

NaNoWriMo 2004

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I am lost. One of my companions, Viera, is no where to be found. The other, Kom, is likewise missing. I have lost them in the void of this place. A grey nothing of swirling possibilities. I had learned that there was no air to breathe when we first came here. Kom had taught me to keep such things in the back of mind. He was a little surprised that I caught on so quickly.

It was Kom who had ultimately brought us to the city of Tâ€™lakthâ€™kor though it was indirect. The city was not as big as some of the more known cities in the plane of pure chaos, but it was prosperous enough due to its mining operations of the hallucinogenic spice known as Kaleido. I had never tried it, but I've seen its effects on people. In expertly measured quantities, it's an effective anaesthetic. In an overdose, let's just say that people die in every kind of ecstasy known and perhaps a few more. However, it's usually sprinkled into food or drink to give that extra kick at parties or orgies or whatever else. The younger Sensates swear by it. Anyway, that was Tâ€™lakthâ€™kor's claim to prosperity. Tâ€™lakthâ€™kor was the last place we had visited in the plane of chaos.

Now I floated in nothing and I let it carry me. I seemed to be caught in some kind of flow that was taking me somewhere. Or had I created the flow myself? I saw the billowy somethings become water, earth, fire or misshapened imps that chattered and chuckled. Then it was swallowed by a large cloud which became a toothy maw belonging to no creature and that too eventually went back to the grey. Swirls of light jumped and made circles, lightning crackled in their wake. Chaos. I closed my eyes and felt the flowing maybe matter pass about me. I thought back and remembered to where I had begun, hoping that in remembering that I might through some act of sheer belief find myself where I was.

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It had also started in a city. The nice person I spoke to at the Faculty of Planar Affairs called it the City of Doors. I needed the relevant permits and such before I could leave my prime world for my final year practical assignment at the university. I had chosen Planar Affairs and had gone to the faculty building for more information. I was sold on the idea pretty quickly. The way I saw it, the city was more a City of Possibility. When I stepped through the portal, I was immersed in a bustling metropolis filled with philosophical noise, backed as much with cudgel and sword as it was with fervour and faith. Everyone could have a voice and the louder they were in their belief, the little bit more powerful they became. That day I took plenty of fliers and other pamphlets of informational and educational propaganda from factions, cults, societies, sects, orders, schools, businesses, and other individuals. I saw many people of all races, some known, some I had only read about it books, and others which were utterly alien. It was

overwhelming yet exciting. Luckily, the Faculty had a commissioned house here for new travellers to the planes, so I had a place to sleep and have as a safehouse.

I spent a week exploring the city with a map. I was generally unmolested. I attended open air speeches, listened in on the governance of the city, visited various libraries and museums, and learnt some of the peculiar slang language that became more common towards the poorer sections of the city. It was in the richest area of the city that I had met Kom. He had suggested that any young prime wanting to learn about the planes should start at the beginning. That meant a visit to the elemental planes. Kom was an enthusiastic fellow despite the loss of his wings. He never talked about his wounds which must have been wings at one point in his life. They constantly bled and he always was heavily bandaged about the chest. The only thing he would ever say when I brought up something that might have led to a question about his missing wings was that it was his punishment. It's all he ever would say. Straight after he would tell a raunchy joke with boisterous vigour and we'd laugh ourselves into forgetting the subject.

“There's four places you have to go when you go elemental,” he told me. “The City of Brass, The Cloud Trinity, The Nexus in Water, and The Bejewelled. Fire, Air, Water and Earth.” He'd pull out sketches he had drawn of those places and show them to me. I asked him if he had ever been to those places. “No, but all the planewalkers' tell me it's the thing to do. After those places, the others are optional,” he had replied. I went along with his suggestion. We never got to any of those elemental cities.

