aw, come on, lady," he whined, glancing at his watch. "He can see the patterns now. It's kids stuff. He'll be able to get rid of them."

Sheila walked over to where the katana lay and picked it up then leveled the tip an inch away from Lucifer's nose. "No go. You promised, now keep your promise."

The small man smiled. "A promise is a promise." He reached out with a single finger and pointed it at her.

The vixen reeled, feeling dizzy then slowly dropped to her hands and knees, where she retched the remains of her breakfast on the floor. The last thing she heard before she passed out was the sinister chuckle of the devil as he faded into the shadows.

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I was blind, but now I can see.

The cavernous room stood silent, the only movement or sound coming from the torches flickering along the walls. Arden stood, staring down at the unconscious form of Sheila for several minutes before kneeling down next to her. He reached out with his hand and caressed her muzzle, gently stroking the fur. "Sheila," he said in a quiet yet firm voice. "Wake up, Sheila." As he continued to caress her face, the sleepy vixen smiled and rubbed herself against his palm. "Wake up. It's time to go."

"Time to go?" the drowsy female replied, opening her eyes. She blinked a couple of times as she focused on the man's face. The blurry oval resolved itself into the now quite familiar image of Arden; only his eyes were wrong. It took her a second to realize it wasn't a trick of the dim light, but that his eyes were in fact solid black with no trace of whites or irises. "What happened to your eyes?"

"My eyes?" he replied, rocking back on his heels for a moment in thought before smiling. "My eyes, yes. I can see now. I can finally see." He glanced around the room before beaming a smile back down at the vixen. "There's so much that I understand now that I didn't before, when I was blind." He shook his head, as if to get rid of the distraction. "But we can't sit around all day talking about that. There are enemies about, and the longer we stay here, the more likely they'll find us."

Sheila's gaze shifted from his eyes to the hand he held out for her. Taking his hand, she was swiftly lifted to her feet where a wave of dizziness stuck her for a moment. "Whoa... I feel woozy," she complained, holding her head with her free hand and trying to balance herself.

"It's natural. You should feel OK in a few seconds," Arden replied while reaching down to pick up the silks, which had been folded neatly nearby. He opened the top and held it out for her to slip into. "Put the armor on. It will lend you strength."

As she slipped her arms into the silk jacket, Sheila felt an odd surge of strength fill her body, helping her to steady herself. Cautious despite the new strength, she carefully put on the pants and tied the outfit off with the silk sash. She held her hand out towards Arden who simply cocked his head at her. "The swords?" she prompted.

"Oh," he grunted as he removed the wakazashi and tanto, handing to them. "I'm going to need this one," he commented, patting the katana.

Sheila nodded to the oversized, ebony colored sword that was still sticking out of the middle of the circle. "Why do you need that one when your old one is still over there?"

"That sword..." the large man muttered, walking over to the sword and drawing it. He glanced around, frowning. "Where's Lucifer?"

"He's gone." The old witch with her cane stood up from her chair and walked over to

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the circle. "You didn't expect him to stand around watching you drool, did you?"

"Lucifer!" Arden snarled at the air. "You still owe me three services!" He looked around for a few moments, before again shouting, "Lucifer!"

A strong tenor voice spoke from behind him. "Would you stop shouting already?"

Arden spun to face what appeared to be a Franciscan monk. The man wore simple brown robes and had the bowl haircut that the monks were notorious for. "Who are you?"

The monk smiled and bowed. "My name is Asmodeus. I'm sorry, but I must inform you that his unholiness is unavailable right now. However, I have been ordered to deal with you for your remaining tasks, as long as they are within my power."

"No," Arden grunted. "Not good enough. The bargain was with Luci, so tell his asshole that he needs to attend to business."

"His..." Asmodeus paused, letting a small smile caress his lips. "His asshole is busy. He warned you that he had pressing business elsewhere. You can either wait for him to finish, or tell me what you need." He brought up his arms, tucking his hands inside the sleeves of the robe and watched Arden with a smug look.

Arden opened his mouth to argue, but instead closed it. With an annoyed sigh, he tossed the ebony blade to Asmodeus.

Catching the blade by the hilt, the monk held it at arms length by two fingers, as if it were a dead rat. "And just what am I supposed to do with this?"

This time it was Arden's turn to cross his arms and chuckle. "Why, deliver it to Hukkath, of course."

The monk's face turned red. "What the fuck do I look like," he shouted, "some kind of God damn delivery boy?"

"Well," Arden replied, drawing the word out, "you said you'd do any task if it was in your power. Are you telling me that you can't deliver a sword?"

The brown-robed man pursed his lips and glared at Arden for a moment before nodding. "Yes, it's within my powers," he reluctantly admitted. "Are you telling me you were actually going to make Lucifer deliver this sword?"

"Oh yah. That, I was," Arden replied lightly. "Don't worry. It's not a demeaning as you think." The monk's glare forced him to unconsciously backup a step. "Trust me. Take a good look at the sword."

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Asmodeus glanced at the sword, paused, and then studied it closely. "Excuse me," he said, taking a step towards the other man, "but aren't there supposed to be a pile of pristine souls taken from a bunch of kids?"

"I think that was the original intent," Arden replied, smiling at the other man's confused expression. "However, Hukkath made the mistake of losing his temper as I was asking him about all the different possibilities. He actually said, and I quote," he cleared his throat a couple of times before speaking in a gruff snarl that sounded like it belonged to a wild animal. "I don't care about any of that shit. If the kids are already dead then bring me their parents."

The monk put the tip of the sword against the floor and leaned on it. "OK. I'll bite. What happened to the kids?"

"I killed them, of course," Arden replied with a shrug. "Before performing the ritual, that is."

Asmodeus chuckled as he shook his head. "I don't quite think that's exactly what Hukkath had in mind."

Arden nodded in agreement. "Neither do I. However, I did live up to the letter of the agreement, though maybe not the spirit."

The monk looked down at the sword and chuckled. The chuckle soon transformed itself into a fit of snickers, which then became a full-blown laugh. After two long minutes of this, he ran out of breath. Virtually collapsed and leaning heavily on the sword, he wiped tears from his eyes. "Oh, that's too precious. Hukkath's been bragging about how he worked a scam to get a pile of pure souls and you screwed him at his own game."

Arden nodded, his smile growing somehow larger at the praise. "So, do you still think this is some shit delivery job?"

"Oh, no!" Asmodeus replied quickly, tucking the sword into his belt. "I'm going to relish the look on his face when he realizes he's been had." Another small fit of chuckles passed over the man before he got control again. "All right, is there anything else you need right now, or can I go?"

"That's it for now," Arden replied, bowing with a flourish. "I'll give Luci a holler when I'm ready for the next task."

"Luci, eh?" The monk shook his head. "I'd be careful about that if I were you. You may be important to him now, but once your usefulness is done, he's going to bitch slap you around like a red haired stepson. So take my advice and don't antagonize him. You don't want him for an enemy." With that said, he simply faded into the

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darkness and was gone.

The old woman cackled and pounded her stick on the floor. "You've got one hell of a pair of brass balls, boy! Playing with Hukkath like that."

"Hukkath is of no concern," Arden replied, rudely turning his back on the old woman as he stepped back over to Sheila. "Shall we?" he invited the vixen, gesturing towards the door. As he reached the doorway, he looked back at the old crone who was intently studying the summoning circle. He gestured with a finger, creating a crackling blue sphere, which he then lobbed towards the circle. As it struck, a shockwave tore through the floor, reducing the black granite surface to gravel and destroying all traces of the summoning ring.

"No!" the old hag shrieked. "You destroyed it! You destroyed the circle!" As an afterthought, she looked around at the rubble and added "And you destroyed my floor! Do you have any idea how much it's going to cost to replace that?"

"Send Luci the bill," he replied, stepping through the arch.

Outside, two figures stood inside the open mouth of the snake and watched the couple as they climbed into the buggy. One wore immaculate shining silver plate and gold chain armor with an ornate gold and silver sword hanging at his side. Next to him, a small man in a dapper suit and hat stood leaning on a cane.

"That's him," Lucifer stated, nodding at Arden.

The other man frowned. "He's not much to look at, is he? Is that the best you could come up with?"

"Hey!" the devil barked in defense. "It's not like we had a selection here."

"Still," the other mumbled, absentmindedly stroking his chin, "I don't like the idea of having to rely on him. He's too unstable."

"Unstable, schmable. He's the only chance we've got," Lucifer replied. "This is the first time Lakash has stuck his neck out in eons. It's no time to get choosy."

An armored head shook negatively. "It doesn't matter. We will not interfere. We can not break the compact, even by agreement."

"Damn it, I'm not asking you to break the compact," the dapper man replied, annoyed with his companion's attitude. "You're the only one who can do this. You and I both know it can be done in the Sea of Dreams, where the compact has no influence."

"I don't know," the armored figure commented skeptically. "I can't afford to show

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bias to either side. If the Voice caught wind of that, it would cost me my wings."

"You worry too much. Besides Lakash wants it done too, only not quite the way I'm suggesting. You can't get in trouble if all three sides want it done, right?" He turned to the man and placed his hand on an armored shoulder. "We've got to cut the connection between him the dragon while giving him his human form again. The only way to do that is by rebirth, and we can't do that without your help. Are you in, or do I have to do it myself?"

The armored man frowned. "You know he won't trust you with that."

"Then do it for me," Lucifer said, almost pleading. "For Christ sake, this is the end game. If we don't fuck it up, we can neutralize Lakash."

"All right," the large man replied, brushing off Lucifer's hand. "All right. I'll do it. Just stop taking Junior's name in vain, OK?"

The devil smiled and nodded cheerfully. "Whatever you say. So, I have your word that you're going to do it, right?"

"Yes, already," the armored man acknowledged, annoyed at the repeated question. "I'll do it. You have my word." He looked in the general direction that the buggy had gone and frowned. "So tell me: If this is such a good thing, why do I feel like there's a large, heavy object hanging over my head, ready to drop?"

Lucifer chuckled and clapped the armored man on the back. "You'll get used to it. I've had that feeling ever since I first met him."

The small campfire crackled and popped as Sheila slept on the ground next to a log, wrapped in a blanket while using another for a pillow. Arden sat near by, watching the fire and listening to the night sounds. Near the edge of the clearing, the horse stood with an empty feed bucket nearby.

Sheila rolled over and cracked her eyes to watch Arden. His eyes had remained large, glossy pools of ink that reflected the light from the fire. As she watched, a plant sprouted from between his fingers, quickly growing from a tiny thread into a large, colorful flower. It was as if she were watching a time-lapse movie of some sort. She watched as he took a sniff of the flower and then stared at it again, causing the flower to immediately wither and fade to dust. Over and over as she watched, he repeated the scene, each time with a different flower. Sometimes the flower was one she recognized, other times they looked like some mad scientist's attempt to cross-pollinate. "What are you doing, practicing your illusions?"

"Illusions?" he echoed thoughtfully. "No, no illusions." He concentrated and created

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a flower, causing it to sprout from nothing and grow to full bloom within seconds. He took a sniff, savoring the aroma before tossing it over to Sheila.

The vixen picked up the flower, avoiding the sharp thorns and inhaled the sweet scent. "How'd you do that?" she asked, studying the flower. It looked and felt real to her.

"It's quite simple once you can see the pattern," he replied, looking around at the forest. "Any sorcerer can summon up a reasonable knock-off, but it won't be a living plant. They can't see the entire pattern. That's why they're always doing research. They can't see how it's all put together, so they guess." He summoned up another rose, this time a yellow one, and sniffed it.

"And you can see it now?" Sheila asked, watching him wearily. "You can see how it's all put together?"

"That and much more," he replied, smelling the rose again before crushing it in his fist. "I thought Lucifer was doing me a favor, showing me how to use this sight, but now I realize that there are some things that mortals were never supposed to see."

The vixen twisted and managed to sit more or less upright, leaning against the log. "Arden?" she asked in a quiet, uncertain voice. "What's happening to you? What's happening to us?"

Arden looked at her for a moment then turned away as if unable to face her. Instead he stared down at his hand and summoned an orchid. "They're making me into a weapon," he replied in a somber voice. "The bargain Lakash made with Nanuk has left him vulnerable, and they're going to use me to strike at him."

Sheila frowned at him. "What about your quest? What's going to happen to you when this is all over?"

"The quest? Oh, if everything goes according to their plan, the quest will be complete." He let himself lean backwards until he was lying on the ground. "As for me, I don't know anymore."

"You don't know? What the hell do you mean, you don't know?" Her brow furrowed as she studied him. "What am I supposed to do if something happens?"

He sat up again. "I mean I don't know! This isn't like paying a parking ticket. There's no guarantee about how things will turn out. As for you?" He shrugged. "You'll get back home one way or another. It's part of the bargain." Sheila looked down at the fire and pulled the blankets closer around her. "Are you cold?"

"No," she spat back angrily in reply. "I'm just... I'm scared."

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"Of what?" He scooted his way over to the log and settled down in near her. As he reached out to put his arm around her, she pulled away. "What's wrong? There's nothing to worry about. You will go home when this is all over."

"God damn it," she snarled, taking him aback, "I don't give a flying fuck about that." She clenched her teeth and frowned. "OK, maybe I care a little bit about it, but that's not what I'm worried about. What am I supposed to do when I get back? I'm counting on you to be there with me."

"I know," he admitted quietly as he looked away, past the fire, "but you're a resourceful girl. You'll manage to get by somehow."

Sheila hit him in the arm hard enough to rock him and nearly knock him over. "God damn it, that's not what I'm talking about! What about us? What about our baby? What happened to us being parents together, living in a nice house somewhere? What happened to all that?"

He looked at her with those black eyes that made her feel like he was looking into her soul. "What about it?" he challenged in a harsh tone. "You never wanted that. You've been complaining about how you were nuts to let yourself get pregnant. You never said anything about wanting any of that." He leaned forward, forcing her to lean backwards over the log. "Where do you get off trying that bullshit on me? Huh? Hell, you don't even love me, do you? Admit it---you don't!" Arden sat back and turned angrily towards the fire.

The vixen closed her eyes and hung her head. A single tear crept down her face. "I don't know if I love you or not," she whispered. "Everything's so confusing right now. I don't know what I feel." She didn't see his face soften as he turned to look at her. "I don't know anything at all. I'm so alone now. You're the only thing I have left in the world and I don't want to loose you."

Arden reached out and brushed the tear from her cheek. His eyes locked with hers as she looked up at him. "I guess we're both in the same boat about now," he said, cupping her face with the hand and caressing the fur with his fingers. "Neither one of us knows what's going to happen. All we can do is hang on and hope for the best." He dropped his hand down to pick up hers and held it tight. "All I know is that I still love you and I won't abandon you. No matter what happens, if it's at all possible, I'll come back to you." He paused, and then looked away, releasing her hand and whispered under his breath "If you'll have me."

Sheila reached out to touch him, but stopped. Trembling with indecision, she finally dropped her hand to the blanket. Pulling it tightly around her as she turned and rolled back over onto the pillow and stared into the fire

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A mouse in the worxx.

Arden sat next to the fire, nursing it as he listened to the pouring rain. Occasionally he'd look out and a bright flash of lightning, which was soon followed by the booming thunder and then a whimper from Sheila, as she cowered in fear from the storm. He glanced up at the tarp that was stretched out over the fire as it snapped in the wind and nodded, satisfied that the lines anchoring the tarp were secure and that the branch wasn't in any danger of snapping. As he watched, smoke rose from the fire to coil in the apex of the makeshift tent, only to quickly roll towards the higher end of the canvas and escape into the nite.

"I hate thunderstorms," the vixen whined as she huddled under the blanket, only her nose poking out from the mass of cloth. "Can't you make it stop?"

"Yes, I could" the man replied, putting another couple of thin sticks on the fire, "but that would give away our position. There are hunters about. They know we came this way, but so far my wards have kept them at bay."

Flinching as another flash of light was immediately followed by a crash of thunder, Sheila managed to hunch into a smaller ball under the blankets. "But what if lightening strikes the tree? We're right under it."

Arden let out a low chuckle. "Don't worry about it. I've warded the tree. No lightening will hit it or any of the trees around us." He reached over, lifted the mass of cloth so he could see her face. "Trust me. This storm isn't dangerous to us, OK?"

"Well... OK," the vixen replied, slipping the blankets down from her head so they rested on her shoulders. "But if I get struck by lightening, I'm gonna kill you."

This time, he let out a full bark of laughter, not just a chuckle. "It's a deal." His head swiveled towards the forest as if searching for something. He then stood up and walked to the edge of the tarp. "I'll be right back. I want to get some more wood for the fire." Moving silently, he quickly disappeared into the rain.

Sheila looked down at the large stockpile of wood that would easily last the night and frowned, wondering what the real reason was for his late night excursion.

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Mary the Mouse

To say that Mary was wet would be an understatement. She was absolutely soaked to the bone. Add that to the fact that she'd been wandering around lost in the woods for hours and you had someone who was absolutely miserable. What little clothing she wore, a blue t-shirt, a long, black wool coat and sword around her waist, squished as she made her way through the maze of trees in the dark. The diminutive female stood only three foot, eight inches tall, which for a human might be small, but for her species was quite tall, for you see Mary was a mouse. Gray fur with light tan coloring on her chest and feet, Mary looked like any other small mouse you'd find in a field, only she stood upright on a pair of dog-legged knees, with only a silver hoop through her left ear and a tattered daisy tucked behind the other for decoration.

Each time there was a flash of lightening, she'd freeze and study the afterimage in her eyes, looking for some sort of shelter and then, once the image had faded, she'd move again. After repeating this sequence of actions innumerable times, she paused, not for a stroke of lightning, but for a flicker of flame that she saw through the forest. Cautiously she made her way to the edge of the clearing where she saw a makeshift tent that had been constructed by draping a large tarp over a tree limb and then anchoring the corners with stakes to the ground. Under the tent she saw what appeared to be a fox huddling under a large blanket or piece of cloth as it sat next to the fire. Behind it, a large, hollow log rested which it used for a backrest. Nearby were more blankets folded on the ground and a large pile of firewood. She also spotted a couple of sacks sitting on the ground, one next to the fox and another part

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way around the fire.

Shivering from the rain, she studied the scene for a moment before glancing around to see if there was anyone else watching. The only movement she saw was from a horse that was tied up near a buggy with its own makeshift tent protecting it from the rain.

Cold, wet and tired, she shook her self off as well as she could and stepped away from the trees. Mindful of where she stepped, she made her way over towards the tent. When she was about eight feet from the tent, a bright flash of lightning illuminated the area, followed a few seconds by a clap of thunder. The fox by the fire looked up and gasped at the sight of the mouse. It threw back the blankets and struggled to its feet while drawing a short sword. It was then that Mary realized that the fox was female and pregnant. The distended belly obviously made it hard for the vixen to move. Before Mary could react, she caught a glimpse of motion out of the corner of her eye just before the edge of a blade lightly touched her throat. Turning only her eyes, she saw a tall human with a long, slightly curved sword, watching her with guarded eyes as the rain fell around them.

"All right," the man commented, not moving the sword. "Who are you, and why are you here?"

Mary wanted to swallow, but didn't dare for fear of the blade against her throat. "I-" she squeaked once before clearing her throat. "I'm Mary," she replied, finding her proper voice. "I was lost and was looking for shelter. I spotted your fire and... well... I guess I was hoping you wouldn't mind sharing it."

"Lost, huh," the man replied, staring down at her. A fresh flash of lightning illuminated his face, revealing eyes that were solid black, as if they had been replaced by obsidian orbs. "I guess that would explain how you got past my wards."

The vixen, having gotten a good look at the mouse put her sword away. "Good lord, girl," she said, stepping up to the edge of the tent. "You're soaked to the bone. Come on over here next to the fire and let's get you dried out."

"Damn it, Sheila," the man rumbled, risking a glance at the vixen. "We don't know anything about her. She might be a bounty hunter." He looked back down at the mouse, "just looking pitiful to gain a target's confidence."

"Please," the mouse pleaded, looking up at the man. "I'm just lost. Really. I've been wandering these woods for hours looking for some kind of decent shelter, only none of the trees are any good for stopping the rain."

"Come on, Arden," the vixen chimed in again with a slightly whining voice. "Look at the poor thing. She's shivering from the cold. You don't really think she's a danger,

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do you?"

The man grunted in disgust. "Only one way to make sure," he replied, waving his hand in a pattern as he cast a spell on the mouse. Once he'd finished, he withdrew his sword and sheathed it. "All right. I've put a spell on you that will prevent you from taking action against us in any way." He turned and walked back under the tent past the vixen and sat down by a large, open sack.

Mary looked down at herself as if to see if there had been any physical change from his magic. "You cast a spell on me?" She asked looking back up at the man who was occupied with chewing on something. "Are you some kind of sorcerer or a wizard?"

"Actually, he's an asshole," Sheila said, stepping out in the rain long enough to take the mouse by the arm and draw her under the tent. "Trust me, if you ignore him, you'll probably be better off for it." The vixen looked down at Mary and tisked. "You're soaked to the bone, girl. You had better slip out of those wet things and dry off next to the fire."

A crack of thunder shook the tent as lightening strobed overhead. "Take them off?" Mary parroted, glancing over at the man who was casually watching the pair.

"Just ignore him," the vixen repeated, handing the mouse a blanket. "Trust me, he's nothing to worry about. If you're concerned about your modesty, you can wrap yourself up in this blanket."

Mary nodded and then turned around, dropping the blanket by the log. Removing her coat and shirt, she draped them over the log, trying to keep them out of the dirt. She then wrapped the blanket around herself and sat down by the fire, savoring the heat as it slowly soaked into her fur, drying her.

"Are you hungry?" Sheila asked, reaching to pick up the bag near her blankets. Sitting down next to the mouse, she removed a large wedge of cheese and a half a loaf of bread from the bag, along with a flask of water. "It's not gourmet dining, but it should help hit the spot."

"Thank you," Mary said in a small voice, accepting the food. She hungrily took a bite of the bread and chewed on it as she softened it with some water.

The man swallowed whatever he was chewing on and nodded at the mouse. "So what were you doing wandering around in the forest at night during a lightning storm?"

The small female swallowed the bread and shrugged. "Like I said, I was lost..."

"Yah, we got that part," the man rudely interrupted, waving a hand in her direction. "Why were you wandering around the forest? Were you part of a group that got split

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up?"

"Oh," Mary mumbled, understanding what he wanted to know. "Well, actually I was running away from someone, someone bad." She looked around nervously between the two and shrugged again.

"It's all right," Sheila said by way of encouragement as she gave the mouse's shoulder a squeeze. "Nobody can harm you as long as Arden's here."

"You don't understand," the mouse replied, looking down at the fire. "He's the ruler of these lands and very, very powerful."

Arden nodded. "I take it you're referring to Cheyanne?" A peal of thunder split the night as lightning flashed from cloud to cloud while the horse winned in dismay. He took Mary's sudden startled look as an acknowledgement. "Yah, she's a nasty customer all right. Probably the strongest non-human in all of Husquahar."

"You know about her?" Sheila asked, staring in disbelief at him.

He nodded again. "Yah, I've heard about her," he grudgingly admitted. "She's one of the people I was worried might decide to come after you. She's as bad as they come and then some."

"Yah, but you can take her, right?" the vixen asked with a quirky smile. "I mean, you're this bad-assed sorcerer, now, that can do anything, right?"

Slowly he shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Not her, anyway. You see, she has a destiny," he explained, stirring the fire with a stick, "and by the rules which govern this reality, she's untouchable until that destiny is fulfilled." He tossed the stick onto the fire and leaned back against the log. "I could probably fight her to a standstill, but I doubt I'd be able to face her down. The rules wouldn't allow it."

"Destiny," the mouse whispered. "I wonder..."

"What was that?" the vixen prompted, her sharp ears picking up the whisper.

The mouse looked up rather startled that she had been overheard. "Umm. I was just thinking about destiny," she replied. "I wonder what it's like to know you have a destiny."

"Ask *Testaclease* over there," the vixen replied, taking a strip of jerky out of the bag and ripping off a chunk. "His destiny is the reason I'm in this mess."

She looked over at the man and studied him carefully. "You have a destiny?" she asked, curious to hear his story.

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"Yah," he grumbled glancing at the vixen before looking back at the mouse. "From before I was even born, they were planning my destiny. My *glorious* destiny," he spat the words as he threw another small stick into the fire. "I had to loose my home, my life, everything that I valued," he paused to look at the vixen and then turned to the fire, "including the woman I loved. All so that I could become a tool for the celestial host, letting them screw over one of their number without breaking their precious rules. As a reward I'll probably just be cast aside, assuming they don't just destroy me outright."

"That's horrible," she replied, her brow furrowed as she thought about it. "Are all such destinies doomed to be a tragedy?"

Arden's face lifted as he stared off into space, as if seeing something far away. "All epic quests resulting in a fulfilled destiny shall require great sacrifices by those involved, up to, but not necessarily heir life in the fulfillment of said destiny." He focused back on the mouse and nodded. "The book of rules, volume eight, page one-twenty-three, paragraph nine, subsection b. As pertaining to quests and destinies."

"Jesus," Sheila muttered after swallowing the jerky. "Every time you rattle that crap off it sounds like something you'd hear in the tax code."

Mary smiled at the comment and took a drink of water. She looked over at the vixen and studied her as she tore off another chunk of meat. "What about you? What destiny do you have?"

"My destiny?" Sheila echoed with a laugh. "My destiny..." She paused and thought about it for a moment before nodding. "I guess you could say that my destiny is to be the sidekick, kind of like Bat and Robin. Robin was always getting into trouble and Bat would have to bail him out." She took a swig of water and wiped her mouth off on the sleeve of her shirt. "That's me. I keep getting into trouble and the *Lone Stranger* over there has to keep rescuing me."

"I see," the mouse replied with a smile, glancing between the two as the sound of distant thunder rumbled by. "From the way you argue, I'd think that that the two of you were in love rather than just sidekicks."

Sheila let out a loud bark of laughter as she sprayed water on the fire. "Us? In love?" she derided the thought with a laugh as she wiped her muzzle on her sleeve. Glancing over at Arden she saw the pained look on his face. All traces of humor left her as she watched him for a moment before looking away. "Yah, in a way I guess you could say that." She took another drink from her water flask and then looked back over at the mouse. "So, what about you? What's with your destiny?"

"My destiny?" Mary blinked at the thought and shook her head. "I don't know, though I guess I may have one." She nodded to Arden, "You said you'd lost everything you valued. I guess I've had the same thing happen. I was kidnapped and

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brought here. I have no clue how to get home. I've lost my best friend as well as the mouse I love." She glanced over at Sheila for a second. "I guess you could even say that I've betrayed him." She took in a deep breath and let out a sorrowful sigh. "I don't know if I have a destiny or not. Right now, I'm just trying to figure out how to undo the wrong I did."

Arden nodded as he chewed on a coin and then swallowed. "Well, I wouldn't worry about that right now. That's for tomorrow. Right now, I suggest that you two get some sleep. Morning will come quickly and I think you'll be needing what sleep you can get."

Mary thought about it, then took the cheese and bread and replaced them in the bag. She hugged the blanket closer to her as she lay down next to the fire. As she lay there, she watched the flames, wondering if she'd be able to find Nino and redeem herself to him.

The loud hiss of sap escaping from fresh wood that had been tossed on the low fire terminated in a loud pop that startled the mouse fully awake. Disoriented by coming out of a dream so quickly, she panicked at the feeling of an arm around her. Rolling away from the arm, she looked back at the pregnant vixen who had snuggled up to her in the night. A few seconds later, the evening's events flooded back into her awareness and she looked around. The man was still sitting by the fire, stirring it with a stick. He didn't look like he had slept at all, not that he looked tired.

"Didn't you sleep?" she asked the man, getting up to recover her clothing. A quick check of the shirt showed that it was pretty much dry. Slipping it over her head, she then picked up her coat and sword before turning back around to face the man.

"He never sleeps," came the drowsy voice of the vixen as she stretched out on the ground. Sitting up, she shook her head and smiled at the mouse. "Apparently dragons don't need much sleep."

"That's not true," Arden replied, tossing a couple of sticks onto the fire. "We require plenty of sleep. The only difference is that we sleep for weeks or even months at a time, conversely we can stay awake for similar stretches."

Mary paused with one arm in her coat. "You're a dragon?" she asked in disbelief, not sure if the two were pulling her leg.

The man smiled, put one finger to his nose and exhaled, sending a jet of flame into the fire. "Does that answer your question?"

"Ignore him," Sheila grunted as she clambered to her feet. "He's just showing off. Besides, he's not a real dragon. He's just using its body." She looked at the confused

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mouse and laughed. "It's a long story. The short of it is that he died, had his soul stuck into a gem at which point I used a magic dagger to inject it into a dragon allowing him to take control of its body. He's just using his magic to look human. In reality, he's humongous."

Mary stood frozen through the entire explanation, then slowly finished putting her jacket on. "Oh...kay," she said, drawing the word out. "Well, I'd like to thank you for the fire and the food. I really appreciate it." Taking her sword belt, she slipped it around the bottom of her shirt and buckled it.

"No problem," the vixen replied, picking up a small bag. "Here, I've put some cheese, bread and water in here for you." She waved off the mouse's objections. "We have plenty, really. Please, take it."

Mary accepted the bag and tied it to her belt. "Thank you very much. I appreciate your hospitality immensely."

"Before you go," Arden said, standing up and walking over to the mouse, "there's something I have for you." He knelt down by the mouse and held out a string with a stone tied to it. "While you were sleeping, I did some research. You do have a destiny, Mary, and it's an important one. I can't tell you what it is, but I can give you this." He held the string and dangled the stone, allowing it to turn. Slowly it rotated and pointed in a southeasterly direction. "This stone will help guide your way. Twice a day, if you hold it up like this, it will help you find the proper path. I can't say where it leads you, but if you trust in it, it will guide you well."

The mouse hesitantly reached out and took the string from his hand. She watched the stone as it continued to point in the same direction. She then wrapped the string around it and put it in the bag at her belt. "I don't know what to say," she squeaked in a small voice, "except, maybe, thank you again."

"That's more than enough," he replied standing up again. "Safe journeys to you."

"Thank you," Mary said, looking taking the vixen's hands and looking up at her. "I won't forget either of you." She glanced back and forth between the two before letting go.

Sheila smiled as she watched the mouse scamper away in the general direction the stone had pointed. The touch of Arden's hand on her shoulder as he stood next to her made her look up at him. For a moment she was tempted to shrug him off and pull away, but changed her mind. "You think she'll be OK?" she asked, looking back towards where the mouse had disappeared.

"Yah. For the first time since this damn thing started, I'm assured of a good outcome for someone." He looked down at Sheila and gave her shoulder a squeeze. "How

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about you, *Tonto*? You gonna be OK?"

The vixen elbowed him in the ribs. "Only if I manage to take a piss before my bladder explodes!" Pulling away from him, she hobbled over to a nearby cluster of bushes, frantically untying her pants and complaining, "God damn it, why couldn't you have used a button and zipper instead of these damn laces!"

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Why ask why?

Arden leaned casually against the wheel of the buggy, his eyes half closed as his skin soaked up the sunlight. They'd pulled off the road slightly as Sheila had once again heard the call of nature. A couple of minutes later he cracked his eyes at the sound of Sheila pushing her way through the bushes. "Everything OK?" he asked, giving her a hand up.

"Just dandy," She replied, dropping heavily down onto the wooden seat.

He harrumphed as he walked his way around the buggy. "You're welcome," the man muttered under his breath before climbing back up onto the seat. He reached for the reins but found that Sheila already had them. With a slight lurch, the buggy pulled back onto the road. "You know, you don't have to drive."

Sheila glanced over at him and smiled. "I know. It gets a bit boring sitting over here all the time with nothing more to do than look at the scenery."

"Ahh," he grunted, giving a knowing nod. "Now you can sit there and watch the scenery drift by while holding onto the reins, eh?"

"Something like that," she replied with a similar nod, getting comfortable. As Sheila drove, she watched Arden leaning against the side rail of the seat, staring out into the distance. They rode in silence for the better part of an hour before Sheila finally spoke. "Hey." Not getting a reply, she reached over and swatted his arm, speaking louder, "Hey! Anyone home?"

Arden jerked upright with a start and looked around quickly before noticing the smirk on her face. "Sorry, I was thinking," he mumbled, leaning back against the seat again.

"Yah, I know," the vixen replied with a snort. "The gears were grinding so loud I was afraid you were going to spook the horse." She waited for a reply, but had to settle for a momentary cocking of one eyebrow in her direction for a response. "So what were you so hard at work thinking about? You were a million miles away."

He cocked an eyebrow at her again and then shrugged. "Actually it's a bit more than a million miles," the man replied stretching his back and clasping his hands behind his head. "I was thinking about Japan."

"Oh," she replied, not sure what to say.

Arden smiled gazed off into the distance. "I was thinking about the trains."

Sheila's face scrunched up in confusion as she looked at him. "Trains?"

"Yah. Trains." He smiled and chuckled at her consternation before continuing. "I

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used to love riding on the trains. It was one of the few times that I felt at peace." All traces of amusement faded as old memories made themselves felt. "I could sit there and watch the world safely passing me by for hours. I didn't have to worry about someone on the street taking a shot at me, or someone trying to run me down. I was in my own little world and everyone else was outside of it."

"What about the people on the train with you?" the vixen asked, scooting around to get comfortable again. "Didn't you have to worry about them?"

"Sometimes," he replied with a shrug. "If you pick the right time of day and the right rail line, there probably wouldn't be that many people on the train. As long as I was careful not to be followed, the train was safer than anywhere in Tokyo or Shinjuku."

Sheila nodded as she listened. "Sounds nice, though I'm surprised that someone didn't figure it out."

"They did," he replied, putting his arms down and frowning. "It was shortly after I went ronin. The government sent people to eliminate me. They knew that I liked to travel by train even though I never used them for business."

"What happened?" she asked as she intently studied his face, waiting for the answer.

"They made a critical mistake." He sat up and turned on the seat so he could face her, his knee up on the bench, resting his arm on its back. "They were rushed and couldn't use outside talent. As a result, I recognized two of the people in the teams. I thought they'd wait until I disembarked the train, but one of them panicked." Arden looked away for a moment and pursed his lips. "The fool opened up with an automatic weapon in a car full of people. When it was all over, there were six agents down and more than twenty bystanders wounded or dead."

Sheila's mouth hung open as she stared at him. "Jesus! And you walked away from that?"

"I didn't exactly just walk away from it," he snapped making her flinch. "I had taken a bullet in the arm and two in the legs. When the train slowed down to enter the Yokohama station, I shot out a window and jumped. I barely managed to get away from the station before the police started searching the area. Even then I wound up having to kill some poor bastard from Sonobe who'd just rented a car and had the bad luck of being in the first vehicle I saw."

"You killed someone just so you could steal his car?" Sheila couldn't believe what she was hearing. "I can understand killing the bad guys in the train. I mean, you were just defending yourself, but how can you justify killing someone for their car?"

"Hey!" he barked back angrily, "Don't take that tone of voice with me, woman! You don't know anything about what it's like to live like a hunted animal!" He turned

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back around to face the front of the buggy and folded his arms over his chest. "I was fighting for my survival. Standard operating procedures when running from the opposition is to kill any potential witnesses. He would have told the cops I had stolen his car. Given that I was wounded, they'd almost immediately link me with the massacre on the train. By killing him, I assured myself that nobody would be looking for the car for at least twenty four hours, by which time I'd have obtained new transportation, preferably off the island."

"So that's supposed to make it right? You needed to get away so it's OK to kill someone?" She shook her head. "Does that mean that if someone corners you, that you'll kill me to get away?"

Arden's head snapped around as he stared at her in disbelief. "How can you say something like that?" The words were spoken so softly as to be barely heard over the sounds of the horse and carriage. "With all that we've been through, how can you even suggest something like that?" He turned and stared past the horse and down the road. "That happened a good fifteen years ago. I've changed since then."

"I suppose," she muttered noncommittally, with an awkward silence settling over the pair. They rode on in silence for some time before she again spoke. "Umm... You know all that talk last night about destinies?"

"Yah," he grunted.

The vixen just stared ahead as she asked, "Do I have a destiny?"

"What?" He looked over at the vixen and gave her a half-cocked smile. "What brought this on?"

Sheila shrugged. "I don't know. I was just thinking about what you said last night. You know, how anyone with a destiny has to deal with a bunch of crap before they can accomplish it, usually turning their life into a living hell in the process." Again she shrugged. "I was just wondering if all this was because I had my own destiny, or was I just unlucky and got sucked up into yours."

Arden chewed on his lip for a bit as he thought for a while, then let out a long sigh. "You do have your own destiny, though I'm afraid it's not very earth shattering."

The vixen glanced over at him with a look that was split between concern and fear. "What is it? Do you know?"

"Yah, I know," he reluctantly admitted.

She waited several seconds before glancing at him again. "Well? What is it?" The vixen watched him for a few seconds before prompting him again. "Arden, please. I

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have a right to know."

At last, he nodded. "Yes, I suppose you do." He took a deep breath and let it out before continuing. "Nanuk forged your destiny at the same time she forged mine. Though you may not think it important or glamorous, it is an important one in the greater scheme of things." He rocked his head back and forth as he searched for a way to put it, only to fail miserably. Again, he took a deep breath and simply said, "Your destiny is to be the mother of my children."

"WHAT?" Sheila barked in surprise and shock. "My destiny is to have your kids? What the hell kind of destiny is that?" She sat fuming as she ground her teeth together. "Next you're going to tell me that I'm supposed to stay at home and become Ms. Beaver, right?" She clasp her hands together in front of her and gave him an extremely sucrose smile. "Hi honey. Did you have a hard day at work?"

Arden glowered at her. "That's not what I meant."

"Yah?" the vixen growled back. "It may not have been what you were thinking, but I'm sure someone out there was."

He took another deep breath and slowly let it out. "Tell me, why did you decide to get pregnant?"

"I don't know," she whined, shaking her head. A second later her eyes lit up with an answer. "Say, maybe my destiny made me do it? Yah, that's it. My destiny took control of me and made me do the stupidest thing of my life."

"Your destiny doesn't control you," Arden growled. "There are lots of people who never achieve their true destiny. Besides, somehow I don't think that qualifies as being the stupidest thing you've ever done."

The vixen cocked an ear in his direction. "Oh?"

"Making that wish while we were in the locker room," he replied with a smirk. "Now there's a class A screw-up if I ever saw one."

She rolled her eyes. "Ha ha. Like our last night together doesn't qualify?"

"Actually," he replied, tilting his head to one side, "as I remember it, I don't think up or down qualifies for how we did it."

"That's NOT what I meant!" Sheila replied, swinging at his arm with a fist and only grazing it. For the next few seconds, she rained a hail of blows at him that he somehow kept deflecting with one arm, all the time laughing. Finally she sat back in her seat and just glared at him. "You can be the most annoying person some time."

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"Thank you," he said with a small grin. "I try." He watched her stew for a moment, and then reached out to lightly tap her arm. "Oh, come on. Don't sit over there and sulk. All this will be over soon." He turned back forward and propped his feet up on the railing. "Tonight we'll meet back up with Hecate. In two more days, we should be at the Castle Terindell. It won't be much longer after that until my quest is done and you can go home."

"Home." She let out a long sigh. "I can't wait to get back. I miss everyone, terribly." She sat upright and looked over at the man. "Wait! What about you? Aren't you coming back too?"

"Why should I?" He paused to watch the look of shock on her face. "Ever since you brought me back, you've abused me, been condescending to me, denigrated me and been a pain in the ass without end. Even after the spell was removed that was screwing with your emotions, you've continued to be nothing but a pain in the ass. I see no reason why I should return to a world where all I have to look forward to is more of that. Shit, for all I know, you don't even want me to come back." He crossed his arms over his chest and stared out the side of the buggy at the slowly passing scenery.

Sheila slowly closed her mouth and looked away. She sat, staring down at her hands for some time before again speaking in a quiet, meek voice. "I do want you to come back."

"Eh?" he grunted, looking her way. "Sorry, but I didn't catch that."

"I said, I want you to come back," she repeated without looking up.

He gave a single nod of acknowledgement. "And why do you want me to come back?"

"What do you want me to say?" Sheila shot back, annoyed at his attitude. "You want me to say that I need you? You want me to tell you that I can't live without you? Well it's not going to happen!"

"No," he replied slowly, "That's not what I want. I want the truth. Why do you want me to come back?"

"I don't know," she replied, crossing her arms and hugging herself slightly. "Maybe it's because I'm scared, or maybe it's because I don't want to be alone." She shrugged and shook her head. "Hell, for all I know I just want you to come back so I don't have to change the diapers. I don't know. Why the hell are you giving me the third degree on this now? All I've heard from you is that you'd move heaven and earth to come back and now you're telling me now that you might not. What's up with that?"

Arden scratched his chin and chewed on his lower lip for a moment as he thought.

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"Things are coming to a head," he explained without looking at her. "All the possible paths that I might take are converging on one event where, if I'm successful, I'll make the wish. I have no vision beyond that point. Before I dedicate myself to the goal of returning to you, I have to know that I'm making the right decision. Too many other things could be affected by that outcome for me to ignore the alternatives."

"Yah," the vixen replied in a soft voice. "I guess I can see how you might not want to go back. It's not like you have anything to look forward to other than me."

"Oh, don't get me wrong," he said, sitting up. "If all I had to look forward to was being with you, I wouldn't let anything stop me. I just..." He paused, searching for the right words. "It's just that there's no point in me going back if you don't really want me there." He leaned against the side rail again and looked out at the grasses of an open field. "We'd both be better off going out separate ways if that's the case. Until I know for a fact what you want and why, I'm not making any plans."

Sheila started to reply but stopped herself. She watched the horse as it made its way down the meandering path, lost in thought as she contemplated a now very unsure future.

Lakash lay in a meadow of grass that swayed gently with the breeze. Before him stood the translucent, glowing image of Arden, his ghostly visage not having any noticeable effect on the surroundings. The dragon stirred, lifting its titanic head from the ground and looking down on the small, flickering image. "Have you done as instructed?"

The man nodded, "I have."

"And if she doesn't tell the truth?" the dragon prompted.

"Then per our agreement, I'll not return to her world." He crossed his arms as he glowered at the dragon. "And if she does, you'll keep your end of the bargain? You'll ensure that no matter what happens, I'm returned to her world and that nobody will interfere with our kids until after they turn twenty?"

"Of course," Lakash replied, his head giving a slight nod. "I always keep my bargains."

Arden frowned. "Why doesn't that give me a warm, fuzzy feeling?"

The dragon chuckled as the aura faded, taking the man's image with it. He waved his hand, summoning an image in the air of Nanuk who sat in her cottage, sipping a cup

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of tea. "You heard?"

"We may be old, but we are not deaf," the polar bear retorted. "We heard. You'll lose your bet, dragon. Both of them."

Lakash laughed, causing the grass to shudder in waves at the sound. "You're mighty confident, considering that you no longer hold any sway over the female."

"Perhaps," the bear replied, nodding in acknowledgement. "We know this woman. We are confident that she will do as we expect."

Again, the dragon laughed. "Indeed." He leaned towards the image and grinned, but it held no humor, only threat. "You better hope that they don't discover the truth about you and your imminent demise, or I will own you."

Nanuk simply smiled and waved a hand, causing her image to fade from his view. Lakash rolled his enormous bulk over onto its back and stretched out. "Silly bear. Ruddygore knows the truth and will surely tell your champion. Let's see how well you do when that happens." Again a rumble of laughter echoed up from the cavernous mouth, and didn't fade for quite some time.

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Putting on a Happy Face or Marry Kay Gone Wrong

Arden wound the buggy through the back streets of Kathem, a small town with only a couple of hundred people living there. Situated on the river, it was the last stop for many river barges until they reached the River of the Dancing Gods near the castle Terrindel. Sheila lay in the back seat, watching the stark shadows created by the moon as they silently moved through the streets. When Arden had told her that they would sneak into town, she was skeptical, but after seeing how efficiently he could silence the sounds of the horses hooves and the buggy, she'd understood what he meant.

Pausing at the intersection of two alleys, Arden looked around as if confused before turning the horse to proceed down the right side alley. They got about twenty feet when he stopped and backed the horse and buggy up, then turned them around and headed down the alternate alley.

"Do you have any idea where you're going?" Sheila asked in a hoarse whisper.

The sullen man growled in a low voice, "I would have if Hecate had marked the path better." His ebony eyes scoured the walls for faint magic clues as the buggy silently crept between the buildings. "It's not like I can just stop and ask directions, you know."

The vixen propped her muzzle on her hand as she leaned against the side of the buggy. "Yah, that's what they all say," she commented in a low voice.

Arden ignored the comment as he concentrated on navigating the horse and buggy down the narrow alleyways between buildings. After several twists and turns, including a few wrong ones, he pulled the buggy to a stop. "Here we are," he announced quietly as he looped the reins over the front rail of the buggy.

Sheila leaned forward and peered out into the darkness. "How can you be so sure this is the place?"

"Because Hecate's hiding in the shadows," he replied, helping the pregnant vixen down from the buggy.

"Huh?" she grunted, glancing around. "I don't see anyone."

With a flick of his wrist, Arden sent a small blue ball of light into the corner between two buildings where it seemed to burst, outlining the standing form of Hecate in a ghostly aura before fading away. "See?"

Hecate stepped out of the shadows, frowning at the man as she approached. "It seems you've learned a trick or two while I've been gone," she commented as she stopped before them. Pausing for a moment, she squinted as she studied his face, then cocked

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an eyebrow at him . "What the hell did they do to you?"

"They've helped to open my eyes," he replied with a smile.

The Imir frowned at him and crossed her arms. "I wouldn't get too cocky about having the sight. I've known several mortals who gained it and went mad as a result."

"Speaking of going nuts," Sheila interjected, pushing her way between them, "I gotta take a piss or I'm going to explode. Should I just pick a convenient puddle and add to it, or is there something approaching a real bathroom around here?"

Hecate nodded and gestured towards the door she'd been lurking near. "In that door and immediately to the right. There's a small, private apartment that I've arranged for you to stay in. As long as you don't leave the room, nobody should know you're staying there."

"What about food?" the vixen asked, eyeing the large, two story structure. "I gotta eat too, you know."

"They'll bring you food and drink three times a day," the ebony woman replied, taking the vixen's arm and ushering her towards the door. "These people won't talk about you being there, but that's no reason to risk being spotted by their patrons."

"Yah, yah," Sheila muttered as she made her way up the steps to the door, "I get locked in a room while y'all get to run around and have all the fun..." Her grumblings faded as she turned the corner.

"I thought you were going to get her fixed?" Hecate asked, glancing at the man.

"I thought she was," he replied with a shrug.

"I heard that!"

Slipping from shadow to shadow, the short dwarf made his way to the back of a small warehouse. He examined his surroundings for a moment to ensure that he hadn't been followed before slipping inside the door. The entry way was a short, narrow hallway that was covered with a large blanket, preventing any light from leaking out when the door was open. Pushing the door aside, the dwarf paused at the sight of a dozen or so men, all with their weapons drawn and aimed at him.

"Damn it, Thumper," another dwarf grumbled as he sheathed his weapon, "where the hell have you been?"

"Out," the new arrival replied, making his way over to a table with some food and

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drink on it.

"Out?" A female dwarf came out from a side room, scowling at Thumper when she saw him. "Care to elaborate on that answer?"

Thumper looked down into his cup as he swirled the wine, watching the pattern of light as it was reflected off the surfaces. "Nope."

"Damn it thumper," the first dwarf shouted, getting back up again, "You were supposed to be here hours ago. Now you better have one hell of an excuse, or you'll be on watch at the south end of the docs for the next week."

Swirling his wine some more, the surly dwarf cracked a small smile. "All right," he replied, taking another drink. "I found them."

"You found them?" the female echoed. "What do you mean, you found them?"

"Which part of 'I found them' did you not understand," Thumper shot back angrily.

"Enough!" the first dwarf shouted, putting himself between the two. "No more bickering." He turned towards thumper and crossed his arms. "Now, explain yourself. How'd you spot them and where are they?"

"As you know, I've been keeping tabs on Hecate for the last few days," the dwarf replied, pausing to take a bite of some cheese.

"Amazing how you're the only one who spots her," the female grumbled.

Thumper snarled at the woman, "If you went outside once in a while, you might actually see something for yourself rather than relying on these longlegs to do all your work for you!"

"Stop it," the first dwarf ordered, turning to the female, "the both of you." He turned back to Thumper. "Now continue."

"As I said, I've been keeping an eye on Hecate." He glanced at the female, ensuring that she wasn't going to comment again before continuing. "Tonight I saw her sneak out the back door of the inn, trying to use that Imir trick to stay hidden, so I made my way around to the alleyways and went looking for her. She hadn't gone far, just lurking in the shadows by the door." He took another bite of cheese and followed it with a drink of wine. "Anyway, I figure she's waiting on someone, so I find myself a good niche to hide myself and settle in. Round about an hour ago, I'm about startled out of my skin as this horse and buggy pass by where I was hiding."

"Fell asleep did you?" the woman prompted.

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"No," he growled back at her. "The damn thing was all silent like. Not a sound came from it. Even the horse's hooves didn't make a sound. It was a mighty fine magic, if you ask me. And what do I see poppin' out of the carriage but a big human guy just covered with scars."

"HMMMMM," the first dwarf grunted, "Interesting."

"That it is," Thumper agreed, nodding. "But that ain't the half of it. He reaches up and helps a pregnant female down."

The female let out a bark of laughter. "What makes you so sure that it was the bitch?"

Thumpers hand slid down to the weapon at his belt, but passed it by as he wiped his hand on his pants. "I'd have to say the fox head and the tail were a good clue. The fancy duds she was wearing didn't hurt either. The thing fairly glowed."

"Finally," the leader growled with a predatory smile. "Our patience is paying off." His head snapped around as he looked back over at thumper. "You're sure that you weren't seen?"

"No way," thumper replied with the shake of his head. "Hecate followed the bitch inside while the human took off in the buggy. Neither one could have seen me. If they had, well, do you really think I'd be here now? This is Hecate we're talking about."

"Good point," he conceded, wringing his hands together, the predatory grin returning to his face. "We know where they are, now all we have to do is arrange a distraction for those two who are guarding her and snatch the bitch. When that's done, we'll be filthy rich and famous to boot." He turned back to Thumper, his grin somehow growing larger as he did. "And if we have to kill someone in the process, the more the better."

Together the two dwarves laughed as they toasted to their soon-to-be-found fame and fortune.

"You've got to be kidding," Sheila grumbled as she looked around the sparse room. In one corner was a twin-sized bed with a straw mattress, some sheets and something that resembled a pillow but she wasn't sure about it. Next to the bed sat a small crate that held a large oil lamp, which illuminated the windowless room. Next to the crate sat an old, unfinished rocking chair with a pillow that looked new sitting on it. The only other things in the room were a duffle bag, table with a candle, two stools and a chamber pot. The bare, unadorned plank walls had never been painted or stained and

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the floor was covered with sawdust. "You expect me to stay in this shit hole?"

Hecate pulled one of the stools away from the table and sat down on it. "Hey! It's the best I could do, OK?" She leaned back against the wall and rocked the stool back on two legs. "It's not easy finding a place to stash you in a town this sized without everyone knowing about it."

"How do you know they won't talk?" the man asked, pulling out the other stool and sitting on it. "The idea is to make it look like we snuck into town."

Sheila cocked a ear towards the table as she settled awkwardly into the rocking chair which creaked at her weight. "Beg your pardon? What do you mean by making it look like we snuck in. If we didn't sneak in, then what was all that about tonight?"

"It's all part of the master plan" he replied, leaning on the table. Pressing one finger against the side of his nose, he exhaled sending a small burst of flame out which lit the crude wax candle. "By now, they know that we're in town and that we're hiding you here, only they think that we don't know that they know. You follow?"

"No, I don't," the vixen replied, rubbing the bridge of her snout with her hand, "but don't let that stop you from continuing on with this master plan of yours."

Chuckling at the vixen, Arden leaned back against the wall and clasped his hands across his stomach. "Even as we speak, they are no doubt deploying people to watch the building in case you go anywhere, therefore tomorrow, we're going to give them exactly what they want." He gave her a rather sinister smile that sent a shiver down the vixen's back. "We're going to have me leaving the building with you wearing a heavy cloak, supposedly to disguise you."

"Wait! Just hold it, buddy," Sheila said, holding up a hand. "I thought you said I'm not allowed to leave the room?"

"You're not," he replied, nodding.

Sheila shook her head and blinked at him. "Then how can I be seen leaving the building with you?"

"Simple. Hecate's going to shape change so that she looks like you." He nodded to the ebony female.

"Oh no I'm not," Hecate replied, shaking a finger at Arden. "There's no way I'm going to shape change into that!" she replied, pointing over to Sheila. "No offense"

"None taken," the vixen replied.

"Besides," the deamoness continued, "even if I did, anyone with the sight could see the illusion. The only way to make it stand up to close inspection would be

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transmutation, and I'm not that good."

"No," Arden replied, pulling a gold coin from the pouch at his belt and popping it into his mouth, "but I am."

"Hell no!" Hecate stood and backed away from the table. "There's no way I'm going to let you transform me into her! If anything happened to you, I'd be screwed!" She continued to back away as the grinning man pushed his stool back from the table and stood. "No no no! Oh no! Please! No! NOOOooooooooooooo....."

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The Manchurian Candidate

Sheila sat on the bed, naked, glaring at Arden as he examined the silk armor closely. Beside her sat another Sheila, who also glared at him, though the look she gave may have been slightly more murderous. “What the hell are you doing?” the first vixen asked.

“I’m going to try and duplicate this armor, though it won’t be easy,” the scarred man replied, flipping the jacket over to examine it closely from the back.

“Yah, right,” the second vixen muttered. “I think you’ve got delusions of grandeur. That thing was crafted by a celestial, right? What makes you think that you’re going to duplicate it?”

“Oh, just something I learned while programming computers in the military.” He flipped the jacket back over and studied the inside lining near the center of the back. “Computer software isn’t unlike a spell. Given the proper utilities, there’s no reason you can’t copy the program no matter how well protected it may be.”

The second vixen rolled her eyes and gave a derisive bark of laughter. “And you think you’re going to come up with some kind of spell-program that’s going to copy something so complex that I can’t even see ten percent of it?” She shook her head and let out a long sigh. “Look, there’ve got to be thousands, if not millions, of branches to the threads that make up the weave of that armor, each one its own spell. I don’t see how you’re going to do it.”

Arden stopped and leaned back for a second, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his hand before turning to face the two females. “The trick is recursion. In a computer, you can have a program spawn a copy of itself to continue processing a separate part of the job, then disappear or report back to the master version when it’s done.” He paused to smile at the identical looks of confusion on the faces of Sheila and Hecate, both with their ears cocked forwards and heads slightly tilted. “If I can get this spell to mimic that functionality, I can start it on the key thread and it will follow the entire tapestry of the armor, duplicating it exactly. Even if it does miss a few threads or copy them incorrectly, the difference should be so small as to be insignificant for what I need it for.”

“Oh?” the first vixen piped up, crossing her arms. “And just what is that?”

“To block anyone from scrying or locating you with magic,” he replied, gesturing to the true Sheila who’d just spoken. “Though I expect that the armor should function pretty much as the original will, it won’t be an exact duplicate. However, much of the basic matrixes of the spells are designed to conceal the wearer from being magically observed or tracked.”

“Uh huh,” the suspicious vixen grunted, frowning at him. “And what about that spirit thing that you said was in the armor?”

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Arden arched his eyebrows for a second as he rolled his head to one side, looking at the armor and bit his lip. “The spirit is an artificial construct, woven into the armor. In theory it should copy that at the same time it copies the armor.”

“You can’t just copy a spirit like it was some kind of computer program!” Sheila blurted out. “Can you?” she asked Hecate, less sure of herself. The other vixen just shrugged.

“I guess we’ll find out,” Arden replied, flattening out the armor on the table.

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“I don’t see why we have to cooperate with the other groups,” Thell grumbled as she carefully packed up some of her potion making equipment. The female dwarf cursed as she noticed one of the flasks had a small chip on the edge of the lip that she’d have to pay attention to in the future when using it. “I just don’t see the profit in doing that.” She paused to look at the lead dwarf as he sat in the chair at the end of the table. “Come on, Kord. You know we don’t need those losers to take them. Especially not considering the ace in the hole that I have.”

“Maybe,” he grudgingly admitted, “however they have Mandrel with them and he’s second in line for Kathlan’s seat on the council. Somehow I don’t think that you could stand up to him, even with your secret weapon.”

The witch was about to reply when a short, stout black candle which sat in the middle of a magical circle on the table ignited itself, the flame bent in one direction as if blown by an intangible wind. “Hold the boat,” she stated, rooting around in her bag for a moment before pulling out a large, ornate crystal ball and setting it on the table. With a few gestures and mutterings of a spell she soon had an image of Sheila in the ball as Kord look on from over her shoulder. The scene in the sphere shifted as if it were a camera panning back to reveal the two Sheilas sitting side by side, both holding onto the hilt of a small sword while watching the man intently as he cast a spell. “What have we here?” she asked. Curious as to what the spell was, she zoomed the image in some, closing on the casting. As she watched the completed spell, it appeared as a small, white spec of light floated down onto the armor. A second later, there was a blinding flash of light followed by an explosion as the crystal ball detonated like a bomb.

Ears ringing from the blast, the witch shook her head to clear the mental cobwebs left behind by the shock before looking back over at the table. The exploding crystal ball had destroyed the table along with all the remaining alchemical equipment she’d not yet packed. From the looks of the box she’d been packing things into, she doubted there was much left that would be useable. She accepted Kord’s hand as he helped her up from the floor.

“What the fuck just happened?” he demanded, squicking a finger in his ear to try and clear it of the ringing.

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“Feedback from whatever spell he cast,” she replied, wiping her brow then noticing that it was blood, not sweat, on her hand. Gently she dabbed at the gash on her forehead as she poked the remains of her equipment with her foot. “From what I saw, I think they’re setting up some kind of bait-and-switch trap.” She looked over at the leader of the group and frowned. “I strongly recommend that you don’t group up with the others. Let them have first crack at the target. Whatever he’s got planned won’t be pleasant and I don’t want to be a part of it.”

“So that’s the way it is?” Thumper asked, glass crunching under foot as he approached. “First sign of trouble and you want us to give up our advantage?” He turned to Kord, giving him a stern look. “We know that they’re planning a switch. It won’t be a surprise to us. I say let’s go and use their trap against them.”

“No,” Kord replied, scowling at the wreckage around him. “I think the witch has it right this time. Let’s watch, but take no action and see how he handles this. Once they think they’ve gotten rid of all the hunters, then we’ll move in when they least suspect it. Should our target manage to capture them, then we can deal with that in our own good time.”

“But, Kord,” Thumper started, but was interrupted by the other dwarf’s stern look.

“I said no,” the leader reiterated. “For now, we wait and watch.”

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“Well, that certainly was interesting,” Hecate muttered derisively as she let go of Sheila’s tanto. Heaving herself up, she waddled over to the table. All around the room there were deep, black lines of charred wood that still glowed and smoldered in places from the release of energy they’d just witnessed. She gave a neutral grunt as she examined the two sets of nearly-identical armor that now sat side by side. “OK. I’ll admit that I’m impressed, though I can clearly see flaws in the copy. Your spell worked, but I wouldn’t say it was an amazing success.”

Sheila tossed the tanto onto the bed and pulled herself up using the footboard as a crutch and made her way over to where Arden lay. The discharge had thrown him across the room and against the wall where he’d slid down into a sitting position. As she looked him over, she could see angry red marks where the tendrils of energy had coursed over his body, burning him. “Are you OK?” she asked, reaching tentatively out to help him up.

“Yah,” he grunted, “I’ll be all right.” His answer didn’t do much to reassure the vixen who watched him as he grimaced at the pain, his arms and legs pulled up into a ball. After a few seconds, he seemed to relax a bit though he continued to breathe heavily, his eyes clenched shut in pain.

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Sheila turned to her mirror image. “Hey, Hecate? I think you should come check this out.” Hecate waddled over to where the man lay and examined him for a second before laughing. “What the hell are you laughing at?” the vixen demanded. “This isn’t funny!”

Hecate turned to Sheila and let out another bark of laughter. “Bullshit. It’s hilarious,” she replied to her scowling counterpart. “That asshole turned me into a clone of you, against my will, then had the balls to assume he could screw around with celestial armor as if it were a mortal artifact, and he got his ass burned for it.” She turned with hands on hips and looked down at him again, laughing. “Frankly, the arrogant son of a bitch got off easy.”

The demonic vixen’s laughter stopped abruptly as Sheila slapped her. “You bitch! How dare you laugh at him like that!”

Before the daemons had a chance to respond, Hecate found her self suddenly flat on the floor, her feet having been kicked out from under her by Arden who now knelt over her, one hand at her throat, the other drawn back to throw a punch. “You think it’s fucking funny?” he raged. “I’ll give you something to laugh about!”

“Stop it!” Sheila shouted, grabbing his arm and trying to pull him off the other vixen. “What the hell has gotten into you two?” she demanded, fighting to keep him from swinging. “I thought you two were supposed to be fighting the hunters, not each other!”

Arden paused, his head cocked to one side. After a moment, he released the vixen on the floor and stood up, a curious look to his face which vanished with a shake of his head. “She’s right, you know,” he commented, reaching a hand down to help Hecate up. “We should be cooperating, not fighting. After all, we are allies.”

The daemon-vixen slapped his hand away with a growl. “Allies don’t force each other to do things against their will. You’re treating me more like a tool than an ally, and I don’t like it.”

“So be it,” he replied coldly, walking over to the table to examine the replicated armor.

Hecate ignored Sheila’s hand, choosing instead to use the bed frame to help hoist herself up from the floor. “All right, you’ve duplicated the armor. I assume you want us to get dressed again?”

Arden nodded, and picked up the original armor. “You wear the master set while Sheila wears the copy.”

The daemon-vixen unfurled the pants and started to struggle her way into them. “Why do I have the feeling that this is going to turn into a cluster fuck?”

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“Because you’re not used to being around him,” Sheila replied, struggling into her new clothes. “You’ll get used to it.”

As the two females donned their clothing, Arden picked up the weapons. Once they were dressed he tucked the katana into his belt, handed the wakazashi to Hecate and the tanto to Sheila. “You shouldn’t need this,” he said to Sheila wrapping his hand around hers as he handed her the blade, “but I think having something might help to keep you calm, and it’s important that you stay calm.”

“Why’s that?” the vixen asked nervously, concern etched in her dark eyes.

“Remember what I said about the armor: It responds to emotion. Since it’s not a perfect copy, I don’t know what might happen if you get yourself all worked up. Your best bet is to just lie down, relax and try to take a nap.” He let go and stepped back. “If you can’t sleep, then try thinking about something from back home, something that will get your mind off of being here. Think you can do that?” He watched the vixen as she nodded. “Good.” With a nod of his own, he collected Hecate and headed for the door as Sheila lay down on the bed. Once they’d left the room, he paused to cast a spell on the door.

“What are you doing?” Hecate demanded in a harsh whisper. “You’re locking her in there!”

“I don’t want her wandering around,” he explained, concentrating on the door. “This will keep her in and anyone else out. Last thing I need is her mucking things up by wandering around at the wrong time.”

Once the spell was finished, the two quietly made their way out the back, carefully checking to see if they were being watched. Half-way down the alley, Arden groaned and leaned heavily against the wall before sliding down to one knee. As she watched, Hecate saw his shape ripple as he fought to maintain the artificial form that he wore. The vixen suppressed a smile at his discomfort as she glanced around.

“How long are you going to keep that up?” she whispered in a low voice. “There are two of them watching now and I don’t want them spoiling the plan.”

“You worry about yourself,” he grunted as the attack subsided. “I’ll be fine.” Putting a hand against the wall for leverage, he stood up and shook off the last of the effects.

“Speaking of attacks,” Hecate whispered as they continued to walk again, “just what the hell is going on with you?”

Arden glanced around to ensure nobody was in earshot. He spotted the two men behind them, skulking in shadows, but he ignored them. “Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing to concern yourself with.”

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“Bullshit,” the vixen muttered. “Last thing I need is you popping your cork and turning back into a dragon, especially if I’m near enough to get squashed in the process.”

Taking her arm in his hand, he directed the vixen towards the stable where the horse and buggy were. “I said, don’t worry about it. Just be ready to act surprised when they jump us.”

As they turned a corner, Arden heard a rustle of movement. Deliberately turning slowly, he caught the blur of motion out of the corner of his eye as a sap came down on the back of his head, the impact throwing him forward and dropping him to the ground. Half a dozen men emerged from the shadows, several grabbing the vixen while four of them rapidly bound Arden, then disarmed them both. The leader directed the men with hand gestures, causing them to pick up their unconscious victim and dragging the now captive vixen with them to a warehouse not far away.

When the group was inside, Hecate saw that there were nearly two dozen people there of many different species. The apparent leader, a tall, thin, rather austere looking elf dressed in black and silver strode forward. “Ah, you must be the lovely Sheila,” he observed, smiling at the terrified-looking vixen. Turning to the apparently-unconscious man, he nodded. “And this must be her guardian, though I’m surprised that he was captured so easily.” Stepping back, he waved his hand in front of himself, casting a spell. “No, I don’t think so. Not so easily. More like you let yourself be captured.” When the man didn’t reply the elf frowned. “I tire of this game, human. You twitched when I grabbed your hair, so I know you’re not unconscious.”

“Very observant,” Arden said, opening his eyes. Pulling his feet under him, he stood without help, though he did notice that his guards never let go of him or relaxed their vigilance. “You’ve got some rather well trained lackeys.”

“They’re not lackeys,” the elf replied, stepping back to sit down in a large chair and crossing his legs. “They’re all independent businessmen who’ve seen the light and decided that cooperation is far superior to competing with each other.” He reached out as a small upright lizard handed him a goblet from which he drank. “Especially considering that they’ve all got a curse on them that only I can remove.”

“Quite clever,” Arden replied, testing his bonds. “It’s always nice to have leverage over underlings, especially the kind that backstab you, eh?”

“Indeed,” the elf agreed with a nod, taking another sip. “I wouldn’t try anything if I were you. I can see that you have the strength to break those bonds, but I think you’ll find you’ll still be at a disadvantage if you do.” He smiled as he gloated in his cleverness. “You see, I took the liberty of blocking your magic while you were feigning unconsciousness. On, it’s nothing that you can’t break on your own, but that will take time. Time that we’ll use to cut you down.”

“So what do you want?” Arden growled.

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“Simple. We want the vixen.” He handed the goblet back to the lizard before steeping his fingers together. “Since we have the vixen, the question becomes, what do we do with you? Most of the men want to kill you. I, on the other hand, am intrigued by you. You’ve done quite a job keeping her safe. I could use someone with your talents. So tell me,” he paused as a sly grin crossed his face, “just how much are you being paid to guard her?”

“Paid?” Arden echoed with a quirky smile of his own. “I’m not being paid anything.”

“Oh, no,” the elf replied, looking rather put out. “You’re not one of those goody-goody types who feels obligated to help the poor and downtrodden, are you?”

Arden ignored Hecate’s derisive snort. “Actually, no. To be honest, I’ve spent most of my life as a paid assassin. This particular job just happens to be something that I’m doing for personal reasons.”

“Hmmm. That’s too bad,” the elf replied with a melancholy sigh. “You could have been of such use to me.”

Arden let out a started cry as one of the guards behind him plunged a dagger in, and then pulled it out. A second later, he heard the sound of a scream as the dagger dropped to the floor, the blade slowly being eaten away by his acidic blood. Taking this as their clue, Hecate released the spell she had been holding, tossing her two guards like rag dolls through the air and into the walls where they crumpled silently to the floor. Nobody paid much attention to them, though, as Arden grunted loudly, followed by the sharp snap of rope breaking. Freed of his bonds, he grabbed one guard, swung him around and smashed him into the shocked guards who’d been behind him, one cradling his wounded hand where the acid-like blood had splashed it.

The rustle of steel echoed through the room as swords were drawn from their scabbards. Every man in the room except the elf in the chair moved for position around the two. “I don’t care about him, but I want the bitch taken any way you can as long as she and the unborn are still alive.”

Hecate and Arden stood back to back as they faced the ring of steel. “Now what?” the vixen asked, summoning manna to her for a spells.

Arden let out a low, rumbling laugh that no human throat would be capable of creating, causing their opponents to pause. “Now we get to have fun!”

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Things that go bump in the night.

Sheila lay on the bed with her head on the pillow and the Japanese dagger tucked in close by her side. She watched as the flame on the candle that sat next to the bed burned and occasionally flickered, its orange tongue dancing lightly as it slowly consumed the wax. Her hand shifted down to her swollen belly as she felt the child within her kicking, and smiled. Having children hadn't really been a highpoint in the grand scheme of things as far as she was concerned, and she still wasn't too thrilled with the idea, but it was slowly growing on her. She wondered if she'd turn into one of those mothers who'd hand their kid a lunch as she sent them on their way to school, or if she'd be more like her mother, someone who'd not given a damn about either her or Tammy and was happy to be rid of them when, in their teens, they left home to run with a pack.

A smile slowly made its appearance as she thought back to the days when she and Tammy had been carefree. It had seemed like a never-ending summer vacation, but that was just an illusion. The pack had trespassed into territory controlled by a pack of jackals one too many times and there'd been hell to pay. Tammy and Sheila had been lucky to get out of that fight relatively unscathed, though most of their friends hadn't. It had been a harsh lesson in the realities of life, but one she'd not soon forgotten. With their pack mostly dead and the few stragglers left scattered to the four winds, Sheila and Tammy had hitched their way to the big city in hopes of hooking up with another pack that might take them in. After two weeks of kicking around on the street they were about to give up when they'd met Melissa, one of the girls who'd worked for Zig Zag at that time. It was one of the best moves of her life, and one she'd never regretted. The thought of Zig Zag and the rest of the crew brought another smile to her face, though it was a wistful one. Chuckling quietly to herself she wondered what Zig Zag would say once she found out she was pregnant. It certainly would be the last thing anyone at the studio would ever have expected.

The sudden loud crack startled the vixen out of her reverie. "That sounded like lightning," she muttered to herself. Swinging her legs off the bed she sat up, protectively clutching the dagger in her hands as she did so. Ears cocked and sweeping like small, furry radar antenna, she listened to the stark silence for a hint of some danger. Again there was the crack of lightning, though it was without the usual rumble you'd hear during a storm. Instead this sounded more like the low snap of an angry spark, amplified a thousand times. A second later, the sound of a tremendous explosion made her unconsciously flinch as the walls of the room shook and dust fell from the ceiling. Not long after she heard the sound of objects bouncing off the roof above her.

Using the bedpost for leverage, she hauled herself up off the bed and waddled over to the door, only to find it secured by more than the locking mechanism on the doorknob. Frantically she tried to force the door open. "Let me out!" she shouted, pounding on the door and the lock. Using the tanto, she began attacking the door, its latch and even the hinge trying to force it open...

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A casual observer might suspect that an accident of some sort had caused the fire in the warehouses; however the lone figure standing hunched over in the middle of the flaming inferno would quickly dispel such a misconception. The warehouse had been pretty much obliterated by the force of the explosion. Timbers and pieces of the wall sagged outward. Part of the roof which had been blown upwards had managed to cling to the cross member long enough to drag down the remainder of a wall, pulling it inward, all of which was now burning quite profusely. The warehouses on either side had not fared much better. The force of the blast had bowed walls and ignited wood and shingles, causing a ring of fire that was rapidly expanding due to the dry nature of the wood.

Breathing heavily, Arden straightened up and looked around at the remains of the building and its occupants with a frown. The sound of shifting rubble caught his attention, causing him to turn towards the collapsed section of wall that still had some roof attached to it. Picking his way through the debris, he made his way over to the shifting pile of wood and grabbed the remains of a support beam, hefting the mass with both hands to see what was underneath. The splintered remnants of a crate fell away as Hecate sat up, muttering to herself.

"That's no way for a lady to talk," the large man commented as he flipped the debris he was holding off to the side. Reaching down, he gave the vixen a hand up. "Then again, you're no lady."

"No shit," she replied as the armor's aura flared up around her. Without warning, she yanked herself towards him while at the same time striking him with a right cross that sent him spinning to the floor. "And you're no fucking gentleman, either."

Arden's head snapped around to glare at the outlined glow of the fox as he wiggled his jaw, checking it for injury. All around him, flames danced outward as if blown by a strong burst of air as his body lifted from the floor to a standing position. "What the hell was that for?"

"That's for trying to kill me, you fucking moron!" the angry vixen retorted, the armor's aura swirling around her like it was her own personal firestorm, lifting her hair into a halo around her head. "Just what were you thinking?"

A snarl escaped his clenched teeth as the man's hands slowly curled into balled fists. "I was thinking that I'd better deflect that spell or I'm going to be in some deep shit. What the hell did you expect?"

Hecate reached down and picked up the wakazashi and scabbard from where they had fallen on the ground. "From here it looked like you were trying to see if you could get us both killed." Taking a step towards the man, she glared at him menacingly. "Why didn't you deflect it up through the roof instead of into a pile of

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barrels filled with alcohol?"

"Get off my back," Arden growled angrily. Holding his hand out, he summoned the katana, still snug in its scabbard, from across the room. Catching it easily, he peeled off the burnt hand and remains of the arm it was attached to, discarding them like rubbish.. "I'm not the one throwing around high energy combat spells in a room full of volatile liquids, so back off."

"I've had it with your arrogance and stupidity!" Hecate declared, her armor's magical aura changing color from a bright red into a deeper burgundy color while at the same time becoming more solid around her. The eyes of the dragon on the armor's chest plate glowed with an inner fire. With an inhuman shriek, Hecate leapt forward, striking at him with the sword. Arden took a small hop backwards as he drew the katana and deflected the blow. Together the duo swept about the room in a deadly dance of steel. Brows furrowed, Arden found himself constantly on the defensive as the vixen pushed the attack, her strength and speed enhanced by the armor to the point that it gave her the advantage.

Unable to concentrate long enough for a spell and unable to change the momentum of her attack, it was all Arden could do to retreat before her, while trying not to stumble over any of the wreckage that littered the room. Hecate grimaced as she leapt forward with a snarl, dropping the scabbard so she could use both hands to wield the blade. Leaping backwards in response, Arden was surprised to discover that she had maneuvered him towards one of the few intact pillars in the warehouse. Using her strength to her advantage, she spun Arden's katana around and away, disarming him. Her sword low and to the side, she twisted her body, bringing the sword around in a deadly arc towards the left side of his head. Arden twisted violently, turning away from the blade while trying to duck to the side, but the tip still managed to bite deeply, slicing from the base of the cheek up through his eye and out his brow. The attack however, had left her unable to deflect the blow of the scabbard in his off hand, which snapped up and around to strike her in the back of the head like a sap.

An inhuman roar of pain and anger echoed across the town as he stumbled away from the vixen, holding his hands to the left side of his face. A new sound of movement caused him to turn back to Hecate. As he watched, she rose from a kneeling position, the aura around her now solid, with an almost plastic look to it as the entire dragon on the armor glowed with the same color. Eyes unseeing, the unconscious vixen rose to her feet and turned towards Arden. His pain was forgotten as the realization of what was happening struck him. "Lakash," he snarled as he faced the vixen being controlled like a puppet by the armor.

Hecate raised both hands towards the man as the aura around her body seemed to flow towards her hands. Second later sheets of lightning flew from her fingers towards Arden as the armor released its magic in a violent flood. With both hands held before him in defense, Arden was forced to stagger backwards despite having

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leaned into the assault. The torrent of electricity struck his hands, yet it didn't burn him, nor was it deflected. Instead, the electricity was captured into a sphere that grew in size until the attack ended several seconds later.

With a lopsided grimace, Arden glared at his opponent with his remaining good eye. "Burn me once, shame on you," he grunted in a raspy voice. "Burn me twice, shame on me. Didn't Lakash teach you more than one trick?" With a sharp shove from his hands he launched the accumulated energy as a single bolt that struck Hecate squarely in the chest, slicing through the protective aura and ripping into the figure of the dragon woven into the armor. An otherworldly scream filled the air as the vixen fell to the ground, her arms and legs flailing against the ground in an uncontrolled fit. Exhausted from the battle and his wounds, Arden slowly walked over to the twitching figure and examined it. There was a gaping hole in the armor where most of the dragon's image and the armor had been obliterated by the attack, as well as a fair size chunk from the side of the vixen's chest, which oozed blood from the cauterized wound. The glow on the dragon was slowly fading, but not fast enough for the man. Pointing a finger like a pistol, he fired a small burst of magic into the head of the dragon, thus putting an end to the last of the spirit's death throes.

"That motherfucker," the man muttered as he stared down at the remains of the armor for a moment. Reaching down opened her top slightly to reveal a small bead necklace hanging around her neck. With one finger, he yanked on the band, snapping it. As he watched, Hecate's shape shifted and flowed, slowly returning her to her original shape. He gave a brief nod, satisfied with the results as he noted that the wound in her side had closed itself when body returned to its natural state. An ugly burn still remained, but the damage was far less than it had been before.

Slowly he straightened up and looked around while probing the wound on his face with one hand. Blood flowed in a small river down the side of his face and chest. He paused for a moment and closed his remaining good eye in concentration. A minute later, he removed his hand revealing an angry scar running up the side of the face and an eye that was once again whole. Cautiously bending over, he picked up the katana and wakazashi, returning them to their scabbards before he then tucked them into his belt. He then took Hecate by one arm and heaved her over his shoulder, staggering somewhat under the load. A brief wave of his hand cast a spell to hide his movement from the town's people he heard running towards the blaze as he staggered his way towards the inn where they'd left Sheila.

"See?" the female dwarf chided from the shadowed alley of some near by buildings. "I told you we should just wait and watch." She gave Thumper a smug look, demonstrating her superiority. As the three watched, the man walked over to a section of fallen roof and lifted it up. "I'll bet anything that's a double over there and the real bitch is back at the hotel. No female in her condition would be able to get up

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after something like that."

Kord nodded to the witch and smiled. "Take two men and go get the bitch. Do whatever it takes, but do it fast." He reached out to grab the female's arm as she turned to go. "Make sure you don't injure her or the kid, understand me?" Without waiting for a reply, he released her and turned back towards the ruined warehouse just in time to see the man get nailed by a right cross. "Whoa."

"I guess that answers the question of it being the real bitch or not," Thumper growled. "I better head over to the hotel just in case there's trouble."

"No," the leader whispered sharply as he watched the ensuing battle. "I want you here. If we're lucky, they'll take each other down. When that happens, we should be able to move in and take out whoever's left standing."

"Do you think that's wise?" the other dwarf prompted. "We might be better off just doing a snatch and run. They're both magic users and you just sent off our only defense."

Together the two men watched the combat until its conclusion as the human destroyed the armor. Kord grunted to himself as he watched the bitch's shape shift back into that of Hecate. Drawing his axe, he was about to order his men to move out when he saw the witch round the corner at full speed. "What's wrong?" he whispered in a low voice.

Holding up her hand, the witch paused for a couple of breaths before speaking. "There's a seal on the door." She shook her head and glanced over at the man as he lifted Hecate's form. "There's no way I can get through it. Even if I could, I wouldn't want to go up against whatever's locked in that room." She nodded, trying to catch her breath while enduring Kord's scowl. "It sounds like there's some berserk animal in there. Something's tearing up the place. I don't know if they planted something in there as a trap and it broke its control or what, but I wasn't about to find out."

"All right," the leader reluctantly agreed. "Until we know where the female really is, we'll just keep them under observation. I want you to follow him. If he does get the bitch, we take them immediately, before they have a chance to recover."

The female nodded in agreement. "Right." Turning, she gestured to two others who followed her as she ran off down the alley again.

Turning back to the warehouses, Kord swore a curse as he tried to spot their quarry. . "Where the hell did they disappear off to?"

Arden paused as he approached the back of the inn and listened to the sounds issuing

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from within. It was difficult to make out what was happening with the ringing of bells and sounds of people shouting, but what he heard was enough to make him curse and lunge for the rear door. Rounding the corner to the small hallway that lead to the room he'd left Sheila in, he was shocked to find that not only was the door still securely closed, his seal on the door was intact and showed no signs of tampering. Quickly he lowered the unconscious elf to the floor then concentrated on removing the protective spells on the door while at the same time trying to ignore the sounds of crashing furniture and screams coming from beyond.

No sooner had he removed the spell on the door than it virtually exploded, sending wood flying down the short hallway. On the other side of the door he saw Sheila standing with the remains of the table in her hands, beating on what was left of the door in a mindless rage. Around her body flowed a deep chartreuse color that fluctuated in both color and intensity as the berserk vixen finished destroying both table and door at the same time. Panting for a second, she blinked before realizing that the door was no longer there. Her eyes settled on Arden and she let out another shriek of rage, dropping the table and drawing the tanto before charging him.

Shocked at her attack, Arden barely dodged the dagger as it whistled in front of his stomach, passing within an inch of his skin. With a snake-like strike, his hand shot out to grab her wrist as she swung the dagger back towards him, blocking the blow and preventing her from swinging it again. Enraged, she lashed out with her other paw, slashing at his face with claw-like nails. Twisting his captive wrist, Arden pulled Sheila off balance, causing her attack to miss and giving him the opportunity to grab the other wrist, hauling them both high up over her head. He grunted as one of her knees slammed into his groin, causing him to bend over slightly, allowing Sheila to sink her long, canine fangs into the base of his neck at the shoulder. With a snarl, he slammed her two wrists together and then wrapped the fingers of his left hand around them both, freeing his right hand. The fingers on his right hand glowed with a black aura as he clawed at the dragon on her chest, causing her to release his neck. The vixen cut loose with a howl of pain that was echoed by the unearthly sound the armor's spirit made as black tendrils rapidly destroyed it and much of the armor around it seconds after.

Without the influence of the dragon spirit, Sheila's eyes rolled back up in her head and she lost consciousness. Only the fact that Arden still held her hands kept her from dropping to the floor. Reaching down, he lifted the limp vixen and carried her back inside the room and surveyed the damage. She had pretty much destroyed all the furniture in her crazed desire to escape the room. He sighed and tossed the mattress out from the corner of the wall and gently laid her down on it, grunting with the effort. Hobbling out into the hall, he grabbed Hecate by one hand and dragged her into the room, unceremoniously dumping her by the vixen. Exhausted, he leaned against the wall and slid down it until he sat on the floor.

Staring at the open door, he sighed and closed his eyes, summoning power from the very air around him. Seconds later, he concentrated on the doorway and the shattered

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wood around it. The pieces of wood blurred, faded and reappeared as a smooth wooden door, which once again hung on its hinge as if nothing had ever happened. Concentrating again, he then sealed the door with a protection spell.

Secure in the knowledge that they were safe for the moment, he closed his eyes to catch his breath. Despite his best efforts not to fall asleep, exhaustion claimed him.

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Let's play the blame game! Come on, it's easy and it's fun!

Hecate awoke to discover utter darkness. A momentary panic ran down her spine as the thought that she might be blind hit her, but faded as she shifted her sight into the magic bands, revealing the small, windowless room. She started to sit up, but immediately dropped back down to the floor, clutching at her side. Wincing, the wounded woman gently probed her ribs, examining the extent of the damage while trying to remember what had happened. Her mind wandered back to the warehouse and the explosion that had buried her in the rubble. She remembered the man lifting the roof off of her and her anger at his careless actions and her blind rage that drove her to attack him. "What the hell?" she muttered to herself while shaking her head as if to clarify the memories. Concentrating on the memories, she tried to recall the chain of thought that had caused such intense anger, and failed. It was as if she were remembering a dream, though she knew it have been real.

Cautiously she sat up while trying to avoid putting any strain on her injured side and summoned a ball of light. Now able to see, she looked down, surprised at the fact that she still wore the silk jacket, though most of the left front and side was missing, an area that suspiciously matched the wound in her side. Her magical sight showed that although the armor was in no danger of degrading further, the spells interwoven into it were quite inert, surprising her. A scowl crossed her face as a rather unpleasant thought made its way into her head. Looking around, she saw Arden sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, asleep. On the mattress in the corner she saw that Sheila was also unconscious and, for some reason, naked. A brief visual search showed the remainder of her armor shriveled up on the bed, its fabric rapidly being consumed by some strange, black spell that ravenously ate away at the edges.

With a flick of her wrist, she sent the small ball of light flying into the air. At the top of its ark, it slowed to a complete stop, hovering as if suspended by a string from the room. Hecate took a deep breath and let it out slowly, wincing at the pain before she cautiously rolled over onto her knees and then stood up. Flexing her right shoulder back, she slipped her right arm out of the jacket's sleeve, freeing her wings and allowing her to let the jacket slip off her left arm without straining her ribs too bad. She tossed the useless jacket in the corner and soon followed it with the silk pants she wore, happy to get out of the unfamiliar clothing. Using her good hand, she pulled and adjusted the body stocking that she wore, trying to get it comfortable, but with a good portion of the left side missing, it refused to sit right. She let out a sigh as she examined the damage again. She'd paid a small fortune for the hand crafted material and relied on its natural magical properties to protect her from minor magic.

Shuffling over to where Sheila lay, she kicked the vixen's leg. "You alive down there?" she prodded, kicking the female again.

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Sheila mumbled and grunted unintelligibly before squinting up at the demonic imir. "What the hell are you kicking me for?" The vixen blinked and looked around for a moment, her brows furrowed in confusion. "And what the hell happened in here?"

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," Hecate replied, summoning a chair apparently out of empty air before sitting on it. "This place looks like there was a bar fight. Any clue what happened?" With a grunt of exertion, Sheila pushed herself upright and then blinked a couple of times as she took a deep breath. "You all right?" the ebony woman asked, leaning towards the vixen.

"Yah," the pregnant vixen replied with a curt nod, "I just felt a little light headed there for a second." Again she shook her head as if to clear it then looked back up at Hecate.

Hecate nodded and leaned back in the chair. "So. Tell me what you remember before you blacked out."

"Well," Sheila started, shifting herself on the mattress to get more comfortable, "I remember lying in the bed, just about asleep when I heard what sounded like lightning." She looked down towards the floor, her eyes focusing on something unseen beyond it. "It startled the hell out of me. When I heard it again, I remember sitting up and trying to figure out what and where it was coming from. Then I heard a loud explosion followed by stuff falling on the roof." She looked back up at Hecate, chewing her lip in thought. "The last thing I remember was finding the door locked and feeling panicked because I couldn't get out." Shrugging her arms, she glanced around the room before looking back at the other woman. "That's about all I remember. The rest is just a big blur." She glanced over at Arden and frowned as she noticed the large scar that ran up and across his face. "Is he all right?"

"He's alive, if that's what you're asking." Frowning, the imir studied the sleeping man for a moment. "I don't think we'll be waking him up any time soon either."

Sheila cocked an ear towards Arden, as she looked him over. "Why not?"

"Because he's hibernating right now," the ebony woman replied with a long sigh. "At least that's the best way to describe it. From the looks of him, I'll bet he's been eating gold like it's going out of style, hasn't he?"

Sheila's confusion shifted over to Hecate as she contemplated the answer. "Yah. As a matter of fact he has. Why?"

Hecate nodded. "Dragons need gold. They don't just hoard it out of greed. They need to eat it to stay healthy. That body was locked in stone for a very long time and although time was slowed, it wasn't stopped. By now he's probably more than just a little short on reserves." Tisking, she shook her head, frowning as she watched the unconscious form. "You probably aren't aware of it, but he's been running on the ragged edge of complete exhaustion. The idiot's been tossing around mana like a spendthrift so that anyone

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watching would think they're up against someone in a hell of a lot better shape than he is." She looked back at the vixen and pursed her lips. "That's not the worst part. We're stuck in here until he does wake up."

Sheila flopped backwards onto the mattress with her arms flayed out to the sides. "Great. How long will that take?"

"If were lucky?" Hecate waited for the vixen to lift her head and look back over at her, "Only five or six weeks, though I've heard of dragons hibernating for as long as a decade after enduring extreme stress like our boy here has."

"WHAT?" Sheila rocked her body side to side as she used her arms to lever herself upright again. "Five or six weeks? Why can't we leave now?"

"Because your boyfriend locked us into this room, that's why." Standing, Hecate waved her arm around the room. "Every surface is covered with protective wards that I can't even begin to unravel, locking us in and everything else out." She limped over to the door and studied it for a second before continuing. "Only thing I'm sure of is that there are some strands that look like they'd unravel the spell if you pull on them, but only an idiot would fall for an obvious trap like that." Turning, she leaned heavily backwards against the door and banged the back of her head on the wood in frustration. "I knew I should have just killed him and dragged your ass to Ruddygore when I had the chance."

"Six weeks?" Sheila sobbed as she held her hands to either side of her head as if to keep it from splitting apart. "How the fuck are we supposed to survive locked in this fucking closet for six fucking weeks!" Reaching out past the end of the mattress, she picked up a piece of wood and threw it at Arden, missing him with plenty of room. "This just isn't happening!" she screamed at the top of her voice. "Why are you doing this to me!" she shouted towards the roof, her hands balled in anger on the mattress. "Why?"

The vixen's claws dug into the mattress, ripping it apart as she pulled fabric and feathers free to fling them in whatever random direction suited her whim. "Its not fair! It's not fair," she sobbed, falling over to the side and curling up into a ball as well as she could. "I wish I was back home again." Her eyes flew open in panic as she ripped at the amulet around her neck. "NO!" Whipping the chain over her head, she tried to remove the amulet only to have the chain catch on her hair. Screaming unintelligibly, she fought to free the chain from her hair by simply yanking on it, pulling a small clump of hair from her head before Hecate could take two steps from the door. Her arms strengthened by the adrenaline coursing through her veins, she threw the amulet hard enough for it to ricochet off of the far wooden wall before coming to rest next to her on the shredded mattress.

"What the hell was that all about?" Hecate demanded, trying to keep an eye on both the vixen and the amulet as she moved towards the bed.

"Nothing--nothing happened," Sheila muttered in shock. "Nothing happened."

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The ebony female's gaze continued to bounce between the amulet and the vixen's eyes as if following some invisible volleyball match. "What something supposed to happen?"

Sheila reached out and picked up the amulet, noticing for the first time that the metal was cold. "It's the Amulet of Lakesh. It's supposed to answer a wish by transporting whoever makes the wish to an alternate reality where that wish can come true."

"Amulet of Lakesh, eh?" Hecate parroted with a slight smile. "I've heard of that. Pretty powerful mojo in it to be able to cross the barriers like that. So why didn't it work?"

"I don't know. It's odd." Flipping the amulet over, she studied both sides closely, running the tip of one clawed finger over the intricate design. The expression on the vixen's face changed from confusion to realization and finally to anger. "Lakash," She venomously spat, her head snapping around towards her companion. "He's fucking with us. First he does something with the armor that screws with us and now he's screwed with the amulet." Snarling, she again threw the amulet across the room, this time to have it come to rest in the shadows of the corner. "If I ever get my hands on him..."

"You'll what?" The deep, resonant, cultured voice of a man asked from the shadowy corner.

Hecate bolted to her feet, wincing at the pain in her side as she summoned a blade and faced the voice. "Who's there?" She demanded, trying to peer into the shadows.

"That's no way to treat an amulet, you know," The voice continued, ignoring Hecate and her demands. From out of the shadows a medium built man wearing a three piece, pin striped suit complete with hat and cane. He looked the model of a 1920's gangster right down to the white carnation in the buttonhole. Piercing blue eyes looked out over a pair of Ben Franklin glasses resting on a small Roman nose. His mustache looked like it had been drawn on with a pencil, the two thin lines angling out from under the nose were perfectly manicured. He flashed them a smile showing off perfect, pearly white teeth as he strutted over towards them, his cane tapping on the floor. The amulet twirled about on the end of the chain he held in his left hand. "You should be more careful how you treat such items of power. You never know who might take offense to the abuse."

Hecate studied the man for a moment before dropping her guard. "Lakash?" Straightening up, she allowed the summoned sword to vanish as she moved to sit down in the chair. "How the hell did you get in here?"

"Simple. She summoned me." Casually he walked over to the bed and held the amulet out to the vixen. "Here, you might need this." He stood there for the better part of a minute before simply giving a shrug then tossing the amulet on the bed. Taking a step back he summoned a chair and sat down, crossing his legs. "Now, what was this you were saying about if you ever got your hands on me?"

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"What's your game?" Sheila growled, glaring at the man. "First the armor tries to kill us and then the amulet doesn't work. Just what the hell are you trying to pull?"

"Oh no," Lakash chuckled, shaking a finger at the vixen. "Don't try to blame this on me. You're responsible for both of those artifacts malfunctioning."

"Bullshit," Sheila spat back at the man. "How could I have screwed them up?"

"Simple. The amulet was altered because of your first wish." Smiling, he removed his hat and held it in his hands, slowly rotating as he ran his fingers around the rim. "After you screwed things up with that idiotic wish in the studio, I was forced to alter the amulet's function so that I personally had to handle the wish rather than let its inherent powers do it just in case you did something stupid again, like, say, wishing you were home?"

Sheila crossed her arms and snarled at the man. "Fine. Blame that one on me if you want. That doesn't explain why that armor went berserk. Or are you going to try and convince me I broke it?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Lakash tossed the hat aside, uncrossed his legs and leaned forward as Sheila rolled her eyes in response to his answer. "Tell me. Do you know what made Arden the perfect choice for this little quest? Hmmm?"

"No," the vixen muttered as she crossed her arms over her swollen womb, hugging herself.

"Simple." Holding up his hand, he raised a single finger. "Loyalty and his sense of personal honor. Once he's given his loyalty to someone, it's absolutely complete. Unless that person betrays him in such a way that he can't forgive them, they'll retain that loyalty."

Sheila gave a derisive snort. "And what's that got to do with me breaking the armor."

"When I created that armor, it was designed to bond with his spirit, a bond that goes far beyond anything you can imagine." Leaning further forward so as to rest his elbows on his knees, he frowned and glared at the vixen. "Thanks to you, when it was bonded to him, he happened to be in your body. Although it did its best to protect him, he still took a fatal wound. When you made the wish that brought you to Husquhar, your soul returned to your body, confusing the armor."

"Oh. Great," Sheila flippantly laughed. "Blame me because your armor couldn't handle reality. Well I have a reality check for you mist..."

"HONOR!" Lakash shouted, coming out of the chair to tower over the now cowering vixen. A tangible aura surrounded him that struck terror in the heart of the vixen. Even Hecate found herself paralyzed with fear at the elemental force that was being exuded by the fallen angel. "Something you have no personal experience with. You, who betrayed

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his trust in your own world. You who betrayed his trust when he was in your body, even after you begged him to take you back. You who betrayed him and others in this world as well. Your actions are to blame." The outburst over, Lakash regained his composure, stood up and straightened his suit before returning to his chair where he again sat, taking a casual posture.

Sheila swallowed several times before finding her voice to speak. "I-I don't understand. How did I betray him?"

Lakash let out a long sigh. "First, there was Bjorn, or don't you remember him? You know, the guy you "rehearsed" with after agreeing not to sleep with anyone outside of actual studio work?"

"Fuck you!" Sheila shouted angrily, her ears lay back as she snarled. "Don't you ever talk to me about Bjorn! If it hadn't been for you he'd still be alive."

"Don't blame me," Lakash replied, quietly. "Bjorn would have been dead soon there after anyway. If you don't believe me, I'll be glad to show you his obituary from a hundred different realities. The only difference is that he'd never have proposed to you." He waited as the words struck home. "But let's forget that. How about after you two swapped bodies."

One ear perked up as the vixen's brow furrowed in consternation. "What about it?"

"The first night you were in town?" the man prompted, leaning forward and resting his arms on his knees. "You were busy chatting it up in the bar with the other boys and Arden was feeling a bit put out. She grabbed a bottle of booze, went up to her room and got stinking drunk. You remember that?"

"Yah, I remember that," Sheila muttered, frowning again. "So what?"

Lakash cocked an eyebrow at the female. "Do you remember what you did afterwards?" He watched as Sheila gave an uncomfortable shrug. "Let me prompt your memory. Do you remember sitting around the bar afterwards?" Sheila's eyes darted nervously between the man and Hecate in answer. "OK. How about the barmaid at the bar? You remember her?" Sheila shifted on the bed, looking distinctly nervous while not looking directly at either person. "Damn it, woman. Do I have to spell it out? You screwed the bar maid!"

Sheila's head snapped back up to look him in the eye. "So what? Christ, do you have any idea what her pheromones were doing to me? I needed some relief!"

"HAH!" The man leaned back momentarily as he let out a loud bark of laughter before leaning forward again. "Pheromones that you didn't warn her about, right? Pheromones due to her being in heat, something else you hid from her, right?" He glared down at the vixen, cowering her with his accusations. "Pheromones that ultimately got her raped, and ultimately pushed her to commit suicide!" Hecate and Lakash watched as Sheila only

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stared at the floor, her hands clasped in front of her, looking rather dejected. "That's not where it ended, either, is it?" he continued more gently, leaning back. "Once Arden had recovered you continued to screw damn near anything that walked on two legs, human or not, didn't you?" He slid off the chair to kneel in front of the vixen and lifted her muzzle, forcing her to look at him. "Nipping off for a quick knee trembler wasn't a big deal to you, was it? After all, that's what you'd been doing all your life, right? You'd gained acceptance using your body and now you were doing it again."

Sheila pulled her muzzle from his grasp and looked away. "It wasn't like that," she mumbled.

"It doesn't matter what it was like," the man replied standing up again. "Arden suspected, but didn't try to catch you. She wanted you to be happy. That's all she cared about. Of course that's all you cared about too, isn't it?"

Sheila shot the man a hard look as she sat back down. "You weren't there. You don't know what I was feeling. Besides, Arden told me that Lucifer had screwed with that love spell."

"Such a convenient excuse, now that you know about the spell." Lakash crossed his arms. "Bet he didn't mention to you that the changes didn't affect Arden's body, did he? They only affected your body." He smiled at the look of surprise on the vixen's face. Again he leaned forward, speaking gently. "We choose Arden because we needed someone who was focused, almost obsessive when it came to accomplishing a task. When he went to your world, we used you to create an emotional bond giving him a reason to live, to want to succeed and return. But you screwed it all up by holding out on him, keeping the amulet you knew he needed and lying about it. You betrayed him and in doing so, you set into motion a chain of events that have caused catastrophic problem after problem."

"You make it sound like it's all my fault," Sheila replied defensively. "He screwed up too. A lot!"

Lakash took another deep breath as he sat back and nodded, rubbing the bridge of his nose for a second. "Do you know what Arden's biggest problem is right now?" He paused to watch the vixen for a moment. "It's you." He continued before Sheila could respond. "You're a distraction. He's constantly more worried about you, what you're doing and that you're safe. He worries about it more than he does the completion of his quest." Again he leaned forwards to rest his arms on his knees, and then folded his hands. "While you were traveling with the Duke and Duchess, Arden entered the spirit realm to train with me. During that time, she was constantly distracted. Time after time I would catch her watching you and your sexual antics in the real world rather than studying." He paused to shake his head, looking away for a second before continuing. "Her training should have lasted decades in my realm, but she wouldn't stay. She rushed through things, trying to take shortcuts, learning only the most powerful and passing over the subtle in order to return to you as soon as possible. That's the reason I had to make the spirit of the armor

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so powerful and protective. When she'd mastered the basics, I knew I couldn't keep her any longer, so I gave her something I hoped would be his saving grace."

"Yah, right," Hecate chipped in. "It was so protective it tried to kill him."

"Insects should be seen and not heard," Lakash said, glaring at the Imir sideways. "Interrupt me again and I'll destroy you." He pursed his lips for a moment to regain control of his emotions before looking back to Sheila. "The unfortunate fact of the matter is that I initially tailored the armor for your body. Even though it would fit the body of anyone who put it on, it was initially crafted to fit you. When Arden died, your soul was put back in your body, which confused the armor. Same body, different soul."

"And that's my fault?" Sheila prompted, cocking an ear in his direction.

"No. That's my fault," He replied with a nod. "I never expected Arden to get killed. Then again, I hadn't expected Lucifer's direct intervention in that realm either. There were too many variables to predict that event. The problem is what you did afterwards."

Sheila rolled her eyes and let out a sigh of exasperation. "What did I do now?"

Lakash counted the items on his fingers as he talked, "You lied and cheated."

"Like I had any choice?" the vixen shot back indignantly. "Dropped in a strange world without any resources. What did you expect?"

"Without resources?" He let out another derisive bark of laughter. "You had the gold from the other world. You most certainly weren't short of resources once you found out that you were an exotic lay. And how about Ross?" He cocked an eyebrow at the vixen.

"Don't talk to me about that slime," she growled back.

"Why not?" the man taunted. "After all, you were cheating on him even though he'd professed his love, just like Arden." He waved off her objections with his hand. "Oh yah, I know what you're going to say. 'It was all an act. He was just lying to me. Using me.' Yah, yah, yah. You didn't know that at the time and you were screwing others when you didn't think he was looking." He leaned closer and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. "Here's a secret for you, babe. Magicians can see through walls, and he saw it all."

Sheila grunted and glanced away. "So what's your point?"

"My point, you ignorant bitch," he yelled, causing her head to snap around, "is that you're wearing armor that was attuned to Arden's soul. Armor that valued honor and loyalty above all else. Values that you, by your very actions, showed nothing but contempt for." He continued to glare at the cowered vixen for a second before he stood up and walked to the corner where the armor lay. "It was forced to serve you, a mistress that neither knew nor cared about those values. All you know was that it was magic and would protect

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you." He turned back toward the bed and sighed. "Worse yet, when Arden took over the dragon, he left the armor on you, forcing it to endure you and your repulsive amoral conduct."

Closing his eyes, he let out a long sigh before returning to the chair. "Unfortunately, I never expected it to have to deal with you. The longer you wore it, the more disenfranchised it became about having you as a mistress. It's feelings of anger and dissatisfaction leaked through the spells that connected it to the wearer making you angry and dissatisfied with Arden being the target of both your displeasure. That in turn fed the armor's anger as it was designed to read your feelings and act on them to protect you. Because Arden didn't take the armor from you when he became the dragon, the armor got even angrier."

Hecate snickered. "What was he supposed to do, wear it on his pinky?" The smile faded as she involuntarily flinched from his glare. "Sorry," she squeaked.

"Well?" Sheila prompted. "How would he wear it? It was a bit small for him."

Lakash turned back to the vixen and shook his head. "Like I said before. It was able to accommodate anyone who put it on, even a dragon as massive as Arden. It wouldn't look anything like it did before, but he'd have been able to put it on."

The vixen nodded. "That still doesn't explain why it tried to kill us."

"It was a side effect of his trying to copy the armor," Lakash explained, scratching his head. "That had to be the most brilliant spell idea I'd seen come from a mortal in a long time, as well as the stupidest. You already know the spell didn't copy the armor perfectly." He paused a couple of breaths to gaze sadly at the armor before looking back at Sheila. "Unfortunately, it also damaged some of the spells on the original armor that kept the spirit in check. Also, the duplication spell harmed the spirit in the process of trying to replicate it. It was a living being that was literally ripped apart and put back together. What remaining bits of loyalty to him which kept the spirit dedicated to him, were destroyed." He shrugged and glanced back over at the armor. "All that remained was the hatred that you had helped foster towards him."

"Oh my god," Sheila whispered in disbelief as she weighed the evidence. "Could I really have caused all this?"

"Bull shit," Hecate stated, standing up. "Don't let him fuck with your head. He just wants to shift the blame on to you."

"What did I tell you about opening your mouth" Lakash growled, taking a step towards the ebony female.

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"Fuck you," the imir defiantly shot back. "I'm not going to sit here and listen to you lay down the guilt trip from hell on her just because you were too damned lazy to fix the problem."

"Are you forgetting that there are rules that even I have to abide by?" He snarled, his anger taking on an almost palpable aura around him.

"Yah, rules that you and the other celestials break whenever it's convenient," Hecate fired back. "You're in this realm so often I'm surprised that you don't have a revolving door somewhere to make it easier for you to cross over." She stepped forward, defiantly standing face to face with the man. "Or have you forgotten that I can sense whenever one of your kind enters and leaves this world. There's no reason you couldn't have repaired the armor or its spirit any time you wanted to."

"There are rules that go beyond Husquhar that I have to play by, and they prevented me from interfering without being asked to." He nodded to the unconscious Arden. "Unless I'm mistaken, he's gone out of his way to make sure he doesn't call on me for anything."

"That's your problem." Hecate turned her back on the man and walked over to the vixen. "Don't let this dipshit screw with your head."

Lakash took a threatening step forward. "You're just asking to experience oblivion, aren't you?"

Before Hecate could respond Sheila slammed her fist against the wall. "Would the two of you just shut the fuck up?" Rolling on to her knees, she leveraged herself up to a standing position with some help from Hecate once the ebony woman realized what she was doing. "I don't give a damn about who's responsible for what any more. All I care about is getting home and I can't do that as long as sleeping beauty there is out of it." She crossed her arms and glared at Lakash. "You're supposed to be his ally. What are you going to do about it?"

The dapper man's glance shifted between the two females as they watched him. "All right then," he conceded with a curt nod. Turning, he returned to the armor in the corner and picked it up. Folding it, he tucked it inside of his vest before walking over to Arden. Gently he laid a hand on Arden's head and concentrated until he heard a low groan from the man. He wiped his hand on his pants as he took a step back, as if to remove some unpleasant substance. "There. He'll wake up in a few minutes." He reached down to the bed and lifted up the amulet and turned to hang it on Sheila's head. "You must keep this safe. Without it, he won't be able to succeed in his mission." As she stepped back, he noticed Hecate staring at the amulet. "I wouldn't let Hecate close to it if I were you."

"Huh?" Sheila grunted, glancing between the two. "Why not?"

"Hecate's one goal in life is to escape this realm and travel all of creation." He frowned at the ebony female as he explained. "With the amulet, any wish she makes will remove her

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from this realm and its rules, freeing her. Now that she knows you have it, I'd be careful, if I were you, never to take it off." He reached out his hand and waved it over the amulet. "There we go, Dorothy. Only you can remove the amulet." He turned to give Hecate a sinister smile. "The Wicked Witch of the West can't touch it."

"Ha, ha," Hecate commented, crossing her arms. "I don't need that dumb amulet to break out of this joint. I'm already working on a way to bypass you and your dragons."

"You wouldn't happen to be referring to that boy you nailed up on the plateau recently, would you?" He smiled at her reaction. "The one your people lost track of after he burned down the fae tree?" He paused, enjoying her discomfort. "Hate to break it to you, but the world mage has him now. He's out of your reach." He chuckled to himself as if having heard a joke. "Then again, maybe I don't hate telling you all that much after all..." With that, he faded into the shadow, leaving only the echoes of his laughter behind.

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It's time for your wake up call....

The courtroom was packed with spectators, reporters and numerous “important” people who were on hand to observe the spectacle. Zig Zag, dressed in a very conservative business suit dress, walked around the railing and took a seat on the witness stand.

“You realize that you’re still under oath, Miss Zumbrowski?” the judge asked, looking down at her from his bench on high.

“I do,” she replied, nodding solemnly.

“Very well, then,” the judge replied, nodding to the prosecution. “You may proceed.”

From the prosecution’s table, a young zebra stood and adjusted his jacket before approaching the defendant. “Miss Zumbrowski—oops, sorry. I mean, Zig Zag,” he paused to shoot her a brief, friendly smile, “Why don’t you tell me about the afternoon of the twelfth. The day when Bjorn Ottersman was killed.”

The skunk took a deep breath and rocked her head for a moment before answering. “Well, there’s not much to tell. Around four o’clock, we showed the week’s highlights reels for the crew. We also baptized Arden, who was our newest employee, with a soaking of cornstarch, lemon lime soda and salt.”

“Really?” The zebra’s ears perked forwards as he leaned slightly forward, intent on her words. “And just what was the point of this little ritual?”

Zig Zag started to answer, but glanced at the jury box and hesitated. Several of the jurors were frowning at her and two had their arms crossed which was not a good sign. Being an actress meant knowing about body language, and she could tell this was going to be trouble. She let out a small sigh and smiled back up at the prosecutor. She’d never been ashamed of what she did and she’d be damned if she’d start now. “Whenever we have a new actor or actress join the crew, we show the best, um,” she paused to think of an appropriate word, “climax scene for the week. Since Arden wasn’t an actor, we had to settle for creating our own little climax scene, only using super soakers rather than the real thing.”

The judge’s gavel rang out amongst the hoots, barks and yips of laughter that filled the room. “Order! Order in the court!” Banging the gavel again, he scowled at the crowd. “One more outburst like that and I’ll order the room cleared.” He waited a moment for the background noise to fade then turned towards the young attorney. “You may proceed.”

“Thank you, your honor.” The young stallion turned back to the witness. “After the awards ceremony, what did you do then?”

“I took a shower.”

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“Alone?” the prosecutor prompted, leaning forward slightly.

“Well, no,” Zig Zag replied, uncomfortable at what she knew was coming.

“And just who did you take a shower with?” he politely asked, a pleasant smile on his face.

“With Arden,” the skunk replied in a low voice.

“I beg your pardon,” the young man prompted, “but I don’t think I heard you clearly. Would you mind repeating that loud enough for everyone to hear?”

Zig Zag pursed her lips and took a deep breath. “With Arden,” she announced in a loud voice, which caused a small stir in the audience.

“I’ll bet that was fun, wasn’t it,” the young man smirked, glancing over at the jury box. “All gooped up in a shower with a big hunky looking polar bear.” He turned back towards her and smiled again. “So tell me, did you practice any scenes from your old shower videos?”

“No!”

“I object!” The gray cat that had been sitting silently at the defense table stood up. “We’re not here to indulge the prosecution’s fantasies.”

“Objection sustained,” the judge replied, watching the cat sit back down before turning to the zebra. “Please keep your questions on a professional level.”

“Sorry, your honor.” Turning back to Zig Zag he nodded. “All right then, how about you tell us just what did happen in that shower.”

“Certainly,” the actress replied with a smile. “We turned on the water, got wet, lathered each other up, washed that crap out of our fur, then rinsed off.”

“Right,” he replied, drawing the word out as he gave the jury box a wink. “You expect us to believe that you took a long, hot shower with what has been described by others in your studio as a…” he paused and returned to his desk where he checked his notes. “Ah, here it is. ‘A real hunk of meat.’ Does that sound familiar?”

“I believe I’ve heard Tammy use that phrase more than once,” Zig Zag replied. “Of course, she says that about most men as tall as he is.”

“I see,” he replied, slowly strolling towards the witness box with his hands behind his back. “And you expect us to believe you, a woman who, by her own admission,” he turned towards the jury and gave a satisfied smirk, “not to mention the record of all your

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movies...” Turning back to Zig Zag, he stopped and clicked his heels together as if standing at a relaxed form of attention. “You expect us to believe that nothing happened.”

“Yes,” the tiger striped skunk replied, leaning towards the microphone. “That’s exactly what I expect you to believe.”