I had prepared for the journey at the faculty boarding house. The management there gave me information on what I needed to know. They told me about the elemental planes, what happens at their junctions and also basic information on the outer planes. I knew most of it already. I had studied it after all. Mentioning this to Kom would always draw a mocking tone from him. He had said that it was prime arrogance to consider that enough. “Ha! You clueless always think you can survive by something you lanned from a book,” he would snort. “Get you put in the deadbook! You follow my lead and I'll teach you good on the dark of it all.” Despite his grim warnings of my arrogance, I always considered myself a pragmatic sort. I was allowed one free rescue by the faculty if I should need it although it would cost me one grade level on my final assessment. I decided getting a bad grade would be better than getting made into a permanent resident of one of the planes. I signed the agreement and they gave me a pair of metal spheres. They were meant to double as stress balls so that I could grind them instead of panicking and wasting the rescue. It was both disconcerting and comforting at the same time.

I met Kom at his usual hangout, a bathhouse and relaxation centre called the Twin Airs. It wasn't the Great Gymnasium, but it was nice enough and you didn't need to be part of a select group to use it. There were quite a few such establishments in the city, but the Twin Airs had open baths though the upper floors had thin gauze walls for privacy. It's architecture was all pillars and marble having been

modelled after some prime civilisation that liked its baths. If you had the coin, you could partake of its services. Kom liked to go there after his deliveries were done. He worked for a courier service and he liked to take the jobs that required him to push himself to this physical limit. He would then relax at the Twin Airs. "The air's good; the food's good; the view's good; it's all good," he said to me the first time he took me. It was a run by a pair of twin air genasi females, Gale and Zephyr, who loved to talk with their customers. It didn't matter if you were naked or near naked with just a small towellette covering you, they'd roam about their establishment together, pick you at random and begin talking until you left or they decided to go talk to someone else. They were fickle like the wind with their attentions. While the view of the city through the gauze in the upper levels was good, I couldn't help think that Kom was also referring to the genasi proprietors.

"Our father's a halfling," said Gale. "Our mother's a djinn," continued Zephyr. I had been soaking in a private hot bath in one of the upper levels when they popped in to talk. It was my second time there, a few hours before Kom told me about how I should go about experiencing the planes. They asked where I was from, why I was here in the city, and about my family. That naturally led them to their parents. "Everyone asks us the question," said Gale. "It's a funny story how they met," continued Zephyr. "Father was in his balloon and flying up into the sky, but he got caught in a slipstream," Gale explained. "You know what one of those are?" asked Zephyr. I nodded. "Well, he soon found himself in a city in the clouds though he didn't know that he had slipped through a portal to Mother's home," giggled Gale. "He crashed right into her bedroom patio!" laugh Zephyr. I listened to their story about how their father, through a series of increasingly convoluted inventions that were somehow related to his love of the air and flying, managed to win the affections of their mother and convinced their mother's father not to throw him out. It was a little farfetched and I'm not sure if they exaggerated a little, but then again, they were here talking to me after all.

When I met Kom on the day we were supposed to go on our trip to the elemental planes, he was having a light meal with the twins. It appeared he had just been through a massage as his skin gleamed and he smelt of perfumed oil. The twins were telling him about their home when I came into earshot. He loved them, I could tell, but I could also tell that they were unaware of his feelings and probably did not return them. I never told Kom about what I thought. Zephyr saw me first and their conversation with Kom ended with a squealed "Look, he's here!"

The twins left us for other conversations after a brief greeting and a farewell and a "Come back to us!" Kom told me he had managed to get a courier job for some fancy cargo for one of the Golden Lords that would take us to each elemental plane. He said I could tag along and provide moral support for the long trip. "It'll be cake," he said. "Just stick with Kom and you'll be right!" I asked if there was anything extra I should know about before we went. I knew the elemental planes were hostile and knew reading about it may not be enough. "All taken care of," Kom replied with a

grin.

We headed to one of the dispatch portals for the Planar Trade Consortium. The cargo Kom was to deliver had been sent there waiting for shipment approval. I had asked Kom what it was that he was delivering and where. It seemed curious that a delivery would go to multiple destinations. Kom said that it was more an exchange than a delivery and that once the exchanges were all made, the real delivery could be made back to Golden Lord who had arranged all this. It just so happened that the places of exchange would be the cities that he had suggested I visit. I asked him about that coincidence and he just shrugged and said something about the luck of the draw, some rule of three, or a unity of rings. In any case, I was glad to be able to tag along without having to pay.