“Oh, come on, Miss Zumbrowsky. Admit it.” He sidled up to the box and leaned one hand on the bar. “A hot guy like that in an equally hot shower? You can’t seriously be suggesting that absolutely nothing went on.”

“Objection,” David, the defense attorney shouted once again as he stood up. “Your honor, he’s badgering the witness. She’s already testified that nothing happened.”

“Sustained. That last part will be stricken from the record.” The judge glowered down at the prosecutor. “I’m warning you, Mr. Abrams, you will keep this out of the gutter, or I will hold you in contempt.”

The zebra shrugged in apparent innocence. “I’m truly sorry, your honor, but I just have trouble believing that any red blooded American male would be able to take a shower with the legendary Zig Zag without having something happen other than a thorough shampoo job.”

Zig Zag crossed her arms and smiled. “Fine. I’ll have the staff dump a couple of gallons of goop on you, then we’ll see if you want help getting it out or not.”

“No, thanks,” he replied. “I have no wish to partake in your bizarre sexual rituals.”

“Objection,” the cat shouted as the judge banged his gavel.

“Council!” the judge shouted, again slamming the gavel. “This is your final warning. You will behave yourself or I’ll hold you in contempt.” He turned to Zig Zag. “And as for you, Miss Zumbrowski, you are here to give testimony, not to provoke the prosecution.” Looking around the room, the judge quickly made sure that nobody was acting out. “The last will also be stricken from the records,” he directed the stenographer. Turning back to the prosecutor, he frowned even deeper. “You’re treading on thin ice, son. You may proceed---with caution.”

“Yes sir,” the young zebra replied. “All right, then,” he said turning again towards Zig Zag, his hands behind him. “What happened after you and Arden were done cleaning up?”

Uncrossing her arms, Zig Zag resumed a more professional appearance. “Well, after drying off and getting dressed, we split up. I needed to get a few things from my office and Arden went looking for Sheila.”

“And?” the prosecutor prompted.

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“And, when I got to the front of the building, he hadn’t found her. The log book showed that she and Bjorn had left at 11:30 but had never checked back in.” She looked down as she remembered the events, her ears wilting slightly. “Arden checked the parking lot and found Sheila’s car was still there.”

“What happened next?” the young stallion prompted.

Zig Zag swallowed a couple of times to try and clear the lump in her throat. “Arden and I came to the conclusion that they might be at the apartment that the studio had rented for Bjorn.”

The prosecutor gave the jury box an exaggerated look of surprise. “So Sheila, Arden’s girl friend, was also seeing Bjorn?”

“It’s not what you think,” she replied, her head snapping up to look at the prosecutor. “Sheila and Bjorn were very close. They were just starting production on a new movie.”

“Interesting,” he replied, chewing on one lip as he nodded. “Tell me, is it usual for two of your employees to go running off in the middle of the day without letting anyone know what’s going on?”

“No,” Zig Zag replied forcefully and looked at the jury. “That’s why we were so concerned. We knew they’d gone to lunch together and wanted to make sure that they were both all right.”

“Isn’t it true that Arden and Sheila had a fight a few days before that about her sleeping with Bjorn on the side?”

“No,” she replied, shaking her head. “I’d say it was more of a minor falling out. I remember talking to Arden about it afterwards. He asked me about Sheila and Bjorn, about how long they’d known each other and what they were like together.”

“And do you have any idea why he wanted this information?”

Nodding, Zig Zag looked towards the jury. “Arden told me when he looked at Sheila and Bjorn, he could tell that they were in love, even if they couldn’t admit it to themselves.” She looked down and took a moment to get her emotions under control. “He said he wanted her to be happy, and if being with Bjorn is what it took, then he wouldn’t stand in their way.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” he said with a chuckle. “This is a guy who everyone at the studio says is madly in love with Sheila Vixen, and yet he’s willing to give her up for the first bit of competition that comes by?”

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“It’s not like that,” Zig Zag replied, frowning. “Arden... He knew that what they had wouldn’t last. That’s why he was willing to give up what time they might have had left.”

“Wow!” the young attorney replied, turning towards the jury. “The guy sounds like a real saint if you asked me. Tell me, did Arden have a temper?”

Zig Zag blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

The young stallion leaned forwards, placing both hands on the railing in front of Zig Zag. “A temper. Did Arden have a problem controlling his temper? Would he get mad quickly? Did he ever break or destroy things when he was mad?”

“What?” the tiger striped skunk squeaked. “No... I mean yes.” Flustered, she shook her head to clear it. “Yes, he got angry, but everyone does that. And no, I don’t remember him ever destroying anything.”

“Oh, really?” The young prosecutor returned to his briefcase where he pulled out some pages that were stapled together. “I have here a sworn affidavit from your neighbors about an incident that occurred late at night where loud shouting was heard to come from your house, sometime after which Arden stormed out the back door and proceeded to, ummm...” flipping through the pages, he found some highlighted text, “reduce a large, sturdy, metal table into a rough sphere approximately the size of a beach ball.” He folded the pages closed and cocked an eyebrow at the witness. “Tell me, Miss Zumbrowski, does that jog your memory at all?”

“W-well, yes. I remember it,” Zig Zag replied.

“And isn’t it true, Miss Zumbrowski,” he demanded, slapping the now rolled up papers in his hand, “that only an hour before, you and he had been in a physical altercation?”

“No!” Zig Zag replied, horrified at the accusation.

“So you’re telling me that he didn’t, in fact, attack you, forcing you to maul his chest in defense?”

Zig Zag shook her head “No! That’s not what happened---“

He leaned closer as he demanded answers from her. “So you’re telling me that you didn’t maul him?”

“No!” She again denied, but shook her head. “I mean, yes, I mauled him, but it wasn’t like that...”

“So you decided to take this man, who’s known for his angry temper, and look for Sheila and Bjorn, right?”

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“It wasn’t like that!” Zig Zag repeated defiantly.

The young stallion turned to the evidence table and picked up a large, black pistol. “Do you recognize this pistol, Miss Zumbrowski?”

The skunk visibly recoiled from the proffered pistol. “Please. I don’t like guns.”

“I didn’t ask if you liked them,” he replied, shoving the pistol closer to her. “I asked if you recognized it.”

“Look,” she replied, shoving the pistol back, “I wouldn’t recognize it if you put the damn thing under an electron microscope. I don’t like guns. I don’t know anything about them and I don’t want to.”

“Fair enough,” he replied, unfolding the tag that was attached to the pistol by a string. “Perhaps this will jog your memory, again. This pistol was found in the wall safe of your office at the ZZ Studios by the police during a search for evidence shortly after the disappearance of Sheila Vixen and Arden Bearridge.” He set it down on the railing in front of her. “Do you recognize it now?”

Zig Zag glared up at the attorney. “I suppose so.”

Once again leaning on the railing the young stallion pointed at the pistol. “Then perhaps you can explain how this pistol came to be in your safe?”

“If that’s the same pistol,” she paused, reluctant to continue with the answer, “then that’s the one Arden gave me to give to James.”

He gave another mock look of surprise for the jury. “James? As in James Sheppard, the former CEO of Sheppard Computers?”

“Yes.”

“He picked up the pistol and examined it as he talked. “Tell me, Miss Zumbrowski. Why would Arden give Mr. Sheppard such a valuable pistol? This weapon is worth a considerable amount of money.”

“James had loaned him a small pistol to use as protection.” She turned to the jury, much more confident in her answer. “After the repeated attacks on his life, it was the least James could do.”

Placing the pistol back on the evidence table he turned back to the witness. “So tell me. How often does Mr. Sheppard give away his pistols?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Zig Zag replied flatly.

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“Indeed. And yet for all your hatred of pistols, you were more than happy to take this,” gesturing to the pistol he raised his voice, “LOADED pistol and place it in your safe where it remained for two weeks until it was discovered by police while searching your business, isn’t that right?”

Defeated, Zig Zag nodded. “Yes, I put it in the safe.”

He leaned forwards over the railing and spoke in a low, but clear voice. “It’s not the first time you’ve handled a loaded pistol, is it?”

Shocked, she looked up at the young man in confusion. “What... what do you mean?” Her mind immediately flashed back to the hillside where she had stood, wearing a black body stocking and holding a machine gun.

Not moving, he kept the timber of his voice low and clear, so everyone could hear. “I mean, Zig Zag, that you once picked up a loaded pistol and shot someone, didn’t you?” He straightened up, pulling on the base of his jacket to get rid of the wrinkles and turned towards the jury. “Isn’t it true that you once picked up a loaded pistol and, not only did you shoot someone but you killed them?”

“Objection, your honor!” David again declared, standing. “He’s badgering the witness.”

“Overruled,” the judge barked in reply. “The witness will answer the question.”

“Yes,” Zig Zag replied in a horse whisper.

“And is it not true that this very pistol,” he shouted, picking up the weapon and holding it out for the jury to see, “was used in the multiple homicide which culminated in the death of one Bjorn Ottersman?” He watched as her head shook in refusal. “Ballistics have matched the bullets from this weapon to the death of one of the men believed to have been responsible for the kidnapping of not only Sheila Vixen and Bjorn Ottersman, but also our own District Attorney, Daniel Khansman! The man shot with this, THIS pistol, had his neck broken by a size sixteen boot, the same size Arden wore. Also, two other people were killed with a sword.” He turned back to the jury. “And this was no ordinary sword, folks. Slivers of metal from the blade, which had come off when they nicked a wrist watch worn by one man showed that the sword was over two hundred years old. Not only that, but that the nature of the slicing wounds as well as those of the man who was stabbed to death indicate that the weapon was most likely a Japanese Katana.”

He returned to the table to pick up a large 11x17” photograph showing Arden and Sheila. “Miss Zumbrowski, would you please identify the two people in this picture?”

Zig Zag swallowed as she glanced at the picture, the pit of her stomach felt like it was trying to worm its way to her ankles. “That’s Arden and Sheila.”

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“And when was this picture taken?” he asked as he handed the picture to the lead juror who glanced it and passed it on.

In a trembling voice, she looked down towards the microphone. “It was taken the night that they left.”

“The night they disappeared, you mean,” he corrected. “Interesting, that disappearance. Interesting how two people who had decided to run from trouble would leave all their worldly possessions behind. Credit cards, cash, clothing, personal mementos, a vehicle, everything. I find it interesting that Arden happens to be wearing a set of Japanese swords. Interesting how one of the kidnappers was killed with a Japanese sword while you also just happened to have a pistol in your possession which was also linked to the crime. A pistol that you admit Arden gave you!”

No!

“Tell me, Miss Zumbrowski, do you really expect us to believe that they just vanished and left everything behind?” He paused to look at the jury and shook his head. “No, I didn’t think so. How about I tell you what I think happened, hmm? Your friend Arden didn’t like Bjorn and he wanted to get rid of him. You saw this as a way to kill two birds with one stone, so you hired those men to kidnap District Attorney Khansman. That way, when you and Arden were done killing everyone off, you could tell the tale about how you tried to save them from the bad guys, but unfortunately only Sheila survived. But it didn’t work, did it? The District Attorney got away. His escape ruined your little plan. Knowing that Arden was the only one he could identify, you arranged for them to disappear, but they didn’t run away, did they?”

No!

As he spoke, Zig Zag’s in horror as the broken logic of his arguments hit home. “No... No...” she muttered in denial.

Zig Zag!

“No. You killed them, didn’t you?” He slammed his fist down on the railing. “You killed them just like you killed your father!”

No! This can’t be!

David jumped to his feet, shouting, “Objection!” as the judge banged his gavel.

“That’s why nobody knows where they went!” He pointed an accusing finger at her and shouted. “You killed them! *You killed them!*”

No!

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“No...” Arden mumbled. “Zig Zag.... No....”

“Wake up,” Sheila said, smacking the sleeping man’s face with all her strength. “Ouch.” Shaking her hand from side to side, she frowned and looked at Hecate. “You’re supposed to be a badass, you smack him around for a while. My hand’s getting sore.”

“Zig Zag!” Arden shouted. Reaching out, he grabbed for something that wasn’t there. “No!”

“Wake up!” the ebony female demanded, smacking his face with a blow that rocked his head like it was mounted on a spring.

Arden blinked and then looked around the demolished room, as if seeing it for the first time. “Where am I?” he asked, looking up at the two women.

“We’re still locked into that shitty hotel room where you left us. Where did you think you were?”

“I—I was back,” he replied slowly before looking up at the pregnant vixen. “I was at Zig Zag’s trial.”

“No you weren’t,” she replied gruffly. “You were dreaming. You fell asleep.”

“Asleep?” he echoed, rolling the thought around in his head. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Going on about six hours if my reckoning is right,” Hecate replied, reaching down and hauling the big man to his feet. “You’d still be asleep but Lakash dropped by and did something so you’d wake up.”

“Six hours?” he muttered to himself before it sunk in. Eyes wide, he straightened up. “Six hours! Damn it. We’ve got to get out of here. Christ only knows what they’ve been up to while we’ve been in here.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Hecate replied in a sarcastic tone, her arms crossed in front of her. “We’d have been out of here hours ago, but you’ve got this place locked up tighter than a drum.”

Arden gave the Imir a confused look. “Locked up? What are you talking about?” He walked over to the door and studied it for a second. “You’ve got to be blind not to see the thread I left hanging to crack the spell.”

Hecate and Sheila both made their way over to the door. “Hey, the only strand I saw dangling looked like a classic trap. I’d have to be an idiot to pull that string.”

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Turning to the ebony woman, Arden gave her a look that fairly shouted “Duh!”. Casually he reached out and tugged on the strand of magic, causing a chain reaction that quickly unraveled the protection spell on the door. “You set traps to keep people out, not in.”

“That’s what you think,” Hecate replied, opening the door and limping out, her hand covering the wound in her side.

“If it’s any consolation,” Sheila said as she waddled by, “I’d have pulled the string.”

Before stepping through the door, Arden paused and looked back and where he’d fallen asleep. “It wasn’t a dream. I know it wasn’t.” He paused and shook his head. “If Lakash was responsible for waking me...”

His gaze swept outward, beyond the boundary of the room, beyond the edge of the town, beyond the horizon of the planet, beyond the very bounds of the reality that he stood in. Outward, his mind reached, searching for something, searching for someone. “No,” he whimpered, as his sight settled back on the spectacle in the courtroom. “My god, Zig Zag. What have I done?”

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Welcome to the machine, part 2.

“Lakash!” Arden grumbled in a low voice. His eyes narrowed to a thin slit as he waited for an answer. “Damn it, Lakash. I know you’re there. I can feel you.”

The dapper man stepped away from the shadows and stopped, facing Arden as he crossed his arms. “What do you want now?”

“Why?” Arden stepped up to Lakash, invading his personal space so that they were almost touching.

Lakash pursed his lips. “Why what?”

“You know damn good and well what,” he angrily replied as he towered over the smaller man. “Why are you screwing with Zig Zag like that?”

“Zig Zag?” A confused look crossed the fallen angel’s face for a second. “Oh, that.” With a flick of a finger, Arden suddenly found himself standing several feet away from the small man. “It’s simple. Unlike you, I clean up after my messes.”

“I didn’t realize that Zig Zag was your mess,” Arden quipped. He tried to take a step forward but was stopped by an invisible barrier. “Last time I’d checked, you were pulling Khansman’s strings.”

“Oh. Him. I don’t actually pull his strings. It’s more of a case of giving him a gentle push in the right direction.” Lakash casually sat down on a chair that appeared under him at the last moment. “As for Zig Zag, think of it as a form of encouragement.”

“Encouragement?” the big man snarled as he pushed against the shield. His eyes flared red for an instant as the shield shattered allowing him to rush forward and grab Lakash by the throat. Lifting him with one hand he held the small man up at eye level. “You should be more careful about how you encourage me. Especially since you decided to hook me into the dragon again.” He smiled at the furious face of the pin stripe-suited man. “In this world, the rules give *me* control, not you.”

“Fine,” Lakash choked out. “Go ahead and kill this avatar. If you do, you’ll never recover the lamp, your quest will be ended and you and your bitch can live happily ever after here in this shit hole.” The sudden release of pressure around his neck followed by the short drop hadn’t been unexpected. Still, it took him a few seconds to recover his demeanor. Still rubbing his neck he glared up at the big man. “You were given the amulet almost eight months ago and what have you done? You’re still fucking around with your comic book cutout, taking little side detours to do personal shit when you should be finishing your quest.”

“I’ll complete the quest when I’m goddamn good and ready,” Arden growled in reply.

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“No. You’ll do it when I tell you to.” Lakash’s physical body expanded so that he was the same size as Arden. “Let me give you a clue: You’re running out of time. You’ve got less than three weeks to accomplish your goal, or you can say goodbye to Nanuk, and to ever getting Sheila home.”

Arden took an involuntary step backwards. “Only three weeks? Last time I checked, Nanuk had more time than that.”

“That shows what little you know.” Lakash stepped up to Arden, poking him in the chest to emphasize his point. “Three weeks. That’s twenty one days. You either get your ass in gear, or you might as well find a nice, comfortable place to settle down...and raise puppies.”

Arden blinked at the space where Lakash had stood. The small man had vanished leaving no trace of his passing. Arden’s mind raced furiously as he considered all his options. His train of thought was derailed by a screech that was cut off suddenly outside the room. “What now?” Turning towards the door, he dashed out and around the corner and into the commons where he saw half a dozen dwarves along with a handful of humans standing on the far side. In the middle of the group he saw the witch holding two small, six inch spheres, one in each hand. In one sphere was Hecate while the other sphere held Sheila. Behind the witch stood Thumper who had a lopsided smile on his face. Arden glanced about the room noting the customers who’d all taken shelter from whatever was about to happen. “You just don’t know when to give up, do you?” he asked as he strolled towards the dwarves.

“That’s far enough,” the witch declared. “Any further and I’ll crush the spheres and kill your friends.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” the big man replied, pausing in his stride. “You need her alive.”

“Maybe,” the dwarf replied, “and maybe not. My primary concern right now is neutralizing you. One more step and we’ll find out the ugly, squishy truth.” She nodded towards a human holding a large bundle of fairy-spun silk rope. “Tie him up, Larl.”

The man began to uncoil the rope as he walked towards Arden. A low, almost subsonic rumble escaped Arden’s throat as he glared at the man, causing him to stop in his tracks. A corona of red energy flared around Arden’s black-on-black eyes for a second as he tapped the power of the dragon. Half a heartbeat later there was a blinding flash, followed immediately by the dull sound of a wet explosion.

The witch blinked her eyes to clear them from the flash then gasped at what she saw; an odd, man-shaped splotch of red consisting of the partially cooked and dripping remains of the man. “Not good,” she muttered to herself. “Time for plan B.” Summoning her courage, she spoke loud enough for everyone in the hotel to hear. “All right. If you want to play it that way, Marge, would you please take care of him?”

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All eyes turned towards a storage room near the back of the hotel at the sound of the low, seductive voice. “It would be my pleasure.” Standing five feet, nine inches, she was clearly a member of the nymph family. Her skin was a dark burgundy color except around the abdomen, breasts, neck and face where it was a lighter lavender color. From her back hung a pair of large, bat-like wings, black on the outside and crimson red on the inside. Long, thick, deep purple-colored hair cascaded over her shoulders, both covering her breasts and at the same time tantalizing her audience with glimpses of the exotic skin beneath. The only clothing she wore consisted of skintight leather pants and impossibly tall stiletto heels. Almond shaped bedroom eyes looked out seductively over a mouth that betrayed a somewhat predatory smile. She curled a lock of hair around one finger as a black tongue darted out to lick the already glistening lips before vanishing as fast as it had appeared. She spread her wings and slowly walked towards the man, rolling her hips with each step as she glided across the floor. “So tell me, big boy---what’s a hunk of meat like you doing in a joint like this?” As she walked closer, a smile appeared on Arden’s face as he gave her his undivided attention.

“We’re screwed” Hecate said as she watched the exchange.

“What the hell is that?” Sheila asked from within her crystal prison. “And how the hell can she stand to wear those heels!”

“It’s a succubus, and there’s no stopping her now,” the imir replied, dropping to the floor of the sphere in defeat.

The nymph ran her hands up and down Arden’s chest, tracing the outlines of the scars with her clawed fingers. “So tell me, big boy---you busy tonight?”

“Busy?” Arden echoed dreamily, his smile growing a bit bigger. He took both her hands in his and kissed the knuckles before replying. “As a matter of fact, yes.” The smile gone from his face, he released her hands and stepped back from the now immobilized succubus. “How about you wait right there while I take care of some business.”

Marge’s eyes looked around in horror as she discovered she couldn’t move. “What the--? No!”

The witch’s jaw dropped as she watched the man turn away from the paralyzed nymph. “No! That can’t be! No male can resist the charms of a succubus, no matter what species it is. Even dragons aren’t immune! I looked it up!” She let out a snarled screech of frustration. “How in hell’s name can this be?”

“I tire of this,” Arden replied, crossing his arms. “This is your last chance. Return them to me or die.”

The witch opened her mouth to reply but instead grunted and stumbled forward a step, the tip of a long stiletto blade protruding from her chest over her heart. She turned, agape

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at Thumper who released the hilt before snatching the spheres from her. She dropped to her knees and looked up at him, confusion and betrayal in her eyes. “Why?”

“Sorry, but it’s nothing personal,” her assassin replied. “Your friend Thumper died in the river. I’m the necromancer Rathsmo.”

“No!” Kord, the leader of the dwarves shouted as he charged forward, running Rathsmo through with his sword. “Traitor!”

The undead dwarf just chuckled and turned his head towards Kord and laughed. “Foolish dwarf. Don’t you know you can’t kill the dead with a sword?”

“Maybe not with just one sword,” the dwarf replied, “but I bet we can hack you up to the point where you’re as good as dead. Get him, boys!”

Rathsmo dodged to one side, avoiding a sword that was aimed for his neck only to find a different sword slicing along his side, almost disemboweling him. Seeing his companion in trouble, Arden let out a roar that shook dirt from the rafters and caused the dwarves and men to momentarily back up. Throwing his hand out, he released a torrent of lightning that wove its way through the mercenaries, electrocuting them where they stood. Only the leader still stood, his terrified gaze on the corpses of what had been a well armed and well trained fighting group. He looked up at Arden and let out a small whimper as the big man glared at him. Murderous eyes bored down on the dwarf as a smile betraying evil intent grew on the man’s face. Holding up his clenched fingers, Arden snapped them at the dwarf, causing him to drop bonelessly to the ground where he began to flop and quiver.

“God damn it,” Rathsmo exclaimed as he examined the loops of intestine which hung from the wide slash in his side. “How the hell am I supposed to go out looking like this?”

“Just tuck ‘em back in and stitch it up,” Arden replied, taking the spheres from him. He set Hecate’s on the ground and gestured, causing the sphere to pop, releasing the deamoness who returned to full size, then stood up. “Here, hold this,” he directed, handing her the other sphere.

“Great,” the dwarf grumbled looking around the room. “All those humans and not a single, useable body left.” He started to tuck the loops of intestines back inside his abdomen. “God, I hate being a dwarf.” He was distracted by a gurgling grunt that came from behind. Turning, he saw Kord still writhing on the ground. “What the hell? I thought you were dead,” he muttered as he walked over to examine the dwarf with Arden not far behind. Looking down he saw that the dwarf’s arms and legs were twisting and squirming in ways that no limb should be able to. “Sweet mother of god!” He turned to Arden. “What the hell did you do to him?”

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“Not much,” Arden replied, squatting down next to the dwarf on the floor. “It’s a spell that just came to me back then, something from the dragon’s memory. It turned all his bones into cartilage with the exception of his ribcage, spine and head.”

Hecate walked around Rathsmom for a look and smiled. “Nice spell. Think you can teach it to me?”

“Oh god,” Sheila exclaimed from inside her sphere. “I think I’m going to be sick!” Turning away, she dropped to her hands and knees, panting and trying not to puke.

“You bastard,” Kord spat as he flailed in Arden’s general direction. The bones, or what should have been bones, simply twisted and writhed as the muscles pulling against now flexible arms and legs deformed them in a hideous way. “What do you plan to do with me?”

Reaching out, Arden grabbed the elastic dwarf by the front of his leather armor and stood up, holding him at arms length. He walked passed Rathsmom, grabbing the hilt of the sword which was embedded in the dwarf’s back and yanked it out as he past. Swinging the sword overhead, he drove it point-first against a thick beam supporting the roof, imbedding the sword at a forty-five degree angle. He then used a loop on the back of the armor to dangle the dwarf from the hilt of the sword. “You, my antagonistic little tool, are going to be a warning to those who may follow.” He paused as he concentrated on a spell, tracing symbols in the air in front of the dwarf. “These spells will make sure that you don’t starve or die of dehydration. There’s also a rather nasty trap spell I’ve placed in conjunction with the curse to discourage anyone from trying to restore you to normal.”

Kord squirmed even harder, trying to dislodge himself from the sword. “You can’t do this! I have friends!”

“I just did.” Turning, Arden walked back over to Hecate and Sheila. “Sheila, I’m afraid that I’m going to have to leave you in that sphere for a bit longer.”

“WHAT?” the vixen demanded incredulously.

“Try to understand,” he continued, trying to calm her down. “You’re pregnant and move about as fast as a drunken three-legged water buffalo on roller skates. Hecate can easily carry you like you are. In a crunch, she can even fly you to castle Teriendel without any major hassle.”

“But---” the vixen started and then stopped, her ears drooping in defeat. “All right,” she meekly replied, nodding, “I’ll stay in the sphere.”

Prepared for a fight, Arden was momentarily at a loss for words. “Umm, well, good.” He glanced at Hecate for some sign but she only shrugged. “First thing we need to do is get the horse and buggy from the stables.”

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“Wrong,” Hecate stated, moving to cut him off. “They’ll be watching the stables. I’ve got several horses tethered outside of town in a secluded spot. We’ll go get them.”

Arden shook his head violently. “Unacceptable. I have to get to that buggy.”

“Why? So you can get to your gold?” The daemoness shook her head. “No. We can’t take the risk. Leave the buggy and the gold behind.”

“I need that gold, Hecate. This isn’t about greed. I need it,” the big man argued, half pleadingly.

Again she shook her head. “I said no. You’ll live without it. It’s only about five days ride to the castle if we push it. You’ll live without your precious gold for that long. Ruddygore’s got plenty of gold for you to nibble on and I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to break some out.”

“But---“ The man wanted to argue, but stopped, knowing that she was right. “Fine, but we won’t be taking the horses,”

“Huh?” Now it was Hecate’s turn to be surprised. “Why not?”

“Because it’ll take too long.” The big man started heading towards the back door. “We’ll take a river boat. It should only take us two days if we go by river.”

Cocking her head to the side, Hecate chewed the idea over in her head for a moment before following. “I guess that makes sense, though I don’t trust river rats. Half of them will stab you for any cash you have and the other half will kill you just for the fun of it.”

“Hey,” Rathsmoan barked out as he scampered along behind the others, “What about her?” he asked pointing to the succubus.

Arden stopped and walked back to the seductress and frowned. “What about her?”

“Please,” Marge pleaded from her statue-like pose. “Don’t leave me like this. They’ll kill me.”

A bark of laughter was Arden’s first response as he moved to stand in front of her, his arms crossed. “Excuse me, but you’re a succubus. You’re evil. You use your powers to control and seduce men so you can eat their souls. Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t nail your hide to the wall next to that dwarf for the villagers to deal with?”

“Look. It wasn’t anything personal. They just hired me to delay you for a bit. That’s all,” she explained rapidly, looking for any excuse to prolong her existence. “It’s not like I would have necessarily done anything to you, though you do look like you could be fun in bed.”

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”Hey!” Sheila barked angrily from her tiny prison. “That’s my boyfriend, you---you---two-bit whore!”

“Honey, I am many things, but I am not cheap,” was the succubus’s quick retort. “Please. I’m not as bad as you think I am. Really.”

“Yah, right. I’m sure you’re a regular Mother Teresa.” He uncrossed his arms and shook his head. “Sorry, babe. Not good enough.” He turned and walked past the nymph.

“Hey! You’re going to Terriendel, right?” she shouted, unable to turn her head. “I know Ruddygore. He’s actually my friend.” She paused for a second. “Well, as much a friend as someone like him has with anyone. He brought me across from Earth Prime a long time ago, back when I was human. He’ll tell you, I’m not as bad as you think!”

Arden stopped dead in his tracks his eyes open wide. Slowly he turned and walked back to the succubus. “What did you just say? What was that about Earth Prime?”

Sensing her opportunity, she spoke rapidly so as not to waste the chance. “Ruddygore brought me and a truck driver over back during the war against the Dark Barron. At that time I was human. I didn’t know it, but I was actually a changeling. It didn’t start until I came over here.”

Walking around in front of the succubus, Arden studied her closely. “So you’re saying that you were a human who was a changeling succubus?”

“No,” she responded, unable to cower from his gaze. “I was originally Kauri, but I was corrupted into this later.”

“What’s your name?” he demanded.

“Marge.”

“Where were you from originally?” he demanded, rifling off the question as soon as she answered.

“Earth Prime.”

“No. Where on Earth Prime?” he shot back.

“Texas. A little place called Brownsville.” She replied, more curious about his questions than worried now.

He frowned at her answer. “That’s up by San Antonio, right?”

“No,” she replied, unable to shake her head. “It’s down south by the coast, near the southern tip of Texas.”

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Arden nodded and smiled. "All right, one last question. What were you seeking at the time were corrupted from being a Kauri to a succubus?"

"Huh?" The question had taken her completely by surprise. Not many people knew about that adventure. "We were seeking the Grand McGuffin."

"Well I'll be damned," Arden replied with a smile. He waved a hand casually in her direction, freeing her from the spell. "You've got to be the last person I ever expected to run into."

No longer constrained by the spell, Marge folded her wings and took a step away from the big man. "Just who are you and how do you know so much about me?"

Again he laughed. "Fair enough question. My name is Arden. The little lady inside the sphere happens to be Sheila. The dwarf's body is currently holding the necromancer Rathsmoan, and our ebony companion over there is Hecate." He paused for a moment, smiling before speaking again. "As for how I know so much about you, I read the Chronicles of Joe and Marge back in my home dimension. I know about everything you'd done from the day Ruddygore brought you over here to when you helped defeat Boquillas."

"Chronicles of Joe and ---" she stopped and stared, her mouth hanging open in disbelief. "Oh my god!" she declared, squealing like a little girl. "You really read about us in a book? That's incredible! Wait until I tell Joe!"

"Ahem," Hecate grunted, insinuating herself into the conversation. "I hate to break up old home week, but we've got to get our asses out of here before someone else decides it's time to take a shot at us."

Arden started to argue but caught himself and nodded. "You're right." He turned back to Marge and gave a small smile. "It was nice meeting you. Think you can do me a favor and delay anyone that may come looking?"

"Sure," the seductress replied with a smile. "Just leave it to me. I could keep a small army occupied if I wanted to. Give my regards to the fat man when you see him."

"Can do," Arden replied, following the others out the back of the hotel.

Once out in the rear alley, the group paused and looked for any possible ambush. Cautiously but quickly they made their way towards the river, dodging in and out of alleys. They pulled up short of the main street where they'd have to cross to get down to the docks and paused to make sure nobody was following.

Arden peered around the corner to check the street and cursed.

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“What’s wrong?” Hecate whispered.

“You remember that idiot mage back in the warehouse?” the big man asked in a horse whisper. “He’s out there with two more guys who look like spell casters, too. From their auras, I’d say that they’re adepts. Low level, probably, but still initiates none the less.”

The ebony woman glanced about nervously to make sure nobody was sneaking up on them. “Shit! Think we can take them?”

“We?” he echoed, cocking an eyebrow at the winged female. “We, eh? Not with Sheila to worry about.” He let out a long sigh. “I want you and Rathsmom to take the long way down to the docks. I’ll deal with these guys.”

“Hey, look. I know you’re pretty good and all, but do you really think you can take on three adepts at once?” She shook her head and handed the sphere to Rathsmom who scrambled not to drop it. “No way. I’ve got more experience than you do. Besides, last time you faced that guy he damn near tore you apart.”

“That was before Lakash came and plugged me back into the dragon,” Arden replied with a sinister smile that sent a chill down the ebony female’s spine. “That power isn’t governed by the rules. If need be, there’s a way where I can completely circumvent the rules, which will leave them powerless.”

Both Hecate and Rathsmom were left momentarily speechless. Hecate recovered first. “You pull a stunt like that and you’ll have the entire council out gunning for you. Even *you* couldn’t stand that kind of heat.”

“Right now, I don’t care. The important thing is to get Sheila to Terriendel safely, and if that means breaking a few rules, then so be it.” He glanced around, frowning. “Now get moving. They’re getting impatient and I don’t want to risk them getting their hands on her.”

Hecate nodded. “All right. You win. Just don’t take too long. You have no idea who else might drop in unexpectedly.” The elf turned and headed back down the alleyway, Rathsmom running along behind her, his stumpy legs pumping as fast as they could to keep up, his hands trying to keep his guts from spilling out and tripping him.

Arden closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Reaching deep within, he tapped into the powers that he had available, native to Husquahar and otherwise, to prepare for the battle. Smiling, he looked up and opened his eyes, their black-on-black color rimmed with a crimson halo of raw power. “It’s show time.”

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Drastic times demand drastic measures.

Hecate paused halfway down an alleyway that led to the docks, causing Rathsmo to almost run her over. She turned back towards town and closed her eyes in concentration. "Shit!" the ebony female spat, handing the sphere containing Sheila to Rathsmo. "That idiot's in trouble. Take her down to the docks and find us a boat."

"Hey!" the dwarf called out as she hustled by him. "What if there aren't any for charter?"

The demoness paused and turned back towards the dwarf, her eyes glowing with an eerie red fire. "Persuade them! And don't take no for an answer!" With that, she spread her wings and launched herself into the air, leaving the dwarf alone in the alleyway.

"Don't take no for an answer," he mocked in a small, whiny voice. "Easy for her to say. She scares the shit out of anyone she looks at. Nobody in their right mind is afraid of a dwarf." He tromped down the alleyway with heavy, angry steps. "Now an army of the little bastards, that's something worth fearing. But just one? Hah!" He paused at the end of the alley and examined the docks. Several riverboats were tied up, though only one appeared to be active. A long line of man-rats were busy carrying crates from several warehouses to the boat and then returning for more. He looked down at the sphere in his hand and frowned. "You'd best be quiet from here on out. No sense in attracting attention to you, if you know what I mean."

"Yah," Sheila replied with a nod, "I get the picture. Just try not to drop me, OK?"

Rathsmo grunted and stepped clear of the alley. Half-way to the boat one of the rats noticed him and called out to a few others who weren't immediately occupied. The dwarf stopped a safe distance from the rats, all of whom had their hands on their weapons. "I'm looking for the captain of that vessel. Where can I find him?"

The rat that'd spotted him laughed. "He's aboard ship, but I don't think that'll do you any good. You've got to be so high," he held out a hand well above the dwarf's head, "in order to board our ship. You understand. We gotta have standards, eh?" With that, he let out another laugh, which was quickly joined by his companions.

The dwarf glanced around and noticed that the rats were loading cargo from three different warehouses. More interesting was the fact that there didn't appear to be anyone else around, working the warehouses. He smiled, understanding that most folks in the town were probably off fighting the fires. "Interesting load operation you have going here," the dwarf commented, nodding to the warehouses. "Curious how there's nobody tallying what you're loading."

"You're a smart one," the rat commented, drawing a blade, which then prompted his friends to draw a blade too. "A little too smart if you ask me. You should have

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walked away when you had the chance, dwarf."

Rathsmon shook his head with disappointment. "Why do I always have to get the stupid ones?" He let out a sigh and looked at the oncoming rats. "I am the necromancer Rathsmon. You will either go and fetch your captain, or I'll slay you where you stand."

His declaration caused the rats to pause for a second, but the leader just laughed again. "Yah, right. And I'm the Master of the Dead, come back to take my revenge."

"Master of the Dead, eh?" The dwarf reached out with one hand, sending a torrent of lightning into the rat and his companions, frying them where they stood. "There's only one Master of the Dead around here, and that's me." A cry of outrage came from the rats on the docs as well as the ones onboard the ship who had seen what had happened. Many of the ones carrying crates of cargo dropped them and ran towards the dwarf and the bodies that lay around him. With a snap of the necromancer's fingers, the five bodies twitched, then slowly stood up, as if puppets on a string. This unnatural sight stopped the mob in its tracks.

"I am the necromancer, Rathsmon," the dwarf shouted. "Now I've tried to be reasonable about this, but I'm losing my patience. Either bring the master of this ship to me, or by the gods I'll kill you all and use your corpses to man the ship."

"There won't be any need for that," came a voice from the shadows of the gangplank. A tall, orange, tiger-striped cat wearing knee high black leather boots, dark blue pants and a bright red coat with gold embroidery around the edges stepped out and into the light. A large cutlass with a bright silver handle hung from his hip. His face was obscured by the wide brim of a red hat which had a large white plume stuck into the band. He tilted his head back, revealing two emerald green cat eyes that pierced the gloom of the night. "I am called El Maxx and I am both captain and owner of this boat. Now that introductions have been made, what can I do for you?"

Rathsmon strode casually over to the cat and nodded. "I'm here to buy passage for myself and three others down river. We must leave tonight. No questions asked."

"No questions, is it?" he echoed with a laugh. "Isn't that always the way it is? I take it you and your friends are the ones responsible for the fire on the other side of town?"

The dwarf nodded. "You might say that, though it's not quite true. All you need to worry about is getting us safely down river." He paused and nodded towards the warehouses that stood open. "As for your cargo, we could care less about such matters."

"Hah! Well said, then." He turned to the rats and said something in an odd language that got them back to work. "And just how far down river are you wanting to go? We're not exactly going to be very popular and I wasn't planning on taking this boat

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far right now."

"We need passage to Castle Tierendel."

"What?" The cat backed away, waving his hands. "You're crazy if you think that I'm going to take you there! That's where the sorcerer Ruddygore resides!"

"I know," the dwarf commented with a sadistic smile. "I and my friends are agents of Ruddygore's, and if you deny us passage---" he shrugged, letting the remainder of the threat fade. "Either way, dead or alive, you and your crew will transport us to there."

Maxx glared at the dwarf for a moment, his hand clutched the hilt of his sword. After a minute, he let go of the weapon and nodded. "I see I have no choice then. If your friends show up before we're ready to leave, we'll take them with us, but I won't wait for them."

"Agreed," the dwarf replied with a nod. He turned and looked back towards town and frowned. "They'll be here. You'll see."

Hecate skimmed the roofs of the buildings as she circled around to hopefully approach the three magicians from behind. Her wings fully extended, she stalled out on the blind side of a roof near the fight, landing without a sound. As she peeked over the top she could see the battle clearly. Arden was braced, leaning into the magical attacks from two of the other casters while a third was busy defending them from some sort of small, flying creature. It took a few moments for her to finally spot one of the tiny creatures. It turned out to be a miniature dragon, barely a foot long. There were dozens of them flying around, striking at the mages, but their attacks were constantly being blocked by the third caster.

"That crazy son of a bitch," Hecate muttered under her breath. "Summoning dragon spirits for a fight like this? I'll bet Lakash is going berserk about now." With a small chuckle to herself, she edged her way up the roof to perch on the apex. "Time to mix it up a little." Reaching her right hand out, she summoned a long, black spear with an obsidian tip that glowed with an eerie internal magic. "You're going to owe me for this big time, bub. Big time!"

With that, she launched herself from the rooftop and dove towards the defending mage who turned to block her attack, thinking she was another of the small dragons. His eyes opened wide with the shock of seeing the demonic form that dove down at him, a blazing spear aimed at his heart. Using both hands, he reinforced the shield enough to deflect her blow, but this left him and his companions defenseless from the small dragons that now swarmed them.

Hecate laughed as she pulled up and away from the mage while lashing out with her

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tail to strike the side of his neck. Blood sprayed in a wide arc as the man spun slowly around, before dropping lifeless to the ground. She pulled up to avoid running into a building on the far side of the street and winged around to the right so that the mages would be between her and Arden. The smile faded from her lips as she saw the dragons blur and vanish, leaving the most powerful of the mages standing. The other, she saw, would not be much longer for this life, but that was the least of her concerns. A quick glance showed Arden on the ground, his body writhing and deforming itself as whatever curse he'd been battling reasserted itself.

"Aw, shit!" she spat, turning to attack the remaining mage, only to run headfirst into a solid wall of magic. Dazed, she barely glimpsed the ground before slamming face-first into the dirt.

The sorcerer smiled and turned back to Arden, who had apparently regained control over his body and was about to throw a spell. Automatically, the mage threw up his defenses, creating a web of shifting strands of magic that would block all but the most extreme attacks. A confused expression flittered across his face as he saw the man slam the spell into the ground, detonating it. A dome of black magic so dark he could only perceive its expansion by the fact that it blocked out all magic beyond it exploded outwards in less than a second, trapping both of them within its confines.

Arden stood up and smiled at the man. "I didn't want to have to do that, but I'm afraid that you had me at a disadvantage."

Relaxing a little, the mage lowered his defenses, allowing them to fade into the murky surroundings. Everything inside the sphere had an odd gray tint while everything outside had the appearance of being stark black and white, as if drawn with pen and ink. "Interesting spell. From the looks of it, you think you've trapped me in here, don't you?"

"Oh, I've done far more than that," Arden replied as he strode purposely towards the mage, his hands balled into fists. "I've blocked all magic from the outside. You're powerless now."

"What?" the man demanded in disbelief. Reaching out a hand, he tried to cast a spell, but nothing came. He looked down at his empty hand in shock. The very air around them was saturated with magic that almost burned him, but he couldn't tap it. There was nothing to summon. He looked up again just in time to see Arden's fist before everything went black.

Arden stood over the man, sweat pouring off his body as he gulped air. Gradually the black dome around him faded away into nothingness. Drawing his sword, he placed it over the heart of the mage and was about to strike when a voice stopped him.

"That wouldn't be very wise." Lakash's voice came from the shadows. A second later, he stepped out into the moonlight and walked over to the unconscious mage.

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"If you kill him, his soul will go to hell."

"I thought that was the point," Arden sarcastically replied.

The demon sighed and shook his head. "Come now, is that really what you want?" He shook his head. "Think about it. What's going to happen after his soul goes to hell?"

Arden paused, frowning as he thought. "Whatever demon he's been trafficking with will snatch up his soul."

"And?" the demon prompted.

"And he'll be interrogated about what happened," Arden replied, nodding. "The demon will report up the line what happened, and it'll filter back to the council who'll use it as an excuse to come after me."

"See?" Lakash gave a patronizing smile and a pat on the back. "When you think about it, it's all so simple, eh?"

"Yep," Arden replied with a nod. He then turned and drove the sword through the heart of the unconscious magician.

"No!" the demon cried out angrily. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"Yes. I've sent a message." Pulling the sword from the body, Arden cleaned the blade on the dead mage's clothing before sheathing it.

The demon took off his fedora hat and threw it on the ground. "Damn it, Arden! There are rules involved here. You can't just go around breaking the rules in this world."

"Sure I can." Walking over to where Hecate lay, Arden knelt and examined her. "I'm an outsider. I'm a wild card. My magic doesn't have to come from this realm, and therefore I'm immune to its rules as long as the magic comes from outside." He paused to look up at the frustrated demon. "Just like you or any other creature not of this world."

Lakash reached out and smacked Arden in the back of the head. "I hate to break it to you, but there's a covenant in place regarding the use of such powers." He bent over and picked up his hat, brushing it off. "If you keep pulling this kind of shit, the council won't be the only ones coming after you."

Taking one of Hecate's arms, Arden stood and lifted her up and threw her over one shoulder before facing Lakash. "The council will do nothing. Most of them are on hell's payroll and Lucifer has given orders not to screw with me. Any who come after

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me will be the renegades and will be dealt with when the time comes."

"You are insane," Lakash growled in a low voice. "You're threatening all that we've worked for."

"NO!" the big man barked, grabbing the demon by his lapels. "I'm not! I'm short on time and I'm done fucking around with these insects. No more playing by the rules. No more mister nice guy. Someone comes at me and I'll erase them from all existence!"

"Insects? Listen to yourself. Insects?" Lakash pulled himself away from the big man's grasp. "Do you hear yourself talking?"

"I have seen the future, Lakash. Through the dragon, I've accessed the Times Eye and know what I must do and I won't let you or anyone else distract me from my mission. I am what you've made me, Lakash. Live with it." Reaching down, he picked up the body of the mage he'd just slain and tossed it over his shoulder. He then turned towards the docks and strode purposefully away without looking back.

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"We're leaving," the cat announced from the base of the gangplank as the few remaining rats scurried aboard. "If you're coming, it's now or never."

"No," Rathsmo directed, walking over to the large cat. "You'll wait for my friends."

Maxx shook his head. "Look. I'm not going to hang around here hoping that your friends show up. Someone's going to think to check the warehouses and I want to be long gone before they do."

The dwarf held out a hand and summoned a head sized sphere of flame. "You try and leave the docs, and I'll destroy your boat before it gets twenty yards out."

"You wouldn't dare," the cat denied in disbelief.

Rathsmo looked beyond him and back towards the town. "Actually, that won't be necessary." He snuffed out the ball of fire and pointed towards the lone figure carrying two bodies over his shoulders. "Here comes my big friend now."

"Right. Hurry it up. We're shoving off as soon as they're aboard." With that, the cat turned and bound up the plank and onto the ship.

"It's about time," the dwarf said, hurrying the tall man aboard. The deck was a bustle of activity as men cast off the lines in preparation to move. He followed Arden to an open spot near the front of the boat where he watched him drop Hecate and the

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mage's body. "Why'd you bring him?"

"You've been bitching about being in that dwarf's body, so I brought you a replacement." Kneeling down, he again checked Hecate's wounds to be sure they weren't too severe.

Rathsmon rolled the mage's body over and cursed. "Ah, Jesus Christ. Did you have to bring him? Couldn't you find a better body? One less---gak!" His rant was cut off as the big man snatched him up by the neck and held him at eye level.

"You listen to me, you ungrateful little shit," Arden growled menacingly. "I've listened to you bitch and complain about being stuck in that dwarf's body ever since you crawled out of the river. If I hear you complain about one more God damned thing, I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure that you're trapped in that body until judgment day. Do you understand me?"

"Yah! Yah," the dwarf capitulated quickly, nodding his agreement. "No problem. I swear, not another complaint." The big man let go of him, dropping him unceremoniously to the deck where he landed on his rump, the sphere clutched to his belly to protect it. He stared in shock at the big man as he stormed away to the other end of the boat. "What the hell got into him?"

"Hey!" the small voice of Sheila cried out. "Get me out of this damn thing, will you?"

"Oh, yah. Sorry." Setting the sphere down, the dwarf tapped it, causing it to release the vixen. "There you go."

"Thanks," the vixen replied, leveraging herself up with a nearby crate and cautiously made her way aft towards where Arden went.

Behind her, the dwarf stood up, climbed over to the rail and jumped overboard. A few seconds later, the body of the mage twitched and then sat up. Rathsmon took a second to run his hands over the body to check it for damage before standing up. He looked around at the rat crew and smiled. They were all easily a head shorter than he was, which was the way things were supposed to be. It may not have been his first choice for a body, but he was more than satisfied with the result. Turning back towards the docks, he watched as the burning town receded into the distance.

Sheila climbed up the stairs and onto the upper deck where Arden stood, looking out over the water. "Hey," she said quietly, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You OK?"

Arden turned and looked down on her, his expression hard and unchanging. "I'm fine," he coldly replied, before looking back out over the water.

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"You sure?" the vixen prompted, giving his shoulder squeeze.

Arden turned and snarled at her. "I said I'm fine!" He watched her expression change from concern to fear as she staggered backwards before turning to flee from him. He reached out towards her, but stopped. "Sheila---" A flood of emotions ran through him as he watched her climb down the stairs, but a part of him squashed them. He turned to look back out over the water and leaned heavily on the railing. "It's better this way," he muttered to himself. "It is better this way. It's what's best for her like this. She'll be happier...." The mantra continued for some time as he tried to convince himself of something he didn't truly believe.

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Alliances are made to be broken.

From the angle of the sun, Hecate could tell that it was just after noon. The gentle, rhythmic slapping of the water against the riverboat's hull combined with the warm breeze to create a relaxing environment. Most of the off-duty crew could be seen stretched out here and there along the decking as they soaked up the sun. Sheila, on the other hand, sat on a small crate by the railing, her cloak clutched around her. Hecate made her way over to the vixen, being careful not to spill the contents of a bowl.

"Hey," the ebony female said, putting a hand on the pregnant vixen's shoulder. "I brought some food for you. It's not the greatest thing in the world, but it's hot and filling."

"I'm not hungry," came the muttered reply as Sheila turned her hooded body away.

"Come on. You've got to eat something." She maneuvered the bowl around so that it was again in front of the vixen.

Sheila batted the bowl away with her hand and turned to once again put her back to the ebony woman. "I said no!"

"Fine!" Hecate replied, setting the bowl none too gently on the top of a near by crate. "Be that way." Turning, she walked over to where Rathsmoan sat and stood, her arms crossed. "What the hell's gotten into her?"

"Mister Personality," the necromancer griped, nodding towards the bow of the boat where Arden stood. "After he brought you aboard, he got all surly and copped an attitude with me then stomped off up front in a huff with the bitch waddling afterwards. A few minutes later I hear him snarl something nasty at her and next thing you know, she's sitting on a crate, bawling her eyes out. They both have been like that ever since."

The Imir sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose as she winced at some unseen pain. "Why do I have to get all the shit jobs?" She ran her hand through her hair then shook her head to clear it while taking a deep breath. "Ruddygore isn't paying me enough for this crap." Turning, she made her way towards the front of the boats where Arden stood. "All right, what is your malfunction, mister?"

The large man turned and gave her a confused look. "Huh?"

Her hands on her hips, the ebony female stood as if talking to a small child. "You heard me, buster. What is your problem?"

"I have no clue what you're babbling about," he replied, turning away from her.

"I'm talking about your girlfriend, asshole!" Reaching up, she grabbed Arden by the

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ear and dragged his head around as she pointed towards the vixen. "She refuses to eat, sleep or drink anything since last night. Now what the hell did you say to her?"

"I told her that I'm fine, OK?" Twisting his head, he pulled his ear from her grasp. "It's only two days to the castle. She'll survive. If you're that worried about her, I'm sure you'll find a way to get her to eat."

Hecate's jaw dropped in surprise at his statement. "Only two days?" she echoed in disbelief. "Do you hear yourself?" Her disbelief quickly changed to anger as he just stared at her without any reaction. "Fine. If you don't give a damn then I'll go cast a spell on the bitch to ma---GAK!"

"Don't you ever refer to her as a bitch," Arden commanded, his hand wrapped around the Imir's throat, choking her for a moment before letting go.

"Right," Hecate croaked out, rubbing her throat. "Kind of hot and cold about her aren't you? One minute you don't care if she starves, and the other you're threatening me for referring to her as a bitch. What the hell is it with you?"

"It's none of your business."

"Well I'm making it my business. I have a bad habit of doing that, you know, sticking my nose in where it's not wanted, and this is a grade-A, prime example of a situation where my nose just won't stay out." She crossed her arms and glowered at the man. "So what's the problem? You suddenly decide that you don't love her any more? Or maybe it's some kind of side effect from that succubus that you didn't account for, is that it?"

Arden frowned and turned away. "I told you, it's none of your business. Why can't you leave it alone?"

"No. I can't. After all the time I've heard you swear up and down that you'd never do anything to hurt her, here you go and do something that's got her practically cowering in a corner." The frustrated woman let out a snarl as she glanced back at Sheila. "What is it with you? Are you trying to make her hate you or something?" She was surprised when Arden's head snapped around to look at her for a moment before he turned away. "Holy shit. That's it. You're trying to make her hate you." Turning, Hecate looked back at Sheila again and shook her head. "Why in God's name would you do something like that?"

For a long time, Arden just looked over the railing at the reflection of the sun in the water without speaking. "It's better for her this way," He replied quietly. "Just leave it alone, will you?"

"Better for her?" She shook her head at the thought. "How the hell can making her

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hate you be better?"

"You don't understand," he replied, leaning heavily against the railing, his head hung low. "I've seen the possible futures and there's no way I can complete my mission and go back with her." He lifted his head and looked at her with hollow, black-on-black eyes that echoed the haunted tone in his voice. "There's no other way. She has to want to return without me."

Her brow furrowed with confused, she cocked her head at the big man. "You've seen the future? What are you talking about?"

"Back when I was fighting those sorcerers, I needed to tap into the power of the dragon, but Lakash had put a block on how much I could tap." He paused for a breath before continuing. "I---I don't know. I went berserk. I attacked the connection between the dragon and me, trying to open it up so that I could draw deeper from its power. I succeeded beyond my wildest hopes." A visible shudder ran down his frame. "I completely destroyed the block. All that power," he said, trembling at the memory, "washed over me. I almost lost myself in it." Pausing, he turned to face Hecate, his arms crossed as he hugged himself. "That's when I saw it---Time's Eye. I saw it, I reached for it...and I looked into it."

"Jesus Christ on a crutch," Hecate replied with an awed whisper. "You looked into the Eye...and survived?"

"It was the dragon. It protected me." He glanced away as he continued to talk. "That's when I saw it. The end of my quest. All the possible paths that I could take to reach my goal, and all the possible outcomes." A shuddered sob forced its way free. "There's no way for me to complete my mission without sacrificing myself for the goal."

This was the last thing that she had expected to hear. "No shit?"

Arden's face returned to the impassive mask it had been moments earlier as he straightened up, his arms by his side. "No shit. That was the plan from the beginning." He looked at the woman, a frown on his face. "In order to renew Nanuk, I have to give up who and what I am, and take on the roll of Nanuk. That's the only way."

Hecate shook her head as she assimilated this new information. "What if you don't do it?" She asked, trying for some alternative. "What if you tell this Nanuk to kiss off and find some other patsy?"

"Then Lakash wins," he replied in a low, angry voice. "The balance between the totems will be broken. The other totems will band together to try and destroy Lakash, to try and force him to give up Nanuk's powers. Alliances will be made with the forces of hell to accomplish this goal, and in the end Armageddon will be triggered."

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All because I refused to sacrifice myself."

"Wow. That's fucked." Reaching out with one hand, Hecate squeezed his arm. "Look, just tell her. She's a grown-up girl. She can handle the truth." Again she shook her head, "Don't you think she deserves the truth?"

"I---I can't." He shook his head and leaned against the railing again. "I swore to her that I'd be there for her. I'd go back with her. We'd raise some kids, spoil our grandkids rotten and grow old together. How am I supposed to tell her all that was a lie?"

"I don't know," the Imir replied frankly, giving his arm another squeeze. "But you do need to tell her. She deserves better than this. You both do."

Rathsmon sat with his legs dangling over the edge of the boat so that his toes could skim the top of the water. His back rested against a small pile of sacks containing grains and barley, which had been intended for a brewery up north. The feel of the sun against his skin warmed his chilled body as he relaxed.

"Rathsmon," came a tiny voice from next to the dead man. As he looked over, he saw a rat with glowing red eyes. "Hello, Rathsmon. Do you know who this is?"

Squinting at the rat, the necromancer shifted his sight into the magic bands and frowned. "Lakash," he spat, turning away and closing his eyes again. "What do you want now?"

"It's not what I want. It's what you want," the rat replied, climbing up onto the sack that the man's head rested on. "You want your old body back, right?"

"Eh?" he grunted, turning to look at the rat. "Damn right I want my body back! Why do you think I'm going through all of this?"

The rat rubbed its tiny paws together. "What if I not only offered to restore you to your original body, alive and well, but offered to make you young again?"