We were to get to the destinations via the Astral on a ship that could sail through the elements. I asked Kom about it. "Water and air's easy. You'll see. Fire is like air though it can get a bit hot in there," he explained with a face. I guessed he meant there might be trouble or there might not. "Earth... that's tougher and we'll go via the fire-earth conjunction until we hit a known travel path." He grimaced. "The junctions are always problems," he added. He grinned when he saw my expression and said, "Don't worry though. I've done this a dozen times before and I'm still around." I reached into my pocket and drew out the stress balls. He laughed and said, "Come on. We've got a ship to catch."

The portal itself was inside a building. I wasn't sure how we'd catch a ship from in here. Kom explained. "We go through a portal to the Astral. Other side is the dock town and we get it there. Cargo's been going through since yesterday and not just mine. Took so long since while the portal is stable as a rock, the dock on the other side is attached to a lump of rock that likes to move about." I asked him for the name of the town. He said it was something like "Silver Stars" or "Slivered Shards". It depended on where the town was at a particular point in time. I guessed that our entrance to the elemental planes would be at the junction between earth and fire. Kom said I was right. When the junction was dominated by fire, the town was called "Silver Stars" and when it was dominated by earth, it was called "Slivered Shards". It was a little confusing and quite unnecessary, but Kom said that the inhabitants were a little touched in the head because of the nearby elemental rift.

The portal only opened from the Astral side and the key was the presence of town itself. Or rather, the lump of rock that Kom mentioned. I learnt later that it was part of the body from a floating god that was long dead. It had broken off the main section at some time in the past and it now orbited the rest of the god. Kom said that the god's name is lost to the ages, but he thinks it was once some god of logic or law; he wasn't really sure. What he did know was that the closer you got to the main part, laws began to break down. It was due to this that allowed a rift that led to the elemental planes to exist. Kom explained to me why this happened as he guessed that all I knew about the Astral was through study. "You know the Astral don't go to the elements, right? Well, you follow your books too close, it'll get you trouble some day. There's always some dark out there that's waiting for the clueless and this is one

of them. Looks like a colour pool you never seen before, but step through and you're ash in the deadbook.â€• Despite the rift's dangerous destination, it was the safest of the known rifts found in the area.

While we waited for the portal to open, we met Viera. She was another traveller who had booked passage to one of the destinations that were to be visited after the elemental planes. Viera's hard to describe. I'm not sure what she looks like. She's either majestically beautiful or horrifyingly hideous or somewhere in between. When I look at her out of the corner of my eyes, I can vaguely make out her appearance, but when I look at her directly, shadow seems to wrap about her. I asked her about this later, but at this point in time, I tried not to stare at her. I thought she was a tiefling, one of those who were part humanoid and part something else, but as I found later, she was not. Anyway, she was just a fellow traveller when we were waiting for the portal to open and she kept mostly to herself. I pointed her out to Kom and I could tell that he knew what she was with one glance. â€œForget her. She's not your type,â€• he told me. I replied that I had no such ambitions and was merely curious. â€œCuriosity gets you killed with her type,â€• he said with uncharacteristic seriousness. I let it drop with that.

Several other couriers and fellow travellers joined us in the waiting area for the portal to open over the next hour. Kom said that it should open soon and that if I wanted to go to a privy, I should go now. I gave him a hard look and he grinned. I went to the privy. It turned out later he was giving good advice. When I got back, the air was crackling with energy. When I reached Kom, he said, â€œCheck yourself after it opens.â€• I asked him what I was to check for. â€œThat you have everything you thought you have,â€• he replied. â€œThe other side is Astral, but it's funny Astral. Sometimes, that funny leaks through. Remember how I told you about them barmies that live on the other side?â€• I nodded. â€œSometimes it does it to things. You don't want your hat to suddenly decide it wants to go for a walk, for example.â€• I raised an eyebrow and he grinned. â€œThough when it happens, it's always a good laugh.â€•