"Young?" the man echoed, sitting up and turning to look at the rat. "How young?"

"Oh, say, around eighteen?" the rat slyly replied with a smile. "You were in your sixties when you made the wish, right? Not much time left for you to purge your sins at that age."

Rathsmon scowled down at the rat. "Why? What do you want from me?"

"I need a service done. A service that you of all people are capable of doing," the rat

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replied, scurrying a bit closer. "I simply need to you drain the life from someone."

"You what?" the necromancer shot back, confused. "You want me to kill someone for you?"

Lakash nodded his tiny rat head. "Yes, exactly. I need you to kill someone."

"And in return, you'll not only restore me to my living body, but you'll make me young and healthy again, right?" the dead man queried, verifying the nature of the bargain.

"Exactly," the rat acknowledged, clapping its clawed paws together.

"All right," the necromancer replied guardedly. "Who do I have to kill?"

The rat scurried forward, climbing a couple of more sacks until he was almost as high as Rathsmon's head and in a secretive voice he said, "I need you to kill Arden."

"What?" Rathsmon squeaked, his head snapping around to see Arden arguing with Hecate about something. "Are you nuts? You want me to kill him? I thought you guys were allies. Don't you loose out on some major power deal if he dies?"

"That deal no longer matters," the rat replied angrily. "Circumstances have changed. The goal is no longer worth the risk." It glared at the dead man, its burning eyes seemed to burrow into him with a physical force. "I will give you your original body back, healthy and whole at the age of eighteen, and in return, Arden Berridge must die!"

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Bubble, bubble, boil and trouble!

Two figures, unseen by those in the mortal realm, stood atop a low hill, observing the river as it flowed by. The shorter of the two men wore a black business suit with a narrow tie, and held an umbrella in one hand, using it as a cane. The other man, who stood a head taller, wore an elaborate outfit consisting of silver and gold chain mail draped over Roman style leather armor. They watched together as a riverboat floated silently passed on the current.

"I think Lakash is losing it," the shorter of the two men said.

The taller man nodded in agreement. "It seems that your man has seen what should not have been seen." He turned to look at the shorter man, his brow furrowed. "You were expecting this, weren't you?"

Lucifer gave a satisfied smile. "I never doubted the boy, though I am curious as to exactly how he got past the barriers."

Rathsmon casually reclined against a stack of seed. As he did so, he watched Hecate through slit eyes. After what seemed like immeasurably long period of time, he saw that she had begun to nod off. He waited until her breathing had become slow, deep and regular before quietly standing up. Quickly he glanced around to see if anyone was watching; however all of the crew were busy with their tasks running the boat. Taking great care to be quiet, he made his way to the front of the boat where Arden still stood at the railing. He could see that the big man was concentrating on the powerful spell. On the horizon, a long line of dark clouds stretched as far as the eye could see, drawing a wet line across the land as they proceeded towards the boat. Bright flashes of lightning occasionally illuminated the landscape hidden within showing the torrential downpour that the heavy, black clouds brought with them.

He made his way slowly up the stairs, being careful not to allow the steps to creak under his weight as he ascended. Pausing at the top of the stairs, he waited for some sign of Lakash's promised distraction. A moment later his patience was rewarded as Arden suddenly grabbed his head with both hands while he let out a startled cry of pain and dropped to his knees. Approaching the stricken man, Rathsmon opened his mouth wide to reveal four vampiric-looking teeth. He was about to sink them into Arden's throat when he was suddenly snatched from behind and thrown to the ground. He looked up, startled by this sudden turn of events to see Hecate hovering menacingly over him. "Hecate! What are---" he sputtered trying to think of something to say.

The ebony female reached down and grabbed him by the front of his shirt, hauling him up until he was at eye level with her and snarled. "What the hell were you thinking?" she demanded angrily.

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"What I'm doing is none of your business!" he responded tersely. "As long as you get the bitch back to the castle, you'll get paid, so it's none of your business what I do with him."

Hecate turned and slammed the undead elf against a stack of crates. "I don't know what kind of bullshit Lakash promised you," she hissed, "but I'm not about to let you throw a monkey wrench into the works this close to the end."

"Damn it," Rathsmo growled, trying to break free of the iron grip that the demoness had on him. "Let me go! This is my one chance to get my body back, not only alive and healthy, but also young again!"

"Is that what he promised you?" With a casual flick of her arm, she tossed the necromancer to the deck. "You're an idiot, you know that? Arden already promised you he'd break the curse and give you your life back. Why turn on him now?"

"Because I was an old man," he declared, climbing to his feet. "If I'm restored to that old body I'll only have a few years at best before I die."

Hecate scowled at the elf. Her red eyes studied him like some distasteful filth under a magnifying glass. "Fine. If that's all it takes for you to turn on an ally, then so be it." She stepped aside and waved towards Arden. "Before you go sinking your teeth into him, I suggest you take a close look at his aura." Shifting her sight back to the magic bands, she looked at the scarred man and the red aura that pulsated around him. "He's fighting with Lakash for control of the connection. What do you think Lakash will do when you break his concentration?"

For several seconds Rathsmo didn't respond. He simply stared at the large man before looking down and away. "He'll use his link between them to channel enough power to destroy us both."

"Right." Taking a step forward, Hecate stood so that she was face to face with him, their noses almost touching. "He could claim that he did it to destroy you and unfortunately had to destroy Arden in the process, thus maintaining his bargain while getting rid of the both of you as a bonus."

Before Rathsmo could reply, the embattled image of Arden disintegrated and faded away. "What the hell?" Both he and the ebony female turned at the sound of creaking boards behind him.

"It seems that you went with the odds and not against them," Arden replied with a patronizing smile.

"What the---?" the necromancer stuttered, looking back to where the other Arden had just been. "How did you---?"

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Crossing his arms, the scarred man nodded to himself. "Seventeen of the twenty four different causal event paths that I saw for this had you either deciding not to attack the construct on your own or being stopped by Hecate. It looks like you made the smart choice."

"Seventeen out of---" Hecate mumbled to herself. "The Eye! You saw this in the Eye, didn't you?"

Rathsmon's jaw dropped as Arden nodded. "But the attack. Lakash was supposed to distract you. How did you get around that?"

"The same way," the big man replied, walking over to a crate and sitting on it. "I knew how he intended to attack me, and I had a feedback trap setup. He barely got started before it triggered. After that, all I had to do was stay invisible and watch the show."

Shaking his head, the necromancer blinked several times as he digested what had just happened. "Wait a minute," he barked, looking back up at Arden. "The Eye? You mean the Time's Eye?" He watched as Arden again nodded. "But--- But only celestials can use the Eye reliably."

"The dragon protected me," Arden sheepishly admitted as he leaned back against the crates and relaxed for the first time since boarding the boat. "It's a construct created by Lakash and through its connection to him has celestial powers."

"Oh, man. Now I understand why he wants to get rid of you," the necromancer mumbled as he leaned heavily against the railing. "The ability to use the Eye would put you on the same footing as Lakash."

"Actually, it doesn't," the big man said in a conspiratorial voice, glancing around to ensure they weren't being watched. "It actually gives me an advantage." He gave his two companions a quirky smile. "The other players in the game have been blocking Lakash's access to the Eye. I've seen the barriers. His access is sporadic at best."

Hecate held up a hand and shook her head. "Wait. If Lakash's access is being blocked, how is it to you got to the Eye?"

Arden shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't even know the Eye existed. I'm not sure, but I think I was shown the Eye by some third party. Don't ask me how or why, I haven't a clue. All I know is that it showed me several key events, including the endgame. If everything happens as I foresaw, then this quest will succeed beyond Nanuk's wildest dreams---" He paused for a dramatic effect, the casual smile changing to one of a true predator, "---and Lakash's worst nightmare." With a short bark of laughter, he stood and walked over to where the magical construct had stood. "If you'll excuse me, I've got to get back to work. We'll be coming up on Laverak soon, and I'll need a

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good downpour to mask our passing from the authorities."

Hecate and Rathsmoan glanced at each other before they turned and walked back down to the main deck. The necromancer paused to look back up at the big man. "Is it just me, or does he scare the shit out of you, too?"

"It's not just you," Hecate admitted with an involuntary shiver. "That sense of dread I've had since I met him just got ratcheted up a few notches."

"I don't like it. I don't like it at all. I'm thinking there's more to Lakash wanting him dead than just winning out on his bet." He gravely shook his head as he turned towards the ebony woman. "I'm almost beginning to think we should kill him."

"Me, too," she replied with a solemn nod. "But how? If he's got access to the Eye, then odds are he's seen anything we try. Without intervention by an opposing celestial, Lakash excluded, of course, there's no way we can be certain he won't know in advance what's going to happen."

Rathsmoan's reply was interrupted as the captain of the boat stomped up to him. "What the hell's he doing up there? It looks like a damned monsoon is brewing and it's the wrong time of year for that!"

"That's exactly what's happening," the dead man replied, nodding towards the storm. "He's going to use the rain to help cover our passage past the next town."

The dapper cat let out a long string of curses, many of which the other two didn't recognize. "Doesn't that fool know that rain will destroy half our cargo? I'll be lucky to get the good stuff under cover!" Growling to himself in an unknown language, he turned and stomped his way back towards the rudder man while snapping orders to the rats that were strewn about on the decks.

"Speaking of getting things under cover," the Imir commented as she turned and walked towards Sheila. "Hey!" Reaching out, she tapped the vixen on the shoulder. "There's a storm coming. You need to get under cover."

"Leave me alone," came the expected reply.

Her patience exhausted, Hecate reached out and grabbed the vixen by the ear. She winced as Sheila grabbed her arm, digging her clawed hand into Hecate's flesh as she used the other to help leverage herself up. "I said, get inside!" the demoness ordered.

"Let go of me!" the angry vixen barked as she finally freed her tender ear from the merciless grasp. "Just leave me the hell alone, will you?"

Hecate's hand shot out and slapped the unprotected vixen across the face, rocking her to one side. "No! You listen to me. I'm sick and tired of your little drama queen,

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'nobody loves me so I'm going to act all moody and self destructive' bullshit! Now you're going to haul your bloated carcass into that wheelhouse and climb onto a bunk or I swear to God I'm going to cast a spell on you that will let me cart you around like a puppet on a string. My job is to get you to the castle alive and healthy. I'm not going to let your little tantrum screw that up!"

Anger clouded the vixens face for a moment, but just a moment. Her entire body wilted from ears to tail as she admitted defeat. "You're right," she meekly admitted. "I'll go inside and lie down." Keeping her head down, she waddled from crate to crate, supporting herself as she made her way to the low doorway, ducking to clear the low roof.

The ebony demoness looked up to the heavens and spoke a quiet prayer. "God, if I ever decide to have kids, please send someone to beat some sense into me!" She turned and locked eyes with Arden, who simply stood at the railing, his arms crossed, staring at her. They stood like that, gazes locked together for several minutes before Hecate finally broke away, turned and went inside the wheelhouse to check on the vixen.

Captain Sturm strode purposefully towards the simple stone house that sat just inland of their patrol boat, adjusting his leather armor as he went. Reaching the house, he knocked once before entering to find a middle aged man in a militia uniform similar to his, sitting at a table and gazing into a crystal ball. "Get your armor on," the officer directed. "I just got a report that a boat load of river pirates will be here within the hour."

"I know," the mage replied, covering his crystal ball with a silk cloth. "I've been watching them."

"Then what are you waiting for, man?" the Captain demanded, slamming his hand on the table. "We need to get ready for them!"

"Uh uh," the mage replied, running his hands through his hair. "Have you seen the storm brewing from down south?"

"Huh?" the officer grunted, momentarily confused. "Of course I've seen it, but I'm not about to let a storm stop me from capturing those pirates!"

"Captain, Captain, Captain," the mage repeated in an exasperated voice as he shook his head. "It's the wrong time of year for such a storm." He held up his hand to stop any reply from the officer. "That storm's been summoned, and not by just any normal magic. That's primal magic, the kind a high level demon would use. There's a mage on board that boat who's got some serious firepower behind him, and I for one am

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not going to challenge him."

"You coward!" Captain Sturm shouted, again banging his fist on the table. "I'll have you court-martialed for this!"

"That's assuming you live," the mage calmly replied, enjoying the look of shock on his superior's face. "Whoever's on that ship could destroy me, you and everyone on your ship with the wave of a hand." He shook his head gravely. "No sir. I'm not going to face down someone like that. Besides, they'll have to get past Castle Terindell, which means that they'll have to get past Ruddygore. If I were you, I'd just batten down the hatches and let them pass."

"He's that powerful?" the armored man asked, his resolve cracking. His expression became even more serious as the magician nodded. "Then perhaps you're right. I'll have the men stand down. Meanwhile, I want you to get word to Terindell and make sure that they know that they're going to have company coming."

The magician uncovered his crystal ball. "Aye aye, Sir."

"Well, there it is," Maxx declared, pointing at the castle on top of the hill which was illuminated by the rusty-colored dawn's light, "Castle Terindell. So where do you want off? The sooner I'm rid of you the happier I'll be."

Arden pointed towards the far shore, a fair ways up stream from the castle. "There's a horse and carriage there. Drop us at the shore at that spot."

"A horse and carriage?" the cat echoed, straining to see. "I don't see one."

"It's another ten miles or so down stream in a break between the trees."

"Ten miles!" The cat looked up at the big man unsure if he were crazy or for real. A moment later he shook his head and turned to walk away. "Whatever. Just have your group together when we stop. I'm not going to tarry long, so make sure everyone's ready to go." He paused at the head of the stairs and turned back. "And about my payment...?"

"Oh, you'll get what's coming to you," Arden replied with a low, rumbling voice.

The better part of an hour later, everyone was on deck and waiting near where the gangplank would be dropped. The riverboat shuddered as its hull ground against the fine silt of the shore, dragging it to a stop. The captain gave orders to the crew who quickly ran the plank out to the shore and secured it against the deck.

"There you go," Maxx said with a practiced smile and a wave down the gangplank.

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"It's a pleasure doing business with you." As Sheila stepped forwards to start down the ramp, Maxx held up his hand. "Uh uh! First, you pay for the ride." The crew of the ship had gathered around the four passengers as they had prepared to leave. Now it was obvious they were there to insure payment was made.

"I said you'd get what you deserve and I always keep my word." Arden reached inside his shirt and pulled out a large sack that was mostly empty. It had been responsible for giving him a somewhat paunchy look. He shook the bag, which rattled with coin before tossing it to the cat who staggered at its weight. "There's more than enough gold there to cover the cost of the boat and everything on board."

"No doubt," the cat said, somewhat awe struck and surprised by the payment, having expected trouble from the big man. He cocked his head at the big man and studied him with a suspicious eye. "But why so much?"

"Simple," Arden replied with a sinister smile. "In another couple of miles, this river merges with the River of the Dancing Gods. There are patrol boats out looking for you, so your best bet is to abandon ship and head up to the north, away from Terindell and the patrols."

"What?" the cat demanded angrily. "You guaranteed me safe passage!"

"That's right. I guaranteed you safe passage to the castle. I said nothing about after you delivered us." He gently pushed the cat out of the way so the others could disembark. "From here on out, it's up to you what you do. You can be greedy and try to keep both the gold and the loot, or abandon ship and keep just the gold. Either way, our business is finished." Turning, Arden followed Hecate down the ramp as the captain gave hurried orders to shove off from the shoreline.

The group proceeded slowly up the grassy embankment towards the waiting carriage and the Imir who stood next to it. His sharp chiseled features were unmarred by any expression as he watched the group approach. When they were within easy conversation range he let out a sigh of disappointment. "River pirates? I don't know why, but I expected better of you, Hecate. I should have assumed otherwise."

"Hey! Don't blame me," the ebony female shot back. "It wasn't my idea to hook up with them, so don't go trying to pin this one on me!"

"Indeed," he commented, cocking an eyebrow at the group as he considered them. "I doubt the fox was responsible, therefore I must presume that it was either Rathsmo or Arden. If I had to guess I would say it was Arden."

"Wrong again," Hecate said as she virtually danced up to stand next to him, giving the elf a toothy smile. "It was the walking corpse."

"Indeed," he again stated with a look of disgust towards Hecate before he stepped

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back towards the carriage. "Be that as it may, it is irrelevant. I am Poquah, the Majordomo and aid to the Sorcerer Ruddygore. I will be responsible for taking care of your needs during your visit, so if you require anything, please let me know. Now, if you would all please get into the coach, we will proceed to the castle. Master Ruddygore is currently busy with other business, but will be back by this evening." He opened the door and held it for the others.

Sheila was first to climb in. Arden started to help her up, but she snatched her arm away and hauled herself up without any assistance. Unfazed by the display of hostility, Arden climbed into the carriage, causing it to lurch from side to side due to his weight. An argument could be heard going on as Rathsmon climbed inside.

"Trouble in paradise?" Poquah sarcastically asked, as Hecate was about to climb aboard.

"You have no idea," she muttered under her breath before climbing inside.

Closing the door behind them, the Imir climbed up to sit next to the driver who tisked a couple times to get the horses moving. A short time later, the carriage pulled onto a smooth dirt road that lead into the castle. The horse's hooves tromped loudly as they crossed the wooden drawbridge and then echoed off of the close stone walls of the tunnel leading through the wall to the inner courtyard. The driver pulled the team of horses around so that the carriage stopped near the main living quarters.

Poquah lightly jumped down from the upper bench and opened the door for the passengers, who disembarked in the same order they had climbed aboard with the exception of Arden and Sheila. Sheila climbed down first, insisting that she didn't feel like being bounced around like a pinball again.

Once out of the carriage, Sheila looked around at the courtyard, identifying what looked like a smithy, stables and two sets of living quarters, the larger of the two an enormous building that rose seven stories into the air and had towers complete with pennants flying on top at each corner. She was about to comment on the big building when the smell of the manure pile by the stables hit her. "Oh god! I'd forgotten how bad horse crap can sm---"

"DOGGY!" came a booming voice from near the other living quarters. All heads snapped around to see a huge, twelve foot tall iron monstrosity with glowing red eyes and smoke bellowing from its ears begin to run ponderously with both arms outstretched towards the vixen who in turn screamed. Arden and Hecate both reacted at the same time, sending bolts of magical force, which, though intended to simply knock the thing down, had combined to lift it from the ground and throw it back to smash against the stone wall with a loud clang. It then dropped to the ground and shattered into a myriad of pieces with cogs and gears rolling away from the ruined hulk.

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"What the hell was that thing?" Sheila screeched, her voice having a squeaky, falsetto tint of panic to it.

"I must apologize," Poquah replied, shaking his head. "That's the project of one of Master Ruddygore's apprentices. The young man has found a way to enchant crystals so that the golem is capable of understanding fairly complex tasks and concepts. He intends it to be a labor-saving device to help stonemasons with large projects. I'm afraid that it still has some---design flaws."

Sheila let out a derisive bark of laughter. "Design flaws my ass. Whatever. Just keep it away from me."

"Considering how much damage it took, I don't believe you will have anything to worry about during your stay." He turned and gestured towards the main building. "If you all will follow me, I'll show you to your rooms where you can rest up from your travels and refresh yourselves." Turning on his heels with military precision, the elf led the procession up and into the main living quarters. At the top of the short stairs stood a young girl standing behind a wheelchair.

"Hey! That looks like something from back home!" Sheila declared.

"Indeed it is," Poquah commented. "This was manufactured over on earth. The Master anticipated that you might not be up to the long walks required to get around the living quarters."

Sheila slipped her fluffy tail through the large gap in the back of the chair as she lowered herself down to a sitting position. A sigh of relief matched the look of satisfaction on her muzzle as she propped her feet up on the rests. "Your boss sure got that right. I could get used to this."

Leading the group through the grand foyer, the elf gave a brief description of various rooms as they passed them. After several twists and turns, he came to a series of doors. "These are your quarters. Women on the left, men on the right."

Arden paused as the others went into their rooms to get settled. "Poquah. I don't mean to put down the hospitality, but I require something a bit more...roomier." He took the elf's cocked eyebrow as an indication to continue. "I need a large cavern, as big as you can come up with. I know there are several below the castle. Nothing fancy, just one with a single entrance where I can have some privacy."

The elf nodded in understanding. "You wish to resume your natural form?"

"Something like that," Arden replied evasively. "I'll need anywhere from five to eight days without interruptions. Do you think you can arrange that?"

Again the eyebrow arched as the elf's face betrayed his surprise. "I believe

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something like that can be arranged. If you'll follow me, I believe I have the perfect place."

Together the two men walked out of the main building and into the apprentice quarters, where they found a narrow passageway that angled down under the castle. The passage doubled back upon itself several times as they proceeded until it finally came to a large, wooden door, which the elf unlocked. The door squeaked loudly as it was pushed open. Poquah held the ball of light he summoned high into the air to illuminate the cavern. It was hard to measure distance with the meager lighting, but from what Arden could see, the cavern was about a hundred feet long and two-thirds that wide. It might be a little cramped, but it would work.

"Yah, I think this'll do," he commented, nodding, as he looked around at the various dusty crates and refuse in the room. "Nothing valuable in here?"

Poquah shook his head. "There shouldn't be. The students come down here to do mock battles, that way there's no chance of them damaging the main building. The walls and roof are reinforced to prevent collapse."

"Great," the big man said with a smile. "Let your students know not to try the door. I'm going to have some pretty nasty wards on it, so unless they want to get reduced to a large blob of protoplasm it wouldn't be wise to touch it."

The elf nodded. "Understood. Is there anything else that you will require?"

Arden looked around and shook his head. "No. This should do perfectly. Thank you."

"You're most welcome," Poquah replied with a curt bow. "I'll inform the Master when he returns. He may wish to speak to you before the time is up so you should be prepared for the possibility of a visit."

Arden's eyes narrowed as he studied the elf for a moment, then nodded. "I suppose so. This is his house and I am a guest. However, I will see him and him alone. Please make sure nobody else tries to disturb me."

"As you wish," the elf replied as he stepped out of the cavern, closing the door behind him.

It took a second for Arden's eyes to adjust to the total darkness; however his dragon's sight soon gave him a perfect view of the room, the objects in it and the spells which lingered. He took several minutes to study the spells reinforcing the walls and doorway before he began casting the ward on the door, anchoring it to the stone around the edges. Almost five minutes later, he stopped and studied the results, satisfied that nobody was going to get past without giving him ample time to prepare. He walked out into the middle of the room and took a deep breath before

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closing his eyes. "All right, Sha'kull. I keep my word. The body is yours again. Do what you must."

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A clean start.

Poquah marched officiously down the steps of the main living quarters, arriving at the bottom just as a large carriage pulled to a halt. Opening the door, he reached in and pulled out the folding steps before standing aside for the passenger to debark. Despite the carriage's extra heavy-duty springs, it rocked sharply to one side as its sole occupant stepped out of the door and down to the ground. To describe the man as large would be like referring to a professional body builder as simply healthy. Standing well over six feet tall, his height was only matched by his enormous girth. Wearing an eighteenth century black suit with a red, silk-lined opera coat and top hat on his head, his red-cheeked face was framed with a broad beard and mustache, both of which were silver-white. At first glance and at a great distance, one might think of him as the picture-perfect Santa Clause; however, upon closer inspection one would get a sense of greatness, a power that was held carefully in check, a power which had nothing to do with toys or holidays. Ruddygore stretched and smiled as he looked around, apparently happy to be home.

"Was your trip a success?" the Imir inquired, closing the carriage door.

"Bah," the fat man grumbled in disgust. "If anything to do with the new council could be called a success." The dark cloud that had briefly covered his face broke and vanished, revealing a jovial smile. "I did manage to fit in a quick trip across to Earth. There was a Gilbert and Sullivan festival in Manitoba that I just couldn't miss."

"Indeed," Poquah acknowledged, knowing that something like that had been inevitable. "You'll be happy to know that our visitors finally arrived this morning."

The big man nodded as they made their way up the stairs. "Excellent! It's about time they got here. I was beginning to wonder if they'd ever make it." He paused just inside the entryway to let his eyes adjust. "I have some things to take care of before I meet them. Have them join me for dinner, make it casual, and then afterwards we'll discuss what the next step is."

Glancing briefly towards the students' dorm, Poquah looked a bit uncomfortable. "I'm afraid that could be problematical. Arden requested some place where he could resume his natural form, so I placed him in the students' practice arena."

"No problem, then. It's been ages since we dined outdoors. We'll simply have a table setup on the balcony outside of the dining hall." His eyes now adjusted to the shadowy interior, Ruddygore started purposefully inwards. "He can relax on the grass. You should see about buying some cattle for him to eat, too. Maybe toss in an ox or some such as long as you're at it."

"An excellent suggestion. However..." the Imir let the statement trail off as the sorcerer stopped and turned to face him. "He requested that he not be disturbed by

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anyone except yourself for the next five to eight days."

The storm clouds once again returned briefly to Ruddygore's face. "Doesn't want to be disturbed, does he?" Letting out a derisive snort, he resumed walking at a much faster pace. "Fine. We might as well meet this female that he's been dragging all over creation then. I understand that he's got that necromancer from down south with him, too?" Without a pause, he pushed his way through large double doors and turned left down a corridor. "Might as well invite him while you're at it. And make sure Hecate's there, too. No doubt they'll be able to shed some light on what is going on."

"Indeed," the elf replied flatly, having already anticipated the order.

Sheila stared up at the canopy of the bed as it rippled in time with the breeze. Lying on her back with her knees up, she was just starting to drift off when there came a knock at the door. "What?" she barked, annoyed at the interruption.

The door opened and the same girl who'd helped with the wheelchair came in. "Poquah suggested that you might wish to get cleaned up prior to dinner, and has instructed me to help you."

"He did, did he?" he vixen growled as she glared at the girl through slit eyes. "Why don't you go tell Poquah what he can do with his bath." Closing her eyes, she squirmed her head into the pillows for a bit, trying to get comfortable again.

"Please, M'am. He will be most upset at me if I don't have you ready to dine with the Master tonight." She paused, looking quite nervous as the vixen ignored her. "Besides, I would think that you would want a bath by now."

"The vixen's eyes flew open. "WHAT?" she demanded as she rolled over and sat up. "What the hell are you trying to insinuate?"

"Please, M'am, I wasn't trying to insinuate anything," the girl hastily replied, trying to calm the angry female. "I mean, just look at yourself. You're hair's all matted, your fur's caked with dirt and....and..."

"And what," Sheila growled dangerously.

Leaning on the doorway, Hecate spoke up, rescuing the girl. "And you smell like a dog," the ebony female stated. "Or have you forgotten that without the armor, you no longer have any of the fancy spells that kept you relatively clean." She shook her head as the vixen continued to growl to herself, causing the girl to retreat behind Hecate. "Hey, if you don't believe me, go take a look in the mirror. Go ahead, look!"

Using the nightstand as a crutch, Sheila stood up and hobbled over to the full-length

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mirror on the wall and stopped, stunned at what she saw. Her hair was frizzed and wild-looking, the fur on her hands, legs and tail was matted and layered with dirt and grime. The simple pullover cloak wasn't in much better condition. Raising one arm, she took a sniff of her palm and recoiled. Staggering backwards, she dropped heavily onto the bed as her knees hit the edge and just sat, staring at the image in the mirror before her.

Hecate sighed as she walked over to the vixen and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up."

"I---I don't understand," Sheila mumbled in shock. "I've ridden a horse across the desert, been through rain storms, hacked my way through the woods and even been through a monsoon, and I've never looked anywhere near this bad!"

"It was the armor." Helping the vixen up, Hecate guided her over to the wheelchair and steadied her as she sat down. "The magic in the armor protected you on many levels, including the elements, dirt and such. Without it," the Imir shrugged, "you were just a dirt magnet waiting to happen. Nature abhors a vacuum, especially one caused by magic. It's in the rules." She followed the young human as the teen pushed the wheelchair, pausing at the doorway to lean on the frame. "Hey. You'll feel ten thousand percent better once you've had that bath. Trust me."

Her face softened visibly as she watched the vixen being wheeled away, then her expression twisted to one of severe annoyance. "What are you looking at?" she demanded, turning to look at Poquah who stood silently a short distance behind her.

"I am again surprised by you," he stated, closing the distance, his hands clasped behind his back. "I never took you for the nurturing type."

"Oh, fuck you," Hecate spat as she crossed the hall to her own room, slamming the door shut behind her.

"Here we are," the girl stated, stopping outside of a pair of large, ornate double doors. Removing a key from around her neck, she unlocked the doors and opened them, locking them again after they were inside. "This is Master Ruddygore's private bath."

Sheila looked around the room. A series of oil lamps around the room bounced their light indirectly off the white walls and tiled ceiling, giving the area a warm feeling. The chamber was sparsely decorated with only a couple of tapestries on the wall. In the center of the floor was a large circular opening that resembled a Jacuzzi more than it did a tub. One end had a sliding grate that could be levered up, similar to a floodgate on a damn, which would allow one to lower the water or empty the tub quickly. Hanging overhead from the ceiling, almost directly over the tub, dangled

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two pipes that joined into a single nozzle just above the water's surface. Each pipe had a chain dangling down that controlled a flow valve, a basic but effective method to regulate water temperature. Nearby was a fully stocked bar on wheels that had a number of pastries and other confections piled up on a platter. A large bench with a series of pegs above it had a pile of plush towels stacked on top. Next to the bench sat a small, doorless cabinet that was filled with vials of oils and bath salts, soaps and other bath supplies.

Wheeling the chair a little closer to the tub, Sheila saw that it was, indeed, very much like a large Jacuzzi with tile running around the upper edge and a single, continuous bench-type seat that ran around the outside of the bath. All that was missing were the jets and water intake. As she watch, the young woman cranked open the valves to fill the tub. "You've got to be kidding," the vixen laughed, watching the hot, steaming water flood into the bath. "This is one guy's personal bath? I've seen orgies take place in smaller tubs than that!"

The teen blushed and turned away. "Master Ruddygore doesn't indulge himself in such things. However, he does occasionally have guests who bring companions. If they are important enough to warrant such a courtesy, they will be allowed to use this room."

"Wait," Sheila said, holding her hand up. "You're telling me that I'm getting some kind of VIP treatment?"

Shaking the water off of her hand, the girl turned and nodded towards the vixen. "Oh, yes, M'am! You and Master Arden are both considered very important guests indeed. The Master has been waiting for your arrival most impatiently for the last several weeks."

"Well, I hate to break it to you, but I think you're a little off base," the vixen stated, standing and removing her robe. "Your boss isn't interested in me. He probably wouldn't give a rat's ass about me if it weren't for Arden. I'm just along for the ride."

The girl held the robe out at arms length with two fingers. "You don't have any particular affinity for this thing, do you?"

"Huh?" Sheila grunted, thrown off by the question for a second. "Oh. Um, no, I don't."

"Good." Tossing the robe into a corner, the girl wiped her hands on her clothes. "Then you won't mind if I have it burned." Taking the vixen's hand, she helped her over to the pool. "Let me know if the water's too hot for you," she directed as Sheila stuck her toe in.

"It's just fine." Carefully making her way down the rough-hewn steps, Sheila waded out into the middle of the pool before submerging herself the rest of the way for a

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moment and then popping her head back up to the surface so she could breathe. Shaking her head to get the water out of her eyes, she rubbed her hands through her hair and grimaced as her fingers snared in the tangles.

Having also disrobed, the teen gathered together a small tray of items from the bathing supplies and returned to the bath with them, setting them down by the side after climbing in. She picked up a small, plastic bottle of pinkish fluid. "This is a combination shampoo and body wash," the girl stated, squirting a large glob into one hand before handing it to the vixen. Maneuvering around to stand in back, she proceeded to start working on Sheila's back. "Let's get your body cleaned up first, then we can worry about your hair."

"Christ," the pregnant vixen muttered to herself as she tried to scrub the fur on her arms. "How the hell did I get this grungy in just three days?"

"As I understand it, you're not from this world. I can tell just by looking by you that you're not acclimated to the rules." Reaching for the bottle, the girl squirted out more soap and continued to work it into the fur. "Right now there are at least two dozen different rules concerning fur that are trying to attach themselves to you. That's what happens to you if you're not acclimated."

"Not acclimated?" Sheila spat, trying to turn to face the girl. "I've been running around in this third world... *world* for the last six months! How long do I have to be here before I'm acclimated?"

The young teen chuckled politely. "It's not how long, but just how. From what Hecate said, I take it you were wearing something to ward off most native magic. That probably protected you from the basic categorization rules. The longer you deny the rules, the harder they can hit you when they finally get the chance." She paused both talking and shampooing as she thought about it. "I guess you could say it's like a drug. You take it for a long time and never notice, but if you suddenly stop, all your symptoms will come back to hit you with a vengeance, as well as a bunch of new ones as you go through withdrawal."

"I wouldn't know about that," the vixen replied, dumping more shampoo onto her arm as she continued to scrub it. "I was never one to do drugs. I prefer life *au natural*." Having lathered the arm thoroughly, she dunked it under the water then lifted it and looked at the result. "Damn it! What does it take to get this shit out of my fur?" She picked up the bottle of shampoo and again squirted the contents onto her arm. She stopped scrubbing at her arm and hung her head, her ears wilted to the side. "God, it's no wonder..." she sighed before half-heartedly began to scrub the fur again.

"No wonder what?" the girl asked while continuing to absentmindedly lather the vixen's back.

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Sheila whimpered as she tried to run her claws through the matted fur. "It's no wonder he doesn't want to be around me. God knows I wouldn't want to be around me right now either. Not after all I've done."

The girl shushed the vixen as she dug her nails into the fur, working the soap all the way down to the skin. "Now-now. I don't think it's that bad. He's a sorcerer, right? Then he should know the rules. He was probably worried someone might attack him while you were near. He was just worried for you. It's not like you wanted this to happen, right?"

"You don't understand," Sheila replied, dropping suddenly in the water until it was up to her shoulders before wading over to the edge of the pool where she sat down. "After everything that I've done to him, he has every right to hate me."

The teen gave Sheila a dubious look as she studied the pregnant vixen. "I don't know. From what Poquah said about him, he seems very devoted to your safety."

"Oh, you do *not* have a clue." Using both hands, Sheila pulled her long hair back, clearing it from her eyes as she spoke. "When Arden showed up in my world, he had this amulet with him. He handed it to me before he passed out. I didn't understand what it was, and he didn't remember giving it to me. He thought he'd lost it." Reclining against the side of the pool, she looked up at the ornately tiled roof and lost herself in the mosaic for a moment before continuing. "He told me about this quest of his and how he needed the amulet to finish it. Even knowing he needed it, I didn't give it back. At the time, I thought I loved him. Then everything started going wrong. People kept trying to kill him. Then they kidnapped me and Bjorn. Oh, god, Bjorn..." She closed her eyes and began to sob quietly. "Bjorn would be alive if I had just given Arden that stupid amulet."

Moving to the side of the pool, the girl took one of the tall, slender glasses and filled it with ice-cold water before offering it to the vixen. "Who was Bjorn?"

"Who was he?" the vixen replied, looking back at the girl. Seeing the offered glass, she accepted it and took a sip. She held the glass in both hands and stared at it as she sniffed. "He was my fiancé."

Now enthralled with the vixen's story, the girl took a seat next to her. "Your fiancé? I thought you loved Arden."

"Yah, well... That's what I thought too." Pausing to take another drink, she took a deep breath to try and maintain control. "I found out later that my attraction was just some stupid spell."

The girl nodded, knowing full well what such magic was capable of. "What happened next?"

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"I..." Sheila paused for a long time, trying to both organize her thoughts and keep from breaking down. "I finally realized that I couldn't keep him. Bad things would keep happening and more people would die if I did, so I decided to give the amulet back, but not before..." With a sudden snarl that surprised the girl, she threw the glass across the room where it shattered against a wall before again running her fingers through her long, wet hair. "Not before I...not before I got pregnant with his kid."

"Ah," was all the girl replied.

"Yah. 'Ah,'" the vixen parroted. "So the next night I decide to give him back the amulet, only I don't understand how it works or what it does. In the process I made a wish that, well, it transported us to another world."

"It brought you here?" the girl prompted.

"No. Some place completely different. A world where there were only humans and some cat-like people that they used for slaves." She paused to rub the end of her snout as she sniffed again. "That's when things really started to go wrong."

Leaning forward with interest, the girl handed her a small washcloth. "Wrong how?"

Sheila blew her nose on the cloth before folding it up and setting it by the side of the pool. "First of all, we switched bodies."

"Really?" the girl said with a smile. "So he was a vixen and you were a dragon?"

"Dragon?" Sheila laughed. "No. I was human. He was a human before he came to my world where he showed up as a polar bear," she paused as her eyes got a far away look. "I remember the look in his eyes when he first went out in public. It was like watching a small child seeing a Christmas tree for the first time. He was so---innocent, so---vulnerable, you know?" She shook her head to break away from the memory. "No, I was in his old human body, and he was in mine. I thought it was kind of fun being a guy, but he didn't handle it very well. Then he got..."

The girl waited a minute for Sheila to continue before prompting her, "Then he got what?"

"Then he got raped," she stated flatly as the girl gasped. "The poor, stupid bastard didn't know that I was in heat. He didn't know that my pheromones would affect humans, either. Not that I could have been bothered to tell him even though I knew damn good and well they did. Some pencil dick local royalty decided he wanted an exotic fuck and had her captured and chained up. Afterwards he had her beaten and given to the slaver's staff. When they were done with her, she was given to a pen full of those cats."

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"Oh my god!" the girl gasped, one hand over her mouth.

"Don't you see," Sheila demanded, almost pleaded of the girl, "It was *all my fault!* If I'd just given him the amulet, nobody would have had to die. He never would have been raped. He never would have died, twice! He wouldn't be trapped in that stupid dragon's body. He wouldn't have to worry about me. He'd just be able to do his quest and get on with his life. The sooner he can get rid of me, the better it will be for all of us."

"You really believe that?" the girl asked, her brow furrowed as she reached out to put a hand on the vixen's arm. "Come on. He's got to still feel something for you. I mean, if he didn't, wouldn't he have left you behind by now?"

"Oh, no. You don't understand." Shaking her head, she used the claw of her index finger to scratch behind her ear. "He's got this over-inflated sense of honor and duty. The only reason he bothers to drag me along is that he feels responsible for me."

They sat together in the pool of slowly cooling water for several minutes before the girl once again spoke. "So do you still feel anything for him? I mean, now that the spells and everything are gone and all." She looked expectantly at the vixen for some time before speaking again. "Well? Do you?"

"I... I don't know," the vixen replied, covering her eyes with her hands as she spoke with a muffled voice. "He's the only connection I have with my home," she sobbed quietly into her hands. "I don't want to loose that, or him." She looked back at the girl with a grief stricken expression. "I don't want to loose him again, but I don't see how he'd ever want me around after all that I've done to him."

"If you want him, you're going to have to make him want to have you around. The best way I can think of to do that is to get you cleaned up." Going back over to the chains, she opened the hot water, allowing it to over-fill the bath, allowing the excess water to drain out the sluice at the far end, taking some of the soap and foam with it as it went. Once we have you all prettied up, then we can work on getting your man back."

"Pretty me up?" the vixen barked sarcastically as she laughed. "You've got to be kidding! I'm a disaster" Raising her hands, she stood so that she was half way out of the water. "Look at me! I'm a bloated, shaggy mess. My fur needs to be trimmed, my nails need to be clipped, my belly's the size of freakin' Ohio and God help me if Philippe could see my hair now. It would take nothing short of a miracle for me to look decent, much less pretty."

The girl laughed and held up her fingers, which had small sparks dancing around their tips. "You forget, you're in a castle owned by a sorcerer and staffed with apprentices. There's not much we can't accomplish when we put our minds to it." She leaned forward and gave the Sheila an impish smile. "So, are you ready for a

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makeover now, or do you want to give up and we'll just leave you looking like a wet, shaggy dog that's been sleeping in a ditch for the last six months?"

"When you put it like that," Sheila replied, smiling for the first time in a long time, "how could I possibly say no?"

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Exit: Stage Left

"What in the name of the Seven Lords!" Throckmorton P. Ruddygore bellowed at the sight of his bath. With both doors held wide open, the massive magician stared agape at the mess that was his private bath. There were rust-colored tufts of hair in a circular pile near one of the chairs, longer such hairs of red and brown stuck to the side of the tub itself and almost a dozen empty plastic bottles were strewn on the floor near the tub. His eyes were drawn to the young girl who held a large pile of dirty towels in her hand. "Melody!" he barked angrily, causing the girl to visibly jump. "What the hell happened in here?"

The girl gave him a nervous smile that was almost a grimace. "Master Ruddygore! You're back!" Tossing the dirty towels into the hamper behind her, she turned back to face the large man while hastily kicking a towel which had fallen to the floor out of site behind her. "You're early! I mean...um... how was your trip?"

"The trip?" he echoed with mock joviality. "The trip was wonderful. I even got to spend some time on earth." With a grace one wouldn't attribute to someone of his size, he lightly skipped from foot to foot as he approached her. "The thirteen hour ride in the carriage was splendid. Nothing more than spending a day traveling behind a half a dozen horses, down a dusty road to make someone feel like a BATH!" Towering over the girl, he virtually snarled with anger. "Now what exactly have you been doing in here? It looks like an entire barnyard has been in here!"

"It wasn't an entire...It was just one dog. I mean fox...errr," she blurted out, cowering in front of the big man, "rather that female that was traveling with the dragon. You know, Sheila. Her. It was her!"

Ruddygore turned and waved a hand around the room. "She did all this, all by her little lonesome? And just where were you during all this?"

Literally backed into a corner, she tried to press herself into the wall to get away from the enraged sorcerer. "No! It wasn't like that! I mean, it's my fault. I brought her here. Poquah ordered me to have her cleaned up before dinner tonight."

"Did he tell you to bring it here?" the fat man snapped.

"Don't call her *it*!" the girl furiously shouted as she straightened up to face the sorcerer with clenched fists. "She's got a name, you know! She's a person just like the rest of us!"

"Fine," he replied flatly, crossing his arms. "That still doesn't explain why you brought *her* here and not to the regular house baths." He paused to glance at the empty bottles by the tub. "Or why you've used almost an entire case of my shampoo in the process."

"I'm sorry, Master, but I saw no other choice." Scrambling over to the bottles, the girl

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started to gather them up. "You should have seen her. Her spirit was almost completely broken. She needed to feel important. Pampered, you know? I couldn't do that by taking her to the house baths. Besides, all we have down there is regular soaps and the most basic shampoos. Not anything like the good stuff you have."

Ribbing his temples, Ruddygore let out a long, slow breath as he attempted to get rid of the tension headache that was rapidly marshalling its forces. "That's not good enough. You know that you're not allowed in here without specific permission."

"Please, Master, you've got to try and understand!" Pleading with him, she quickly disposed of the bottles as she rushed to get a broom. "She's important to that Arden guy. She was despondent about her appearance and the fact that he didn't want to be around her. She's suffering from rule shock. I had to take drastic action. Really!"

The mage stopped rubbing his temples and looked up at the girl. "Rule shock? She's been running around for at least six months. How is it she's just now getting hit with rule shock?"

Using short quick strokes of the broom, she started sweeping up the loose hair on the floor. "Magic armor. Apparently it was fashioned by...who was it... Lakash, I think? Anyway, it was made by one of the celestials and one of its designs was to protect the wearer from all external magical influences. Since the rules are essentially just a very broad magical effect, it was able to block them, too." Sweeping the pile onto a dustpan, she took it over to the trash receptacle where she'd dumped the plastic bottles and added it to the pile. "I know how much time and effort you've invested in tracking her down and getting them here. I also knew that you'd paid Hecate to track her down and bring her back. Hecate isn't cheap. All I had to do was add it up to know that she and her boyfriend are VIPs. As such, I thought that it would be best if I addressed her self-worth issue as soon as possible. The best way to do that was to clean her up and look pretty."

Ruddygore simply stared at the girl for a few minutes before he prompted her, "And?"

The girl gave him a confused look. "And what, Master?"

"And did it work?"

Her eyes lit up with understanding. "Oh, yes. Quite well. Karina's currently working to get her dressed in something suitable for dinner with someone of your stature."

The mage frowned. "Tonight was supposed to be informal."

"Informal it may be, Master, but a girl still likes to look pretty."

Again, he paused to rub his temples as he let out a long, slow breath. "All right. I

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guess I can't argue with your logic, though you should have cleared it with Poquah first."

"I'm sorry, Master, but I didn't think there was time," she explained meekly as she nervously clenched her hands in front of her. "It wasn't until after I'd picked her up in her room that I realized there was a problem. If I'd asked for permission from Poquah first, she'd have known that it wasn't by your order and that you weren't treating her like a VIP."

"Fine. Just finish cleaning up this place then come and get me. I'll be in my study." Shaking his head, he walked out the door and turned, disappearing around the corner.

"Well," Melody said to herself. "That went well. I'm still human and alive. That's better than I expected." Picking up a bucket and a brush, she turned to the tub and winced at the job before her.

"Meep-meep!" Sheila shouted as she wheeled herself down the hallway, dodging the wheelchair around one of the servants. Using her left hand as a sliding brake, she raced around the turn in the hallway before again using both arms to accelerate down the hall. She braked hard as she came to the point in the hall where she thought Hecate's room should be and laughed. "Yo! Hecate!" the vixen yelled, pounding on the door. "Up and at'em, girlfriend!"

A long stream of curses came from the other side of the door. "By the gods I'm going to kill whoever...Oh!" The tirade stopped in midstream as Hecate opened the door to see Sheila. Her brow furrowed at the smiling, vixen. "Sheila?"

"The one and only," Sheila replied, wheeling herself into the room as Hecate narrowly dodged out of the way. "Cleaned, preened, dipped and clipped, and BOY do I feel ten thousand percent better!"

Startled at the transformation, Hecate leaned out the door and checked in both directions before closing the door, unsure if this was some kind of trick or not. "You are Sheila Vixen, right?"

"Did you hit your head or something? It's not like there are a lot of my kind running around in a wheelchair while they've got a basketball stuffed in their gut!" She spun the wheelchair around in a circle twice before stopping to face the ebony woman. "What's the matter? Is there some stupid rule that says I can't be in a good mood after a bath?"

"No," the Imir admitted reluctantly as she shook her head in disbelief. "It's just that after having traveled with you for so long, I'm surprised you're so...so..."

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"So not a bitch?"

"Well, yah. I wouldn't have put it quite that way, but yah, not quite such a bitch." Pulling up a chair, Hecate sat down to face her. "I'm so used to you being a complete pain in the ass I'm afraid this is going to take a little bit of getting used to."

Sheila nodded solemnly, her mood subdued for the moment. "Yah, I know. I've been a real asshole and I'm sorry. You did so much for me and I just gave you a bunch of grief for it." Her ears perked up as a large, toothy smile spread across her muzzle. "But, hey! That's all behind us now, right?" Clapping her hands, she did a little dance in the chair. "I'm through with all that. From here on out, I'm going to try and be my old, happy-go-lucky self!"

Hecate put a hand on the vixen's knee and gave it a squeeze. "That's great. I'm so glad to hear you've finally pulled out of your funk."

The vixen nodded her agreement. "Yep. Wasn't doing any good. So! When's dinner? I'm starved!"

The Imir couldn't help but laugh. "I'm not surprised. You've not had anything decent to eat for a couple of days." Standing, she put her chair back over against the wall before going to the door. "Dinner's not for several more hours, but I think we should be able to rustle you up a snack if you want."

"I want!" she declared, wheeling her self out the door. Turing, she raced off down the hallway without waiting for her companion.

Laughing at her enthusiasm, Hecate took off in hot pursuit, determined not to let the vixen out of her sight. Turning a corner, she almost bowled over Pouqah who'd stopped in the middle of the hall to stare at the wheelchair-bound vixen who'd just raced by. "Coming through!" she declared as she whipped by him, spinning him around and causing him to drop the books he was carrying. "Sorry!" she shouted with a laugh as she put on another burst of speed, leaving the scene of the accident behind her.

Melody stopped at Poquah's door and braced herself before knocking on it. "Enter!" came the muffled voice from inside. Turning the handle, the girl stepped inside to find the Imir sitting at his desk with pen in hand. "Master Poquah?"

"Well, well, well," the elf said as he looked up from his work at the young girl, "If it isn't Melody." He almost spat the name as if it were a curse. "You're to help the kitchen staff out for the next month, muck the stables this weekend and scrub the Master's summoning chamber until every surface shines. Dismissed," he commanded

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without giving the girl a second thought and looked back down at the paper.

"Is that it? You don't even know why I'm here!" she declared indignantly.

The elf's head shot up at her statement. Putting the pen down he studied her. "So you're saying that you're not here to be assigned a punishment detail?"

"Well...no," she replied meekly, glancing away. "But you can't just assume that."

"I can't?" the elf replied. Standing, he walked around the desk to stand in front of her. "You, my dear, are a screw-up. You are incapable of going through a day without doing something wrong." He frowned at the dejected expression on the girl's face. "You have the potential to be one of the most powerful sorcerers in the land, but you have no self control. You do the first thing that comes into your mind without any forethought to what the consequences might be." He leaned forwards until his face was but inches from hers. "That's why I can assume that you're here for punishment detail."

Turning, he returned to his desk where he sat down and picked up his pen. "I suggest that you think about what I've just said while you're scrubbing pots. Your lack of control will someday get you killed and when that happens I will be most displeased. There is nothing I loathe more than waste, and that's exactly what the master will have done with all the time he's spent trying to teach you. Now, unless there is anything further, you are dismissed."

Her head hung low, the girl turned, opened the door and left, closing it quietly behind her. At the desk, the elf shook his head before returning to the papers on his desk.

Ruddygore strolled onto the wide veranda that looked out over the gardens and paused to take a sip of brandy from the tumbler in his hand. Looking up at the clear night sky, he saw the waxing moon as it hovered over the horizon. Staring at the ruddy orb, he thought about the conversation that they'd had at dinner.

"So, my dear," he said to the vixen, "I hope that you're settling in without any problems?"

"Oh yes," Sheila replied, beaming a smile at him. "This place is wonderful. Not like the other castles that I've been to. The people are so nice. It's almost like being at a resort."

"Well, I'm certain the staff will be glad to hear that," the magician replied, reaching for a pastry from the pile of deserts which had been placed in front of him. "I hope that Arden is finding his

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accommodations suitable as well." He paused to take a bite and chew on it before proceeding. "So, tell me. Do you have any idea why he'd want to ask to be alone for such a long time? I must say, I was rather surprised at the news."

The vixen's ears wilted as she looked down at her plate before answering. "I'm afraid that I'm probably the reason. I'm sure he couldn't wait to get away from me."

"I disagree," Hecate said, interrupting the conversation. She hastily dabbed at her mouth before looking to the sorcerer. "He's been acting pretty odd lately. For one thing, he's been having these odd attacks."

"Attacks?" the sorcerer set his unfinished desert on his plate and leaned forwards. "What kind of attacks?"

The ebony female shook her head as she took a sip of wine. "I'm not sure how to describe them. His aura shifted. It's like something I've never seen before. Also, his shape seemed to want to shift, as if the spell he was using to create the avatar was breaking down. Really weird stuff."

Ruddygore nodded as he digested the information. "Most curious. What else strange has occurred?"

"Well," the Imir replied, looking off in the distance as she recalled events, "We ran into someone claiming to be an old friend of yours. Some succubus by the name of Marge who tried her feminine wiles on our boy, but they wouldn't work. Not that he countered her magic at all. It's just that her abilities didn't affect him. It's like he was naturally immune somehow. Of course, he's been really moody since..." she paused to glance at the vixen, "well, since he saw the Time's Eye."

"He's seen the Time's Eye?" the large man demanded, his brow furrowed even deeper at the news. "Did he actually look inside of it?"

Hecate nodded. "Yah. Or so he claims. Personally, Rathsmon and I both are inclined to believe him for reasons I don't think either of us want to go into."

"Indeed," the sorcerer commented. "That is most unexpected news. Most unexpected..."

With a shake of his head, his thoughts returned to the present. He decided that he'd go pay this Arden a visit in the morning when he was refreshed. Turning to return

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inside, he spotted a shadowy figure, perched on the corner of the railing. As he shifted his sight into the magic bands, he saw that it was Hecate who was staring up at the stars, oblivious to the fact that he was there. Squatting on the railing, she resembled a gargoyle more than the huntress that he'd grown used to. Add some horns, fangs and bony plates, and she'd make a fitting creature.

Again, he started to turn to go inside, but stopped and continued to study the female. There was something about the expression on her face that disturbed him. It was one he'd never seen on her before. It was a mixture of longing and loneliness that almost made his heart ache. Quietly, he walked over to where she was and sat his glass down on the railing near her. "Good evening, Hecate," he said, startling the ebony female, who's head snapped around to look at him. "I don't recall ever having seen you stare at the stars like that before."

"Hello, Ruddy," she replied, turning to look back up at the stars. "Yah, well, I guess there's a lot you don't know about me."

"Yes, I guess there is," he acknowledged, his curiosity now piqued. Gesturing to a nearby chair, he caused it to slide over, allowing him to sit and relax. "So, do you feel like talking about it?"

"Talk about what?"

"About whatever." Taking the tumbler from the railing, he took a sip before placing it on the chair of the arm. "Obviously something's bothering you; that's pretty clear. So, how about it? Feel like talking."

For a long time, Hecate just stared up at the stars, but eventually she closed her eyes and dropped her head to her chest in a gesture of resignation. "I want out, TR," she announced, pivoting to face him. "I want out."

"You want to cash out?" the sorcerer asked, confused by her statement. "That's no problem. Just tell Poquah and he'll give you your gold."

She shook her head slowly. "This isn't about gold, TR. This is about the rules and freedom. This is about me having an opportunity to become more than what these stupid rules will allow."

"I see. We all have the desire to become more than we are and you are more than most could ever hope for." He paused to take a cigar from his jacket and with a practiced motion, light it with a spell from his finger. Puffing on the stogy a couple of times, he blew out a large puff of smoke and studied the glowing ember. "Of all the creatures on this world, you are unique. Only you can pass between earth prime and these lands without crossing the Sea of Dreams. Not only that, but I think you're probably the most powerful non-human spell caster I've ever met. To be honest, if it

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ever came down to it, I think you could even beat Poquah."

"You do, eh?" she said with a sly smile. "You sure know how to compliment a lady."

"You? A lady? Hah" He let out a jovial chuckle as he smiled at her. "You are many things Hecate, but we both know that the one thing you pride yourself on is not being a 'lady'."

Hecate smiled and glanced away before looking back at the sorcerer. "Yah, well, I guess you got me there, though we both know that it's not by choice. The rules demand that I not act as a lady of refinement or culture. No matter how hard I try, I'll do something to screw it up." Bracing her hands against the railing, she lifted her feet up and allowed them to straddle the beam until she was sitting. "And that's why I want out. Ever since I ran into the World Mage, I've known for certain that there are other realities. I just had to find a way to get to them. Up until now, even you didn't have any solid proof of their existence. Now we've got two aliens from a different reality staying in your castle, and nothing will ever be the same."

"I think I see where this is going," he stated, taking another draw off of the cigar. "You're going to try and hitch a ride with them when they go back, right?"

Hecate's eyes avoided the sorcerer. "Not exactly. I know that the only reason he's been able to move from universe to universe is because of Lakash. I'm going to cut a deal with him for the ability to break out of this box."

His cigar forgotten, Ruddygore studied the ebony form. "What makes you think he'll give you that kind of power?"

She looked back at the fat man and their eyes locked. "Believe it or not, he wants Arden dead,"

"And you'd be willing to kill him?"

The Imir nodded. "If that's what it took, though I don't know if it's possible. Rathsmon was going to kill him on the boat trip down here, but Arden had foreseen it in the Time's Eye. He claims to have seen all possible futures that lead up to his making the wish. If that's true, then there's no way I can kill him." She stopped and shook her head. "I'm not so sure I believe him, though. I don't think it's possible for him to have seen everything. He's only human. "

"I see." He studied the reflection of the moon in his brandy as he slowly swirled it about. "You've taken a great risk telling me this. What makes you think I won't stop you?"

"I don't," she stated, not averting her gaze. "But you and I both know that the only reason you're doing this is because Lakash has promised to show you how to cross

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the Sea of Dreams to reach other realities, other dimensions. If he takes my offer, I'll make it contingent on you getting your payoff as well."

"And what of the vixen?"

"What about her?" She flinched at the look he gave her. "Look, if it bothers you, then you can take her home. You'll have the ability once you get the secret from Lakash. Hell, I don't care, I'll take her home if need be. At least it'll get me out of here."

"I'll be honest, Hecate, I don't like the idea." He drained the last of the drink and set the glass down on the arm before standing. "He's a guest under my care and I don't approve of such things. However, if you really want out that bad, I promise that I personally will take you with me once I learn the secret to crossing the sea safely."

"I understand," she replied, nodding gravely. "I'll defer to your decision. As long as he's under your protection, I promise not to do anything."

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Never count your chickens before they hatch.

Poquah watched as Ruddygore picked up an ornate pearl textured sphere with silver and gold inlay that seemed to pulse rhythmically with an inner power. "Do you really think that will be necessary?"

"I don't know," the big man replied, slipping the fist-sized globe into the outer pocket of the jacket he wore. "I've got a sneaking suspicion that I might need it."

Cocking an eyebrow at the big man, the elf prompted the big man, "Oh?"

"Yes. After our dinner conversation last night, I got to thinking about what was said." Picking up a top hat, he tapped the rim, causing the top to extend with an audible pop. "Think about it. Arden wasn't born in that body. He's possessing it."

Curiosity turned to concern as Poquah thought about it. "You mean that Ska'kull is still in there?"

"That's exactly what I mean," he replied, nodding gravely. "I think that the dragon's been fighting to take control again, which leads to my second suspicion. One I'll only be able to confirm by confronting them."

"That sounds quite ominous," the elf declared as he followed his master from the room. "Do you wish me to come along just in case there is trouble?"

Ruddygore dismissed that suggestion with a quick shake of his head. "No. Arden said to come alone and that's what I intend to do." He paused to give his companion a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, old friend. I've learned a lot in the years since we last butted heads. If there is a problem, I have no doubt who will win."

"As you wish," the Imir acknowledged with a slight bow. "I shall await your return."

Giving the elf a final nod, the sorcerer turned and walked from the main building into the apprentices' quarters. He paused to undo the latch on the door that led down to the training chamber, noting with satisfaction that Poquah had put a sign on the door that was all but impossible to miss, stating that anyone proceeding through the doorway would be killed. Someone had added that any who survived would be killed again. Chuckling, he summoned up a light that hovered over his head, and then passed through the door, down the long switchback tunnel until he finally arrived at the door to the combat arena.

He shifted his sight to the magic band and immediately let out a low whistle at what he saw. On closer examination, he determined that there were no less than three new spells on the door, all interconnected somehow. It also appeared that there was a mechanism for a key that would disable all three spells at once, but every time he tried to follow the thread, it faded into blackness and disappeared. He'd seen this kind of thing before, but only on curses that had been cast by the true demons of hell:

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Fallen angels. The fact that a mortal could cast such spells made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. "This is not good."

A roar, loud enough to shake a sprinkling of dirt from the ceiling, came from behind the door. The suddenness of it caused the portly old man to retreat a step. "*Who's there!*" a deep voice, echoing strangely in his mind, demanded.

Adjusting his jacket, the sorcerer brushed the dirt from his shoulders and lapels as he coolly replied, "Throckmortton P. Ruddygore. I am alone as..." His reply was cut off by another roar, which was followed by the sound of something huge slamming into the door, causing it to bulge out towards him. Retreating another step, his hand dipped into his pocket while at the same time he heard the sound of a loud, electrical *SNAP!* from the other side of the door, followed by another roar and the crashing impact of a large body slamming into the far wall. He waited, unmoving, as he listened for additional sounds from behind the door. After a few moments, he heard low, muttered curses. "Is everything all right in there?" he ventured.

"*No!*" the voice thundered within his mind. A few moments later, the voice again replied, only this time in a perfectly normal timbre. "*Hang on. Give me a second and I'll let you in.*"

Fingering the orb, Ruddygore waited impatiently for the door to be unlocked. He saw the magic on the door shifting in response to something from the other side. Soon, there was a click and the door opened a crack. Reaching out with his cane, he pushed the door open all the way and peered into the gloom. Even from the doorway the light from his sphere should have illuminated a good portion of the chamber; however, it faded to murky shadows after only a few feet. "Why the shadows?" Ruddygore asked, genuinely puzzled.

"*Don't you trust me?*" came the calm, almost amused sounding mind voice.

"You, I trust. It's the other one that I don't," the sorcerer replied as he listened for any movement.

A low chuckle of amusement came from the shadows. "*So you figured it out, eh? Yah, Sha'kull is still in here, but I've taken precautions to insure that she doesn't get out of hand.*"

The big man nodded. "Still, I'll not enter until the shadows are gone. Either stop hiding and wasting my time or I'll leave."

"*As you wish,*" the voice replied as the dark fog faded away. "*You would have seen the spectacle sooner or later.*"

"Spectacle?" the big man thought to himself as he stepped in, only to freeze in his tracks at the sight of the dragon. Half curled in one corner of the room, it stared at

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him with its right eye, which looked like nothing more than a pool of inky darkness. That, however, wasn't what had caused him to stop. The dragon, or what was left of it, had been mauled by something that had been incredibly vicious. For all practical purposes, both wings were gone. The left one had been snapped off just short of the elbow, while the right one appeared to have been ripped from its socket. The large gaping wound just behind the shoulder of the front leg from where the wing had been ran a good portion of the length of the body. Here and there, ribs could be seen through the scar tissue. All over the body, he saw signs of large tracks of scale and flesh had been stripped from the body. There was what appeared to be a large scar running down through the left eye, which was a ruined, milky white mass. Several of the horns from on top of the skull were broken and missing, as well as a majority of the creature's tail. There were small curls of smoke rising from a fresh burn that ran along the underside of the jaw and down the front leg to the clawed foot-hand. His jaw, agape, Ruddygore could only stare and wonder how it had survived the damage.

"Now you understand," the dragon sent, closing its eyes. *"There's no way Sha'kull could defeat you right now, even if...."*

"Even if she wasn't bearing eggs?" the sorcerer prompted.

The dragon's one good eye snapped open and locked on the large man, who suddenly felt very small. *"So you guessed that part too, eh? What was the giveaway?"*

"It was the succubus," Ruddygore replied, entering the room fully before closing the door behind him, using the hand that had been in his pocket. "When Hecate told me that you'd been naturally immune to her powers, I knew that the only reason would be if you were in a female body. Then I remembered that when I fought Sha'kull, I had just assumed from the number of horns that she was a male. I'd forgotten that ancient females would gain the extra two horns when in their final breeding cycle. Then there was the amount of gold I heard you had been consuming on your way here. The conclusion was obvious."

"An analysis worthy of Sherlock Holmes," the dragon sent with a chuckle. *"If you've figured all that out, then you know the favor that I'm going to ask of you."*

"I assume that you want me to keep the eggs safe until they can hatch," he replied, shaking his head. "I'm afraid that's not something I can do. Greater dragons were a scourge on the land before they were wiped out. They had this belief that everything was food for them, including elves, humans and all the other sentient races."

"They were children of their environment," the man-dragon argued, as he used an elbow and forefoot to prop up his head. The other front appendage gestured as he spoke. *"They were raised by a female who'd learned that growing up, too. It was a vicious cycle. If someone who took the time to teach them about balance and the consequences of their actions raised them, then I think they might find a more suitable way to survive. After all, how many people have actually learned to*

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communicate with dragons?"

"Hmmm." Rubbing his beard in contemplation, Ruddygore paced back and forth as he considered the argument. "You do make a valid point." Stopping, he turned to the dragon and nodded. "I'm afraid that I'm not the person to do what you're asking; however, I do know several people who are most interested in ensuring the survival of all the dragon species. I'm sure I could convince each to take a few of the eggs."

Arden's eyes narrowed into slits. "*You're not talking about dragon riders, are you?"*

"What? No!" Frowning at the thought, the man shook his head. "Most definitely not. Those people are partially responsible for the downfall of the general dragon population. They slaughter dragons they can't tame!"

"*Good.*" The dragon nodded as its expression relaxed. "*I appreciate this. Part of my agreement with Sha'kull was that I'd ensure the survival of her offspring; otherwise I don't think I could have assumed control when I first possessed her.*"

Ruddygore nodded, noting that the left forefoot had stopped smoldering and was now currently digging its claws into the rocky floor. In fact, now that he noticed, the entire body appeared to be tensing. The man's hand started to dip into the pocket until he realized what was probably happening. "Well!" he said with mock cheer as he opened the door. "I think my curiosity has been satisfied for the moment. I'll leave you to your privacy."

"*Thank you,*" the dragon replied as the door started to close. "*Oh, and Ruddygore?"*

"Yes?" the big man asked, pausing in the doorway to look back at the dragon.

"*Next time you come... please, don't bring the orb.*"

He glanced down at the pocket and then to the dragon before nodding. "As you wish."

Hecate knocked on the door. "Sheila? Are you in there?" Waiting several seconds for an answer, she knocked again. "Hey! Sheila! Wake up!" Again, getting no answer, she opened the door and looked in. The bed, though a bit ruffled, was empty. Glancing over to the small bathroom that served this room and the one next to it, she noticed that Sheila's wheelchair was parked next to the door. She walked over to the door and knocked. "Sheila, you in there?"

"Yah! Just a minute!" the muffled voice of the vixen replied. A minute or so later, the sound of running water could be heard. Not long after that, the door opened.

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"Hey. How's it going?"

"Not bad," the ebony female replied, taking the vixen's arm to help her to the chair. "Um, do you know you're ass is hanging out in back?"

Sheila just laughed. "So that's what that breezy feeling is, eh?" Sliding her tail through the open slot in the back of the chair, Sheila sat down and squirmed for a bit to get comfortable. "Since Karina didn't have anything that was actually a maternity gown, she improvised by splitting the back on the dress. Since I'm not going to be walking around any, and I needed a hole for my tail, it just made sense."

"Still," the Imir replied as she took the handles to the chair. "I don't think I'd be too comfortable about going around with my ass hanging out the back, even in a wheelchair."

Again, Sheila laughed. "Honey, I've had so many men watch my naked ass doing the nasty on video, that the last thing I'll ever be is self conscious about letting it all hang out."

Hecate started to push the chair towards the door. "Oh, yah? So why don't you let it all hang out? Why bother wearing clothes at all?"

Sheila's ears wilted slightly as she thought about it. "I guess it's because I don't want people to think I'm an animal." She sighed. "Back home, we all wore clothing as a fashion statement, really. After what happened to Arden, and seeing those cat people running around without anything on, chained and collared, well...."

"I understand," the elf replied, putting her hand on the vixen's shoulder and giving it a squeeze. "Hey. I hear RT went to visit your boyfriend. Want to go see if he's back yet?"

"Arden?" Sheila's ears perked up as she smiled at the Imir. "Sure." Grabbing the wheels of the chair, she rolled it over to the nightstand that had the tanto on it and picked up the dagger, which she then tucked between her leg and the chair arm.

Hecate shook her head. "Do you really need that pig sticker?"

"Yah, well, I promised Arden that I'd always carry it with me," she replied with a shrug.

The elf crossed her arms. "What? You think someone's going to attack you here? Even if they did, what would you do with that thing? Besides, I'll be with you. "

"I guess," the vixen replied, somewhat reluctantly. Removing the dagger, she put it back on the nightstand. She then turned the wheelchair towards the door and pushing

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herself forwards. "So, where should we look first?"

"Let's try his study first," the elf replied, taking a good grip on the handles so that the chair wouldn't get away from her.

Together the two made their way down a maze of twisty passages, all alike. Sheila was a bit confused about where they were even after having spending the majority of the previous day exploring. They paused in front of a solid looking door. "This is it," Hecate announced as she rapped on the door.

"Enter," came a muffled voice from behind.

Hecate opened the door and held it as Sheila wheeled herself through. Inside, they saw the sorcerer sitting behind an antique redwood desk with a modern looking penholder on it, some paperweights holding down parchment and a kerosene lamp. Sheila blinked as she looked at one of the paperweights and realized that it was a tiny metal model of the Golden Gate Bridge encased in glass. She glanced around the room and saw that one wall was covered with hundreds of books, all bound with the identical red binding and some odd, pictographic writing on the back.

"Ah, Sheila. I was expecting you to drop by," Ruddygore said as he stood from behind his desk. "Would you like some tea, or perhaps something a little stronger?"

"Yes, thank you. I think I would like some tea if you don't mind."

"Excellent." Reaching out, he grabbed a fancy rope that hung from the ceiling and tugged on it once, paused and then tugged twice more. He then moved around to a large sofa-loveseat and sat down on it. "Please, make yourselves comfortable," he prompted Hecate, waving towards one of the chairs nearby.

Sheila noticed that there was a blank spot next to the table where a second chair would logically be. Realizing that the sorcerer had indeed been expected them, and had left a place for Sheila to park. "So, I understand you saw Arden. How is he?"

"Oh, doing quite well," he replied, leaning back and pulling out a cigar. He paused for a second as he looked at Sheila. "Do you mind?"

"What? No. Please. Go right ahead."

Trimming the end of the cigar with a knife, he tossed the nub into the ashtray. He then puffed on the cigar as he used a spark of magic from one finger to light it up. Taking a heavy drag on it, he blew out the blue-gray smoke towards the ceiling. He smiled and looked at the vixen as he rolled the cigar in his fingers. "It is my worst vice, but I'm afraid it's one that I do so enjoy." He smiled and puffed again on the cigar before continuing. "Well, what can I say? Arden is doing well despite the

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ordeal she's been through."

"Ordeal?" Sheila prompted, confused at the statement.

"She?" Hecate demanded.

The vixen's head snapped around to look at the elf the elf then back to the sorcerer.
"She?"

"Right," the Imir groaned, drawing the word out. "That would explain why the succubus couldn't affect her. Him. Uh...?" She blinked and looked up at Ruddygore. "Wait a minute. If he's a she, then she's got too many horns."

"Unless?" the large man prompted.

"Unless...unless she's in her final mating cycle. But that would mean that..." The elf groaned again as she smacked her forehead. "No wonder he was eating gold like it was going out of style."

"Huh? What are you talking about," Sheila asked, glancing between the two and definitely feeling left out. "What about the gold?"

"Remember when he said that dragons need gold as part of their diet?" She paused as the vixen nodded. "Right. Dragon hatchlings need it even more, and in an easily assimilated form. That's why the shells are coated with gold. It's also one of the reasons that people like to hunt for the eggs of a greater dragon, even though they know they'll be closely guarded. Intact eggs, when emptied, carry a king's ransom on the art market."

Sheila shook her head and waved her hands as if to clear the air. "So... wait... Let me see if I got this straight. Arden is in the body of a female dragon, who's pregnant and about to have a bunch of baby dragons?"

The sorcerer chuckled in amusement. "She's busy laying eggs, if that's what you mean."

For several seconds, Hecate and Ruddygore sat and watched as Sheila digested the information. They were mildly surprised when she smiled rather sinisterly. "Good. Maybe the bastard will have some idea of the crap he's put me through."

"Oh, I don't think there's a comparison," Ruddygore replied, stamping out the cigar. "The eggs she will lay are usually five or six feet in diameter and close to eight feet long. Somehow, even considering the scale, that's a pretty hefty sized bundle of joy."

"Oh, yah," Sheila muttered to herself, the smile even bigger. "Payback time." She gave a laugh that sent a chill down Hecate's spine. "You know, I never really

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believed in god before, but with poetic justice of that magnitude, I'm starting to believe."

Ruddygore turned at the sound of a muted knock at the door. "Enter!" The door opened revealing one of the servants with a teacart. "Ah, tea. Just in time," he declared, grateful for the distraction.

The shadows in one corner of Sheila's room stirred, allowing Lakash to step out. He quickly walked over to the nightstand where the tanto sat and picked up the blade. Cautiously, he withdrew the blade, while studying its magic to ensure it wasn't trapped. Once the blade was free, he set the scabbard down on the table and began to work on the blade. Shift a line here. Pinch a line there. It only took a few minutes to accomplish what he wanted, but it was more than enough for what he intended. Hearing voices in the hall, he quickly stuck the dagger back into the scabbard and replaced it on the nightstand before returning to the shadows.

"Thanks again, Hecate," Sheila replied as she wheeled her way into the room. Stopping next to the bed, she used the nightstand for support as she stood up, then sat down on the bed. She was about to lie down when she stopped and looked at the tanto. "I could have sworn I set that down with the hilt away from the wall." Picking up the dagger, she drew it and examined the surface for a minute before re-sheathing it. With a shrug, she tossed it back onto the nightstand and lay down for her nap.

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Knocking on Heavens Door

Hecate watched as Sheila tucked the tanto under her left leg. "I thought you were going to stop dragging that thing around," the ebony elf asked with a frown.

"I was, but when I got back to the room the other day, I noticed that someone had been fooling with it." Folding her dress so that it covered the scabbard and handle, Sheila started to wheel herself towards the door. "I'd rather not have anyone screwing around with it while I'm not about."

"It was probably just one of the students taking a look at it. It's not like they get to examine a real celestial artifact every day you know," Hecate commented as she held the door open. "I'm sure they didn't mean any harm."

The vixen gave a small shrug as she rolled down the hallway. "Maybe not, but it still bothers me. Besides, it's not like I'm going to get into trouble for having it, right?"

"True," the elf replied as she followed behind the wheelchair. They first checked Ruddygore's study before heading to the grand foyer. "Ok. I'm going to go find Poquah and see if the RT's gone down to see Arden yet. You hang out here in case he comes by."

"All right," the vixen acknowledged as she wheeled herself over to the door leading outside. It was a beautiful morning with a hint of dew still clinging to the plants. Here and there, small fairies flittered about, tending to the plants while small, gnome-like elves tilled the soil, uprooting any weeds that may have invaded the fertile soil. Sheila took a deep breath, inhaling the scents on the early morning breeze.

"It is a glorious morning, isn't it?" came Ruddygore's booming voice as he stopped next to her chair. Placing his cane directly in front of himself, he leaned on it with both hands. "The kind of day that makes one glad to be alive, eh?"

Sheila smiled up at the big man. "Very much so." She paused for a minute to take in the morning atmosphere before looking back up at him. "Are you on your way down to see Arden again?" She paused as he gave her a silent nod. "Do you think you might ask if it's OK for me to come visit?"

"I'll ask," the big man replied, frowning slightly. "However she's quite exhausted from her ordeal, and I'm not sure if she's feeling up to having visitors quite yet. To be honest, I'm surprised that she's survived this long at all, considering."

Her eyes pleading, she gave him her best 'puppy dog' look. "Still, I'd appreciate it if you'd ask... Please?"

The big man chuckled. "I'm afraid that won't work on me, my dear. However, I will

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ask, as there is no harm in doing so. The worst she can do is say no. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd best get going. I have a full day today."

"Thank you," the vixen called to the retreating form as she watched him go into the apprentice's quarters. She let out a long sigh and frowned. "He'll never agree to see me."

"You know, you don't exactly need permission," came a voice from behind.

Turning, Sheila saw Lakash leaning against a pillar next to the doorway. "Lakash?" She frowned at the man as he tipped his derby hat to her. "What do you mean I don't need permission? He said he wanted to be alone and I'm not about to go where I'm not invited."

Lakash chuckled as he squatted next to the wheelchair and looked at the pregnant female. "What if I told you that you already had implicit permission to enter?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, giving him a dubious look.

"Simple. He took very specific precautions when he cast the spell on the door so that they wouldn't affect you. In fact," he continued, glancing conspiratorially around, "the spell is designed so that you and only you can approach the door and open it without being challenged."

"Bullshit," the vixen vehemently spat back.

Giving her a wounded look, Lakash put a hand over his heart and raised the other towards the heavens. "I swear by the maker, on Heavens and Hells name both, and all that I hold dear and sacred, that what I'm saying to you is the truth. Should I be lying, may the maker strike me down here and now!" He looked around impatiently for a minute before relaxing. "See? No lightning."

"Hah!" the vixen barked derisively. "Like that's any proof. People say shit like that all the time and they're never stuck down by lightening."

He nodded in agreement. "True. True. But how many of those people were of divine creation? Their existence born upon the breath of the creator personally and their every action tied directly to his consciousness?" He paused as he allowed that statement to sink in. "How else do you think he monitors us and ensures that we obey the rules of the game?"

Sheila's jaw dropped. "No shit? God really watches everything you say or do?"

"It's the absolute truth. If any of the others were about, they'd tell you the exact same thing. There are rules that we must abide by and if we break them, there are severe penalties including, but not limited to, total oblivion." He passed to look around and

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smiled. "Personally, I'm not about to take a chance with being obliterated, especially as my goal is to prevent Armageddon and ensure that the game doesn't end. I can't very well do that if I've been destroyed, right?"

"That sounds pretty convincing, but to be honest, I don't believe you." Crossing her arms, she again scowled at the man. "You'll have to do better than that."

"All right," the man replied, gesturing to the dagger under her leg. "The dagger is the key to your entry. That's why Arden told you never to let it out of your site. It's designed to defend whoever possesses it from hostile magic and the spell on the door can't affect it. That's the truth. Arden designated it to be the key to bypassing the wards on the door. "

Sheila took the dagger out from under her leg and examined it for a moment before replacing it. "I'll think about it."

"As you wish," the fallen angel stated as he stood up. "But you and I both know that Arden thinks that you're still the pain-in-the-ass bitch who's been giving him such a hard time ever since you brought him back. Think about it all you want, but you know he's not going to want to see you because of it."

"Listen, assho..." Sheila started to reply then realized she was talking to empty air. Lakash had vanished. Letting out a low growl, she took a few deep breaths to try and calm down as she finished watching the sunrise... Just about the time it had finished clearing the horizon, the vixen gave a deep sigh. "Damn it!" she cursed angrily as she turned the wheelchair to the ramp that had been installed along the side of the building and started to glide down it, braking with her hands. Reaching the bottom, she turned and started across the way to the apprentices' quarters. It was a bit of a pain to get the chair over the lip of the doorway, but she managed it on the third try.

Now inside the building, she took a moment to let her sight adjust to the dim interior before she proceeded in. Pausing at the first intersection, she watched as one of the apprentices approached. "Excuse me, but which way to the chamber with the dragon in it?"

"Eh?" the young man grunted, looking up from his book. "Oh! The arena? Down the hall behind me, fifth door on the right. Look for the one with all the skull and crossbones." He paused to glance down at the pregnant vixen. "You aren't going down there, are you? The master's declared that place off limits."

Sheila gave the young man a smile. "Thanks for the warning, but the dragon's a very close friend of mine and I'm expected. Thanks for the directions."

"Ok," the young man said with a shrug as he walked away.

Sheila followed his directions until she came to the door with the signs on it. There

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was a large sign covered with symbols and numerous skull and crossbones symbols. "This must be it," she commented as she reached for the knob. There was a sudden electrical 'snap' as her hand got close causing her to jerk it back. Cursing, she took the dagger out and pointed the blade towards the handle and started probing with it. There was a flash as the spark jumped from the knob and to the dagger repeatedly before the spell weakened and died. Hesitantly Sheila reached out and cautiously touched the knob. Certain that she wasn't going to get another shock, the vixen kept the dagger in front of her as she opened the door just in case there were any more surprises waiting.

Pausing in the doorway, Sheila hesitated before going down the black hallway. "Don't these people believe in light?" As she said that, the dagger began to glow. "That's a handy trick," the vixen commented with a chuckle. "One of these days I'm going to have to ask Arden to give me an owner's manual for this thing." Holding the dagger between her teeth, she used her hands to control the speed of the wheelchair as it glided down the passageway. As she came to the bottom of the switchbacks, the floor leveled off so that she now had to work to continue ahead. A few seconds later, she spotted the door that would lead to Arden's lair.

Hecate walked through the door leading from the grand foyer and out to the front steps. "Where the hell could she have gone?" Looking around, Hecate spotted one of the students walking from the dorm to the main building. "Hey!" the elf shouted as she jogged down the stairs. "You seen a fox in a wheelchair running around here?"

"Fox?" he replied nervously. "Yah. She was in the dorms. Asking how to get to the arena." He flinched as the elf cursed.

"You moron!" Hecate shouted at the top of her lungs. "How could you let her go down there?"

"Hey! It's not my job to baby-sit her!" Tossing his hands up defensively at the demoness' deadly glare, he backpedaled both physically and verbally. "Look, I warned her it was dangerous, but she said that the dragon was a friend and was expecting her! What was I supposed to do?"

Ignoring the apprentice, Hecate took off at a full run, hoping that it wasn't too late.

"The ferry will be here in two days. You will be ready to go by then?" Ruddygore asked, sitting on a simple, yet comfortable chair as he faced the dragon.

The prostrate dragon just blinked. "*Yes. I should be recovered enough by then.*"

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The large man frowned as he studied the dragon. Before it had appeared healthy enough considering the amount of damage that it had endured, but now the thing was looking absolutely gaunt. "Are you sure you don't need anything? Gold? Some cattle maybe? A dancing girl or two?"

The dragon chuckled. *"No dancing girls, please. I am worried about Sheila. How's she doing?"*

"Quite nicely I must say. She is in very good spirits and has been nothing but a pleasure to deal with." Shifting his position in the chair so that he leaned forwards slightly, the large man smiled. "In fact, she was asking this morning if I would ask you for permission to visit. What should I tell her?"

"*What?*" Rising up, the dragon took a step towards the sorcerer. *"What do you mean she's in good spirits? Did you or one of your lackeys put a spell on her?"*

"No! No spells!" Ruddygore replied, waving his hands towards the dragon to deflect the accusation. "One of the girls gave her a bath, trimmed her fur and generally got her cleaned up, but that's it."

The dragons head hovered over the big man for a minute, studying him through the slit of his one good eye before she relaxed and returned to her resting spot. *"You know, that actually makes a twisted sort of sense for her. I probably could have avoided a world of trouble if I'd just taken her shopping a few times."*

Relieved, the sorcerer chuckled at the humor. "So should I tell her that it's OK to come down?"

"*Please,*" the dragon responded, the impression of a smile on its reptilian mouth.

Ruddygore stood up and turned to leave. "Fine. I'll bring her on my next visit."

"*No need,*" the dragon replied, stopping him. *"Sheila can come down any time. The spells on the door won't respond to her."*

The sorcerer paused and gave the dragon a curious look. "So you wanted her to come down here all along?"

Again the dragon chuckled. *"No. I just assumed that she would even though she was told not to. Besides, the last thing I want is to risk her getting hurt. When all is said and done, I swore to ensure no harm came to her."*

Sheila locked the wheels on the chair, flipped up the footrests then leveraged herself up to a standing position. She paused for a moment to ensure that she wouldn't

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become dizzy before removing the dagger from between her teeth and holding it in her right hand and studied the door that sat approximately ten feet away. "All right, dagger, so what now?" she asked, looking at the blade. Not getting an answer, she took a deep breath and let it out as she slowly crept forwards.

As she got close to the door, she could see the detail of its construction. Similar to most of the heavy doors around the castle, it was wooden with iron bands that held it together. She paused as she noticed a latticework of what appeared to be glowing black crayon scribbles across the surface of the door. As she moved the light away, they faded only to re-intensify as she brought the dagger closer again. "I wonder what these are," she mumbled as she moved closer to examine the door. "They look like..."

Hecate came barreling around the final corner just in time to see the glow of a light that illuminated Sheila and the door leading to the arena. The elf started to yell out, but it was too late. There was a bright flash of light that blinded her for a moment followed by a horrendous scream. Hecate watched in dismay as a torrent of energy leapt from the door and walls around it towards the hapless vixen. Squinting against the pyrotechnic display, the elf could see Sheila as she stumbled backwards, the dagger clenched in her hands and held before her. The dagger, it appeared, was absorbing or deflecting much of the energy being thrown at the vixen, but it couldn't stop all of it.

On the other side of the door, Ruddygore and Arden were also busy deflecting odd bolts of energy that flew from the door. Arden rushed forwards, reaching for the door both with magic and with her hand as she began to weave a spell that would allow the energy coming from the door to harmlessly ground itself in the stone.

Ruddygore winced as a bolt of energy ricocheted off of several walls only to wind up nicking him in the arm. "My god," the sorcerer thought to himself, "*What kind of madman would create a spell like this.*" He watched as the dragon tried unsuccessfully to do something to the spell on the door. "What's the problem?" he shouted.

"Something on the other side of the door is interfering with the warding spell, causing some kind of feedback loop. I'm trying to defuse it, but...." As she worked, she saw the magic that had been woven into the door begin to cannibalize the structure of the wood itself, converting the potential energy of the wood into a useable form. "*What the hell? I never designed it to do any of this!*"

The sorcerer was moving in a surprisingly agile fashion for a man of his stature, as he continued to dodge bolts of energy. "Can't you disable it? Disarm the damn thing?"

"It already was disarmed! The damn thing should have been as dormant as a doorknob. Something's causing the problem from the other side!" Arden roared as

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several bolts struck her in the side. She reached out with renewed determination, calling on the full magic available to her and summoned a sphere of utter and complete darkness, which floated towards the door. Energy that was arcing from the door began to curve towards the sphere, striking it and vanishing into the void. As the ball reached the door, there was a bright flash of light followed by a moment of absolute darkness as both the door and the sphere vanished.

The flash momentarily blinded Hecate as she rushed towards the hapless vixen. She staggered for a moment as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, the only light coming from the room beyond the now empty doorway. The elf skidded to a halt as she saw Sheila's smoking form laying on the ground with small worm like arcs of energy coursing over her prone form. Dropping to her knees near the vixen, Hecate watched as the tendrils of energy burrowed into the vixen and vanished. She looked to see Ruddygore as he rushed into the tunnel with the dragon's head peering through the doorway behind him.

"What happened here?" the large sorcerer demanded as he dropped to his knees and reached out to examine the wounded female.

Arden's heart skipped a beat as he saw Sheila lying on the ground, her fur singed and still smoldering in places. In her hand, the tanto's glow slowly faded. "*Sheila!*" Her world shattered at the sight of the mortally wounded vixen, causing him to momentarily lose control. Pain followed quickly as torrents of energy flowed through the connection he had with Lakash, sending the great wyrm into convulsions before finally falling unconscious to the floor.

Arden became aware that she was awake, or more properly put, she simply became aware. Lying on her back, she could see the doorway out of her good eye. Ruddygore seemed to move in slow motion, a ghost like trail following behind him as he walked through the door. It took what seemed like an eternity for her to realize that the large man was upside down and even longer to figure out why.

"Arden" echoed the sorcerer's voice through his head. "Arden!"

Focusing her eye on the big man, Arden tried to reach out to him, but her clawed hand fell short. "*What's happening?*" she thought to herself through the cottony fog that occupied her mind.

Ruddygore paused and studied the dragon. He had seen what had happened to her and understood instantly what was being done. Now it was up to him to see how much of the situation he could rectify, if any. He stroked his beard as he contemplated how to begin and settled on dealing with the physical issues first. Casually, with an almost second nature ease, he waved his hand at the great dragon, causing her shape to blur and shift as it shrunk down to roughly the same shape and

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size that Arden had been when he'd first arrived.

Satisfied with the results, the sorcerer now delved into the injured psyche of the dragon now turned into a man, examining the damage that the attack had caused. Beads of sweat appeared on his brow as he painstakingly tried to repair the neurological damage caused by the energy as well as to the badly damaged psyche. After more than an hour, he finally took a deep breath, letting it out as he examined his handy work. He reached out to lend a helping hand as Arden tried to sit up.

"What happened?" the scarred man asked, wincing at the sound of his own voice.

"Take it easy," the sorcerer directed, as he helped Arden turn to lean against the wall. "Something happened when Sheila approached the door and it caused a feedback loop between her and the ward. After you destroyed the door, I saw some sort of energy burn its way out of you from the inside. It almost killed you."

"Sheila!" He grabbed the sorcerer's lapel with his hand, clenching it in a white-knuckled fist. "Is Sheila OK?" Ruddygore's expression turned solemn, telling him everything he needed to know. His face was filled with horror at the realization at what must have happened. "Oh god! Please! No!"

Lucifer, dressed in his usual black pinstriped business suit and using an umbrella for a cane, stood once again with the tall, silver and gold armored angelic figure by his side. Both stood off to one corner of a room deep inside of Castle Terindell, unseen by its two other occupants. The fact that one of the occupants was lying on a padded table and covered with a sheet up to her neck was the reason both had manifested here.

"Lakash has overstepped his bounds," the angel declared angrily as he watched the scene unfold before him.

Lucifer sighed and shook his head. "I'm afraid not. The dagger was created in his realm, and as such he has domain over it. He can modify it any way he wants to and we can't touch him."

"I don't care," the angel stated flatly as he turned towards his temporary ally. "This action was inexcusable. She was an innocent third party, not a pawn."

"When are you going to learn there is no such thing as an innocent party in this game!" the devil demanded, startling his angelic companion. "She's just another tool to push Arden around." His head snapped around as he reached out to grab the angel's arm. "Speak of the devil. 'He' is here."

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Hecate stood next to Sheila and watched the unsteady rise and fall of the vixen's chest. Occasionally, the unconscious female would moan and shift in pain from the spells, which had burrowed deep within her body. She reached out and took the wet compress from the vixen's forehead, dampened it again and replaced it gently. Her hands unconsciously balled into fists as she tried to find some way to undo the damage, but only became more frustrated as she realized that this was way out of her league.

"That's a mighty ugly way to die if you ask me," Lakash stated casually as he appeared, leaning against the opposite wall.

"Lakash!" the elf spat vehemently. "You son of a bitch! What did you do to her?"

Lakash looked around in confusion, his face declared his innocence as he held a hand over his heart. "Me? You think I did this? I'm not the one who cast the ward on that door."

The demoness stormed around the table to point an accusing finger at the celestial being. "No, but you had something to do with it. You've wanted nothing more than to screw over Arden, and now you've found a way."

"True," he replied as he crossed his arms. "However, I had nothing to do with the ward. That was all Arden's work. I'm not allowed to interact with anything created in this realm unless invited to." He uncrossed his arms and pushed himself away from the wall and walked over to the table. He looked sadly down at the vixen as he talked. "No, I'm not the one to blame. It was Arden. He knew she'd come down there."

Hecate grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around. "He'd never hurt her!"

Again, he feigned surprise. "No? Then consider this. The ward on the door was inert. He'd disabled it when Ruddygore came to visit and hadn't re-armed it. Anyone could have walked up to that door and gone through it without a hitch." He stepped forwards, invading the elf's personal space. "So why did it react to her? Why Sheila?"

Taking an involuntary step backwards, Hecate shook her head. "I don't know."

"The dagger," he stated, pointing to the scorched blade that lay on a nearby tray. "Anyone, even Sheila would have been able to walk up to that door, but it responded to the dagger. It would have attacked and tried to kill anyone carrying the dagger." Again he stepped forwards, forcing the elf backwards until the wall stopped her. "So tell me, what was the one thing that Arden told her about that dagger?"

"Never let it out of her sight," she replied, her eyes wide with understanding. Her

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expression changed to rage and hate as her hands again balled into fists. "That son of a bitch knew she'd be the only one carrying it."

"Exactly," he said with a smile as she stepped away, her back towards him. "He knew you were supposed to be watching over her. Who better to blame for her death than you? He'd say that it reacted to your presence." He smiled as he watched the enraged elf abandon the rational magic that she'd studied so hard to master and gave herself to her demonic side, summing forth such raw, elemental power that it formed a flame-like, crimson aura about her. "Are you going to let him get away with that?"

Hecate's head snapped around as she heard the door open. Her eyes locked on Arden as he began to step through the door. Drawing her dagger, she launched herself towards the man, taking him by surprise and pinning him against the wall, her dagger to his throat. "You fucking bastard! How could you do this to her?"

Ruddygore reached out towards the demoness. "Hecate!"

Her head snapped around towards the sorcerer who saw the murderous intent in her eyes. "Back off! This is between me and him!" She looked back at Arden and snarled with rage.

"Hecate," Arden managed to choke out. "You know I'd never hurt Sheila!"

"Then explain why your ward attacked her!" she demanded, pressing against his throat even harder with her arm. "Explain why it reacted to the dagger you told her to always carry. Explain why it tried to kill her!"

"No! You have it wrong," he declared, staring her in the eyes. "The ward was supposed to ignore anyone with the dagger. It was supposed to *not* react!"

She dug the point of the dagger into his chest. "You expect me to believe that?"

Her accusations turned his face into a mask of fear and horror. "I swear to God, Hecate! I'd never hurt Sheila. You know that!" He glanced down at the knife, over towards Lakash and then back at the enraged elf. "Hecate, you know how I feel about Sheila. If you truly believe that I would intentionally cause her harm, then kill me. But before you do, I want you to think real hard about where you got your information and then if, *if* you really believe that I did it, kill me."

The ebony female paused, seeing the tears in his eyes for the first time. She glanced over at Lakash and saw a smug smile on his face before looking back into the grief stricken eyes before her. The aura around her flickered then faded as she stepped back and turned to face Lakash. "Bastard! You manipulated me!"

Lakash shrugged. "Oh well. It was worth a try."

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Arden's expression changed to anger. He walked over to the tray with the tanto on it, picked up the blade and examined it. "Son of a bitch!" he declared as he walked over to Lakash, the dagger held up before him. "You screwed with the dagger so that it would create a causal feedback loop!"

"Guilty as charged," he replied with a smile. "Although I couldn't have done it without Hecate's help. She got Sheila to leave the dagger in her room one morning, giving me plenty of time to modify it." He paused to let the information sink in. "Pretty easy work considering she wanted the secret to crossing the Sea of Dreams to other realities."

Arden turned his gaze to Hecate. "Is that true? You helped him?"

"No!" the elf replied as she held her hands up in front of her. "I mean, yes I suggested she leave the dagger, but it had nothing to do with Lakash. Hell, I didn't even know he'd be able to screw with it!"

His anger getting the better of him for a moment, Arden took a step towards Hecate then stopped and turned back towards Lakash. "No. You're responsible. I'm not going to let you distract me. I'm not going to let you get away with this."

"I don't see what you're going to do about it," the celestial arrogantly stated. "You have no power over me any more, and nothing you can do can cause me permanent harm."

Arden grabbed the man by the lapel and slammed him against the wall with the dagger held to his throat. "Maybe I can't do permanent damage, but I can kill your avatar, leaving you without access to this realm."

Lakash nodded. "You can do that if you want, but it won't accomplish anything. Sheila will still be dying and you won't have the power to heal her."

"Oh, I'll have the power. You're in violation of the bargain. You either restore my access to the power or you lose."

"Actually, no," the dapper dressed man replied calmly. "You're entitled to use the power when and where it will advance you towards your ultimate goal. You've been squandering the power on everything but. Healing your *bitch* won't get you any closer to you goal than if you let her die. She's not important to the quest."

"She's important to me!" Arden declared, sliding the dagger so that it caused the outer layer of skin to part. He grinned at Lakash's discomfort. "Either give me the power to heal her or heal her yourself."

Lakash's eyes narrowed to slits. "You want her healed, heal her yourself."

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"I don't have the power!" the scarred man snarled.

The small man snarled back. "Then use the lamp!" He watched as Arden blinked in surprise. "That's right. A properly stated wish will not only cure her, but return the both of you to your home reality."

"But..." Arden stammered, his resolve broken by confusion, "but that means abandoning the quest."

"It's one or the other," the celestial smugly declared. "You want the bitch alive, you give up Nanuk. It's your choice."

The confusion faded from Arden's face as it became a mask of pure hatred that surprised even Lakash. "If that's my only choice, then I choose neither! I'd rather destroy you and to hell with everyone else than giving you the satisfaction of making me choose!" With that, he reared back with the dagger and drove it between Lakash's eyes, through his brain and into the wood beyond so that the tanto supported the twitching corpse.

Turning away, Arden walked over to the table where Sheila lay and took her hand. "I swear to god, I'll destroy them all if he lets you die."

In one corner of the room, a small sparkle of light appeared, quickly growing onto a bright man-shaped luminescent being who's radiance was blindingly bright. Hecate crouched, bared her fangs and claws towards the light as she hissed, before turning to flee from its presence. The light pulsed and faded leaving a tall, blond-haired angelic man wearing silver and gold armor, complete with halo and wings, standing there.

"Son of a bitch," Arden muttered to himself as he moved to the tanto and yanked it from the wall, causing the dead avatar to disintegrate into a cloud of dust. "I'm getting sick and tired of you assholes!"

The angel spread his hands and smiled at the angry man. "Be at peace, Arden Eastridge, for I am here to help."

"I don't need your help!" Arden shouted. "I neither want nor need anything from your kind! All you've done is push me around like a pawn, destroying everything that I loved or cared for! Well I have news for you, I'm not going to take it any more!"

"Be at peace," the angel said again in a calm and soothing voice. "I'm not your enemy."

"No. You're not my enemy," the scarred man replied with a snarl. "I know your kind. All you ever do is sit back and watch. You refuse to take a stand, preferring to sit on

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the sidelines and watch the action."

"And yet I am here," the armored being stated, as it glided towards Arden. "Is not my presence here enough to prove that we can no longer sit and watch?"

Some of the anger seemed to leave Arden as he listened to the words. "Maybe and maybe not. What do you want in return for your help?"

"We don't work like that," the creature said, placing a gentle hand on Arden's shoulder. "You of all people know that we ask nothing in return."

Anguish and loss replaced the rage that had chiseled Arden's face. "I'd like to believe that. I really would."

He gave the man's shoulder a compassionate squeeze. "But?"

"But..." he started to say and then turned away to lean on the table. "But I lost my faith in your kind a long time ago."

"No, you didn't," the celestial stated as he moved to stand next to the table. "You lost your way, but you've never lost your faith. If you had, you wouldn't be here now."

"I don't know," he whispered as tears dropped onto Sheila's furred arm. "It's one thing to know God exists, but it's something completely different to have faith in him, knowing that this is all just one big game. Knowing that we're just ants in a glass jar to him. That all this," he said, waving his arms to encompass everything, "is just a fucking game and that he couldn't give a shit about us one way or another."

The angel sighed and shook his head sadly. "You know that's not true. He cherishes all of his children. He only wants the best for you, but each person must decide for themselves how they'll live their life." He paused to look at Ruddygore who stood transfixed in the doorway then back at Arden. "Yes, this is a game, but it's much more than just a game. Far more. And you have a critical part to play in it." He paused as Arden looked up at him, their eyes locking. "You have a destiny, Arden. You can choose to fulfill that destiny, or you can deny it. The choice is yours. If you fulfill it, then the nature of the game will change, possibly for the better. If you fail, Lakash wins, the game will take a turn for the worse and people everywhere will suffer for it."

Arden nodded and looked back down at Sheila. "How can a god, any god, expect me to be willing to give up the first true love I've ever had?" He reached down and caressed the vixen's hair. "How am I supposed to give up growing old with her, raising children and grandchildren? What kind of god would ask someone to do that?"

"A compassionate god." He paused until Arden looked at him with a confused

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expression. "I can't tell you how, but I will tell you this, and you know that I cannot lie to you or anyone else: There is a way for you to come back once you've accomplished your destiny."

"That's impossible," Arden declared, frowning. "I've seen my futures in the eye. My soul will be completely consumed. There's no way back."

The angel gave a kind smile again. "Were you looking into the eye to see your future afterwards, or simply how to achieve the goal?" He paused as the question hit home. "I've seen the future beyond that event. I've seen you returning to Sheila. I've seen you together, raising your kids and grandkids. I can't say how, just that you managed it, but I know that you have a spirit that is unique. If anyone could manage it, I believe you could."

Arden turned towards Sheila again as his mind raced over the possibilities. His hand clinched hers as she shuddered and moaned. "All right. What do I have to do?"

Again, the angel placed a hand on his shoulder. "All you have to do is ask."

"Ask?" Arden echoed in disbelief. "All right. Please. I beg of you. Please, in God's name, heal her!"

"Your prayers have been heard," the angel replied. He reached out and placed both hands on Sheila's body and concentrated. A pure white glow started around his hands and spread to encompass her entire body for a moment before fading.

"Sheila?" Arden held her hand tight as he caressed her forehead. "Sheila? Honey? Wake up!"

The vixen groaned and opened her eyes. "Can't a person die in peace around here?"

Unable to speak, Arden began to cry tears of sorry, joy, loss, regret and too many other emotions to count as he looked down at the female he loved.

"Hey, hey! What's all this about?" she asked, reaching out to wipe the tears from his face.

Closing his eyes, he gasped for air. "Oh god, Sheila. I thought I'd lost you! Please! Can you ever forgive me?"

Not quite understanding what had happened, Sheila, too, began to cry as what he said hit home. "Forgive *you*? You big lunk! I'm the one who should be asking you to forgive *me*!"

"You don't understand," he pleaded as he held on to her hand with a firm grasp. "I always said that I loved you, but I never knew, deep down in my heart and soul,

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knew for a fact that I loved you until I saw you dying. Please, can you ever forgive me?"

"All right," she replied as tears still rolled down her face, "but on one condition."

"Condition?" Arden echoed, suddenly confused.

"Yes. You've gotta stop blubbering all over me," she replied with a smile.

Arden laughed even as he continued to cry. "Done."

Behind them, Ruddygore turned to leave the two lovers alone. He ran his hand through his thick, silver-gray hair and muttered, "I'm getting too old for this stuff."

Once again invisible to those in the mortal realm, the angel strode purposefully back towards where Lucifer stood with a large, shit-eating grin on his face. The angel pursed his lips at the devils expression and frowned. "Don't say a word! Not one word!"

"Oh, I wasn't going to say anything," Lucifer replied smugly, a hint of a laugh in his voice. "But since you brought it up, don't you think the Voice is going to be pissed when he finds out you performed a miracle without getting permission first?"

"You know, you're not making this easy for me," the angelic creature replied.

Lucifer guffawed. "You know what they say," he chided as they walked further and further from the room, passing beyond the reality they had just been a part of. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

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The Ultimate Question to Life, The Universe and Everything

"I keep telling you, I'm fine. Now would you quit worrying?" Sheila crossed her arms and pouted as Arden wheeled her down the hallway.

Arden stopped and stepped around to kneel in front of the chair. "Look, Sheila, you've been through a lot. You were almost killed back there. All I'm asking is to let Ruddygore check you out to make sure there's not something still lingering. Is that too much to ask?"

"But why him?" the vixen asked, her ears wilted. "He's a nice enough guy, but he weirds me out. Why can't you do it?"

Closing his eyes, Arden let his head hang for a moment as he sighed. He looked back up at the vixen with a sad expression. "Because whatever Lakash did to me back in the cave, left me unable to do any magic. I can't even see it any more."

"Oh my god," she gasped, her hands covering her muzzle in shock. She reached out to touch him, but stopped. "I didn't realize... I'm sorry."

His sad expression softened as he gave her a kind smile. "Don't be sorry. I don't give a damn about the magic as long as you're OK. You're what's important to me right now, and that's why I want you checked out. You were dying back there." He reached out to put a hand on her swollen belly. "I want to make sure you and the baby are OK."

"I guess so," she replied, putting her hand over his. "I still don't remember what happened. One moment I was in the tunnel, and the next thing I remember there was this beautiful winged fox standing over me wearing this fancy silver and gold armor." Her speech trailed off as her eyes focused on some unseen event she was remembering. A second later she shook her head and looked back at Arden. "Next thing I know, you're standing over me blubbering something about how you're sorry about almost killing me. I wouldn't mind so much if you would just tell me exactly what happened!"

Arden gave her hand a squeeze as he stood up. "Some day, love. Some day. Right now, though, Ruddygore's waiting for us." Pushing the chair with a renewed sense of purpose, it was only moments until the pair stopped before a set of ornate double doors. "Here we are," he declared, knocking on one of the panels.

"Enter," came the muffled reply from beyond.

The doors opened easily, allowing the chair and its occupant to pass through with room to spare on either side. Inside, they saw Ruddygore wearing what appeared to be a lab smock, rubber gloves and a face shield as he worked at a bench covered with beakers full of various bubbling liquids. At the moment, he was carefully adding liquid from a flask to a beaker one drop at a time. "I'll be with you in just a second."

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Drop by drop, he watched the bluish liquid as it absorbed each drip until it suddenly changed colors, becoming bright yellow. "Eureka!" the big man shouted as he set the flask aside. He removed the face shield and examined the mixture at close range. Ruddygore turned and walked over to Arden and held the beaker out to him with a smile. "Here. Give this a try."

"Ummm... What is it?" the scarred man asked, cautiously taking the warm beaker and holding it at arms length. "It's not going to blow up on me, is it?"

The sorcerer waved off the question with a rubber-gloved hand. "No, of course not! You drink it, of course."

Arden cocked an eye at the old man before studying the concoction. He cautiously took a sniff of the contents and then held it at arms length again as he blinked the tears from his eyes. "Holy shit! That's nasty!"

Ruddygore finished removing the gloves and laid them on a near by table. "Of course it smells horrible. It's going to taste even worse too. You know that. It's in the rules on potions. Now bottoms up."

"All right," the man replied pursing his lips as he examined the liquid again. "But if I puke, I'm going to make sure it gets on you." Before the sorcerer could reply, Arden opened his mouth and quickly gulped down the contents. His face became twisted with revulsion at the taste. "Christ on a crutch! That was just revolting!"

Ruddygore took the empty beaker and set it back on the bench where he'd be working.

Arden shivered and looked like he was going to be sick, but quickly shook off the feeling. A few seconds later he straightened up and smiled. "Hey. Now that feels pretty good. What was in that concoction, anyway?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just a little lithium sulfide, some protactinium, crystallized ammonia, some tetrahydrocordrazine, bats blood, few eyes of newt, a little semisweet chocolate and some gold. All the things an ancient dragon needs to get her back on her feet." He walked over to a corner and picked up a short stool, which he brought over and set down in front of Sheila. "Now let's get down to business. How are you feeling? Do you have any cravings at all?"

"It's like I keep telling Arden, I feel fine." She glanced over at her companion and then back towards the sorcerer. "As for cravings, I guess I'm a little thirsty and wouldn't mind a pint of Ren and Gerri's, but somehow I don't think you have any place that sells those around here."

"No, I'm afraid not," the sorcerer replied with a chuckle. "However, I can ring to

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have one of the servants bring you some wine."

"Don't bother," Arden interjected. "I'll go and grab some stuff from the kitchen. It's not that far." He leaned down and gave Sheila a quick kiss. "I'll be right back."

Sheila started to say something as Arden left the room, but changed her mind and turned back to the sorcerer, eyeing him nervously. "So where do we go from here?"

"You, my dear, don't need to go anywhere," he replied as he reached out and took her hands. Leaning forward, he studied them, looking for any traces of the damage that had been there earlier in the day. He paused, feeling her tense up as he flipped over her hands. "Please, relax. I'm not going to harm you."

"Sorry," the vixen replied somewhat sheepishly. "I'm just kind of nervous."

"There's nothing to worry about," the big man responded as he scooted even closer. He reached out and took hold of her head with his hands, gently probing her scalp, chin and muzzle. "Any residual aches or pain from what happened? Anything feel unusual in any way?"

"No," she quickly replied, fighting the reflex to pull away as he ran his fingers over her ears. "In fact, my back hasn't bothered me all day, and my feet don't feel like balloons."

Ruddygore scooted back, reached down and lifted up her right foot, examining it carefully. "Interesting," he commented as he let her foot go and examined the other. "Quite interesting." Scooting closer again, he pulled the chair towards him to help close the distance. "I'm going to put my hands on your belly and ensure there wasn't any damage to the unborn."

"Uh... all right," the vixen nervously replied.

For several minutes, the sorcerer pushed, prodded and poked at Sheila's swollen belly, occasionally nodding and grunting to himself as he did so. Eventually he sat back and clapped his hands together. "Well, the good news is that you're in perfect health."

Sheila beamed him a smile. "That's great. How about the baby?"

Ruddygore stood and picked up the stool. "Your babies are doing just fine." He carried it back over towards the corner. "It doesn't look like they were affected at all."

"That's great..." She stopped in mid sentence, her eyes wide. "Wait, did you say babies? As in the plural of baby?"

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"Why, yes," the big man replied, looking somewhat concerned at her question. "Didn't you know that you were carrying twins?"

"Twins? I'm going to have twins?"

"Yes. Twins." Ruddygore squatted down next to the chair. "Didn't Arden tell you?"

Sheila's shock gave way to annoyance. "No! You mean he knew?"

The sorcerer internally winced at her reaction, but the damage was done. "Of course. Anyone with the sight would be able to see that by now."

"I'm going to have twins," the vixen repeated as she tried to adjust her worldview to the news. Her eyes locked onto Ruddygore again. "Can you tell what sex they are?"

"Absolutely," he replied as he stood back up. "That's child's play considering how far along you are." He walked over to a wall covered with small wooden drawers and began rummaging through them. After a couple of minutes, he held up a gem and smiled. "Ah, here we go," he declared as he walked back over to Sheila. As he held the stone over her womb, it began to glow. A second later he straightened up, putting the stone in his pocket. "It would appear that you're going to have a boy and a girl."

Sheila's hands gently cupped her belly. "One of each? Then they're fraternal twins?" She looked up to see him nod. "And Arden knew about this?"

Again the sorcerer nodded. "Considering the level of magic that I've seen him cast, I have no doubt that that he did. He'd have to be a complete idiot not to."

The conversation was interrupted by the sound a door to the room opening. Arden stepped in carrying a wide, silver tray above his shoulder with one hand as he closed the door with the other. "I went ahead and grabbed some apple juice as well as chilled water," he declared as he walked over to one of the workbenches and set the tray down in an unoccupied space. "I figured that you might want something other than just plain old H2O."

Sheila climbed out of the chair and walked over towards the bench where Arden was pouring an amber liquid from a pitcher into a glass. "Apple juice. How thoughtful." She turned and gave Ruddygore as grimace. "How thoughtful, don't you agree?" Her right hand clenched into a fist and she hauled off and belted Arden as he turned to hand her a glass, knocking him sideways and into a wall. "Son of a bitch," she muttered as she shook her fist in pain.

Arden rubbed the side of his jaw as he stepped away from the wall, his eyes a mixture of shock, anger and betrayal. "What the hell was that for?"

"You bastard! Twins?" the vixen shouted as she leaned aggressively towards him,

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her ears laid back in anger. "You've let me walk around, knowing I was pregnant with twins, and didn't bother saying anything? When were you going to tell me? When I was in labor?"

A quick glance towards Ruddygore as the big man shrugged told Arden all he needed to know. He sighed and nodded to Sheila. "Actually, yes, I was planning on waiting till you were in labor. Or at least wait until you were back home."

Sheila stomped her foot as she bared her fangs at him. "I don't believe you! Where the hell do you get off holding that kind of information from me?"

"Look," he said tiredly as he closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You've been going off the wall with the fact that you were pregnant. I didn't want to stress you out any more, especially since there wasn't anything either of us could do about it."

"That's not the point," she growled between clenched teeth. Throwing her arms upwards for a moment, she let out an inarticulate scream. "Twins? I'm not even sure I can handle taking care of one brat, much less twins! How the hell do you expect me to deal with two?"