I should take a moment to reflect on the Cant. Kom's usage of the slang wasn't what I would call native. He could speak quite proper when it was required and I suspect this was a result of his past life. It just seemed that Kom was just trying to fit in and the Cant let him blend in a little bit more. As for my knowledge of the Cant, I learnt it as I went. Usually the context of its use made the meaning apparent, but when it's used strongly, I'm left with nothing but confusion. Sometimes that's a bad thing. There was one time I was asked, in a somewhat hostile manner, â€œJink or the deadbook, berkâ€•. I didn't know what was being said and, in hindsight, that probably made me more of a target. Luckily for me I had been waiting for Kom and he arrived at about the same time. I saw a little of his ability in the ensuing brawl and it helped then and also now to know that he's a good companion to have around.

The energy in the room was palpable. I asked Kom just where the portal would open and he said that it

usually opens in front of the west wall. It was a large room, almost a warehouse, but the "usually" bothered me. I asked him what he meant by that and he said sometimes the portal decides to try a change of view. "Last time, it opened a dwarf's height off the floor and facing down. We had to roll under and stand up into it. Of course, the first person through discovered it was also the same on the other side and ended up with a sore head. You had to jump from the gravity here into the gravity there. Such things rarely happens though."

It happened fast. The wall was there and then it wasn't. It was just empty blackness. "Looks like a jumper," Kom said. "Watch that first step." He checked his belongings and made sure everything was the way it should be and I did as well. I thought I saw a chair twitch slightly, but didn't have time to investigate as Kom was already striding towards the portal. I followed after him. The portal was large enough to allow several people to go through at once. Kom stuck his head into it and looked down before pulling himself back and saying, "Just like stairs." With that, he stepped through and appeared to be walking down steps. I looked back towards the city I was leaving, but all I saw was the inside of the room. Viera was near the back and looking shadowy. I stepped forward and down and found myself in the Astral.

I was struck at how sharp the Silver Void appeared to me. It was bright without being bright and seemed sharp to my senses. My movements were different yet the same. I had read that in the Astral the mind mattered more than the body. The experience could only be described as being in a dream. Kom was waiting for me and when he saw that I had noticed him, he motioned me to follow him as he bounded up a path way towards the town. The portal appeared to have opened to a large cargo area which was almost empty. It was basically a flat area on the rock. Kom later told me that the orbit of Slivered Shards was about a day and the portal was open for about half an hour. In that time, the entrance would move across the area. Transfer of items had to happen quickly but that was doable given how wide the portal was.

I followed after Kom as the rest of the others made their way through. I caught up to him as he was entering a building near the town centre. He seemed to be in quite a hurry. "Astral's nice to stay young in, but in the end, youth becomes your prison," he told me. "Besides, the ship's ready to go in about an hour (or best estimate given this place) and I have to make a quick drop off." I followed him into the building which had a sign hanging above the door which read "The Pyrocast's Emporium".

The store was owned by a fire salamander by the name of Shazallarazar and it was hot inside. With the rift to the fire-earth junction, Shazallarazar had set up shop selling various things from the other side as well as protective items for those going in. Kom told me later that while the ship was protected against the heat, it didn't hurt to have a little bit extra especially when visiting the City of Brass. "They're

not all good bashers if you know what I mean," he had said. However, the main reason Kom had come here was to make a delivery. I was watching the exchange between the two and I saw no delivery made. Kom purchased some charred sticks which looked like they once were the legs of some small avian, but that was it. He bid the shopkeeper farewell and we exited. I was quite wet with perspiration when we were outside though Kom didn't seem at all fazed. I enquired about his delivery and he said that it had been done. "Not all deliverables are physical," he had explained. "Some are metaphysical. It's like portal keys. It's not always about something you can touch and feel." I made a comment about how I didn't need to see the planes and that I just needed to talk with Kom. He barked a laugh and did not reply.