"I don't," Arden replied angrily, taking Sheila by surprise. "I don't expect *you* to deal with them." He glanced nervously away as the flabbergast vixen stared at him. "What I expect," he continued, looking back up at her, "is for *us* to raise them. Together. We. As in you and I. You know, two people, living together. The old house with a yard, white picket fence, kids playing in a yard shtick?" He took a half step forward. His eyes had a melancholy appearance to them that betrayed the humor in his voice. "Come on, you know, the old 'till death do you part' kind of---thing."

Sheila's heart skipped a beat as she stood, staring at Arden as if he's suddenly grown a third eye. Her mouth snapped shut with an audible click as she straightened up. "Did you just..." She turned her head to the side somewhat and squinted at him. "Are you proposing to me?"

"Not exactly..." the he started nervously, then stopped and laughed. "No. That's not true," he said directly and with confidence. He reached out and took her hand. "I don't have a ring, but somehow I don't think that really matters. Sheila, I love you. Despite all we've been through, I know that I want to spend the rest of my life with you, raising our kids---together---spoiling our grandkids rotten---together---growing old and spending the rest of our lives---together. If you'll have me." He paused for a second and smiled. "Sheila Vixen, will you marry me?"

A trembling hand went up to cover Sheila's mouth as she took a step backwards. "Oh my god," she squeaked, her eyes wide open. This was the last thing in the world she'd expected him to do. "I---I don't know what to say."

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Arden simply smiled. "You could try saying 'yes!'."

Sheila closed her eyes and concentrated on staying upright. Her heart was pounding and she couldn't catch her breath. She felt panicked and trapped for some reason. Her mind raced as it tried to get a grasp on what was happening. She clamped down on her emotions and calmly opened her eyes. "No."

The color drained from Arden's face as his world shattered for the second time in the same day. "What?"

"I'm sorry," she replied, turning away, her eyes down cast. "I can't. I...I...." She turned back to face him, her face a mass of conflicting emotions. "It's not that I don't care for you, I do. I just don't know..."

Arden took another step backwards, his eyes searching for some escape as he grabbed onto the bench for support. A second later, his face became a mask as he retreated back behind the walls he'd built up over his lifetime.

Sheila took a step forward and reached out to him. "I'm sorry, Arden..."

"No," he interrupted with a shake of his head. "There's no need to apologize. I...I understand your decision. I'm sorry if I misunderstood your feelings." He forced himself to look away and walked towards the door. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll go get some fresh air."

"Arden!" Sheila called after him, but inwardly hoping he wouldn't stop. She dropped her hand and looked over at Ruddygore who stood with his arms crossed, watching her. "What are you looking at?"

The big man didn't immediately answer but instead continued to study her for a few seconds, making the vixen very nervous. "I know that you've got a million excuses running around in your head about why you did what you just did," he commented, letting his arms drop to his sides as he walked towards the door. He stopped at the doorway and faced her again with a disapproving frown. "You could probably recite them as easily as I can recite the periodic table, but we both know that they're all just that: Excuses."

Sheila watched as he walked out of the room, closing the door quietly behind himself. Angrily she turned and grabbed the crystal pitcher full of juice and threw it at the door, watching it shatter against the polished wood. Her head dropped to her chest as she turned back to the bench and leaned on it heavily and cried.

The setting sun illuminated the lone figure that sat, squatting on the balls of his feet on the edge of the parapets. A gentle wind occasionally tugged at his long hair,

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causing it to flick idly behind him. His form, immobile, could have been chiseled from stone, a wingless gargoyle, guarding the castle from outside invaders, but it wasn't. Instead, it was just a man, trying to lose himself in the serenity of a sunset on a warm, spring day. Unfortunately, as with all good things, serenity eventually comes to an end.

"You trying to take my job?" Hecate quipped as she lit down on the ramparts nearby. "I'm the only one around here allowed to lurk about on the walls, looking all ominous and gloomy."

"I wouldn't want to take your job," Arden replied without bothering to look her way.

"You sure?" the elf asked as she scooted a little closer. "You seem to be doing pretty good so far."

The man turned to face her, his face a mask except for the annoyance in his eyes. "You've nothing to worry about. I'll be gone soon."

Hecate nodded. "Good." She sat there for several minutes watching the sunset with him before speaking. "So, trouble in paradise?"

Again, Arden didn't bother looking back at her. "Nope."

"Ah," the elf grunted, half nodding. "So you didn't have a fight with the little misses?"

"Nope."

She leaned forwards, to get a better look at his face. "And you're not planning to take a nose dive off the wall?"

"Nope."

"Uh huh," she replied, pursing her lips. "So everything's just ducky, eh?"

"Yep."

"Ah hah," the elf grunted to herself. "So you wouldn't know why Sheila's been frantically looking for you all afternoon?"

The scarred man looked at the ebony female out of the corner of his eye for a second, then minutely shook his head as he returned his gaze to the sunset. "Nope."

"Uh huh. So you have no clue why she thinks that you hate her and never want to speak to her again?" she asked, crossing her arms as she leaned against a nearby

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stone block.

Arden let out a long sigh as he turned his head to address the elf. "Whatever the reason may be, I'm sure that it's none of your business."

"Really? You know that's exactly what TR said when I asked him about it," she replied as she stroked her chin thoughtfully. "He also said that I should butt out of it."

"Sage advice," he replied, turning away again.

"Which is pretty interesting, if you think about it," the elf continued, ignoring his last statement. "There's nothing he loves more than sticking his nose in other peoples business." Her eyes narrowed into angry slits. "You really must have pissed him off to want to wash his hands of the two of you."

Arden pursed his lips for a moment as he took a few deep breaths to remain calm. "You should really know what you're talking about before you start accusing people of things."

Hecate smacked her forehead as she rolled her eyes skyward. "Duh! What was I thinking? You're up here, skulking about on a ledge while she's downstairs having a panic attack, about which you apparently couldn't give a damn. This from a man who not six hours ago declared her the ultimate love of your life!"

Arden stood up and grasped the hilt of this wakazashi in his left hand. "Tell me, Hecate. What would happen if I were to jump off from here?"

"Assuming I didn't bother to stop your fall?" the elf replied tersely. "You'd splatter yourself all over the rocks below."

"Really?" the big man asked as he took a step backwards, disappearing from sight as he dropped over the edge.

Panicked, Hecate jumped up onto the edge and was about to dive over when she saw no signs of the big man, either on the wall or on the rocks far below. Her shock was added to as she felt a hand against her rear, shoving her over the side. It only took a moment for her to unfold her wings and recover from the impromptu dive and swoop back up to the ledge where she found Arden leaning against the wall, smiling. She stalled out and landed on the edge of the battlement where Arden had stood seconds before. "How did you do that? I checked thoroughly to make sure there weren't any illusions, or you weren't hiding with that trick of yours!"

"Simple," he replied, drawing the wakazashi part of the way out. "I may not be able to cast spells, but I do have some wonderful toys. One of the special functions of the wakazashi is the ability to displace myself a short distance." The hilt of the sword

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snicked home as he stepped away from the wall. "So you see, Hecate, your assumption about what would happen was wrong, just like your assumption about Sheila and me is. I suggest that you take Ruddygore's advice and butt out."

The elf shook her head. "Would it really kill you to go talk with her?"

Arden sat down in the divot between two large, rectangular stones and wrapped his arms around his knees. "No. Then again, if she wanted to talk to me that bad, she could have come up here."

"You asshole!" the elf shrieked. "You're standing on top of a six story wall! You expect her to walk all the way up here in her condition?"

Arden shrugged. "It would show how serious she is, otherwise I'll talk to her when I'm done... what was it you said? Skulking around up here."

"You know, I thought you were an OK guy. But now I see you're just another self-important prick." Spreading her wings, she launched herself off the wall and glided down to disappear into the shadows of the courtyard.

Turning his head to face the last of the sunset, he just caught the edge of the sun as it vanished behind the horizon, the last light of the day backlit the high, wispy clouds giving them a ruddy, pastel coloring. Soon, the dim glow faded, allowing the stars to begin making their appearance. Now he sat, his back against the stone block with his head laid back as he stared at the starry sky. The light breeze was beginning to cool, but not enough for him to notice. His musings were interrupted by the sound of a foot kicking a small pebble behind him. "Back already, Hecate? Or is that you, Ruddygore?"

"Neither," Sheila replied, causing him to turn with a look of unabridged surprise. The vixen held her left hand under her swollen belly as she leaned against the wall with her right. "Hecate was pretty pissed off after talking to you. She said something about you saying I should come up here if I was really serious about talking to you." She grimaced as she leaned bent over for a minute, panting. "Do you mind if I sit down. Those stairs are a royal pain in the ass."

"Sure," the big man said, standing up and giving her a hand. "Jesus, Sheila, you know, I wasn't serious when I said that. You didn't need to come up here."

Sheila pulled the cloak around her as she sat down on the rock and leaned back with a sigh. She smiled as the big man sat down across from her. "Yah, well, I figure that if I was going to get your undivided attention, this would definitely do it."

"Still," the big man started, but stopped as the vixen held up her hand.

"Please, I know I didn't have to, but I really needed to talk to you." Crossing her legs

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in front of her, she wrapped the cloak around her as best she could to block out the breeze. "Look, about this afternoon..."

"There's nothing to say," Arden interrupted.

"No! Please," the vixen insisted, "Let me have my say. You just caught me off guard is all. I wasn't expecting something like that." She paused to rein in the emotional turmoil. "Look, when I was growing up, I was in a pack. One of the things you learn very early on in a pack is that you don't get attached to anyone. Bad things happen to people, and you can't count on them being there. When Zig Zag found me and Tammy, we'd been turning tricks on the street to make money. We lived out of cheesy hotels and off of fast food. The only reason none of the pimps ever managed to stable us is because of our upbringing in the packs. We could take care of ourselves. Zig Zag changed all that. She cleaned us up, helped us get our GEDs, and best of all, gave us jobs at the studio. Now we were doing what we always loved to do, only the guys were cleaner, it was a heck of a lot more fun and we made money hand over fist."

She glanced away towards the rising moon to hide the tears in her eyes. When she looked back at the big man, she almost didn't continue. His face was flat. Emotionless. But when she looked into his eyes, she saw something in there that told her he *was* listening. "Sure, I'd had the occasional boyfriend, but they were all the same. They were never satisfied with just being in a relationship, or they treated me like a trophy to be shown off to their buddies. None of them ever really accepted me for who I am. At least, not until you came along. At first, you were this mysterious person without a past. You told me you loved me, but you were impossible to get into bed." She laughed at the memory and looked away. "I remember thinking that maybe you weren't like the others. Maybe I had to slow down to your speed and see what happened. I think that's when I first started falling in love with you." She looked back up at him, the tears in her eyes catching the light of the moon. "And then everything went terribly wrong. People were trying to kill you. They kidnapped me and..." She hung her head as she pulled the cloak closer around herself.

"You and Bjorn. And then they killed Bjorn," Arden finished, flinching at the look she gave him before looking away. "You blamed me for getting him killed, and yet, you couldn't turn away from me. Something kept pulling you towards me."

"But it was all a lie, wasn't it?" she asked as she intently studied his face in the pale moonlight. "It was just the effects of some damned spell."

"Maybe it was for you, but not for me. I fell in lust with you the very moment I saw your picture, before I ever made the wish. But it was more than just lust. It pulled at my heart in a way nobody had ever managed before. Right then, in that instant, I wanted to be with you with every fiber of my being. I knew what I'd been missing all those years I'd been alone. What I'd been searching for in all my prior relationships." He smiled and reached out to touch her knee. "I was ready to die. I knew that I was

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being hunted again, and I didn't run because I had nothing to live for, until I saw you."

Sheila hugged herself. "Don't say that. It scares me."

"Why?" he asked, pulling his hands back. "Why does someone committing to you scare you so?"

"Because!" she whined, unable to express herself. "Every time I start to get close to someone, something happens. Look at Bjorn. For the first time, I really, really took a risk. I followed my heart and said yes. The next day he was dead with a bullet in his back. I don't want to be hurt like that again."

Arden nodded. "So instead you'll just keep bouncing from man to man, relationship to relationship, always getting out before things can go too far." He gravely shook his head. "You'll always be alone, Sheila. You can have a man in your bed every night, and you'll still be sleeping alone. No matter how many men you have passing through your life, you'll remember what you're missing. What Bjorn and I offered you and it'll eat you alive."

"Hah! The vixen barked. "I've been proposed to by far better men than you and not regretted turning them down." She stopped, suddenly regretting what she said as the look in his eyes changed from honest concern to pain. "Look. I'm just not ready for this. I'm not."

"If not now, then when?" the big man demanded.

"When I know you're not going to run off and get yourself killed!" Sheila snapped back, seeing her shot hit home. "I'd have to be an idiot to get married to a man who could die in the next few days. Till death do us part doesn't mean much when you're about to ride off into battle."

Now it was Arden's turn to go on the defensive. "That's not fair."

Sheila shook her head. "No it isn't. So tell me, this thing you have to do to accomplish your quest. What are the odds of you surviving?" She frowned as Arden winced. "That's what I thought. You know, here I've been feeling all selfish for turning you down when you're the one who should be feeling selfish. You want to get married two days before you're probably going to die? Who's the selfish one here?"

"I never said I wanted to get married now!" the big man snapped back angrily. "I just asked if you'd marry me. I never said anything about today!" He ran his hands through his long hair as he let the anger fade to a manageable level. "Ever heard of an engagement? You know, where two people agree to get married at a future date? Say, after we'd returned back to your world?" Sheila stared at him in wide-eyed

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disbelief. "I'm not such an asshole that I'd expect you to marry me before we got back, not when there was a chance I might not come back. But the fact is that after I finish my quest, there's a way I can come back to you. I can't tell you how, but I know it."

"How? How do you know it?" Sheila whispered against the chill wind.

"Remember when you were on the table? The vision you had of an angel?" Arden prompted. "He was a real angel. He'd talked to me before healing you and he told me that even after I'd restored Nanuk that I'd find a way to return to you. He'd seen the probabilities."

"An angel?" the vixen asked, taken aback by the news. "A real angel? Not the kind of, sort of, used to be knockoff's like Lakash and Satan?"

The big man chuckled. "Yes. A real, honest to goodness, straight from heaven, angel." Reaching out, he took a hold of one of Sheila's hands and looked at her with an intensity that scared the vixen. "I'm going to be brutally honest. What I've got to do to complete my quest scares the shit out of me. I've seen horrors that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemies. I've seen myself destroyed body and soul, blasted to oblivion, and that's just the beginning of what can go wrong. But I've also seen how I can complete the quest, too. Through all of it, the one thing that I saw driving me was the knowledge that you'd be waiting for me when I came back." He paused, trying to control the emotions but not completely succeeding. "I need to know that you love me."

Sheila pulled her hand back and looked down. "I don't even know what love is."

"For me," Arden replied softly, "it's having my thoughts constantly wandering back to you when you're not around. How your smile makes me believe that everything can turn out all right. That despite the fact that you can annoy the hell out of me, I still want to spend the rest of my life with you. The knowledge that you are the most important thing in my life. For me, that's love."

"More important than your quest?" she asked, looking back up at him. "Would you give it up for me?"

Arden stiffened at the question. His lips pursed as he gave the vixen a distasteful look for the better part of a minute before he gave a slight nod. "If it means that much to you, then yes. I'll give up my quest if that's what it takes to be with you."

Sheila's ears perked up at the unexpected response. "Really?"

"Really," he replied, still looking unhappy. "If it means that much to you, I'll betray everything I hold sacred: my honor, my totem, everything. If that's what you want."

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"Jesus," the vixen replied, suddenly feeling very small. "You make it sound so...so..."

"Bad?"

"Yah," she replied, unable to look him in the eye.

"My entire life has been leading up to this one event. Everything. If you ask me to give it up, you're asking me to betray not only myself, but the time, effort and trust that others have placed in me to complete this." He paused and let his expression soften. "Sheila, this is a lot bigger than just you or me. It's not a question of Lakash winning or not. If he wins, things will go bad for everyone. You've seen what he's capable of. If I succeed, it'll mitigate his influence some and help to stabilize things, hopefully to make life better for folks on a whole. I'm not doing this just for Nanuk or myself. It's far bigger than anything I'd ever imagined."

"I...I don't know," the vixen replied, shivering from the cold. "I need to think about this."

"OK," he replied with a nod. "I've waited this long. I suppose I can wait a few more days." He leaned forward and studied her, noticing her shivering for the first time. "Are you cold?"

"Cold?" she replied, her teeth starting to chatter a little. "Naw. Freezing my ass off, yes, but I'm not cold."

The big man chuckled and adjusted his position some. "Here, scoot over here," he said, holding his arms out.

"Huh?" Sheila uncrossed her legs and using her hands, scooted herself around to sit next to him, but was surprised when instead he reached over and picked her up. Careful not to pinch her tail, he nestled her into the center of his crossed legs. "How's that?"

Sheila pulled the cloak closer around herself as she snuggled up. "Wow, you're warm. I thought dragons were just an overgrown lizard?"

"We may be reptiles, but we're still warm blooded," he replied with a smile as he inhaled her scent.

"MMmmmm... This is nice," she muttered dreamily as she looked up as the moonlight silhouetted his face. "I wish we could stay like this."

"We can," he replied, loosing himself in her eyes, "For as long as you want."

"How about forever?" she asked as she closed her eyes and laid her head against his

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chest.

Arden sighed. "Nothing lasts forever."

"It should," the vixen muttered.

"Yah," Arden replied, hugging her a little closer. "It should."

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Bang, Bang Maxwell's Silver Hammer Came Down Upon His Head!

Dust particles danced in the air as a lone beam of sunlight crept its way across the bed, towards Sheila's sleeping form. With a steady pace, it crossed the covers, climbed up the pillow and inched towards the vixen's face, eventually coming to rest on her right eyelid. Groaning, the vixen shifted her head so the sunlight no longer was in her face and tried to go back to sleep. Her rest was again interrupted as the beam of light found its way onto her defenseless eyelid.

Unable to go back to sleep, Sheila yawned a wide, tooth-and fang-filled yawn as she stretched her arms. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes as she rolled over onto her back, grunting involuntarily as the large, liquid-cushioned mass in her womb sloshed, squeezing her internal organs. Her desire to go back to sleep was overridden by the urgent signals coming from her bladder, warning that she'd be wet as well as tired should she tarry much longer.

She tossed the covers back and rolled her legs off the edge so she could sit up, and was startled to discover something on the floor by her feet. Looking down, she saw Arden curled up on the rug next to the bed. As she watched, his eyes opened just enough to look up at the vixen before closing again. "What are you doing down there?" she yipped.

"Trying to sleep," he muttered in reply, shifting slightly to get more comfortable.

Sheila gave a derisive snort as she shook her head. "I can see that. Why are you sleeping on the floor instead of the bed?"

"I'd break it." Rolling over onto his stomach, he proceeded to arch his back like a cat, stretching the muscles. "Ruddygore didn't adjust my gravitic constant, so I still weigh a couple dozen tons." He pushed himself upright so that he was kneeling Japanese-style on the floor. "Or didn't it occur to you to wonder why I went down the siege ramp rather than taking the stairs last night?"

"To be honest, I didn't notice," the vixen replied, again yawning as she scratched the back of her head. "I was kind of out of it."

Arden chuckled. "I'll say. Do you know that you snore when you sleep sitting up?"

"I do not!" she replied defiantly as he noisily simulated what was supposed to be her snoring.

"That's what you think," he replied as he twisted his torso towards her until his shoulders had rotated almost a full one hundred and eighty degrees.

Sheila winced at the sight. "How can you do that? I'm getting back spasms just

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watching you."

Again he chuckled. "I'm a dragon," he replied, twisting his body the other direction, only this time he used his arms to leverage his shoulders even further so that he was almost facing her.

"Oh God no!" the vixen whined, covering her face as she involuntarily shuddered. "That's just not right!"

"Of course not. That kind of thing is why they call us wyrms, after all." Returning to a normal sitting position, he crawled over to where the vixen sat and laid his chin on her knees, being careful not to put any real pressure on them. He smiled up at Sheila and asked, "And how are the kids doing today?"

Sheila gave her belly a rub and shrugged. "No complaints so far. The real question is, do you like golden showers?"

"Huh?" Arden grunted, sitting up slightly.

"Cause unless you do, you should get out of my way," the vixen explained as she leveraged herself to a standing position, using the nightstand as a support. "I've got to go take a piss before I have an accident."

"Hmmm," he replied, leaning back to give her room to walk. "Golden showers, eh? I think I'll pass on that one. I was never a big fan of those kinds of water sports."

"Neither am I," she replied, pausing before closing the door to the water closet, "however, some of my tricks used to ask for it. It takes all types in that business, you know." She shrugged before closing the door.

"That," he commented to himself as he got to his feet, "she says to a man trapped in a female dragon's body, who's hopelessly in love with an anthropomorphic vixen straight out of his fantasies, who just happens to be pregnant with his kids." He looked at his reflection in the mirror and shook his head. "It takes all types, all right."

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Rathsmon stepped out from the adepts' dorms and blinked as his eyes adjusted to the sunlight. He paused as he spotted Arden, who was sitting with Sheila on the grass near the gardens. The two of them appeared to be having a small picnic lunch involving sandwiches and a bottle of wine. For a moment he considered turning around and going back in the building, but he shook off the feeling and forced himself to approach the duo. He paused a few feet away and nodded. "Hello."

"Rathsmon," Sheila said, her face brightened by a smile as she looked up at him.

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"Hey! Where have you been? I haven't seen you since we got here."

The necromancer looked a bit embarrassed as he glanced at Arden. "I've been teaching Ruddygore's adepts about how to manipulate the undead. Kind of a *Zombie 101* for aspiring sorcerers."

"Sounds fascinating," she replied without enthusiasm, the smile faded from her face.

"I know, it's not a popular thing to think about; however, there are people who would use such magic, and knowing how to do it yourself is required to do battle against it." He looked at Arden and bit his lip for a second. "Actually, the reason I came over was to talk to you, Arden."

"Oh?" Arden replied, looking up at the necromancer. "What can I do for you?"

"You promised to break the enchantment that made me a litch once we'd reached Castle Terindell," he said nervously. "As I understand that you'll be leaving soon, I was wondering if you were still planning on doing that?"

Arden studied the dead man for several seconds before he nodded. "Sure. I'll do that for you." He paused and smiled. "In fact, I'll do it this afternoon. Bring your students to the smithy in two hours."

Rathsmon looked confused. "The smithy?"

"Yes. The smithy," Arden cheerfully replied with a nod. "Two hours, no sooner and no later. And don't forget to bring your students!"

"All right," the necromancer acknowledged, still confused. "Two hours, in the smithy," he muttered to himself as he walked away.

"In the smithy?" Sheila asked.

"In the smithy," Arden confirmed. "Care to come and watch?"

"Sure," she replied, finishing off her glass of wine. "This I have got to see."

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"There's quite a crowd out there," Sheila commented as she peeked out through a crack in the smithy doors. She turned to look at Arden, who was etching a pattern into the flat metal surface of an anvil. "The natives are getting restless. How much longer?"

"Go ahead and let them in," Arden replied as he continued to carefully etch away at

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the metal.

"It's about time," the vixen grumbled as she opened the door. "All right. You can all come in now. Be careful not to disturb the circle over by the forge unless you want to stand around for another couple of hours while he redoes everything."

A line of students, both male and female, filtered through the door, with Rathsmo and Poquah bringing up the rear. They crowded around the anvil, vying for an opportunity to see the delicately inscribed pattern that was being etched in the metal. One of them bumped into Arden, jostling his arm. Fortunately, the tip wasn't against the metal at the moment. "Back off, damn it!" the scarred figure snarled, sending the group scattering away from him. Putting the tool down, Arden reached for a large wineskin and took a hearty drink before discarding the now empty bag. Somewhat renewed, he stood up and turned to face the group. "All right. You can quit cowering. I'm not going to eat any of you." He scowled at the young man who'd jostled his arm and frowned. "Well, you maybe, but the rest are safe." He clapped his hands loudly, making the students jump and pointed to the wall that was closest to both the anvil and the circle in the sand. "Everyone over there. And don't screw up that circle!"

Poquah and Rathsmo made their way over to the anvil as the students rushed to stand by the wall. The Imir was the first to speak. "That is a most curious pattern you have there. Is it a...?"

"Ah ah!" Arden interrupted, holding up a hand. "This is a teaching exercise. Let's let the kids try to figure it out." He turned to the students as Sheila took a seat on a stump near the bellows. "All right. You all know that Rathsmo here is undead. Technically he'd be considered a litch; however, he didn't do it himself. Nor is his spirit bound directly to the corpse, but to an inanimate object not directly related to the body. The spirit is bound to a soul stone, a gem whose crystalline structure is naturally harmonic with the energies that we associate with the soul." He paused and pointed to the circles. "First, let's start with some basics. What can you tell me about the structure of these circles?"

The students took a few minutes to examine the pattern on the anvil as well as the one in the sand. One of the male students with blond hair and a handlebar mustache spoke up. "They're identical?"

Arden nodded. "Right. What else?"

A redheaded girl who had produced a magnifying glass and was studying the anvil spoke up. "This is using sympathetic magic?"

"Very good," Arden replied, smiling. "What else?"

"Ummm..." the blond boy started to speak then paused, looking nervous. "I've never

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seen a septagon before, much less one with elements of sympathetic magic in it before. But unless I'm mistaken, these symbols lining the interior are for some sort of summoning or channeling of energies."

"Oooh," Arden cooed, looking over at Poquah. "You do have some smart ones here," he commented as he nodded to the students. "Exactly. The two circles are identical. They are linked using sympathetic magic, and have elements of channeling imbedded within the septagon interior. Does anyone know why I used sympathetic magic?"

"Because you can't cast it yourself?" someone mumbled from the crowd.

Arden stepped around the stone. "Who said that?"

The small group separated leaving a lone boy, maybe fourteen years old, standing alone. His curly black hair and dark complexion resembled that of Middle Eastern folk on earth. The kid held up his hand. "I did."

"That's right." Arden squinted at the kid for a second before summoning him over with a wave of his hand. "You're the kid that was working on that automaton that attacked Sheila when we first arrived, aren't you?" The boy nervously nodded. "I thought so. So you've got some experience with self sustaining sympathetic magic as well as channeling, right?" Again the boy nodded. "Perfect!" Arden clapped the boy on the back and led him around the anvil to where he'd been sitting moments earlier, then turned to Rathsmom. "If you'd please get into the larger circle, we'll get this show on the road. But first, I need the stone."

"The stone? Oh, yes," the necromancer replied, turning to Sheila. "You have the package I gave you back in my castle?"

"The what?" she asked, looking confused. "What package?"

"The stone I gave you," Rathsmom replied, stepping over to the vixen. "It was folded inside of some cloth. I told you never to open it or expose it directly to sunlight. Remember?"

"Oh, yah," she replied, nodding. A moment later, her ears wilted as she covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh my god! The stone! It was in the armor!"

"WHAT?" Rathsmom grabbed the vixen by the lapels of her cloak. "What do you mean, 'it was in the armor'?"

"Let go of her," Arden commanded, grabbing the litch by the shoulder and squeezing.

Rathsmom released Sheila and turned to face Arden. "Damn it! Don't you

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understand? If she lost the gem, then I'm screwed!"

"Calm down! Panicking won't do you any good." Arden paused to give the dead man a moment to get settled. "Now, you have a connection to the stone. We know that you can't range very far from the stone, so it must be nearby. Why don't you concentrate and try to locate it?"

"R-right. Locate the stone." Rathsmo closed his eyes and slowly turned around. "It's close. I can feel it." He held out his arm and suddenly stopped turning. Opening his eyes, he realized that he was pointing at Arden. "What? You have the stone?"

"Let this be a lesson to all of you," Arden stated, sweeping his cold gaze over the crowd. "*Never* give someone something that valuable unless you're positive they won't lose it." He smiled, extended his neck unnaturally and appeared for a moment to be choking on something. Suddenly, a large lump rose up in his throat, and a second later was spit from his mouth and into a bucket containing water. Casually, he reached in and pulled out the cloth bundle and began to unwrap it. "I removed it when I went to duplicate the armor. Since I, as a dragon, don't actually have pockets, I had to store it in the only place I was sure it couldn't get lost from."

"Very funny," the necromancer grumbled.

The cloth slipped off of the stone, revealing a dark red, square cut stone that resembled a ruby, except for its oddly surreal glow. Arden stepped over to the anvil and placed the stone in the center of the septagram. "All right, Rathsmo, in you go. Don't mess up the lines, or I'll leave you like that."

Looking rather annoyed, Rathsmo stepped into the inner part of the circle, taking great care not to damage any of the delicate markings in the sand. "What now?" he grumbled.

Arden turned to the boy by the anvil. "As you can see, there are only three lines to close. When you close them, you need to harmonize them to the circle. I could do it, but I think you've probably got more experience at this than I do."

"That, and I can juice it to lock the harmonics in place, too, right?" the kid stated somewhat smugly.

"Yah, that too," Arden replied with a laugh. He watched as the boy finished etching in the last of the three lines, noting that the lines in the sand also closed themselves at the same time, demonstrating that the outer sympathetic ring was functioning properly.

"All right, now to lock it in," the kid stated. Taking a deep breath, he placed his hands along the lines of the outer circle and concentrated until the entire pattern glowed with a white light, as if illuminated from within the anvil itself. The glow

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faded, leaving the pattern a shimmering silver texture that was matched by the pattern etched in the sand. "There you go. Is that what you were looking for?"

"Perfect," Arden replied, shooing the kid away from the anvil. "All right, now that we have the litch in the circle over there, and the soul stone in the circle on the anvil, anyone care to venture a guess as to what's next?"

The blond kid raised his hand. "You're going to hit it with that hammer?"

"Hammer?" Arden asked, holding his hands out. "What hammer?"

"The one you've got tucked in the belt at the small of your back," the youth replied.

Arden smiled and drew a large, three-pound hammer from a loop in the back of his belt. "Not bad," he commented to the boy as he tapped it on the anvil. "Smart and observant. Now, just because I have a hammer doesn't necessarily mean I'm going to strike the stone, does it? What else could it be for?" He looked around as he waited, noticing that Rathsmom had actually begun to sweat, something he'd never see one of the necromancer's bodies do before. "Anyone?" He asked again, this time looking at Poquah.

The Imir shook his head. "I can see no other reason for you to have the hammer."

"All right, then. We've established that the only reason I have this hammer is to strike the stone with it," Arden said, giving the necromancer a small smile. "Anyone care to tell me what will happen to the stone when I hit it?"

"It will shatter?" the redheaded girl asked.

"Will it?" Arden tapped the hammer on the anvil twice to get the feel for it then raised it over his head.

"NO!" Rathsmom shouted as he dove towards the anvil, only to bounce off of the invisible barrier inside of the summoning circle. He let out an inarticulate scream as the hammer struck the stone and bounced off. Dropping to his knees, Rathsmom grabbed his head with both hands before falling over onto the floor where he lay, twitching.

"Well, what do you know!" Arden said cheerfully. "The stone didn't break. Can anyone explain why?" He paused for an answer, looking even to Poquah who remained silent. "Oh, come on! What happens when you strike an ordinary gemstone with a hammer?"

"It shatters," the girl quickly answered.

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"Why does it shatter?" Arden prompted.

"Oh! I know!" the blond boy piped up. "The crystalline lattice absorbs the kinetic energy until the structure suffers a catastrophic failure. Once that happens, there's a cascading effect where the structure will fail along multiple stress points, releasing the energy in such a manner as to cause the gem to virtually explode."

"Close enough," Arden replied, leaning on the hammer. "Now, why didn't it explode?"

"The sympathetic circle," the curly haired youth said. "That's why Rathsmoan cried out like that. His circle is about twenty times the size of the one on the anvil. That means that anything you do to the gem directly is only going to have one-twentieth the effect on Rathsmoan."

"Right. In other words, even though I hit this stone with far more than enough power to shatter any ordinary stone, it's unscathed because of the energy differential created by the sympathetic channel." He nodded to the curly haired boy. "What else has happened to the stone?"

The boy stepped closer to the anvil and studied it for a moment before giving Arden a wide-eyed look. "It's absorbed the energy!"

"That's right!" Arden said, raising his voice for the entire class to hear. "Each time I hit this stone," he stated, raising the hammer and slamming it down onto the gem, causing Rathsmoan to scream out, "the stone absorbs more energy." Again he struck the stone, causing Rathsmoan to cry out.

"Stop it!" Sheila shouted, as she grabbed his arm. "Stop it! You're torturing him!"

"No I'm not! I'm fulfilling my promise while teaching these kids a valuable lesson," Arden replied, prying her hands from his arm. "I can't stop now. Either I release him, or he's going to be like this, *in pain*, for a very long time!"

The horrified vixen looked over at Rathsmoan as he lay twitching on the ground, foaming at the mouth and then back over at Arden. "You monster!" she shouted as she turned and ran for the door.

Arden started to go after her but instead turned and, with all his might, slammed the hammer down onto the stone, causing the handle to shatter as the head ricocheted off and disappeared in a pile of scrap metal. The force of the strike had literally bounced Rathsmoan off the floor several inches as he continued to twitch, oblivious to any further pain. Arden turned and grabbed a much larger hammer and, using both hands, slammed it down onto the stone with all his might, shattering the stone.

Rathsmoan cried out once more as there was a bright flash, then both summoning

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circles were filled with flame. "Now's where the sympathetic magic combines with the channeling runes," Arden shouted at the top of his lungs. "The energy released from the gem is fed into the summoning circle, where it's now being channeled back into the sympathetic circle and back again, creating a loop. The feedback loop is sufficient to break the spell, while at the same time, the channeling effect will insure that his soul can only go into the summoning circle." Seconds later, the flames vanished as quickly as they came, leaving the charred form of a body lying on the sand in the circle.

"You killed him," someone muttered.

"No. He was already dead," Arden replied.

The red headed girl angrily faced him, her hands balled into fists. "You said you were going to break the spell."

"I did," Arden replied with an impish grin.

"You bastard! How cou---" the girl started, but stopped as she heard a groan coming from the circle.

Everyone turned to see large chunks of charred ash drop away from Rathsmo as he sat up with a groan. "What the hell just happened to me?" he asked, coughing as he inhaled some soot.

Arden stepped over, reached out and gave him a hand, helping him to his feet. "Welcome back," Arden said as he picked up a nearby barrel, effortlessly lifted it up, and then dumped the contents on Rathsmo, who cried out in shock. "Was that a little cold?"

Rathsmo stood, shivering from the cold dousing as he sputtered incoherently. "Cold? That was freezi..." The necromancer stopped, his eyes wide open as he realized what he was feeling. "I'm cold? I'm cold!" He ran over and touched Arden's face. "You're warm!" Laughing, the man hugged himself and shivered. "I can feel the air against my skin! I'm alive again!"

"You're better than that," Arden said, reaching down next to the anvil and picking up a polished square of metal and handing it to the man.

Rathsmo looked in the mirror and froze, stunned at what he saw. Slowly his hand rose to his face and touched the smooth skin before he turned his gaze to his hands. "I'm--I'm young again?" he asked, looking up at Arden.

"Yep," the scarred man replied. "I'll bet Lakash didn't tell you that part, did he?" He chuckled as the un-dead man shook his head. "When the amulet grants a wish, it always renews the person making the wish, returning them to the prime of their

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youth. Once the spell was broken, you were returned to your original, youthful body." He reached out and squeezed the man's shoulder gently. "He wasn't offering you anything you wouldn't have gotten when the spell was broken, when he made that deal back on the boat. He was just using you."

Rathsmon lunged forwards, wrapping his arms around Arden in a hug. "Thank you! I don't know how I can ever thank you!"

"Ummm," Arden replied somewhat embarrassed as he glanced at the others in the room. "Actually, if you put some clothes on, I'll call it even, OK?"

The necromancer stepped backwards and looked down, realizing for the first time that he was naked. He blushed and hastily took a robe that was offered by a student. "Thank you," he repeated, his eyes tearing with joy.

"You're welcome." Turning to the class, Arden nodded. "All right. Class dismissed. For extra credit, someone take Rathsmon to the baths and see that he's taken care of." He watched as the students filtered out of the room, excitedly talking amongst themselves as they left.

Poquah walked over to Arden and frowned. "None of that was necessary, was it?"

"Huh?" Arden grunted as he cocked an eye in the elf's direction. "All right," he admitted with a sheepish grin. "You're right. I could have done it without all the hustle."

The Imir's frown deepened. "Then why did you put him through all of that?"

"Two reasons, really," Arden replied, as he scrubbed the pattern from the anvil's surface with a metal spike, destroying the enchantment. "First was to teach the students a lesson about sympathetic magic, channeling, and its uses."

"Right. And the second?" Poquah prompted.

"To teach them a lesson about making a deal with demons," Arden stated flatly. "All of them are going to be tempted to make a deal sometime in the future. I put Rathsmon through a living hell to turn him human again. I could have done it without almost any pain, but if I had, they would have had an example of someone getting out of a bargain with little to no cost. This way, any time one of them thinks about making a bargain, they'll remember what happened to him, and think twice."

"Indeed," the elf replied flatly. "So his attempt to kill you on the boat had no effect on your decision to inflict this upon him?"

"Oh, I won't go so far as to say that," Arden replied, tossing the spike away into the same pile of scrap the hammer head had flown into. "Let's just say that it's more like

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the frosting on the cake. Makes for a nice topping, but without the cake, it loses its appeal."

Poquah cocked an eyebrow at Arden and nodded. "Indeed."

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Sheila lay curled up on the bed, hugging the pillows as she cried quietly into them. Her ear turned towards the door automatically as someone knocked on it, but she ignored it, burying her muzzle further into the pillows. A minute later, another knock came, this time louder and more insistent. "Go away!" The vixen shouted, trying to curl up even smaller on the bed.

"Sheila!" a strange voice called out from the other side of the door. "Open up, please."

"Go away!" the vixen cried out, throwing one of the pillows at the door.

Again came the insistent knock. "Sheila! It's Rathsmo! Please! Open the door!"

"Rathsmo?" the vixen muttered quietly, not quite believing what she'd heard. Rolling her feet off of the bed, she got up and waddled to the door. "This had better not be some kind of cheap-assed trick, Arden, or I'll skin you alive!" Yanking the bolt back on the door, she opened it to see a small, bookish young man in his early twenties wearing a plain, brown monks robe. "Rathsmo? Is that really you?"

"Indeed it is," the small man replied with a broad smile.

Sheila's hands shot up to cover her mouth as she gaped at the man for a second before she reached out and embraced him. "You're alive! You're really alive!"

"Yes, I'm really alive now," he replied, cautiously giving her a hug back, suddenly uncomfortable at the closeness. "May I come in, please?" he asked, pulling himself away.

"What? Oh, sure!" she replied, stepping back into the room so he could enter. "So this is the real you?"

"Yes, it is," he replied, sitting down in one of the two chairs by a small table which had a tea set on it. "At least it's how I looked when I joined the monastery."

Sheila moved to sit in the chair opposite from him. "I'm glad you made it. After seeing what Arden was doing to you, I was sure he was out to destroy you."

Rathsmo shook his head. "Destroy? No. Hurt, yes. However, I think I know his

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reasons and I can't blame him for them."

"Bullshit," the vixen spat. "There's no reason for him to have tortured you like that. There's no excuse. Period!"

"That's where you're wrong," the man replied somberly. "During the river boat journey here, you were in your cabin so you didn't see it, but I was going to kill Arden. Only he knew what I was up to and took steps to prevent it." He paused as the information sank in. "Of course, I don't think that's the only reason." The small man shrugged as he twiddled the end of his belt between his fingers. "I think he was using it as a lesson to the students."

"What the hell kind of lesson is that?" the horrified vixen asked.

"Interesting you should phrase it that way." He gave her an impish smile. "I'll lay odds that nine out of ten of those students will some day cut a deal with a demon for some sort of service. I think that was Arden's way of making them realize that the cost of getting out of such a deal can be far worse than anything you could get in trade." His eyes glazed over as he lost himself in some memory for a second before they focused back on the vixen. "To be honest, that pain was small penance for some of the things I've done since I came to this world."

"I don't know," Sheila replied, chewing on her lower lip.

"Sheila," the monk said, reaching out to take her hand. "Please. Don't blame him. He did what I wanted, and I wouldn't have it any other way." He arched his eyebrows and nodded. "Please?"

The vixen smiled. "All right. Since that's what you want, then I guess I can't hold it against him." She released his hand and nodded. "So what will you do with yourself now?"

The small man shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Poquah indirectly implied that Ruddygore might keep me around to act as an instructor. I might also take on the duties of maintaining his library."

Sheila's brows furrowed as she listened to him. "It doesn't sound to me like that's what you want to do."

"I don't know," he replied, shaking his head. "I entered the monastery with a conviction that I was following Christ's teaching. That everything I had read in the Bible was the truth. Since I've come here I've learned much that has made me question my faith, but at the same time, it's somehow managed to reassure me about certain things as well. I no longer blindly follow those writings, but I do see the truth in some of it." He looked down at the simple robes he wore and then smiled at the vixen. "I'm almost thinking that, after all this time, I'm finally about to start down the

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path that will lead me to true enlightenment."

"Really?" the vixen asked, cocking an ear in his direction. "And what's your first step?"

"I think I shall go visit the witch, Huspbreth," he stated, noting her confused look. "Yes, I know. When you think of witches, you think of evil women, flying on brooms or standing around a caldron, muttering evil spells. Well, you're half right. Plenty of witches use caldrons, fly on brooms and other such things, but some of them are actually good witches. Huspbreth's coven considers themselves to be the daughters of Eve, who was cast out of Eden. They're good people who seek to do good in the world. If anyone in this world can get me started on the path, it will be her."

Sheila smiled. "That's great, Rathsmon. That's really great. I'm so glad to hear you're ready to start a new life."

The small man nodded. "Well, if you'll excuse me," he said standing. "I wanted to come by and make sure you were all right. Some of the students said you were upset when you ran out."

"I'm fine," the vixen replied, standing also, "now that I know you're OK."

"Good. Now if you'll excuse me," he said, giving her a small bow, "I must return to my students and see that today's lesson isn't lost on them."

Sheila escorted him to the door and closed it behind him. She then turned and walked back over to the bed and lay down. "I don't know," she whispered to herself. "I just don't know." Taking a pillow, she again curled up with it between her legs and tried to go to sleep.

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The ornate carriage, pulled by four Clydesdale horses, made its way through the pre-dawn morning as it rolled down the winding dirt road that lead away from Castle Terindell. Less than an hour out from the castle an odd, heavy fog seemed to engulf the road and all of the surrounding area, shrouding it from view, even to those in the carriage. The fog, thicker than what London often encounters, seemed to cling to the ground in such a way that the horses seemed to be splashing in some murky water as they marched along. After several minutes of this, the driver of the carriage called the horses to a stop.

Poquah climbed down from the front as the driver locked the simple wooden brakes. With a practiced motion he let the steps down as he opened the door, holding it so the occupants could exit. Ruddygore was first, managing to somehow fit his immense bulk through the door without help of a crowbar. Next came Sheila, who

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accepted a hand from the elf as she stepped down the stairs. Last was Arden, who jumped down to the ground, causing the carriage to lurch, despite the extra heavy duty springs which had been installed.

"Think you got the soup thick enough?" Arden asked as the carriage vanished into the fog.

"It is as thick as it needs to be," the sorcerer replied as he started walking across a smooth, grassy field. In the distance, the low moan of a foghorn could be heard. "It's necessary to cover the arrival of the ferry."

"I suppose," Arden commented as he walked along behind Sheila, watching to make sure she didn't stumble in the dark, "assuming this isn't the only patch of fog you have about."

Ruddygore stopped and shot him a scathing look. "I managed to keep the secret this far by not making stupid mistakes."

"Just an observation," Arden replied, shrugging off the comment. "Is this thing much farther?"

The sorcerer shook his head. "No. In fact, we should be seeing the lights soon." True to his words, several lights faded into view as a large, paddle-wheeled riverboat pulled into view. No steam engine drove this boat, though. Instead, the regular sound of a drum could be heard along with the splash of oars, which drove the boat out of the fog. A series of staccato beats from the drum brought the oars to a halt as the boat settled against the grass. The boarding ramp dropped, landing noisily on the grass. "Right on time," the big man commented, pleased with himself. "Now, if everyone will quickly board, we can be off."

"I hope you don't mind a few extra passengers," came a voice from the fog.

"Who's there?" Ruddygore demanded, summoning a light that failed to show anyone in the fog. The mist swirled and appeared to get thicker before it suddenly dissipated, revealing Lucifer and the angel who had appeared to Arden, standing before them. "Lucifer? What do you need with the ferry?"

"Throckmorten, my old friend," the devil said with a smile as he strode confidently forward. "Surely you realize that I'm not permitted to step foot on where our boy must go?"

"What?" The big man turned to Arden. "What's he talking about?"

Lucifer feigned surprise, holding his hand over his heart. "Oh, he didn't tell you?" He turned to Arden. "You didn't tell him where you were taking him?"

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Arden simply shrugged. "He didn't ask."

"What's he talking about, Arden?" the sorcerer demanded. "Where are we supposed to be going?"

"We're going to the genesis point," Arden casually declared, stepping towards the ramp. "Now if you don't mind, I think we best get a move on."

The large sorcerer looked annoyed and confused. "The genesis point? What's that?" he demanded.

Arden sighed, as if dealing with a small child. He turned to the sorcerer and asked, "Where was God before he created everything?"

"I don't know," Ruddygore replied. "That's something that's been debated for a long time."

"Heaven?" Sheila ventured.

"No, not heaven," Arden replied with a smile. "God created the heavens and the earth, so He had to be somewhere else. Where He was is the genesis point. When God created all of creation, He did it from a point *outside* of everything, a point that is, in fact, in the middle of the sea of dreams. Of course, that's not really accurate, since that's only the point where creation occurred, and not where God was. It is, however, the central point for all creation. It's where the origin of life, the universe and everything is. The sea of dreams is the fabric that ties everything together, and it all leads to that one point. And that is where we're going."

"No shit?" Sheila asked, somewhat awe struck.

"No shit," Arden chuckled before looking at Ruddygore. "You'll have two celestials aboard to help navigate our way there and back. You'll be the first human since the dawn of time to see the point of creation. "

"Since the dawn of time?" Ruddygore asked, confused, "Who else has seen it?"

"Think about it," Arden said with a sly smile. "The first humans, created by God himself, and placed in a paradise that no human has ever been allowed to set foot in again. His grand experiment with humanity for the first time. The template for all the rest of creation, so pure and powerful that every universe has a mythos built around it."

"Eden," the sorcerer whispered. "You're talking about the Garden of Eden."

Arden nodded. "That's right. That's where we're going, the *first* Eden. That's where

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my quest will end."

"No!" the sorcerer roared. "You're insane if you think I'm going to take you to Eden. It's forbidden!"

A calming hand came down upon Ruddygore's shoulder, causing him to turn and look into the gentle eyes of the angel. "There's no need to worry." He smiled and shook his head as the sorcerer started to speak. "There *is no* need to worry." Releasing the sorcerer's shoulders, he turned and took Sheila's arm, escorting her towards the ferry. "Hello again, Sheila. I hope you're doing well?"

"I'm doing wonderful," she replied dreamily.

"Hey!" Arden grumbled. "That's my girl you got there, buddy!" he said as he followed them onto the boat.

"You go get 'em, tiger!" Lucifer said, urging Arden on. He turned to Ruddygore and slapped the big man across the back. "You coming?"

Ruddygore blinked and looked down at the devil. "Do I have a choice?"

"No," Lucifer said, laughing as he started up the ramp.

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Your Dogma Ran Over My Karma

"Anyone in here?" Sheila asked as she opened the door to Arden's cabin. Peeking in, She saw him sitting on the floor in the corner, his legs crossed, reading a book he was holding in his hands. "There you are!" the vixen declared as she entered the room carrying two large plates heaped with food. "I've been looking all over for you."

"And see what it got you?" Arden asked with a smile as he closed the book. "All that searching when you could have just come here in the first place."

"It's not like I knew this is where you were," she argued as she closed the door with her foot. "I was waiting in the dining area for you to come by, but you never did so I decided to bring you something to eat." She sat the two plates down on the bed within easy reaching distance and sat down. Using the claws of one hand, she picked up a long strip of meat and popped it into her mouth. "You should try the roast beef kind of stuff. It's pretty good."

Arden just smiled and turned his attention back to the book. "Thanks, but I'll pass."

"Geez," Sheila mumbled before hastily swallowing the meat, "Aren't you hungry? You've not eaten anything in days!"

"Actually, I'm starving," he admitted giving the plate a wistful glance, "but that wouldn't do much more than whet my appetite. I don't smell any cattle onboard, so I doubt there's enough to really satisfy me. Besides, I'm trying to watch my weight."

Sheila let out a loud bark of laughter. "You? Watching your weight? You're the size of a fricken football field! How can you even suggest you're watching your weight?"

Arden cocked an eyebrow in her direction. "Have you ever seen an overweight dragon?"

"No," the vixen replied, rolling her eyes.

"Exactly." Arden closed the book and set it aside. "All joking aside, Sheila, if I were to gorge myself now it would take a week at least to digest it, and I don't have the time to spend doing that. Not that Ruddygore has the facilities to deal with what logically follows, either."

The vixen scrunched her snout up in disgust at the thought. "Oh god! Don't remind me. I can still see those poor people you bombed outside of the cave." She pushed the plate away, no longer hungry.

"Actually, considering what I could have done, I was pretty easy on them," he replied with a chuckle. Arden opened his mouth to speak, but paused instead,

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cocking his head to one side as if listening.

"What's up?" Sheila asked, also listening for some unusual sound.

"No oars," the big man replied as he rose to his feet. "We've stopped."

The pregnant female heaved herself to her feet and followed him to the door. "You mean we're there already?"

"No," he replied, opening the door and stepping through. "It's way too early." He paused to look both ways down the length of the ship and spotted movement towards the bow. Turning, he made his way forwards where he saw Lucifer and the angel standing near the ramp on the front of the ship, which had been lowered until it was horizontal with the water. "What's going on here?"

"Ah! There he his," Lucifer announced with a wave of his hand in Arden's direction. "The boy wonder himself."

"Hello, Arden," the angel said with a small nod. "We need to talk."

Arden squinted at the two. "About what?"

Lucifer let out a derisive snort. "About your body. Or more precisely, about how you need a new one."

"A new body?" Arden echoed, shaking his head as he approached the duo. "No. I don't need a new body. This one is more than sufficient."

"You know that's not true," the angel stated, his expression sad. "It's dying, Arden. The wounds you have, combined with the ordeal you've been through, have weakened you greatly. Aged as that body is, it cannot recover."

Arden shrugged his shoulders. "If we were talking about the long term, here, maybe, but we're not. It only has to last long enough to get to Eden, at which time Lakash has to give me full access to the power or he forfeits the bargain. Once I've got access to his power, my true strengths and weaknesses won't apply."

"That's what I said," Lucifer complained as he moved to stand next to Arden. "But no! Choir boy here doesn't think that you're good enough to take out the guardian."

"You're not," he angel declared. "You can't even step foot on the island in your current form. Dragons are an unnatural creature and as such are forbidden from entering Eden."

"I may not be able to set foot in Eden, but that doesn't mean that I can't fly over it," Arden said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Once I have my powers back, I'll be

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able to perfect my form again. I'm quite good in the air, you know."

"Don't you think I know that!" the angel shouted angrily. "Don't you think the creator took that into account when he made the guardian? It's even more lethal in the air than on the ground. You don't stand a chance even with the full assets of Lakash behind you!"

"So what are you suggesting?" Arden demanded angrily as his hands dropped to his sides, balled into fists. "Are you going to make me a new body? One that's acceptable?"

"Yah, right!" the devil grumbled, rolling his eyes. "His ass-holiness here can't use his powers, and there's no way I'm going to do it. Even if I did, you'd be tainted merchandise and still unable to step foot on dry land."

"Right," Arden said, nodding to Lucifer. "So what's the alternative? Have Ruddygore do it? He's not capable of that level of magic. So what other options are there?" He stared at the angel for a minute, his eyes boring into the divine creature relentlessly. After a minute, Arden's expression changed from anger to surprise and then back to anger. "No! Oh no! There's no way in hell you're going to get me to do that!"

"Do what?" Sheila asked as she stepped around the corner.

"Karmic rebirth," the angel stated with a nod. "It's your only hope, Arden. You have no choice but to go through with this. We will not proceed beyond this point until you've done it."

Arden balled his fists and snarled, "No! I won't do this and you can't make me!"

"See? I told you," Lucifer said as he shook his head. "I told you he wouldn't do it willingly."

The angel frowned and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Arden. But you have no choice."

"So what? Are you going to force me to do it? Is that it?" he demanded, taking a defensive stance against the angel. "Are you finally going to show your true colors?"

"No," the angel said with a heavy sigh and a heavy heart. "I could never raise a hand against you."

It took just a second for Arden to realize the significance of the words before he was lifted into the air as his swords clattered to the deck, the belt they'd been tucked into expertly severed. Moments later he found himself flying through the air out over the railings and towards the sea of dreams.

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"Arden!" Sheila screamed as she ran towards the railing.

A crimson glow flickered around Arden as he stopped inches above the water. Lucifer cursed and punched downwards with his hand, sending an enormous fist of magic that dropped from the heavens onto Arden's back and driving him into the water with a splash. The devil screamed in pain as the magic fist vanished in the water as well as the portion of his real arm that matched it. There was an eruption of light and water as the enormous frame of the dragon burst momentarily from the inky liquid, its horrendous scream of pain shattering several of the windows on the ferry and sending Sheila to her knees.

At first, Sheila didn't understand what was happening, but then she realized that the water was eating away at the dragon, as if it had been dropped into a vat of sulfuric acid. As she watched, the scales and flesh melted away, showing bone and internal organs, which were also being slowly consumed. Her heart skipped a beat as the dragon ceased its writhing, looked towards her and reached out with a skeletal arm that crumbled into nothingness. A second later, the head vanished into the murky waters with nary a ripple.

"No!" the vixen shouted before turning to the two celestial entities. "You assholes! You killed him!"

Lucifer smiled. "Hell, yah! I've been wanting to kill that son of a bitch ever since he started calling me Lucy!"

"It's not what you think, Sheila," the angel hurriedly intervened, moving to physically block her sight of the devil. "This will give Arden the best possible chance of success."

"If he makes the cut," Lucifer commented, stepping around his counterpart.

The angel growled. "You're not helping."

Lucifer held up the stump where his hand had been. "I'd give you the finger, but I'm a little short at the moment," he commented then turned towards Sheila. "Listen up, bitch. I'm sick of prancing around and playing Mr. Nice Guy. That's for twinkle toes here to do. Our best chance at ensuring that Lakash gets his ass reamed is for your boy to go through Karmic Rebirth. Yes, he might not come back. Yes he might come back but have his mind trashed by the experience. However, if he does make it back and with his brain intact, his chances of succeeding will have improved by at least a factor of twenty times what it was, so you'll excuse me if I don't give a fuck right now about your pathetic little feelings on the subject. Now if you'll excuse me," he growled, glancing at the angel and back to Sheila, "I'm going to go regenerate this hand before I decide to kill something else that I find incessantly annoying!"

Sheila watched the devil walk away for a second before turning back to the angel.

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"You bastard!" she growled. "You knew he didn't want to do this, yet you still did it to him!"

"I did nothing," the celestial being replied. "I'm not allowed to interfere. I can only stand by and observe. I could never force Arden to do anything he didn't want to."

"No. You just played good angel, bad angel with super prick there to distract him so that he could toss Arden's ass into the drink!" Using the railing, she pulled herself back up to her feet. "If you're an example of what it is to be an angel, then I don't want any part of what you're selling!" Angrily she turned and stomped away without pause and disappeared around the corner.'

The angel sighed before picking up the swords that had lain forgotten on the deck. He walked over to the railing and leaned on the railing as he studied his reflection in the water and wondered if he'd made a mistake.

"Aren't you going to follow him?" Ruddygore asked as he stepped out of the shadows on the far side of the ferry.

The angel shook his head. "I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?" the large sorcerer demanded as he stormed over to the angel. Grabbing the creature by the arm, the sorcerer spun him around. "I was told that you'd go with Arden to ensure he came back! So why are you still standing here?"

The angel yanked his arm free and stepped away. "It's not that I don't want to. I can't! I wasn't supposed to heal Sheila. If I follow Arden, they won't let me return."

"What?" the large man spat in surprise. "That's crazy. You acted within the rules."

The angel sighed and leaned back against the railing. "I may have acted within the rules, but I overstepped the bounds of my authority." He turned his head and looked down the corridor where Sheila had vanished. "In case you hadn't noticed, Heaven's been a little tight about allowing miracles. I shouldn't have acted without getting permission from above, first."

Ruddygore pressed the palms of his hands against the sides of his head and grimaced. "This is insane. I knew your kind were on a short leash, but that's ridiculous! Who's bright idea was that?"

"The voice," replied the celestial creature with noticeable disdain.

"The voice?" Ruddygore squinted at the angelic figure. "You mean the Metatron? That moron, Enoch, is behind this micromanagement crap?"

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"Unfortunately yes," the celestial replied with a nod. "I don't understand what he's doing. He's tying our hands in such a way that it's almost impossible to battle hell."

Ruddygore gave a derisive snort. "It just goes to show what happens when you elevate a mortal to that kind of power."

The angel smiled and chuckled. "And yet here we are, in the process of trying to elevate another mortal to such a position in the hopes that he'll pick up the slack."

"Still," the big man said with a sigh as he pulled out a stogie and lit it. "Knowing the repercussions of your actions, I'm surprised you didn't wait until after the rebirth to heal the vixen."

"I couldn't run the risk," he replied solemnly. "Do you remember what Arden said when Lakash told him to use the lamp to heal her?"

Ruddygore nodded. "Yes. He said something about destroying Lakash, and to hell with everyone else."

The angel glanced nervously about before continuing in a conspiratorial hushed whisper. "It goes well beyond just destroying Lakash. Arden has stolen knowledge from him that, if used while he's in Eden, would be capable of undoing creation." For a moment he shivered as if from a cold breeze, though the air hadn't stirred. "I saw one of the possible futures for him where he spoke the original words of creation in reverse, destroying everything and everyone. I couldn't risk allowing that future to come to pass."

The sorcerer Ruddygore, a creature who was once human but having transcended that state thousands of years ago, stood staring at the angel, slack jawed in horror at something he'd never imagined could happen. "You're telling me that he knows the divine language of creation?"

The angel nodded. "He's had an open pipe to the hive mind that is the dragon for some time. That mind is directly slaved to Lakash's will. Arden has been picking through his memories of the earliest days of creation almost at will without Lakash realizing it. As Lakash was one of the Seraphim and guardian of the vale, he witnessed all subsequent acts of creation after the first Eden. Although we celestials are forbidden from ever speaking the words, Lakash knows the tongue well and through him, Arden now knows it. Of course, if he uses it, he'll be consumed by the power he'll have to channel, but I don't think he would have cared at that point."

"This is insane," the big man muttered as he grasped for the railing, suddenly feeling lightheaded. "What's to keep him from using that to make himself a god? With that knowledge, he could even replace the Metatron and command the very armies of Heaven. No! Forget that! He could force an end to the war completely and control

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both Heaven and Hell! What am I saying? There's nothing he couldn't do."

"In theory, I suppose your right," the celestial agreed. "However, in practice, I don't think so. Right now, he's being judged by the maker and I don't think that the maker will be sending him back if he's going to cause more damage than good." He pursed his lips and thought for a second before giving his head a shake again. "No. Arden is too honor bound to do something like that. Oh, don't get me wrong. He's going to shaft Lakash good when he gets the chance, but I don't believe that he'll do something that extreme."

"No!" Ruddygore shouted, slamming his fist down on the railing. "Ever since I got roped into this thing by Lakash, I've had the bad feeling that it's been spinning out of control. First he shows up as a dragon, then this crap with the vixen getting hurt and him facing Lakash down. Now you're telling me that he's a loose cannon that could destroy all of creation, and you expect me to just sit back and watch?"

"You have no choice," the angel stated in a hard, cold voice. "Your part in this show is to observe. Should you try to interfere in any way with Arden or Sheila, I swear by all that's holy that I will destroy you, rules or no rules." He paused and gave a somewhat sinister smile. "That's assuming that Lucifer doesn't beat me to it." The smile vanished as he turned somber. "Look, it's out of our hands now. Once the maker has judg---" The words faded, unspoken as he slowly turned to look out over the water. "He's coming," the angel whispered.

Without warning, the ferry shifted in the water, as if suddenly drawn sideways by an unseen current. A soft glow filled the water around the ferry as it slowly began to rotate as if caught in the middle of a vortex. The stronger the current became, the brighter the water became until the illumination spilling forth was as bright if not brighter than daylight. A wave of water cascaded over the bow of the ferry near where Ruddygore clung to the railing for support, his celestial companion stood calmly beside him, unaffected by the movements of the ship. The wave, which had completely submerged the ramp of the ferry, retreated leaving a large oval shaped ball of water on the deck in its wake. A second later, the light faded along with the current, leaving the ferry once again sitting calmly on the dark, placid water.

"What the hell is going on?" Sheila demanded as she made her way around the corner only to come to a screeching halt as she spied the blob on the deck. "And what the hell is that?"

"That, my dear," said the angel as he walked over to the blob, "is Arden." Reaching out with one finger, he pricked the surface of the sphere causing it to vanish, releasing the water in a wave that went everywhere. A pale white form with long white hair dropped to the deck of the ferry with an audible thump. "Arden!" the celestial shouted as he smacked the man across the face.

Arden's eyes flew open as he gagged and then coughed up water for several seconds.

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Gasping for breath, he looked up at the angel with pale pink eyes for a moment before letting out a long, keening howl as he curled up into a ball, hugging himself. His body shook as the long, sorrowful wailing slowly changed to wracked sobs of grief.

The angel reached down and scooped the albino into his arms and walked back towards where the staterooms were, passing by Sheila without a word or a second glance.

"What's wrong with him?" she demanded as she hurried to follow. "Why's he crying like that?" The vixen was shocked and surprised when a hand grabbed her arm and prevented her from following the angel into the room. She turned to see Lucifer holding her arm. "Let go of me!"

"Leave him be," the devil commanded, releasing her arm. "He must come to grips with his grief on his own. You can't help him now. Not yet."

"Grief?" the vixen echoed. "What grief?"

"The grief of being alive again," Lucifer replied, uncharacteristically compassionate after his earlier outburst.

Sheila shook her head. "I don't understand. Why would he grieve at being alive?"

"Think about it," he replied in a low voice. "Arden has been in the presence of God. He may even have touched the face of God. And now he's back here," he paused to wave a hand to encompass the ferry, "back in the body of a mere mortal."

"Look. I understand that there's some significance to having met 'God', but I don't understand why that would make him grieve at coming back here." She ran her right hand through her hair and shook her head. "I just don't get it."

For a moment, there was a look in Lucifer's eye that gave Sheila a sudden sensation of incredible sadness. "Being with the Maker is like being inside of joy itself. There's no drug that can give you the same high, no sex as wonderful, no experience that can encompass your entire being with such perfection of existence as when you're in the presence of God. To touch Him, to actually become a part of Him, even for just an instant, is something that there simply are no words for." A lone tear formed at the corner of one eye as he stared at something unseen in the darkness. "He's been there. He's felt the ultimate sensation of joy that any being can know, and now he's back here, trapped inside the mere body of a human being, with all the flaws and imperfections that implies." Lucifer turned to look Sheila directly in the eyes. "If Arden succeeds in his quest, he will never again feel that joy. It will transform him in such a way that, unlike you or any other mortal who may make it to Heaven, he will never again know God's presence until after Armageddon, when we all will stand

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before Him and be judged."

Sheila was struck speechless as she stared at the devil incarnate who, rather than being the powerful and intimidating creature she'd feared, but instead looked like nothing more than a sad old man. In that instant, she realized that he wasn't speaking so much about Arden as he was about himself, and in doing so she had an epiphany into the nature of the game, and into the players. "I think I understand," she said in a hoarse whisper.

Lucifer's expression hardened as he glared at the vixen. "Don't you dare pity me, bitch! I don't need your pity, nor do I want it. If anyone needs it, it's that worthless excuse for a boyfriend of yours. Anyone who would throw away their chance at being with the Creator is a fool, and I have nothing but contempt for fools."

"I don't have pity for you," she softly replied, allowing his anger to wash over her without touching her. "But I do have sympathy for your loss."

"Loss" he demanded, his anger unabated. "You want loss? I'll give you loss. Some day in the future, I'm going to destroy all that you cherish and make your life a living hell, and when that day comes you'll actually be stupid enough to thank me. One year to the day, you'll realize what happened and what you lost. Then and only then will you know something of *my* loss!" With that he turned and stormed away.

Sheila nervously swallowed as she shook her head and then turned to the doorway that Arden and the angel had passed through. She knocked lightly on the door before opening it. "Is it safe to come in?" she asked, sticking her head through the door.

"Sure," the angel replied as he covered Arden with a sheet. He walked over to the table in the corner, picked up the two chairs and carried them over near the bed. He held one for Sheila as she sat down before he also sat. "He's asleep right now."

Sheila studied the face somewhat confused. She recognized it as Arden, but there was something different about it that she couldn't identify. She reached out to brush a strand of hair from his face and gasped. "He's burning up!"

"He's adapting to his new body," the angel explained. "It was created by nothing more than the divine will of God, who breathed life into it. He is as Adam was in the first Eden. Pure in body and spirit."

Sheila cocked an ear in the angel's direction. "Adam was an albino?"

"The first one was," he replied with a smirk. "It was a prototype. The Maker hadn't gotten around to tossing skin and hair pigmentation into the mix. Subsequent versions did have that. It cut the sunburn factor down immensely."

"Tell me, is what Lucifer told me true?" the vixen asked without looking. "Did

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Arden actually touch---God?"

The celestial shook his head. "I don't know. He was certainly in the Creator's presence. Beyond that, I don't know."

For several long minutes, the two sat together without speaking. Finally, Sheila broke the silence. "How about afterwards. Is it true that Arden will come back to me when all this is over?" She turned and studied the angel.

"If you ask him to," he replied with a nod, "then he will return to you. It will be your choice. However," he paused for a moment before continuing, "I must warn you that it won't be like before. Arden the polar bear cannot return. There are too many loose ends that remain, loose ends that will complicate his life and yours. It's even possible that it would put you and your children's lives at risk."

Sheila blinked at that unexpected news. "If he won't come back as a polar bear, what will he come back as?"

"I can't say," the angel replied with a sheepish grin. "It will be a form you are familiar with, so Arden will not be a complete stranger to you. But you will have to come to terms with accepting Arden for being Arden, and ignore the shell he must wear."

"Jesus! Think you can get any more cryptic?" the vixen grumbled. "How the hell am I supposed to make a decision with all that double talk?"

"You must follow your heart," he replied. "You are a good person, Sheila Vixen, with a good heart. You should let it lead your way."

She shook her head. "I probably shouldn't ask him to come back," she decided. "It wouldn't be fair."

The angel cocked his head and shot her a quizzical look. "Fair?"

"Yah, fair," she repeated. "It would be kind of rude for him to come back and find me in a convent."

"A convent?" he spat, stunned at the very thought. "Why on earth would you join a convent?"

"I don't know," she replied with a shrug. "To undo the damage. You know, to have a chance at getting into heaven."

He turned to face her directly. "What makes you think you're going to hell?"

Sheila just shrugged. "That's what all those bible thumping evangelists keep saying."

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I'm just another dirty harlot who's living a life of sin and going to hell. It's not like there's any question about the existence of God any more. I may not have met him, but after meeting you and Satan, I'd have to be pretty dense not to pick up on that little fact!"

The angel let out a belly laugh that startled Sheila. "Oh, that's good! Oh, that's just precious."

More annoyed than anything, Sheila frowned at the angel. "What the hell's so funny about that?"

"Those bible thumpers you talk about are far more likely to go to hell than you are," he said, wiping a tear from his eyes. "Look, it's simple: *No religion in existence has it right*. Even those who claim to follow God's word, don't. Christians are constantly ignoring Christ's teachings and referring to the Old Testament. Junior said, 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone', yet these same people are constantly casting verbal stones and judging everyone else when they're no better. They've even invented the concept of *original sin*, sins that they decided were good enough to add to the list, even though the Maker never mentioned them. Even the Muslims tend to pick and choose the teachings of Mohammad, deciding which rules they like and which ones they don't. How else can you get suicide bombers? Do you really think that Allah wants them to kill innocent men, women and children, all in His name? Every religion has people who would twist the word of God to their own meaning. Not one single religion in existence has not been perverted in one way or another over the centuries."

He leaned forwards and took Sheila's paws in his hands. "Answer me this question: In doing what you do for a living, are you harming anybody?"

"No," she replied. "But if you listen to..."

"Stop!" he interrupted. "I'm not talking about them; I'm talking about you. Do *you* believe you're harming anyone? By doing what you do for a living, are you having a negative effect on your friends, your co-workers or the people who buy your videos?"

Sheila shook her head. "No. But what about all that 'Don't covet thy neighbor's wife' stuff?"

Again the angel chuckled. "Have you ever dated a married man?"

The vixen blinked at the question. "Not intentionally."

He nodded. "And have you ever set your eyes on a man who was in a relationship, knowing that he was in a relationship, with the express intent of having sex with him

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despite his being in a relationship?"

"Hell, no!" Sheila spat. "I'm not some slut that goes around wrecking marriages! Besides, there are plenty of single guys out there."

"Exactly," he said, giving her hands a squeeze. "Covet thy neighbor's wife is all about wanting someone who's already in a relationship. Breaking those bonds which are sacred to that relationship."

"You mean like I did with Bjorn when I cheated on Arden?" she asked, looking down at her hands rather than meeting his eyes.

"No," he replied, startling her with that unexpected answer. "If anything, it was Arden who came between you and Bjorn. Not intentionally, mind you, but the fact remains that you had a relationship with Bjorn before Arden ever came along. He recognized that fact and accepted it. Otherwise, why would he have encouraged Bjorn to take a look at your relationship and decide if he was serious or not?" He paused as he watched that sink in. For a moment, he chewed on his lower lip before making a decision. "I'm going to tell you a secret, one that even Arden doesn't know."

"What kind of secret?" Sheila warily asked.

"About the love spell between you and Arden." He gave her a mischievous smile that was echoed by a twinkle in his eye as he leaned forward and whispered, "There never was a love spell."

Sheila yanked her hands away from him and shook her head. "Bullshit! Arden knew about it. Lucifer screwed it up. Hell, even Nanuk admitted to having a hand in it."

"Sheila, I can *not* lie. There was *no* love spell," he said as he folded his hands in his lap. "There was a spell, but its effects were to create a sense of curiosity between the two of you. That curiosity served to draw you together, but that was it. Any feelings other than that were your own."

The vixen shook her head. "No. That doesn't make any sense. If that's true, then why did Lucifer's breaking the spell make me hate Arden?"

"What's the opposite of curiosity in a relationship?" the angel asked, pausing for a moment before answering. "Familiarity. Familiarity breeds contempt. You suddenly went from being intrigued by Arden, to Arden being a boyfriend, or in that case, a girlfriend who'd overstayed her welcome. There was no longer a sense of discovery, a sense of newness to the relationship. The biggest problem was that instead of taking a break and getting away from each other, you were forced to stay together. Sure, there was still an attraction, even a love between the two of you, but it was

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tainted, jaded."

Sheila looked at Arden with new eyes. "So you're telling me that when I fell in love with him, it was really me and not some stupid spell?"

He nodded. "Yes. You did what you did because you loved him, just like you loved Bjorn. You were caught between two men that you loved, and you reacted the only way you knew how. You loved them both." He reached out and put his hand on her knee and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Don't you see, Sheila? You're a good person. You live life on your terms, harming nobody and doing your best to not only be happy, but also to make those around you happy. No loving god would condemn someone like you."

Sheila laughed. "So all those religion freaks who are dedicating their life to some religion are really the screw-ups?"

"Oh, no," he replied becoming quite serious. "For some people, it is a true and honest calling. There are those who follow their faith because they believe that it's the true path to enlightenment. Those will most likely go to heaven. Then there are those who entered religion with the intention of using it for personal gain, or once they had begun to rise in the structure of the church, turned away from the light and towards personal power and personal agendas. Priests who molest children and tell them they'll go to hell if they reveal their secret. Clerics who tell men they'll go to paradise if they blow themselves and a dozen innocent people to smithereens. The evangelist who claims that God speaks through him, and that God wants you to send him your money, and then spends the money on mansions, cars and other decadent pleasures. Those are the ones who will fall. They have betrayed their calling and will suffer the punishment." He stopped and shook his head as he tried to think of a way to explain it. "The simple fact is that each person is different. There is no one correct way of living for everyone. The religious texts and teachings are a guideline for living life, not an absolute law. For some, they give a stability and structure to their spiritual being and for others they're an antiquated set of rules that don't apply to today. Which will go to Heaven and which will burn will ultimately be up to the Creator on Judgment Day. Until then, each person must find their way through life as best they can."

"Judgment Day," Sheila echoed quietly. "Tell me," she whispered, "is what Lucifer said true about that?"

The celestial's brow furrowed. "I don't know. What did he say?"

"That if Arden succeeded, he'd never again be in the presence of God again until Judgment Day."

"Yes," he replied, nodding gravely. "That's true."

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She looked up at him, her eyes shimmering with wetness. "But how can that be? If he comes back to me, won't he be mortal again?"

He sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Sheila, but that's not quite how it'll work. Yes, he'll be mortal, but he won't have a soul. He'll have a spirit. Once that mortal body dies, the spirit will return to the realm from whence it came. It won't pass on to Heaven or Hell like a normal soul will."

"Wow," Sheila sighed. "Guess it really will mean till death do us part. I've always heard people talking about being with their loved ones in the afterlife, but I guess that won't happen with us."

Again the angel smiled. "It could, if you really want it to."

Sheila cocked an ear in his direction. "Huh?"

"Heaven and Hell aren't the only destination for souls," he cheerfully explained. "It's quite possible for you to go to the same place that Arden does, if you desire it. We don't hold the monopoly on the afterlife."

Sheila smiled back at him. "Great. I get to choose to be with him for eternity, or hanging with my friends."

He reached out and felt Arden's forehead. "His fever has broken. He will be fine." The angel stood and reached out to caress Sheila's cheek. "I leave him in your caring hands."

"Thank you," she said, taking his hand for a moment before releasing it.

"You're a good person, Sheila Vixen," he said as he walked to the door. "Let no one tell you differently." He stepped through the doorway, closing the hatch quietly behind himself.

Sheila scooted her chair closer to the bed as she took Arden's hand in hers. She sandwiched his hand in hers as she watched him sleep. "So tell me, who's more foolish? The fool, or the fool who marries him?"

Arden awoke with a start. The darkened room was disorienting, as was the feeling of the fur-covered arm across his chest. He glanced to the side and saw Sheila had crawled under the sheets with him and had draped her arm across his chest. It was then that he realized that he was, in fact, in a bed, which only added to his disorientation. He removed Sheila's arm from his chest, climbed out of bed and started to stand up, but quickly sat back down. It took a few moments for the room to stop spinning enough for him to try and stand again. He leaned heavily against the

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wall as he made his way to the small water closet that was attached to the stateroom and opened the door. The soft glow of a magical sphere suspended from the ceiling gave him enough light to see by, though not very clearly. He reached up and brushed his fingers across the globe, causing the light to flare to its full brightness. His eyes were squinted against the light as he turned the knob on the faucet and quickly splashed his face in the water. A quick twist of the squeaky valve stopped the flow of water.

His eyes clear of sleep, he studied his features in the mirror. Pinkish white albino eyes surrounding steel gray irises stared back at him from a familiar, yet unfamiliar, face. That face was framed by a shock of white hair that reminded him somewhat of a picture of Einstein he'd seen. He frowned as he studied the smooth, lineless skin that covered his face. It was a face that had never smiled or frowned. It was a face that had never experienced life or death. It was an ageless face, without expression or character. It was a travesty, a cosmic joke played at his expense. Angrily he lashed out at the mockery that stared back at him, shattering the mirror with his fist and sending shards flying.

Sheila woke up to the sound of shattering glass. It took her a moment to realize that Arden was no longer in bed, and another moment to realize that the bathroom door was open and the light on. She climbed out of bed and waddled over to the bathroom, worried about the sound that had awakened her. When she got to the door, she was shocked to see Arden leaning on the sink with both hands, crying. She could see the shattered mirror as well as the shards of it scattered about the cramped room. Last thing she noticed was that Arden's right hand was bleeding. "Arden! What happened?"

"If thine eyes offend thee," he said, reaching for a shard of mirror in the sink, "then pluck it out."

"NO!" Sheila screeched as she grabbed his arm, pulling it away from his face. "What do you think you're doing?" Sheila shuddered at the expression on Arden. He appeared to be looking right through her, as if she didn't exist. She felt an odd wetness on her hand and looked down to see more blood, this time coming from where he grasped the shard. Using both her hands for leverage, she forced his fist inwards so that his fingers would open. "God damn it! Drop it!"

Arden glanced down at the shard as it dropped to the floor then back up at Sheila. "It doesn't make any difference you know. It's all for nothing. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Ass up or tits up, either way it's a bust." He turned and pushed past her to get out of the cramped room.

Sheila let out a yelp of pain as she involuntarily took a step backwards onto some glass. Limping from the pain, she hobbled her way over to the bed while muttering a long string of curses.

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"You know, you really shouldn't take the lords name in vane like that," Arden muttered as he began to paint his face with his bloody hand. "Toot and tell or go to hell! Can't get in if you've still got that sin!"

"God damn it, Arden!" Sheila shouted as she yanked the glass from her foot and tossed it towards the bathroom. "What the hell has gotten in to you?"

"Into me?" he asked, looking at her as if seeing her for the first time. "I'm inside of me," he said, tapping his head. "It's just me, now. All alone." His voice faded as he turned away. "All alone. Nobody else but me." He giggled to himself and began to sing, "Well, I believe what you say when you say you don't miss nobody else but me. I believe what you say when you say you don't kiss nobody else but me."

After briefly running her hand over her foot to make sure there was no other glass imbedded in the injured appendage, Sheila climbed off the bed and limped over to Arden. She grabbed him by the shoulders, spun him around and slammed him against the wall. "Arden! Look at me!" she shouted, grabbing his chin with her free hand. "Look at me!" When she saw his eyes focus on her, she asked, "What the hell did they do to you?"

"They destroyed me," he mumbled, his eyes loosing their focus again. "They lied to me. It's all a lie, you know. Same old talk is going round and round. All the smiles are turning into frowns. When they say low and I say high. When they tell me that I better, I know it's all a lie." He focused on Sheila again and reached out with his good hand and caressed her face. "Everything they told us is a lie. Everything you know is false. None of this is real. A simulation, ones and zeros on a cosmic scale. There's no here and no now. Just you and me on this endless sea, trapped for ever and a day."

"Why? What do you mean, it's not real? What do you mean we're trapped?" the vixen demanded, taking his hand into hers. "You're not making any sense, Arden!"

"How can you make sense when the universe is chaos? Black is white and white is black. Makes it kind of hard to find the crosswalks, don't you think?" He giggled as he shoved her away. "You should have seen it! It was horrible!" he said as his face twisted in torment. "No! It was beautiful!" He shook his head and looked around with wild eyes. "Mother mooch is calling me back to her silver womb. Father of creation takes me from my stolen tomb. Seventh night the unicorn is waiting in the skies. A symptom of the universe, a love that never dies." He reached out towards something unseen. "I saw Him. The Creator. I saw the rapture. I felt the glory. It was perfect." He shook his head again. "NO! It was a lie!" he snarled before grabbing his head and crying out in pain.

Sheila lunged forwards barely in time to catch him as he fell forwards, dragging her to her knees. She wrapped her arms around him as he began to cry again. Without warning, she was knocked backwards as Arden thrashed clear of her and stood up.

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"Arden!"

"It's not fair!" he shouted towards the ceiling. "It's not fair! God damn it! Why me? Why do I have to be the one?" He snarled as he tried to pull the hair from his head and started singing again as he pounded against his forehead with his fists, "The lunatic is in my head! You raise the blade. You make the change. You re-arrange me 'til I'm sane. You lock the door and throw away the key. There's someone in my head, but it's not me!"

Sheila rolled over and with the help of a nearby chair, leveraged herself to her feet. "Arden! Please! Calm down!"

"Calm down?" Arden snarled as he spun to face Sheila. "Calm down? How can I calm down? Don't you understand? I was thrown out of Heaven! I was never given a choice! I've never had a choice! It was a lie! It was all a lie! There is no free will for you or I! Slaves to destiny are we. All choice is an illusion. It's all just one big lie!"

"I'm sorry to have to do this," Sheila mumbled as she reared back with a fist and nailed Arden in the jaw with a roundhouse punch. She let out a stream of curses as she clutched her hand to her body.

The force of the blow spun Arden around, slamming him into the wall where he slumped partway to the floor. It took a few moments for him to get his knees steady enough to stand up. He shook his head and rubbed his jaw with his hand. Slowly, his head turned towards the pregnant vixen who was cautiously examining her injured hand. "You," he muttered in a low, gravelly voice causing Sheila to look up at him. His eyes, the eyes of a predator had locked on to hers. "It was you," he growled menacingly as he shook his head to clear the cobwebs.

Sheila limped backwards as a rush of panic went through her system. "Arden, please! You've got to calm down."

"YOU!" he shouted as he lunged forwards, grabbing her by the hair on the back of her head, causing her to yelp in pain. "It was you all along, wasn't it?" he demanded. "You were the one responsible for all of this! It was you!" He pulled her forwards so that her muzzle almost touched his face and drilled his eyes into hers, ignoring her frantic attempts to get away. His expression softened as he relaxed his grip. "It really was you, wasn't it?" he asked, his eyes searching for something. His face took on the expression of a confused, small child as he let go of her hair. "You brought me back," he whispered softly as he brushed his hand along her muzzle. "Your love brought me back." He pulled back, a horrified expression on his face. "No! You're going to leave me! You don't love me! You never loved me! You're a lying, conniving bitch! All you want to do is destroy me!" Again he shook his head as he fought to control the runaway train wreck that was his mind. He cried out in pain as he dropped to his knees, his head clutched in his hands.

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Sheila dropped to her knees and gathered him into her arms, cradling him against her swollen belly. "It's all right," she whispered as she kissed the top of his head. "It's going to be all right. I'm with you now and I'm not going anywhere. I do love you and I'm not going to let you go."

Arden rocked back on his heels and looked up at her with uncertainty. "You do?"

The vixen reached out with both hands and took firm hold of his head. "You listen to me, Arden Berridge! I love you! Do you hear me? I love you!"

"Oh, god. Sheila?" He reached up and cupped her head in both hands as tears began to stream from his eyes, and he kissed her.

Outside the cabin door, Ruddygore, Lucifer and the angel stood, waiting. "It is done," the angel stated with relief.

"What's done?" the big man asked, confused about what just happened. "A minute ago it sounded like they were trying to kill each other, and now you say it's done?"

Lucifer, ignoring the question, simply turned and walked away.

"She has brought him back from the brink of madness," the celestial being explained. "She was the only one who had a chance of doing that."

"And what if she'd failed?" Ruddygore demanded.

The angel's eyes narrowed as he glared at the sorcerer. "Then we would have had to kill him. The quest would have failed and all of this would have been for naught." Without further comment, the angel also turned and walked away, leaving the sorcerer standing alone.

Ruddygore took a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his brow. "I'm definitely getting too old for this."

"I'm back," Sheila announced as she closed the door behind her. Still limping slightly, she carried a tray over to the bed and set it down next to Arden, who sat with his knees pulled up to his chest, his head buried in his arms. Sheila grabbed the chair that still sat near the bed and dragged it over so she could sit in front of him. "OK. Let's take a look at that hand." She waited a few seconds before smacking his leg lightly with her hand. "Come on, Arden. Quit dicking around and give me your hand." Again there was no response other than his slight shift to show he was still breathing. Sheila glowered at the albino for a moment before getting an impish grin. Her hand snaked between his calves and gave him a shake. Arden's back stiffened as he suddenly sat up straight and looked down at the vixen's hand at his crotch and

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then back up at her face, which was grinning from ear to ear. Her expression drooped along with her ears as he simply shook his head and returned to his original position. "Damn it, Arden," Sheila grumbled in disgust as she let go, "when I do that to a guy I'm used to getting a more enthusiastic response."

"Sorry," came the muffled response. "I guess I'm just not in the mood."

"Yah," Sheila sighed, "I guess it's hard to get enthused when you're being manhandled by a blimp."

Arden raised his head again and cocked an eyebrow in her direction. "Fishing for compliments again?"

"Fishing," the vixen spat as she rolled her eyes. "Not even! With you it's more like strip mining! Now either compliment me or give me your hand!"

"You're the most beautiful woman in the world to me, pregnant or otherwise," Arden officiously stated. "And there's nothing wrong with my hand."

Sheila smacked his shin with the back of her hand again. "I'll be the judge of that. Now give."

With a sigh of exasperation, Arden unfolded his right arm and held his hand out to her. "If it'll make you happy, here."

"Ugh," the vixen grunted as she scrunched her nose at the sight of caked on, dried blood. "God you need a bath." She reached into the bowl on the platter and took out a cloth and wrung the water out of it before proceeding to clean blood from his hand. After a couple of minutes of scrubbing, she flipped his hand over, and began scrubbing the back side, confused at the lack of wounds. "Wait a minute! I remember you cutting this thing when you picked up that chunk of mirror!" Again she flipped his hand over and searched for any signs of the wounds that had been responsible for all the blood.

"I told you," Arden commented as he pulled his hand free from hers, "my hand is fine."

Sheila blinked in confusion. "But how? Can you regenerate?"

"No," Arden said with a laugh. He waved his hands over his head in a large arch, leaving a rainbow of colored sparkles behind as he said in his best Doug Henning impersonation, "It's magic!"

"You got your magic back!" Sheila exclaimed with enthusiasm!

"*My* magic, yes," Arden replied, frowning slightly. "I still have no access to Lakash's

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power, though."

Sheila reached into her dress and pulled out the amulet. "What about the Amulet. Lakash said he'd be listening. All I have to do is make a wish and he'll come."

"No!" Arden shouted, reaching for the amulet, then snatching his hand away suddenly as a spark of electricity zapped him. "If you make a wish, that sadistic bastard might just grant it while sending you off to some alternate dimension. If that happens, I'd have no choice but to use the lamp to return you home and everything would be lost."

Sheila's ears wilted as she looked down at the amulet. "Oh. I hadn't thought of that."

Arden growled to himself and stood up. "Lakash is in the perfect position right now. As long as he doesn't show up before I have to confront the guardian, he can deny me the power without breaking the word of the agreement. I have to seek him out to get the power, and I can't do that from the Sea of Dreams."

"Can't you just project yourself, or whatever it is you used to do, and go track him down?"

"No," Arden replied, shaking his head. "Why else do you think Lucifer has stayed onboard for the entire trip, rather than just manifesting when he felt the need? We're cut off. Lakash could channel himself through the amulet, but why should he? The only way out is through the sea itself, and I've already taken that log ride once." He closed his eyes and leaned heavily against the wall. "As much as I want to go back there, I can't."

Sheila stood and put an empathetic hand on his shoulder. "They told me what happened. I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"No!" Arden said angrily as he shrugged her off and stepped away. "I don't want your pity! Don't feel sorry for me, ever!"

"You sound just like Lucifer," the vixen commented dryly, surprising him. "Here's the deal, Arden. If you want my love, then you've got to take the bad with the good, happy with the sad, joy and the sorrow, pride and the pity. It's a package deal. If you can't accept that, then tell me now and you'll save us both a world of heartbreak."

A smile slowly crept across Arden's face as he gazed into the vixen's eyes. He stepped forwards, took her into his arms and kissed her. As their lips separated he smiled again. "So tell me, when did you get so wise?"

"Oh, I don't know," she sighed as she stepped back and hobbled her way over to the bathroom. "Maybe it's the company I've been keeping. Geez. I better go find a broom

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and a dustpan and get this cleaned up."

"Don't worry about that," Arden said walking over to examine the damage himself. "I'll get one of Ruddygore's people to take care of it."

Sheila shrugged and made her way back over to the bed and sat down. "You better tell them to hurry, unless you want them to mop the place up as well."

"Oh," the albino grunted as he grimaced in understanding. "In that case, how about we take a short cut." He turned back to the mess and studied it. "Let's see if I can remember how to do this without resorting to arcane magic." He steepled his fingers as he concentrated on seeing the shards of the mirror and their inherent natural structure as defined by the laws of magic. After several minutes he began the spell, manipulating the shards so that each slid back into position in the mirror, exactly where it had been prior to being punched. It was almost like watching the mirror shatter in reverse only some of the shards were still covered in blood, creating a gruesome puzzle pattern on the surface of the mirror. As the final piece merged into the restored mirror, Arden relaxed his concentration. "There you go. Good as new, kind of." He nodded to Sheila. "At least you won't have to worry about stepping on any glass when you go to the bathroom."

"Better late than never," Sheila quipped as she scooted by him and closed the door.

Arden turned and started to take a step away from the door but lost his balance, as the room seemed to spin around him. Stumbling, he reached out and managed to catch himself on the frame of the bed, cushioning the fall. Dizzy and lightheaded, he rolled over and used the bed to help sit up.

"Everything OK out there?" came Sheila's muffled voice from behind the door.

"Yah! Everything's just ducky," he replied, lying through gritted teeth. For several seconds, he sat there, sucking wind as he tried to get the spinning of the room under control. He looked down at his trembling hand and cursed. "How the hell am I supposed to defeat a guardian angel if I can't even fix a broken mirror without collapsing?"

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Beware Celestials Bearing Gifts.

The predawn glow on the horizon slowly bled across the night sky, bringing a new day to the Sea of Dreams. The ruddy glow illuminated a not too distant wall of fog that lay ahead of the ferry, giving it an eerie orange tint. The oars of the ferry continued to stroke the water with a constant rhythm as it slowly cruised along. As the dark shadows of the night retreated before the predawn light, the lone form of Arden could be seen kneeling in meditation on the ramp at the bow of the ship. A gentle sea breeze tugged at his loose hair which, though it had been combed so that it hung down, it still had strands floating freely in the air, waving to and fro on the wind's whim. His eyes cracked open at the sound of footsteps from behind.

"Hello, Arden," the angelic figure said. "Isn't it a little early for you to be out meditating?"

"That depends on your definition of early," came the muttered response, sounding a bit annoyed at the interruption.

"I suppose so," the angel replied as he leaned against a nearby railing. "It wouldn't happen to have anything to do with Sheila sitting alone on a bench near the aft, would it?"

Arden shrugged. "I don't know. Why don't you go ask her?"

The angel ambled over to squat near Arden. "I did. She said something about you never bothering to come to bed last night. Want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?" Arden challenged, annoyed at the angel's meddling.

"About why you're here and she's there," the celestial being prompted.

"I'm here because this is where I wanted to meditate," he replied angrily. "As for why Sheila's in the back, ask her. *Ow!*" Arden rubbed the back of his head where the angel had smacked him. "What was that for?"

"Let's try this again," the celestial declared, his voice stern. "Why are you here, and Sheila is back there? Why aren't the two of you snuggled together in bed, enjoying what little time you have left together?"

"You know damn good and well why!" Arden shouted, rolling out of the way in anticipation of another blow from the angel. He got to his feet and took up a defensive stance.

The angel smiled. "Oh, are you going to fight me?" The creature's beautiful smile turned sinister as he snarled at the man. "All right, then. Bring it on!"

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Arden backed away warily. "You know I can't fight you. There's no way I could defeat you right now."

"Then what makes you think you'll defeat the guardian?" the angelic figure replied, relaxing his stance and standing up.

"I can't, damn it!" Arden shouted in frustration. "You know that there's no way in hell I can defeat him right now. My only hope is in sneaking onto the island and getting off before he can figure out exactly what's going on. The only way I can do that is to remain pure in mind, body and spirit; otherwise I might as well have a marching band escorting me. Soon as I touch foot on that sand he'll know where I am, and it'll be all over."

"And you think skulking around on the island will actually let you succeed?" the angel asked, laughing.

"It'll give me a better chance than facing it head on!" Arden snarled.

The celestial shook his head. "Either way, Arden, you're going to die." He paused to let that sink in. "No matter what you do, win or loose, you're a dead man. You'll be dead, and Sheila will have to go home, bear your children and raise them *alone* until such time as you manage to make your way back to her, *if* you even make it back at all." He walked over and took Arden by the shoulders, forcing the man to face him. "Think about it, my friend. She's finally admitted to herself and to you that she loves you. You're finally in a form that's the right size, sex and species for her to be with, not that species was ever really a factor for her, but I digress. This is the last chance that you'll have to be together for a long time."

"So what?" Arden demanded as he pulled away, "I'm supposed to screw up my chances at completing the quest for her?"

"You tell me," the angel shrugged. "Which is more important to you, Sheila or the quest?"

Arden's anger slowly faded away as he thought about it. He glanced back towards the ferry for a few moments, then at his feet as he shook his head. "But what good is loving Sheila, if I have no chance to return to her?" he asked looking back up at the angel.

The silver-armored being leaned forwards and spoke in a conspiratorial voice, "You'll have a heck of a better chance than if you don't."

"Huh?" Arden grunted, confused by the statement. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Everything!" the angel replied with a mischievous smile. "Look. What's important now is that you take care of Sheila. It's not fair for her to finally admit she loves you, then have you turn your back on her for the quest. Now I want you to go apologize to her,

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sweet talk her into forgiving you, then I want you to take her back to your cabin and screw her brains out."

"Excuse me?" Arden said, shocked at the angel. "I beg your pardon, but I'm having a hard time believing I just heard you say that."

The angel sighed. "Think about it, Arden. You love her. She loves you. That's what's important here. You need to get things straight with her before you can move on and finish your quest. I'm just giving you a shove in the right direction." He paused, noting the dubious look in Arden's eyes. "Look, can I lie to you? Can I encourage you to do anything that's wrong? Could I even suggest you commit a sin? Think about it!"

"Well," Arden said as he chewed on his lip for a moment and shrugged. "I guess not."

"Good!" the angel replied, giving him a jovial slap on the back. "Now go *poke* her one for the Gipper!" He smiled and shoed Arden along as the man paused before passing out of site around the corner. "Man, I love this job!" he commented to himself.

"Don't you think that was a bit over the top?" an identical angel asked, stepping from the shadows from the other corner of the deck.

"Naw," the first replied as his form melted to become those of the devil.

"I don't know. I think he began to suspect something towards the end," the silver-armored celestial commented.

The devil gave a derisive snort. "So what! Like a good sheep, he's taking what he thinks is your advice. Who cares who it actually came from, as long as he does it?"

"That's not the point," the angel complained as he rubbed the brow of his nose. "I have a serious problem with you using my form to encourage him to sin."

Lucifer smiled. "So why didn't you stop me?"

"Because we can't interfere," the angel declared, annoyed with the devil's attitude.

"Bullshit," Lucifer happily countered. "You've stuck your nose in where it shouldn't have been so many times that there's no way I'm going to let you off now." He leaned forwards and jabbed a finger at the other being. "Admit it. You need him to do this as much as I want him to, but your rules won't let you handle it yourself. That's why you people need us around; so we can do the dirty work." He clapped the angel on the back. "Come on. Let's go see if Ruddygore's up for some more poker. I think I'm in the mood to win some more."

"You only win because you cheat," the angel complained.

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"I do not!" the devil said in denial, then chuckled. "Well, not every hand, any way."

Arden paused as he spotted the pregnant vixen leaning against the railing that looked out over the ocean. He walked up to her and hopped up to sit on the railing nearby. "Hey," he said as he found his balance. He frowned as he noticed she was holding an unlit cigarette. "You taking up smoking?" he asked with a frown.

"No," Sheila sighed and turned towards him to lean on the railing with one arm. "Not really. I used to smoke when I ran with the packs. Zig Zag convinced me to give it up once I started working for her, but every now and then I get a craving for one."

"Ah," Arden replied without implying comment. "I didn't think Ruddygore would stock those."

"He doesn't," she replied, turning to look back out over the water. "Lucifer wandered by here a little bit ago and gave it to me."

"I see," Arden again replied neutrally. "So you're saving it for just the right moment?"

Sheila chuckled and held out a classic-style Zippo, which she flicked several times without successfully lighting it. "The asshole gave me an empty lighter." She looked at the inert device, and then tossed it into the water below.

Arden chuckled. "Yah, I guess he can be a sadistic bastard at times." He held out his fist and flicked his thumb upwards, causing a small flame to jut out of it. "You know, that's a nasty habit, and it's not good for the babies."

Sheila looked at the blue flame dancing merrily on its tip, then up at Arden. "Oh? Then why are you encouraging me?"

"I'm not. It's your decision. If you wanted to, I'm sure you'd find a way to light it." He shrugged, causing the flame to flicker slightly. "Far be it from me to tell you how to live your life."

"Oh, right," Sheila growled. "Like I was trying to tell you how to live yours last night?" She frowned and looked down at the cigarette before flicking it away into the water. "You're right, though," she grudgingly admitted. "It wouldn't be good for the kids. Not that I've ever cared if anything I did was good for them or not." She turned to lean her backside against the railing and rubbed her swollen belly. "All they've ever been to me was an inconvenience. I never wanted kids, you know. I don't know what I was thinking back then."

"Oh, I don't know. I think you were scared, hurt, alone." He looked out down at her and smiled. "And in heat. Boy, were you in heat!"

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"Hey!" the vixen shot back with a grin. "I didn't hear you complaining about it, at least not until I broke out the handcuffs. You've got some real issues with control, you know that?"

Arden chuckled. "Yah, I suppose I do." He hopped down off of the railing and nodded. "You know, we may not have any handcuffs, and you may not be in heat any more, but I'm sure we can find some way to pass the time until we reach the island."

Sheila cocked an ear at him. "Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?" She blinked in surprise as he nodded. "What about all that 'gotta stay pure' crap?"

"Yah, well," Arden hemmed and hawed embarrassedly as he scratched the back of his head. "I'm an idiot. I admit it." He sighed and shrugged. "I've been putting my quest ahead of everything without really worrying about how it's affecting you, and it's not fair."

"I see," she replied slowly. "So you're doing this out of guilt about how I feel?"

Arden shook his head. "In a way, yes, but its more than that. I love you, and I really have been bad about showing it. This is my last chance to make it up to you for a long while."

"Oh, that's so sweet," the vixen cooed as she reached out to stroke his face. She put her arms around him and gave him a quick hug. "That's the most romantic thing you've said to me in a long time."

"Anything for you, hon," Arden replied, kissing the top of her head. "Shall we go?"

Sheila released him and returned to leaning on the railing. "No."

"Huh?" he grunted in surprised. "Why not?"

"I'm not in the mood," Sheila replied with a grin.

Arden laughed. "You're not in the mood? Come on, Sheila, don't start playing games now!"

The vixen chuckled. "Seriously, Arden," she said, looking at him again and smiling. "That's the most wonderful thing you could offer to do for me, and it only goes to show how much you love me. There's no way I could ask you to do that, knowing that it would hurt your chances at completing your quest."

"You sure?" he asked, putting his arm around her shoulder. "I'm not worried about the quest. I just want to spend time with you."

"So? Spend time with me," the vixen replied as she snuggled up under his arm. "Standing here like this is nice."

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"Yah, but..." he mumbled, "that's not exactly what I had in mind." He leaned over and whispered into the vixen's ears for a moment, something that made her ears stand straight up.

Sheila turned to give him a surprised look, and then shook her head. "Nope. You're not going to buy me off. You go complete your quest first."

"You sure?" He asked as he leaned over and whispered something else to her.

Sheila stood strait up, her eyes wide as she stared at him, and then nodded. "All right, you're on." She shook her head as he held out an arm for her. "No. Carry me. It's a long walk."

Arden let out a low whistle. "OK," he replied shaking his head. "Just remember, I'm not a dragon any more, so if I throw my back out *I'm* going to be screwed, *you* won't get screwed, and the quest will be on indefinite hold."

The vixen gave him a sharp look for a moment as she decided whether to take his comment as an affront or not. "All right," she replied, not taking his arm as she began waddling to the stateroom, "but I get a foot massage before we begin."

"Done," Arden laughed.

The angel walked up to the desk where Lucifer sat and placed a pile in front of him. "There you go. The swords and the armor Lakash gave us."

Lucifer picked up the cured silk top and unfolded it. "You think he did anything sneaky when he repaired it?"

The angel dragged a chair over by the desk and sat down. "That's what we're here to find out. That, and I'd like you to repair the damage to his dagger."

"Hmm," the devil grunted as he tossed the jacket on the desk and picked up the tanto. Drawing the blade, he studied it closely. "Ah, I see what he did. Clever modification. He didn't add or remove, just shifted the existing formula around a bit."

"You'll fix it?" the silver-armored creature asked.

Lucifer sighed. "Do I have a choice?" Reaching into his jacket, he pulled out a small pair of reading glasses and put them on. "Doing someone a favor and not asking for anything in return. How the hell did I get roped into this crap?"

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Sheila reached out and used the tip of a claw to lightly trace patterns on Arden's chest. "What'cha thinkin' about?"

"Hmmm?" Arden turned his head and glanced down at the vixen before looking back up at the ceiling. "Things."

"What kinds of things?"

"Well," he said hesitantly. "I've been thinking about the quest."

"Oh, great," the vixen grunted before rolling over onto her back. "That quest again. It's our last night together for a long time, maybe even forever, and you're worried about your quest."

"I'm thinking about giving it up," Arden stated.

"What?" Sheila asked as she rolled back over to face him. "What do you mean, you're going to give it up?"

He flopped back down on his back and sighed. "I've been thinking about us and I realized that I don't want to risk losing you. I don't want our children to grow up having never known their father. I don't want you to have to go on alone."

"Hey, hey! You said you'd come back, right?" She reached out and wrapped her arm over his chest and snuggled close. "Then what's the problem?"

"You don't get it, Sheila," he replied somberly. "I've seen the Time's Eye, and it's shown me all the possible outcomes of my trying to complete this quest. What I've not told you is that in most of those outcomes, I don't succeed." He sighed again and looked at her. "It's not fair to you. I've dragged you along this far, and for what? Only to have you lose me at the last minute? I don't know, maybe---*YOUUCH!*" Arden sat up and probed his right nipple, looking for signs of blood from where Sheila had bit him. "What the hell did you do that for?"

The vixen propped herself up on one arm so she could look him in the eye. "Now you listen to me, Arden Bearridge," she ordered in a no nonsense tone of voice. "I'm not going to let you throw away this quest because you're feeling sorry for me."

"But..." he started to say but was interrupted.

"No! Listen to me," Sheila ordered. "If you quit now, you may come back with me, but you'll regret it for the rest of your life. I know you. You'll always be looking back at this and regretting it. It'll be like a rotten piece of fruit, stuck in your craw. It'll poison you and it'll poison our relationship." She passed and sighed. "Besides, this is your quest. You're the only person who can do this. You *need* to do this. You skip out now and I'll never have another thing to do with you for as long as I live."

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Arden frowned as he studied the vixen's face. "You'd really do that? You'd really walk away?"

Sheila nodded. "Yes. I haven't come this far and put up with all this...this *shit* that I've had to go through just so you could pull out at the last second. If you don't go through with this, I'll never forgive you."

"Sheila," he whispered, surprised at her conviction. "I never knew you felt that way."

The vixen looked a bit embarrassed and lay back down. "Yah, well, I'm not good at subtle, though getting things across to you takes a clue by four more often than not."

"Yah," Arden muttered as he lay back down on his back. "I guess I don't have any choice, then."

"No, you don't," Sheila said with a smile as she lay back down, as she seductively smiled and stretched her arms over her shoulder. "Of course, you can't go and complete your quest until you're done here, and last time I checked, you haven't managed to make me pass out."

"She tasks me!" he replied with a smile. "She tasks me! And I shall have her. I'll chase her round the moons of Nibia and round the Antares maelstrom and round perdition's flames before I give her up!"

"Oh no!" She said, hitting him with her fist. "You did *not* just quote Star Trek to me in bed! You did *not* do that!"

Arden chuckled and replied impishly, "At least it was Ricardo Mottledfawn I was quoting. Or would you prefer me to do Shatn---*YOUUCH!*"

"Arden!" Sheila muttered sleepily as she shook the man next to her. "Wake up."

"What? Again?" Arden groaned.

"Someone's at the door," the vixen complained at the same time there was a loud knock. "Go kill them, will you?"

"Me?" he whined before yawning. "Why me? Isn't it your turn to kill whoever-*ow!* Ok. OK! I'll go. Jesus." Swinging his legs off the bed, Arden sleepily stood up, dragging the top layer of sheets off the bed as he shuffled towards the door. He'd just finished wrapping the sheet around his waist as he opened the door. Blinking against the bright morning light, he saw it was Lucifer. "We're not buying any," he declared and started to close the door.

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"You're buying what I'm selling," Lucifer replied, blocking the door with his feet. "Let us in, Arden."

"Us?" the shaggy-haired man replied, looking again, this time seeing the angel standing outside as well. "Oh. Yah, OK. Come on in." Wiping the sleep from his eyes, he let go of the door and moved to the desk nearby and activated the lamp.

"Beware celestials bearing gifts," the angel stated as he put Arden's swords on the desk.

"My swords!" Arden excitedly declared, quickly examining each one. "I thought I'd lost them when you tossed me in the drink."

"That would be counter productive," Lucifer stated, "even for me."

"This is for you, too, Arden," the angel stated, putting a cylindrical bundle wrapped in brown paper on the desk.

"Oh?" Arden grunted, looking up at the angel before proceeding to undo the bundle. He paused when he realized that it was his old silk armor. Cautiously, he lifted the jacket-like top and held it up, looking into the eyes of the dragons woven into the fabric. "I thought this had been destroyed."

"Lakash restored it," the angel stated, giving him a bit of a predatory smile, "after we convinced him it would be in his best interest, of course."

"Indeed," Lucifer agreed, taking the other chair and leaving the angel standing. "We pointed out that not providing the armor would be considered acting against the letter of the agreement, Lakash was more than willing to restore the garment."

"Are you sure it's safe?" Arden asked, setting the top aside and examining the pants.

"Yes," the angel replied, nodding. "We both went over the garments with the proverbial fine tooth comb and could find nothing that could possibly cause you a problem. If he'd stuck something like that in, he'd forfeit automatically, and he doesn't want to risk that."

"You should put the armor on and start bonding with it," Lucifer suggested as he poured himself some wine from the bottle on the table.

"I will later," Arden replied, tossing the pants on top of the desk. "Meanwhile, how about y'all run along and leave us alone for a bit."

"All right," the devil agreed as he drained the glass. "We'll head out, but don't take too long. We'll be at the island in about four hours."

"Four hours?" Arden asked in shock. "That's all?"

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The devil just laughed as he stood up. "What do you expect? You two have been locked in here a day and a night. Now's the time to stop dicking around with your girlfriend and prepare."

Arden looked over at the angel who nodded in agreement. "All right. I'll work on bonding with the armor," he grudgingly agreed.

"That's our boy," the devil said as he gathered up the angel and walked to the door. He paused and smiled back at Arden. "If you need anything, feel free to get it yourself!" Laughing at his own joke, Lucifer closed the door, leaving the two alone again.

Arden tossed the sheet aside and donned his armor. He then knelt in the floor and began to meditate.

Over on the bed, Sheila rolled over and buried her face in the pillows.

Another knock at the door brought Arden out of his meditation. He rose fluidly to his feet and opened the door. "Yes?"

Ruddygore nodded. "We're approaching the island. It's time."

"Thank you. I'll be right out," Arden replied before closing the door.

"So that's it?" Sheila asked from the bed. "Time to go already?"

"I'm afraid so," he admitted as he walked over to sit on the bed.

Sheila took his hand and sighed. "I knew this time would come, but just not this soon."

Arden leaned forwards and brushed his hand through her hair. "It was like a fairytale we'd live out, you and I. And yes, some dreams come true. And yes, some dreams fall through. And yes, the time has come for us to say goodbye."

Sheila grabbed his head and pulled him to her, kissing him. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "Promise me you'll come back! Promise me nothing will stop you!"

"I promise," Arden said, kissing her again. "I won't let anything get in my way of coming back to you."

The vixen nodded, tears now running down her face. "Then go. Go and finish your quest."

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Arden stood, walked over to the desk and retrieved his swords, tucking them into the belt at his waist. He then opened the door and paused to look back at Sheila. "I love you," he said as he blew her a kiss, then closed the door.

Sheila sighed, swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. After a few moments to make sure she wouldn't get dizzy, she waddled her way to the bathroom. Several minutes later, she stepped out and walked over to the foot of the bed where her clothes lay strewn about, casually discarded in her haste to get undressed. She slipped the simple dress over her head and tightened the laces along the side to cinch the fabric tight. She reached down to pick up her cloak, but instead stood suddenly, her hand on her stomach. "Ooh," she grunted as she turned and sat heavily on the bed. "Oh boy," she said as she started to pant slightly at the contraction. "Come on, you. Settle down in there," she said, speaking to her womb. After a minute or so the pain gradually faded, leaving her slightly out of breath, but that was all. Using one claw-tipped foot, she dragged the cloak over to where she could get to it by leaning sideways, picked it up and wrapped it around herself. Again she stood, walked to the door and left the room.

Standing in the hallway, she cocked her ears to either end of the ferry, listening to see where everyone was. Unable to hear anything over the low beat of the rowing drums, she turned and headed for the bow. Exiting onto the deck she saw that Ruddygore, Lucifer, Arden and the angel were all gathered by the ramp. Off in the near distance, the shoreline to an exotic-looking tropical island paradise could be clearly seen. It would only be a matter of minutes until the ship touched land. "Wow. Is that Eden?" she asked, stepping from the doorway to stand by the railing.

"Sheila!" Arden cried out, startled at her appearance. "I thought you were going to stay in the room."

"Yah, well," she muttered as she glanced towards him, "I decided I couldn't handle sitting in there and not knowing." She paused and looked at Arden with concern. "It's not going to cause any problems if I'm out here, will it?"

"Well," he started to say something and then stopped, noting her expression. He gave her a quirky smile as he walked over and hugged her. "No. It'll be fine. I just wasn't sure you'd want to watch this. It might get kind of gory."

"I don't care how bad you have to mess him up," she joked with a smile that hid the true nervousness she felt, "just as long as you come back to me, you here?"

"Hey, I gave my word," he replied, giving her a brief kiss.

"We're getting kind of close," Lucifer complained. "Don't you think you should get ready?"

"In a second," Arden said over his shoulder. "But first, I need Sheila to give me the amulet."

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"You need the amulet?" Sheila asked as she removed the medallion, her brow furrowed with confusion. "What do you need it for?" She started to hand it to him, but pulled it back. "Won't it zap you?"

"Not if you give it to me willingly," he replied, taking the amulet from her hand. He hung it around his neck and examined it briefly before tucking it into the collar. "Think of it as an American Express card. You don't want to leave home without it."

"Ahem," came the impatient noise from Lucifer.

"All right already," Arden said before giving Sheila another quick kiss. He turned and walked middle of the ramp and kneeled, taking the three weapons from his belt. He drew the katana and ran the blade lightly across the back of his hand to draw blood. "Tora, shookan!" he commanded. The blade glowed with an orange fire for a moment before the energy leapt from the blade, landing on the ramp in front of him and coalescing into the form of a large Bengal tiger. "Tora, hairu!" The tiger turned and leapt, striking him in the chest and vanishing. Arden doubled over in pain as his body shifted shape slightly. Fur appeared on his skin with the black and orange striping that the tiger had. When the transformation was complete, he looked like an ordinary human with tiger-stripped fur.

Next, he took out the wakazashi, and as with the katana, he drew it across the back of his hand, drawing blood. "Kitsune, shookan!" A reddish aura flickered into appearance over the length of the blade for a moment, and then jumped from the blade to the deck where a three-tailed fox appeared. "Kitsune, hairu!" he commanded, causing the fox to turn and leap into his chest. Again Arden doubled over as a transformation took him. His face shifted as a vulpine muzzle formed. His ears shifted, rising until they sat on his head, looking like normal fox ears. The shock of white hair he had turned bright orange. The fur covering his hands and feet turned black as his finger and toenails turned into claws.

"Interesting," Ruddygore commented. "The tiger for strength and the fox for cunning, though I must admit I've never seen a three tailed fox before. I wonder what the dagger will have in it."

As if to answer the sorcerer's question, Arden drew the dagger and traced the blade across the back of his hand so it, too, drew blood. "Niko, shookan!" he commanded. A pale white aura flickered over the blade for a moment and leapt to the ground where it turned into a small, cuddly looking white kitten that looked up at him with big eyes and mewed.

"Oh great!" Lucifer grumbled. "Don't tell me. This one grants him unstoppable cuteness, right?"

Ignoring the comment, Arden leaned forwards and played with the kitten for a moment before picking it up by the scruff of the neck. "Niko, mamoru!" he commanded, holding his left arm in front of the cat. The cat snarled and sank its claws through the fabric of the armor and into his arm. The cat then shifted its form, becoming an almost transparent disk eighteen inches in diameter.

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"Now that's what I call a pussy defense," the devil quipped.

Arden placed the blades back in their scabbards and tucked them once again in his belt before rising smoothly to his feet. "I'm ready," he announced the same time as the rowing cadence came to a halt followed by the bottom of the boat settling against the sand of the shore.

"Good," the angel said, patting him on the back. "The armor's all ready to go. It can still do all the old tricks you learned back when you first got it from Lakash."

Arden frowned. "That would be great if I had the power to drive it. As it is now, I can barely light a candle."

"You don't have to," Lucifer piped in. "One of the conditions we set upon delivering the armor to you was that Lakash power it. You may not have a link to the dragon, but the armor does. Command it, and it'll do what you need it to do."

"Is there anything else you're not telling me?" Arden asked.

"Everything," the devil replied with a smug grin.

Arden's eyes got wide for a moment before he shot an angry look at the angel who just shrugged in return. "Shit. With friends like you guys, who needs enemies?"

"Arden," The angel hastily said, "Remember. The guardian is a Seraphim. His job is to guard Eden from harm and ensure nobody trespasses."

"Yah, yah. I know." Stepping up to the very edge of the ramp that hovered a foot or so over the sand, Arden smiled and said, "Hoo-yah!" as he leapt from the ramp, using it like a springboard. Landing a good fifty feet from the end of the ramp he paused to listen for a response from the jungle.

Birds scattered as an angelic form launched itself high into the air from deep in the jungle. It spied the lone intruder and dove for him.

"Incoming!" Arden shouted to himself. Steepling his fingers, he concentrated, "Kage bushi no jutsu!" A huge cloud of smoke appeared, blanketing the beach in all directions, causing the guardian to pause.

As the smoke cleared, the guardian saw not one intruder, but hundreds, possibly thousands spread out across the beach in all directions. "Such tricks will do you no good, mortal," the creature shouted as it called down a rain of fire on the beach.

"Wohoo! We're going to have a hot time in the old town tonight," came the chant of a thousand voices as they scattered in all directions. Dodging and rolling as best they could,

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hundreds were struck by the flames only to vanish in a puff of smoke. A good portion of the army reached the tree line and quickly sought cover.

Overhead, the guardian roared. His body shined with a light that rivaled the sun for a moment, and then faded to reveal a hundred duplicates, most of whom dove for the tree line, while the rest spread out to chase the intruders on the beach.

Back on the ferry, Sheila banged her forehead against the support pillar she was leaning against. "I don't believe he just did that."

"Did what?" Ruddygore asked, walking over to stand next to the vixen. "It appears to have been a quite successful gambit."

"Oh yah, I agree with you there," the vixen said with a sigh, "I just can't believe he used a phrase he got from some stupid Japanese cartoon as the trigger."

"Oh," the big man grunted in understanding. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, my dear, such things are rather common. I'm not familiar with the language, but I'm sure that the words have a meaning that is relevant, even if he did steal the idea from a cartoon."

"Whoa! What was that?" Sheila asked, pointing at what appeared to be a burst of fireworks.

"I'd say that one of Arden's duplicates has found the lamp," the angel replied. "Now all they have to do is get it back to the boat."

Sheila cocked her head at the angel. "Why do they have to get back to the boat?"

"The wish Arden needs to make is long and complicated," the angel replied gravely, "and once Arden starts, the guardian will know which one is real and go after it. If he can make it to the ferry, the guardian won't be able to touch him since it can't leave Eden's domain."

"Oh," the vixen replied as her attention was drawn back towards the forest. Multiple Ardens appeared to be coming out of the woodwork, literally. There was a large number coming from either ends of the beach, though to her it looked like their ranks had been reduced significantly. As she watched, a group of Ardens managed to strike one of the guardians, dispelling it, but not before it had taken four of the duplicates out. "He's losing, isn't he?"

"If you're talking numerical superiority," Lucifer replied, "then yes, he is."

Arden, or rather *an* Arden broke from the tree line carrying an old, plain-looking, somewhat tarnished brass lamp. Three guardians followed him in close pursuit. Just as one of the angels was about to strike him, he tossed the lamp to another Arden who caught it and bolted for the ferry. Guardian angels stopped hunting individual clones and

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instead began pursuing the lamp. Time after time the guardians would kill one of the army only to have it throw away the lamp at the last minute. The battle wasn't all on sided, though. Now that the angels were concentrating on the lamp, the army of Ardens began to take their toll on the guardians. Arden's luck, however, was doomed to run out. One of the army had thrown the lamp only to have it snatched from the air by a guardian.

"Oh no! Interception on the ten yard line!" Lucifer announced.

Now it was the guardian's turn to play keep-away, only now they were moving the lamp towards the tree line. The battle continued for a few more minutes until a dozen guardians surrounded only four Ardens. They passed the lamp along their ranks until it came to one, which simply held it. "You should never have trespassed on Eden, mortal," it declared.

"Look," the Arden said while breathing hard, "all I want is the lamp, OK. Now we can do this the hard way, or we can do it the easy way. I'd much prefer it if we did it the easy way."

"Unfortunately for you, no matter how we do this, your only prize will be obliteration," the guardian replied.

The Arden looked around and laughed. "Three to one advantage, eh? I suppose you're probably right."

The guardian angel snapped his fingers, causing his duplicates to vanish. "They are irrelevant as are your shadow warriors. Our fight will be one on one." Taking the lamp, he hung it from a hook on his belt and drew a flaming sword from his scabbard.

"Oh, man," Arden drawled as his duplicates vanished. "That wouldn't happen to be one of those hellfire-and-damnation, burn-you-to-a-cinder-and-then-some swords, would it?" He let out a low whistle. "Damn it. Just my luck they were out of stock when I stopped by K-mart. Guess I'll have to settle for these." Arden drew the katana and wakazashi from their scabbards.

The guardian laughed. "Do you really think you stand a chance with those? Best to surrender and get it over with quickly. The fight hasn't even begun and you're already exhausted. Not much of a challenge if you ask me."

"Well now," Arden replied as he tucked his katana under his left arm. "That's yet to be seen, eh?" Reaching into the pocket on the front of his armor, he pulled out a small fruit and held it up for inspection.

"Blasphemer!" the guardian shouted.

"No!" the angel cried out from the ferry.

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Arden smiled and sank his teeth into the fruit, taking a hefty bite. He let go of the fruit and danced lightly to the side as the guardian's sword whistled through the air where he'd been.

"What the hell was that he just ate?" Sheila asked.

Lucifer laughed. "That, my dear, is the fruit of life. Arden just evened up the odds some."

"Cool," the vixen replied with a smile.

"It is *not* cool," the angel shouted. "He has eaten forbidden fruit. By God's decree he'll never leave the island alive. Even if he defeats the guardian, the fruit will eventually destroy him from within."

"That may be true," Lucifer replied, crossing his arms, "however, if he can defeat the guardian, then he can take the lamp and make the wish before the fruit kills him. Meanwhile he'll have strength and speed unparalleled in a mortal."

"Holy shit!" the vixen exclaimed as she watched the battle begin. Both the guardian and Arden were moving almost too fast to see. All the vixen could make out were the blurred trails caused by the flaming sword and Arden's brightly colored armor. "How the hell can they move so fast?"

"Magic," the devil replied, nodding. "The guardian has pulled out all the stops now. At this point, I'd say that it's all Arden can do to not get turned into sushi."

Sheila gasped as she watched Arden's katana go flying. "He's been disarmed."

"Not quite," the angel said, nodding towards the wakazashi Arden now held in both hands.

The two charged each other, but just as the guardian's sword would have impaled him, Arden vanished, appearing in the same instant behind the guardian. The guardian, now off balance from the attack, stumbled giving Arden the chance to drive the wakazashi into its back. "Fractal korosu!" Arden commanded, followed immediately by a bright flash.

The guardian howled as the left side of his body was suddenly pierced by hundreds of tiny spikes that radiated in an odd, spine-like structure. It turned and swung at Arden, who'd already danced out of range, sprinting towards his lost katana.

"Fascinating," Ruddygore commented as he squinted for a better look. "If I'm not mistaken, the sword has transformed itself into some sort of fractal geometric shape. Very impressive."

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Lucifer whistled. "That looks painful. I think the odds of our boy winning just got a little better. Wouldn't you agree?" he asked, turning towards the angel.

"Yes," the angel said with a nod. "So far, he's sticking to events which should culminate with a winning strategy."

"A winning strategy?" Sheila echoed as she watched the two combatants start going at it again.

The angel nodded again. "Arden's seen within the Time's Eye possible outcomes to this event. He's following the paths he knows have the best odds of allowing him to win."

Arden stumbled as he backed away from the guardian, giving the creature an opening. The flaming sword struck the shield on Arden's arm and bounced off. The force of the blow pressed Arden backwards. Unable to completely get his balance, it was all he could do to block the incoming blows. Without warning, Arden stopped back peddling and lunged at the creature. As the sword came down, Arden twisted out of the way, while holding his arm out to block the blow. There was a bright flash as the shield disappeared, allowing the sword to pass through Arden's arm, though it missed his body. Arden kept spinning with the katana twisted so the tip pointed behind him, driving it into the guardian's back as it charged by. The guardian stumbled and fell, giving Arden a chance to grab the hilt again. His hand had just closed on the hilt when the guardian twisted and swung its arm backwards, catching Arden in the side with the hilt of the sword and sending him flying backwards.

The guardian wiped a trickle of blood from its mouth and laughed. "That was a good gambit," it said as it struggled to its feet. "It might have worked if it hadn't been for the first one. There's no way I was going to let you do that to me again."

Arden rolled over while clutching his side and coughed, sending a spray of blood onto the pristine sand. He knelt facing the guardian who was slowly walking towards him, the flaming sword being dragged in the sand behind it. "I'm not done yet," Arden replied, coughing again. He bowed his head as he held onto his chest. For a moment, it looked like he'd passed out, but he shook it off and straightened up again. Drawing the tanto from its scabbard, he scrambled to his feet and charged the guardian with an incoherent roar.

The guardian, not expecting the attack was momentarily taken aback. It stared in shock as the dagger pierced its chest where a mortal heart would be. Raising its fist, the creature brought the pommel of the sword down on Arden's head, knocking him to the ground. "Foolish mortal. I'd expected better of you." It raised the sword and paused for a second before driving the blade into Arden's chest. "For those who trespass on Eden's soil, the penalty is eternal *death!*" The flames on the sword exploded downwards into Arden's body, consuming it from the inside out. Flames shot from all the openings in the armor, for a second before dying down. The armor, without a body to support it, collapsed flat on the ground in a mockery of a chalk outline of his body.

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"No!" Sheila cried out, as she watched Arden's body being cremated.

"Watch," Lucifer whispered. "It's not over yet!"

Out on the sand, a short distance behind the guardian, a circle of light appeared, from which two anthropomorphic polar bears exited, one female and one male.

The guardian pulled the sword from the round and sighed. "So it is---eh? What?" Turning, the creature was caught off guard as the female polar bear slammed into it, knocking it backwards. The sword flew from its grasp as her leg lashed out, striking his wrist. "Nanuk?" the guardian sputtered at the unexpected turn of events as he grappled with the supernatural creature.

"In the flesh!" Nanuk replied, locking her hands onto the guardian's wrists. "Get the lamp, boy!"

"Arden!" Sheila shouted, recognizing the male polar bear.

Arden lunged under the guardian's arm and hurriedly removed the lamp from its belt. He had just turned to run when the creature broke free of Nanuk's grip and raked its claws down his back, sending him stumbling to the sand.

"You son of a bitch!" Nanuk shouted as she head-butted the guardian. "How dare you treat my son that way!"

Arden lay on the ground for a moment, unable to move. He turned his head and spied the ferry. Sheila stood at the railing, her hands over her mouth and her eyes wide in horror. A short distance away, he spotted the lamp where it had fallen. He crawled using his hands towards the lamp trying to reach it. He didn't understand why, but for some reason his legs didn't want to work. A soft, cotton candy fog wrapped itself around his brain, making thought hard. All he knew was that he needed to get the lamp.

The guardian head-butted Nanuk in return, sending her stumbling backwards. He turned to finish Arden off, but was stopped when she grabbed the wakazashi and yanked, sending him reeling in pain. He turned and snarled, the last vestiges of civility lost and attacked her with his fangs and claws.

Arden's fingers finally wrapped around the handle of the lamp, allowing him to grasp it firmly. He turned his head to look at Nanuk who was on the ground under the guardian and was slowly being torn to shreds. Arden rubbed the lamp, summoning the genie within.

"No!" the angel whispered. "He can't speak the wish there. He'll never make it in time."

The world felt like it was spinning around Sheila as she watched Arden, his back sliced open by the guardian's claws, dying for the second time on the beach. She saw the look of

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hopelessness in his eyes as he rubbed the lamp. Her heart skipped a beat as he began to speak. The world around them lit up as if the sun had come out from behind a cloud, though there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Although Arden was easily within Sheila's earshot, she couldn't hear a word he spoke. Instead, it seemed as if he spoke in something other than sounds. Colors, smells, the sense of touch caressed her mind as she watched him speak. He spoke in a language that was somehow beyond her ability to perceive.

Behind Arden, the guardian stopped mauling Nanuk and looked towards the crippled bear. As it started to release Nanuk, she reached around and grabbed the hilt of the katana. "Not so fast, asshole! Kami kaze no fukushuu!" A pillar of lightning poured down from the heavens, engulfing both the guardian and Nanuk in a blinding torrent of energy.

Arden, his eyes glued on Sheila, continued to speak the words of the wish, either oblivious to or intentionally ignoring the carnage occurring behind him.

Sheila watched as the lightning vanished as quickly as it had come. The guardian lay on the ground, smoldering slightly. Of Nanuk, there was no sign. Slowly the guardian started to rise, but then collapsed and stopped moving.

A moment later, there was a flash and Arden vanished from the sand. Sheila looked frantically around only to find him standing in his human form on the deck of the ferry. He wasn't alone either. Lakash, Lucifer and the angel all stood in front of a wooden judge's bench, behind which sat a bald angel with small, round spectacles, who began banging his gavel on the bench. "All right. Let's get this thing rolling. As I understand it, we have a request for a major modification to the game staffing pursuant to Article 8, Section 5, Subsection B, as pertaining to the replacement of any level A or B ranking individual."

"Actually, your honor," Lakash said, holding up a finger, "I believe that this properly belongs under Article 127, Section 3, Subsection D, as pertaining to wishes made on artifacts of celestial origin by a mortal, the specifics of which implicitly deny by default his wish as being beyond his realm of access."

"Actually, your honor," Lucifer piped up, "that's not true. Arden was dead at that time. Since he was dead, he was no longer mortal; therefore he's not covered by that rule."

"Hmmm," the judge grunted as he studied everyone. "It seems we have a dispute as to the rules covering this. Since you, Lakash, and you, Lucifer, have made your stands, we must go to arbitration." He turned to the angel and frowned. "How does Heaven vote on the subject?"

Looking rather nervous, the angel swallowed before answering. "In this matter, Heaven sides with Hell, your honor."

"WHAT?" both the judge and Lakash shouted.

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The judge slammed his gavel onto the wood. "Order in the court." He turned back to the angel and motioned him forward. "What the dickens do you think you're doing? Your orders are to abstain from any and all votes."

"Ahem," Lucifer interrupted by clearing his throat. "Although your eminence may be his boss normally, you are currently acting in a judiciary capacity, and as such I must request that you cease giving my colleague directions as his superior, and limit yourself to strictly judicial direction." The devil smiled. "After all, the entire point of having someone other than yourself represent Heaven is to give you final say only in case of a tie vote."

"Indeed," the judge admitted, looking like he'd just swallowed a lemon. "All right then, its two votes to one on the subject of which rule covers this situation. At this point will the petitioner step forward? Arden Eastridge. Are you fully aware of the nature of the wish you have stated?"

Arden nodded, "I am, your honor."

The judge nodded. "And is this wish made by you of your own free will?"

Arden glanced back at Sheila for a second and then turned back to the judge. "No, your honor. It isn't."

"What?" Lakash, Lucifer, Ruddygore and Sheila all said at the same time.

Again the judge banged his gavel on the bench. "Order! There will be order in this court! Now, just what the heck do you mean, *no*?"

"Actually, your honor," Arden said, glancing again back at Sheila, "although I was under Nanuk's control when I spoke the words, I knew what they were and wanted to speak them. However, I was wondering if it would be possible to change the wording of the wish?"

"NO!" Lucifer declared

"It's fine by me," Lakash smugly said, smiling for the first time.

"Order," the judge declared, banging his gavel again. "Let me get this straight; you want to change your wish?" He paused as Arden nodded. "OK. Lucifer, I take it you oppose, and Lakash, you're all for it, right?" The judge sighed. "And you---how does Heaven stand on this subject?"

"Heaven abstains from a vote on this subject," the angel said.

"About time," the judge muttered. "In that case..."

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"However," the angel interrupted, causing the judge to wince, "we three are not the only ones involved in the dispute. Nanuk is a class B ranking entity, and by the rules her vote should be taken into account."

"Nanuk's dead," Lakash quickly declared. "She's unable to register a vote."

"Indeed that is correct," the angel replied with a nod. "However, Arden was under her control, he was her chosen in this matter, and I believe that he should be given her vote."

The judge rubbed his eyes for a second, than looked at Lakash. "I assume you're going to agree to this? Yah, that's what I thought. All right, Arden, you can change your wish. How do you want to word it?"

"Just one moment, your honor," Arden said before turning and walking over to Sheila. "Well. Here we are. The choice is yours. If I go through with it, I'll do my best to come back, but I can't promise anything."

Sheila hung her head for a second then looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "I know. But you've got to do what you've got to do. Just make sure you come back, OK?"

"OK," Arden replied as he gave her one final, lingering kiss. He turned to walk away but was stopped as Sheila grabbed him by the shoulder. "Huh?"

"By the way, I do," the vixen said with a smile.

"You do what?" Arden asked, having apparently lost track of the conversation.

Sheila reached out and hit him in the arm. "I'll marry you, you dumb lunk!"

"Oh," Arden replied before the answer could fully register. "Oh!" He turned, grabbed her and gave her another long, sensuous kiss.

"Excuse me," the judge said, "But we're on a bit of a tight schedule here."

Both Arden and Sheila chuckled as they ended the kiss. Arden turned and walked back to his place facing the judge. "Sorry, your honor."

The judge nodded. "All right, what's your decision?"

"I'm going to stick with the original wish, your honor," Arden declared. "I make this decision of my own free will, and with full understandings of the consequences involved."

"No!" Lakash shouted as he turned to the judge.

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"It's about time," the judge grumbled. "So let it be written, so let it be done!" The gavel banged down on the bench for the last time, causing Arden, Lakash and the judge to vanish. As they vanished so did the added light that seemed to permeate the area.

"So that's it? It's over?" Sheila asked, looking up at the angel.

The angel nodded. "Yes, it's really over."

"So what happens now?" Ruddygore asked. "Where'd Lakash go? He was supposed to provide me with the means to navigate the Sea of Dreams."

"You'll have to take that up with him," the angel said as he lightly hopped off the end of the ramp to stand on the beach.

"Hey, wait," Sheila said. "Ummm... by the way, what the heck is your name anyway?"

The angel laughed. "You know my name already, Sheila Vixen. You've spoken it a thousand times and you'll speak it a thousand more." With that he waves his hand, causing the ferry to gradually accelerate away from the island.

"Wait!" Sheila shouted. "How do I get home? How do I get a hold of Lakash?" She cupped her hands and yelled at the top of her voice, "Where's the amulet? I need that amulet!" She stared despondently as the island slowly faded into the fog. Within a few minutes it had passed beyond the misty barrier where it slowed to a halt.

Back on the beach, the angel walked over to the guardian. "You OK there, Eden?"

"Yah," the guardian angel replied as it slowly climbed to its feet. "I'd appreciate it if you'd get these damned swords out of me. That short sword hurts like a son of a gun."

The angel chuckled. Reaching for the wakazashi, he muttered "Kitsune, hanasu." There was a brief flash as the sword recomposed itself back to its basic form. The angel then withdrew the two swords and accepted the tanto from the guardian.

The guardian flexed his muscles, twisting his limbs and body to free up any remaining kinks. "So tell me, you think this was worth it? The voice looked pretty pissed when you sided with hell there."

"What choice did I have?" the angel replied as he began sheathing Arden's swords. "Lucifer is winning. If we don't do something soon, it's going to be game over." He took the silk armor that was lightly singed around the edges and rolled it around the bundle of swords. "How about you? The voice is going to know you gave him the wish."

The guardian laughed. "I'm not worried. It's not like he can banish me to a more remote location, right?"

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"Maybe. You're the lucky one." The angel sighed and shook his friend's hand. "I appreciate the help. I'll be by when I can, but no promises. Right now, I have to drop off this stuff before the voice sends out the hunters to bring me back."

"Good luck," the guardian of Eden said as he watched his friend vanish. He looked around at the tranquil sand and gentle waves, taking in the ambiance before kneeling in the sand. His hands on his knees, he let himself slip in to a trance as he waited for the next mortal to find his way here.

"No!" Sheila screamed in rage as the ferry slowed to a stop. "God damn it! I'm supposed to go home!" She turned to Lucifer who stood off to the side, his arms crossed over his chest and a wide grin on his face. "Where the hell did Lakash go? Where's Arden? Where's my ride home, goddamn it?"

"Don't look at me," the devil jovially responded. "Arden was making a lot of deals. It's not my responsibility to see that they're fulfilled."

Sheila stormed over the devil and grabbed him by his lapels. "Listen you pimple dicked ass fucker! I want to know where Lakash is and I want to know *now!*" she snarled viciously.

"Easy on the threads," Lucifer responded as he gently disengaged himself from the vixen. "Lakash is no longer in any condition to help you. Arden's wish has divorced him from the dragon. He no longer controls the barriers and has no power to cross the planes himself, much less get you anywhere."

"Then what about Arden or Nanuk? What happened to them?" she demanded, searching for some glimmer of hope.

"I'm sorry---actually, no I'm not. You're boyfriend no longer exists. His soul was shredded into millions of tiny little pieces and has been spread across all of Creation." He chuckled. "I wouldn't look for him anytime soon. As for Nnauk, she's been restored; however, she has no powers that would be of any help to you."

"No!" Sheila sobbed as she dropped to her knees, hugging herself.

"I take it then that my bargain with Lakash is also off?" Ruddygore asked.

"That's between you and Lakash," Lucifer replied with a shrug. "You could try to summon him up, but be aware that he's been banished to a dimension without native magic, so the only way you're going to do it is with our help. Would you like to discuss terms? I'm sure we can come up with a quite affordable payment plan to accommodate your needs."

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The large sorcerer scowled at the devil. "No. That's quite all right. You've done quite enough so far."

Lucifer shrugged. "As you wish. I'll be in my cabin. Let me know when we're home." Without further adieu, he turned and walked away. Pausing for a moment before stepping through the hatch, Lucifer turned back and chuckled. "Boy, did Arden ever play the both of you for suckers. He sold you both, hook line and sinker, and in the end he betrayed you both. I don't think I could have done better if I'd tried." The light laughter that spilled forth as he walked away was anything but humorous to either the sorcerer or the vixen.

Ruddygore sighed and looked down at the vixen who knelt on the deck, sobbing. He reached down and gathered her up in his arms, making sure not to step on her dress or tail, then turned and carried her back to her stateroom.

The carriage pulled to a stop at the base of the stairs leading into Ruddygore's castle. Poquah officiously opened the door and unfolded the steps before standing to the side. Ruddygore was the first to step down, followed eventually by Sheila and finally Lucifer. The imir raised an eyebrow at the Prince of Darkness' presence, but made no comment. "I see that we have some unexpected guests," Poquah observed in a neutral tone.

"Yes, we do," the sorcerer, said, glancing at Sheila. "It appears Sheila will be staying with us for a while. As for Lucifer, I'm sure he can take care of himself."

"Actually," the devil interrupted with a smirk. "You don't need to worry about putting Sheila up. I'll be taking her with me."

"The hell you will!" the vixen spat as she moved to stand behind Ruddygore.

"I'm afraid I can't allow that," Ruddygore declared, frowning at the dark prince.

"Oh, pish tosh," Lucifer said, waving a hand. He reached inside his jacket and withdrew three envelopes and handed one to Ruddygore and the other to Sheila. "I'm afraid that I lied back on the boat. Arden did charge me with taking care of the loose ends. However, since there was no way for me to deliver Miss Vixen until we'd returned, I didn't really see any need to rush into things."

Sheila hesitantly took the envelope and saw her name written in Arden's handwriting. "You sorry sack of shit," she growled as she glared at the dark prince. "How dare you!"

"I wish I could say I'm sorry, but I'm not," he replied with a shrug. "It's my job, you know. You two were ripe for the picking and I couldn't really resist."

Sheila opened the letter and read it.

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Dear Sheila,

If you're reading this, then either I've screwed up completely and am hopelessly lost to you, or I've succeeded in my quest. Either way, you now have no way to get home other than with Lucifer's help. Do not make any deals with him. Your passage has been paid for. Go with him and do what he tells you. Our bargain is most specific and should cover all the points. He will return you home and give you an alibi that will explain where you've been for the last nine months.

I'm sorry for everything that's happened to you. Please believe me when I say I wish I could undo all of the pain and misery I've put you and your friends through. Unfortunately, that's impossible to do. I must settle now for getting you home and hopefully undoing as much damage as possible in the process.

Please remember that I will always love you.

*Yours forever
Arden*

Sheila sniffed and wiped a tear as she folded up the letter. She looked to Ruddygore and saw that he too was reading a letter, which had been wrapped around another envelope that had been inscribed with an intricate scrollwork of symbols and runes. The sorcerer folded the letter back around the envelope and tucked them both in his pocket.

"Well, now that we've got the basics down, I believe my business with you is complete," he said, giving the sorcerer a short bow. "If you ever need hell's service, please feel free to call." He turned to Poquah and nodded. "Would you do me the favor of tracking Hecate down? Tell her that Sheila, rather than myself, is looking for her."

"What do you need Hecate for?" Sheila warily asked.

"It's simple, my dear. Hecate has the ability to create portals across the dimensional bounds," he explained as he led her up the steps. "Normally, she's restricted to either this world, hell or earth prime. However, with some help from me, her powers can bridge the gap to other worlds, such as your own. I will need her assistance to get you back."

Sheila stopped at the doorway and shook her head. "So I'm really going to go home?"

Lucifer nodded. "Yes. I always keep my promises. Always."

"I see" the vixen replied with a nod as she stepped into the grand foyer. "When can we leave then?"

"That's up to Hecate," the dark price replied. "Without her help, you're stuck here."

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"Sheila!" the feminine voice echoed off the marble tiled walls. "You!" Hecate spat as she spotted Lucifer standing next to the vixen. "Why's she still here, you son of a bitch? What kind of crap are you trying to pull now?"

"I am not pulling any kind of 'crap' as it were," Lucifer responded holding out a letter. "I believe this will explain everything.

Hecate,

I know we haven't gotten along very well, but I have a favor to ask of you, and in return, I'll do a favor for you. As you've probably figured out, I'm either dead and destroyed or I've completed my quest. Either way, it's going to make it hard for me to fulfill any favors; however, I ask that you hear me out.

Lakash is no longer in control of the dragon, and as such he is unable to transport Sheila home. I've made a deal with Lucifer to see that she gets home. He will need your help to accomplish this.

Here's where my favor comes in. Should you assist Lucifer in returning Sheila to her home, Lucifer will also assist you in leaving this realm. This is your out, Hecate. You wanted to get away from the rules that govern you; well, here's your chance. Get Sheila home, and you'll have your way out.

I'm sorry we didn't get along better. You are a most interesting person and I think we might have eventually become friends. Alas, that's something that will probably never happen now.

Good luck with your new life.

Arden

Hecate read the letter three times before looking up at Lucifer. "Is this for real? You're going to get me out of this hell hole?"

"That's right," the devil replied. "Arden has bought half your ticket. You have to buy the other half by helping me return her."

"I-I don't know what to say," the demoness stuttered. "When do we go?"

"As soon as you're ready," Lucifer responded.

"Great. Let me get a few things." She turned to Ruddygore and asked, "RT, I want to cash out. Remember? Like we talked about? Please?"

"Certainly," the big man replied, reaching for a package that Poquah had produced. "Arden had indicated that he might have a way to get you out when we left, so I had Poquah prepare your payment. It's all there."

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Hecate took the small leather pouch and examined it. It contained five vials of softly glowing liquid as well as several small gold bars. She tied the lid closed and tucked it into a larger pouch on her belt. "Thank you," she said suddenly giving the big man an unexpected hug.

Ruddygore, although initially startled, recovered his dignity quickly enough to return the hug for a moment before disengaging himself. "That's quite all right. You've earned it."

"Well, Poquah. This is it, eh?" she said to the stalwart imir. "Guess you're pretty happy to be seeing the last of me, eh?"

"On the contrary," the emir replied shaking his head, "you have always brought a unique view of the world which I have found fascinating. Although you do tend to be annoying at best, your absence will leave a void. In short, you will be missed."

"Why Poquah," she said with a smile. "That's the nicest thing I think you've ever said to me."

"Indeed," the imir agreed. "Custom says that partings should be on a positive note. Far be it from me to disregard such things."

Hecate laughed. "Same old Poquah to the end.' She turned to the others and nodded. "Shall we go?"

"Lead on," directed Lucifer.

Hecate reached out and touched an invisible point in the air, causing a circular ring of fire to expand. Big enough to accept even Ruddygore, the ring would pose no problem to the pregnant vixen. "After you," she said, waiving towards the hole.

Lucifer shrugged and stepped through without hesitating.

Sheila paused and looked back at Ruddygore and smiled. "Thanks for everything."

"You're quite welcome, my dear," the large sorcerer replied.

The vixen stepped lightly through the ring, not trusting it to burn her. Behind her, Hecate strode through the portal, allowing it to collapse behind her.

"Well, shall we see what Arden's top secret document on how to navigate the Sea of Dreams has to say?" the large sorcerer asked as he strode towards his study. Once in the room, he took a seat at his desk as Poquah closed and locked the door. Taking the letter out of his jacket, he removed the second envelope from the letter and studied it for a second. Satisfied that it has no protections other than that in the letter, he took a knife and slit the top edge open. From within, he withdrew several sheets of paper that were

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covered with scrolling texts, mathematical formulas, diagrams as well as various obscure glyphs and wards.

Poquah waited patiently as his master read the document, noting that the big man's frown grew with each page. The imir watched as the large man flipped over the last page of the document and then folded it back up again. "Is there a problem with the document?" he asked.

"A problem? No, no problem. The document provides exactly what I was promised," grumbled the sorcerer as he stuffed the letter back in the envelope. He walked over to a lit brazier and tossed the document onto the coals. "Unfortunately, the cost is more than I'm willing to pay."

"That is most unfortunate," the imir observed.

"Yes it is," the sorcerer agreed solemnly. He turned and smiled at his companion. "It's not a complete loss. What we've witnessed here, Poquah, is history in the making. The entire nature of the war between Heaven and Hell has had a monkey wrench thrown into it. If we're lucky, that means that we might actually have a chance to help delay or even to prevent Armageddon."

"Indeed," Poquah said, his eyebrows raised in appreciation. "It seems that perhaps providence wasn't so unkind to you after all."

Sheila blinked as she looked around at the complete and utterly black darkness around her. The odd thing was that she could see Hecate and Lucifer just fine. "Where are we?"

"Why, we're in hell, of course," Lucifer replied as he started walking.

Sheila cautiously started to follow him, aware of the fact that they were walking across some sort of field, but she couldn't see any details. "What kind of hell is this?"

"Blindness," Hecate commented as she took a hold of the vixen's arm. "For some people, the loss of sight is the ultimate horror. Be careful. Although you can see us, you can't see any terrain. If you're not careful, you could trip and fall."

"How far do we have to go?" Sheila whined as she stumbled over something she couldn't see.

"Not far," Lucifer replied, pointing off in the distance at something she couldn't see. "We're almost there."

Hecate pulled Sheila to the side. "Watch out. There's a big hole there. You could easily break your leg in it."

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Sheila blinked and looked around, panicked at the world she couldn't see. "Why can't I see anything? How is it you can see?"

"I'm not mortal," Hecate commented dryly. "I'm half demon, so I'm a native to this realm. As such, I can see through the horrors."

"Yah, well, right now being half demon doesn't sound so bad from my point of view," the vixen complained.

Hecate didn't bother to answer, but instead continued to guide the blind vixen through the maze of obstacles. A few minutes later, they came to a stop.

"All right. Here we are," Lucifer announced as he rubbed his hands together. "Ok, first things first. Sheila. In order to return you to your world in such a way as to explain your absence, I have to give you an alibi. In order to do that, I'm going to have to implant some false memories."

"False memories? What kind?" the vixen asked as she glance nervously at Hecate.

"Nothing major," the devil reassured her. "A complete history that covers the last nine months. It will include an explanation for Arden's death and information that will exonerate your friend Zig Zag who's currently on trial for the murder of you and Arden."

Sheila glanced at Hecate who simply shrugged. "What will happen to my real memories?"

"You'll still have your real memories. They will exist side by side with you able to access either equally as well whenever you desire." He shrugged at the vixen's hesitation. "I can send you back without the memories, but then there would be a lot of questions you couldn't answer, some of which are crucial to keeping Zig Zag out of prison."

Sheila thought back to the letter from Arden and nodded. "All right. Will it hurt?"

"Hurt?" the devil echoed with a laugh. "My dear, I pride my self on making such things as painless as possible."

The vixen nodded. "All right. I guess so." She glanced over at Hecate for a moment and nodded. "I guess this is goodbye. I appreciate your helping me get home. Thank you."

"All part of the deal," Lucifer replied as reached out and touched the vixen in the forehead, causing her eyes to glaze over as she entered a spell-controlled trance. Several minutes later he removed his hand and nodded. "Now for the rest of the package," he chuckled as he rubbed his hands together. Reaching out, he touched her dress, causing it to decay away to nothing, leaving the vixen naked. "Not bad," he said as he paced around her, examining her from all directions.

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"What the hell are you doing?" Hecate demanded.

"I have to adjust her appearance to match the alibi," the devil commented as he reached out to stroke her arm. A wave seemed to flow over the vixen, leaving the fur filthy, matted and tangled. Her hair was chopped short, close to her head in a fashion that made it look like it had been hacked off with a knife. He brushed his finger under her right eye, causing the skin underneath to swell and bruise.

"Stop it!" Hecate demanded, grabbing his arm. "This goes way beyond just giving her an alibi!"

The dark prince snatched his arm away and snapped his fingers, caging Hecate so that she couldn't interfere again. "This is all part of the alibi. I'm doing nothing that won't be part of the story, the history that will explain why she vanished from the face of the earth for nine months. No permanent harm will come to her from this." He reached out and brushed the upper part of her right arm, then the right wrist. Walking around to the other side, he brushed his hand over her left forearm, then along her ribs. Time after time he stroked various parts of her body, sometimes creating a visible damage, other times the damage was unseen. Eventually he stepped back and nodded at his handiwork. Again he snapped his fingers, releasing Hecate.

"You son of a bitch!" Hecate shouted as she rushed to examine Sheila. "She looks like she's been beaten!"

Lucifer sighed. "That's the entire point! Do you think I'm doing this just to get my rocks off?" He winced at the look she gave him. "All right, let me rephrase that. I swear by all that is unholy that everything I've done to her is centered on her alibi and maximizing the believability factor associated with it. If she didn't appear abused, the alibi wouldn't fit."

"I guess I don't have much choice but to believe you," Hecate reluctantly agreed.

Lucifer let out a sigh of exasperation. "Good. Now do you think we can work on actually getting her home now?"

"Yah, yah," the demoness agreed. She turned and reached out to brush a filthy strand of hair out of Sheila's face and sighed. "Sorry, hon."

Lucifer reached out to touch the air and concentrated. "All right. I've laid down the probability matrix and initiated the quantum strata discontinuity. Now all you have to do is actually open the gate and it should take her home."

Hecate reached out and touched the same space where Lucifer's finger rested, causing a tiny circle of blue flame to appear. Struggling with all her might, Hecate slowly forced it to open big enough to allow Sheila through. "Quick! I can't hold it for much longer!"

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Lucifer snapped his finger, causing Sheila to walk through the portal. He snapped his finger one last time releasing the spell on the vixen just as the portal collapsed.

"Whoa. That was fun," the demoness commented with a laugh as she tried to catch her breath. "Glad I won't be having to do that one again."

"Actually," Lucifer said, drawing out the word, "the bargain I had to make with Heaven for your escape from this realm was that you go to a reality that has no inherent magic. As such, no matter where I send you, opening the portal is going to be no less difficult than with Sheila."

"No mana?" Hecate cried. "That's bullshit! This is your decision! I know it! It's you punishing me because I won't help you!"

"No, it isn't, Hecate," the dark prince said sadly. "I swear to you, Hecate, that I did not place this restriction on your release."

"Great! Just great," the demoness complained as she threw her hands up in the air. "Just how am I supposed to survive in that kind of realm? No access to mana, and no way to generate it other than through natural replenishment! How am I supposed to adapt myself to fit in? Unless you're sending me to a realm filled with demons, there's not much chance of me being more than just a freak."

"That's not true. I know of a realm where you can fit in. People like you aren't common, but there is a species similar enough that with a few cosmetic changes, you would fit right in. As for your mana problems," he reached under his jacket and pulled out a large gym bag and handed it to her. "This should help."

Hecate unzipped the bag and gaped at the contents. "My god, there must be at least a dozen liters of viscous mana in here!"

"Fifteen, actually," Lucifer replied, nodding. "There's some extra gold in there, too, so you won't have to worry about finding a job right away."

Hecate's brow furrowed as she looked up at Lucifer. "Why? What do I have to do to earn this?"

Lucifer sadly shook his head. "Nothing. You're my daughter, Hecate. Believe it or not, I do really care for you. I know you find that hard to swallow, but it's the truth." He reached out to put a hand on the stunned female's shoulder. "I'm sorry for trying to force you to be what you're not. This is my way of making up for it. Once you go through that portal, I'll never see you again. There's no way I could let you go without giving you enough to make sure you had a good start on the other side."

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"I---I don't know what to say. I want to believe that this is you being generous, but---I just can't believe it." She zipped the bag closed and stood up. "There's no price at all? I can just take it and walk away?"

"I won't demand anything for it, no. However," Lucifer paused for a second and pursed his lips, "I wouldn't turn down a good-bye hug and a thank you for your father."

Hecate's eyes narrowed as she studied him. "I swore that I'd never acknowledge you as my father. I'd rather die first."

The devil shrugged. "It's your decision. You don't have to do anything. Just take the bag and leave."

The demoness rolled her eyes and chuckled. "You know, you're too good at this, right?" She sighed and walked over to Lucifer, wrapped her arms around him and gave him a hug. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," the dark prince whispered as he hugged her back. As the two separated, Lucifer regained his composure and reached out, touching the air again. "Whenever you're ready."

Hecate reached out and opened a portal, forcing it wide enough for her to slip through but. "Thanks for everything," she said as she flashed Lucifer a smile, "Daddy." Before he could react, she slipped through the gate and allowed it to collapse.

Lucifer stood for a moment before he nodded to himself and smiled viciously. "One year to the day, Sheila Vixen. One year to the day." He turned and walked away, whistling lightly as he went. "Damn but I am bad."

Epilog

Seeing is believing, or is it?

The doctor sat at his desk as he flipped through the latest issue of the American Psychiatric Council magazine. His eyes flicked towards the clock as he once again checked the time. His patient, a most unusual individual, could only make appointments in the early evening and was the reason that the doctor was still at his desk long after normal closing hours. He closed the magazine and picked a large, heavy book, which had been covered in an odd, shimmering reptile skin. He opened the book and removed copious notes on yellow legal sized paper and began to review them as he thought about what had been written within. It had taken him the better part of two weeks to read the epic novel, and he was anxious to talk to the author again. He frowned as he remembered the words Arden had spoken to him before handing over the book, "What you read in here is the truth as I remember it."

When he'd first started reading the story, it proceeded much the way he'd expected. What wasn't expected had been the introduction of a supposedly magic amulet and everything that had come afterwards. The book was clearly the product of his patient's imagination, but was it a conscientious one. That's what worried him the most. Did the patient really believe that all these things happened?

His musings were interrupted by a gentle knock at the door. He folded up the notes and tucked them into the book before opening the door to find Arden standing in the doorway. An involuntary shiver ran down his spine as he gazed into a pair of steel gray eyes that somehow seemed to see more than they should. He noted that the snow white hair which had always been tied in a ponytail in the back was now free to cascade over the patient's shoulders and down the back, like frozen fingers of water caught in a cold winter's chill.

He broke eye contact and stepped back. "I'm glad you could make it, Arden," the doctor said as he closed the door after Arden had passed through. "I was rather anxious about whether you'd make this appointment or not."

Arden smiled and gave a light, airy laugh. "I'm paying you a small fortune for your help. It would be a waste for me not to show up." Arden walked over to an old yet comfortable leather couch and sat down. "Did you finish reading the book?"

"The book? Oh yes! Yes, indeed," the doctor said as he retrieved the book from his desk before sitting down in his usual chair. "I must say it is a quite interesting tale."

Arden's eyes twinkled with amusement. "But, you don't believe it actually happened, right?"

The doctor smiled as he shrugged. "I'm sure you can understand my trepidation. First, you were a human male who was transformed by a magic amulet into an anthropomorphic male polar bear, where you met the girl of your fantasies. Later, you swapped bodies with said female and eventually were killed. Yet it seems that death is only an obstacle for you. You've managed to die what, three or is it four

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times? Yet each time you keep coming back from beyond. Forgetting all the other deaths, your last one supposedly tore your soul into millions of parts and spread them on the wind. Surely you can see how I have a hard time believing such a fantasy."

Arden gave the man an amused nod. "It's of no matter. Writing out what happened to me has helped me to remember---no, *realize* who and what I truly am, which is why I came to you in the first place."

"And that's what concerns me the most," he said as he opened the book and pulled out his notes. "In this fantasy history of yours, you have shown yourself to be a very self-destructive person. More to the point, in your story you're not only a danger to yourself, but also a danger to others. To be honest, I spent a long time today considering whether I should have the authorities here or not to take you into custody and have you committed."

"You didn't, though," Arden noted with a smile. "You don't really believe that I'm a danger right now." Arden paused for a thought and chuckled. "That, or you much prefer the exorbitant price I'm paying for your services." Arden stood and withdrew a large envelope from a jacket pocket and tossed it to the doctor. "That's the balance of what I owe you. I wanted to make sure you got that before I returned."

"Before you return?" The doctor said, laying the money on the table. "So you're going to once again magically transport yourself to wherever this fantasy female is?"

Arden nodded and stood. "Something like that." Arden stepped over to a large, leather chair where an enormous, oversized teddy bear sat, filling it completely. Reaching out, Arden brushed fingers across the faux fur of the stuffed animal. "You know, I've been in your office a dozen times, and I don't think I ever asked you about this guy."

The doctor crossed his legs and leaned against the armrest. "That's Beartholomew. He's there so that patients who aren't comfortable talking to me, can talk to him instead. Maybe there's something you want to tell him that you're not telling me?"

"No. Not really," Arden replied, stroking the bear's fur. "I'm just thinking that he would look much nicer if he were white."

"A polar bear?" The doctor asked as he bit the end of the pen he'd been writing with. "I suppose---" The doctor's train of thought was derailed as Arden reached out with an index finger and touched the bear, causing the fur to suddenly change from golden brown to a pristine, snowy white color. The eyes too changed from black buttons to an icy blue color. "H---How did you do that?" the doctor stammered.

"The universe around you is a magical place, if only you know how to look for it," Arden replied. "Thank you again for your help, doctor, but I think that it's time for

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me to be going."

"Going?" the doctor muttered as he stared at the stuffed bear. "How are you going to go back?"

Arden reached into another pocket and pulled out a gold amulet on a chain. "This amulet will get me there."

The doctor frowned. "And you really believe that *that* will return to be with this Sheila woman?"

"I know it will," Arden replied, slipping the necklace on.

"I thought I read in the book that Lakash had to actually perform the magic to move you between worlds," the doctor observed, as he checked his notes. "Yet in the end, you say that Lakash was defrocked and no longer had that power."

"He doesn't," Arden agreed. "This is a one shot amulet that was given to me by someone else. It will return me to Sheila and that's it."

The doctor nodded. "I see. And what will you do when you go to use the amulet and nothing happens?"

"Let's find out, shall we?" Arden said with a mischievous grin and promptly vanished.

The doctor bolted out of his chair and swept the area Arden had been standing with his arms. He looked down into the deep shag carpet where Arden had been standing and saw the pile slowly unfolding now that there was no weight there. Shaking his head as to clear it, the doctor turned and snatched up the stuffed bear. He examined the tag on its rear just under the tail and saw that it did indeed have the hand-embroidered name Beartholomew on it. He gently set the bear down, making sure to place it exactly where it was before it had been changed. He then picked up the book, carried it into his office and dropped it onto the desk as he simultaneously dropped heavily into his chair. The doctor stared at the gleaming cover for several minutes before he picked it up, opened the cover and removed his notes, which he tossed into the trash with a sigh. Flipping to the first page of the story, he began to read it again with an entirely different perspective.

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Old Friends and New Gifts

Dr Grahl wasn't doing too well. No, he wasn't doing well at all. The old schnauzer currently sat in his bed, propped up by numerous pillows as a thin, plastic hose fed oxygen directly into his nose. The gaunt, frail looking old dog clicked the television remote as he surfed from channel to channel looking for something worth watching. Disgusted at the selection, he turned off the TV and tossed the remote on the table by the bed and reached for one of the thick volumes, which were piled nearby.

"Doctor," the voice of a young marmoset said as she entered the room carrying a box. "This package just came for you."

Taking the small, oblong package from the nurse, his hands shook at the unexpected weight. "Thank you, Tiffany," he said, dismissing the nurse. He looked at the plain brown wrapping for some signs of a return address but found none. With the clawed tip of one finger, he ripped the paper along one end of the package allowing the contents to slide free. He discarded the paper as he examined the box. It was roughly six inches long, three inches wide and was hinged at the top of the elongated end. Nervously he pried the box open and gasped at the contents. Within the small box was a folded piece of parchment, which fell out of the box to land on his bedding. The parchment, however, was not what had grabbed his attention. Inside the box was a large, heavy, gold medallion that resembled the one in his father's journal.

He removed the amulet and held it to the light and frowned. Although the markings along the outer edge of the amulet looked almost identical, the image in the middle was quite different. It showed a furless face with a flattened muzzle and herbivore teeth on the grinning face. Its eyes had the slit pupils of a cat, each of which contained a crystal that reflected the ambient light with a rainbow of colors. It almost seemed to glow with an inner fire. He noticed that the amulet was oddly warm as he turned it over to examine the back. His frown deepened as he saw that the back was void of the scrolling text, which had been present on the other amulet.

He replaced the amulet in the box and unfolded the parchment to examine the writing. His hand scrambled on the nightstand for a moment before they found his reading glasses. Now able to see the parchment, he read the scrolling text:

/Dear Doctor,

I'm sorry that we shall never meet again as you helped me greatly during my brief stay in your reality. I'm afraid that the Amulet of Lakash is lost for all times, but I have recently come into possession of a replacement, which serves a similar if not the same function as the other.

Below you will find the words, which, if spoken aloud while holding the amulet, will reunite you with your father. I warn you that the world you go to will seem hauntingly familiar while at the same time horrifying in its difference. All I can do is assure you that there will be someone there who will help you adjust to your new life.

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Should you decide not to use this amulet, or once you are done using it, please pass it on to the next person you feel might benefit from its use.

Be well and goodbye.

Arden./

The doctor found that he was momentarily unable to read the text below until he wiped the tears from his eyes. His heart filled with joy as he took the amulet in his hands and read the words aloud.

The first indication that here was something wrong was when the nurse smelled something burning. At first, she thought it might be the soup she was heating on the stove, but dismissed that just as the smoke alarm began to scream.

Dropping the book she was reading, the marmoset bolted for the master bedroom as the stench of burning plastic and rubber hit her sensitive nose. Turning the corner from the living room to the hall that lead to the master bedroom, she could see the bright orange flames shooting from the open doorway.

“Doctor!” she shouted as she tried to get close enough to look into the room, but was forced back by the flames. She heard glass shattering as she tried again to look into the room. The bed, having been saturated with pure oxygen, had become a funeral pyre. Her eyes were drawn to the plastic hose of the oxygen bottle as it shot around the room, fueling the fire. Her heart skipped a beat at the thought of multiple oxygen bottles in a room engulfed in flames.

Her claws dug into the carpet as she raced for the front door. Frantically, she undid the deadbolt and yanked the door open her only thought to escape. Outside of the house, she was almost half way to the street when the first oxygen bottle exploded, blowing all the windows out and sending flames shooting through the structure.

Stunned at what had happened, she sat in the middle of the lawn and stared at the house, unable to comprehend what had happened as the first wailings of sirens could be heard.

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Lisa closed her eyes as she took a sip of the homemade tea she'd just brewed. The tea was an old family recipe taught to her by her father and him by his father. Making it was something she relished from her past. It had been a long day and this had been her first chance to relax. She shook her long, sandy blond hair out of her eyes and sighed as the tension slowly started to fade away. There was, however, still a sense of expectation as if something was about to happen. She'd just finished her tea when she heard a crash coming from the rear of the store. She looked up in surprise at the sound and saw one of the bookshelves rock before slowly falling over, dumping its contents on the floor. A muffled shout from under the pile of books sent Lisa scrambling towards the back.

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When she reached the fallen shelf, she saw a pair of bare feet sticking out from under the pile of books with the shelf leaning catty cornered over them. Lisa had no trouble heaving the bookshelf so it sat upright again since it was void of books. The person buried, however, might not be so well off. Without regard for any damage the books may take, Lisa proceeded to dig her way down through the pile to the person buried beneath. She was momentarily startled as a hand pushed its way out of the pile as the owner struggled to get free. Lisa took the hand and heaved with all her might, drawing a young woman from the pile as if unearthing some rare find. Both women sat panting on the floor as Lisa examined the young woman for any injuries. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

"Nein," the young girl replied as she removed her hand from her forehead and checked for any blood. "I do not think so," the girl replied in a thick, German accent.

"I'm really sorry about this," Lisa declared as she continued to dig the girl out from under the books. "I thought everyone had gone already. I don't know how this possibly could have happened." She paused to look at the girl who sat staring at her hands. "Are you all right?"

"Mein Gott!" the girl whispered in awe.

"What?" Lisa asked, checking the girl's hand for injuries. "Did you hurt your hand?"

The young woman looked up at Lisa and asked, "Your---your name. What is your name?"

"Lisa. Lisa Graulman," she replied curiously. "Why?"

"Mein Gott!" the girl again whispered. "You were born in Stuttgart, yes?"

Lisa was stunned by the question. "Y-Yes. How did you know that?"

"You have a son, ja?" the young woman asked, "Gunter? Ja?"

Lisa blinked. "Who are you and how do you know so much about me?" she demanded, her concern turning to fear.

The young woman reached down into the pile of books around her and searched frantically for a moment before her hand came up with the amulet. "Does this look familiar?" she asked, holding it out.

"Oh my god," Lisa gasped as she saw the twinkling eyes. "Where did you get that?"

"Arden," the female replied. "Your friend Arden gave it to me so that I could be reunited with you."

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Lisa was stunned. */Arden gave her this amulet? Arden's alive!/* she thought. "Wait a second. Reunited?" Lisa asked, as she tried to understand what was going on. "Just who are you?"

"Gunter," the young woman answered. "I am---or rather was your son, Gunter. The Gestapo brought you an amulet very similar to this back during the war. You were to study it. You vanished four days later."

"Gunter!" Lisa whispered as she covered her mouth, her eyes wide with the shock and realization.

The young woman looked down and chuckled, "Though I do not think I am a Gunter any more," she said with a lopsided smile.

"Oh Gunter," Lisa cried as she wrapped her son, now her daughter in her arms and began crying. "I thought you were lost to me forever."

"I never gave up the search," replied the young woman as she tearfully returned the embrace. "When I met Arden and saw the amulet, I knew he was my key to finding you!"

"Oh my god! Gunter!" Lisa cried as she pulled away from her daughter. "Arden! How is he?"

"I am afraid that I do not know," she replied as she stood and cautiously stepped over the piles of books. Dressed in what looked like a pair of pajamas, she was definitely out of place in the store. "The amulet was delivered to me with a note saying that the Amulet of Lakash was lost forever, but that this new one would serve the same function. He even gave me the words that would bring me here. He thanked me for my help and said that we would probably never meet again. I can only assume that he's alive and has accomplished his quest."

"His quest?" the older woman asked as she walked towards the back room. "You'll have to tell me about it some time. Right now, we need to get you into some street clothes so I can take you home. We have a lot to catch up on."

"Not to mention a lot I must learn from you," Gunter commented. She gave a sheepish smile at the confused look her mother gave her. "You must now teach me the same lesson I taught Arden when he showed up as a polar bear in my world."

"What's that?" Lisa asked, her curiosity piqued by the comment.

"How to use the bathroom," the young woman replied as she began to dance from foot to foot.