We headed for the docks and where our ship was waiting. The inhabitants of the town generally kept out of our way. They looked like pirates. It made sense in a way. The Astral could be sailed and is considered the planar highway by many, so the presence of pirates in the Astral wasn't something that was out of the realms of possibility. I mentioned this to Kom quietly and he said that any kind of piracy out here was dampened by the threat of the githyanki joining in on the pillaging. The folk that we would liase with here were employees of the Planar Trade Consortium and were rotated out periodically. Staying too long near the energies given off by the dead god as well as the agelessness of the Astral were not good for one's career path. The real townsfolk were paid to ignore consortium business and instead went elsewhere for their looting.

The ship was captained by quiet man by the name of Salkin. Tall, lanky and clean shaven, he didn't look like he fit in with the rest of his crew. It seemed as if he were some kind of high ranking naval officer than a simple captain of a merchant vessel. He didn't talk much so I didn't learn more about him. Kom didn't know him either. Most of the others who had come through the portal were already settling into the cabins below decks and we did the same. Kom gave me a key and told me the cabin number. He wanted to check over the cargo he was to deliver. It was when I was looking for our cabin that I finally met Viera.

I had found the right door and was about to enter when she spoke although I didn't know it then. She had startled me. I was alone when I walked down the narrow corridor to the cabin door. "I noticed you watching me before," she whispered. I heard it clearly though I know she whispered the words. Every time Viera speaks to me, it is in a whisper or is said softly and I always feel as if I am in a daze. I can never be sure if my recollection of her words as I remember them now are complete. It's almost as if every word she says has a subliminal message embedded into it. I didn't reply. I just turned my head to look at her. The shadows immediately wrapped about her. "Do you have an interest in me?" she asked.

I shook my head. I didn't want to say she was a curiosity. "Ah. So you don't have an interest in me?" she asked. The shadows on her face seemed to dance. I wasn't sure but she was either amused or angry. I nodded. I told her I liked meeting new people as a way to learn about the planes. "Really? Is your angel friend teaching you? He seems a nice fellow." I had thought Kom was an angel of some host, but I had never brought it up with him. "I am Viera. If you need some balance in your..." She paused for a moment. "... In your education, I might be able to give you some pointers." I asked her what she wanted in return. She said, "Someone to talk to." Then something strange happened. It happens every once in a while with Viera and I can't be sure if I was dreaming it or not. All of a sudden, I was in my cabin and Viera was saying goodbye as the door closed behind her. Every time I want to ask Viera about such events, I never seem to be able to. Later when Kom learned that I was meeting with Viera, he said, "It's your life. Be careful with her." I could never manage to tell him about those little time jumps I have with her.

Kom returned from his cargo check to find me lying on my bunk (I had chosen the top bunk) staring at the low ceiling. I had been listening to see if the sounds of this ship would be like the sounds of a ship in real water. It wasn't. It was a lot quieter. It was also to distract me from thinking about the mystery that was Viera. I knew something had happened between the time I was outside and when I was in the cabin. "What's wrong with you?" asked Kom. I told him about Viera and how I thought I had made a new friend. After he told me to be careful, he said, "We should be off real soon now. How about a game with the cards?"

We were into the third game when the ship left dock. It was the smoothest departure I had ever had while on a ship though it was my first time as a passenger on a ship on the Astral. "We'll start entering the rift in about half a day. We'll start noticing strange things happening in about an hour. Lady's Worship." He laid out his cards. I asked what sort of strange things as I proceeded to concede the game. "Well, shipping out here is a tedious business," he said while dealing out three cards to me. "There's nothing to see except the Silver Void. Sometimes you get lucky and you see something rare, but those somethings are more likely to eat you than let you gawk at them. Luckily, we're going to a dead god. There's always something to see when you get close to a dead god." I asked him what there was to see since he didn't really answer my question. "You'll see," was all he said. I won that hand.

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I opened my eyes. I had heard a noise. The matter of probability still surrounded me. It swirled and became and spun and became not. How did I remember so much? Was it the plane? How could it be? I heard the noise again. Was it a voice? I spun about, the current still carrying me to my unknown destination. There was a shadow ahead obscured by a veil of chaos matter. I had many times previously

taken out the balls that I could have used to take me home, but I had always held off. Although I was in some peril, I was not in a situation where I knew my life would end. Then again, who does? I wanted to shout out, but decided against it. I had passed a group of frog like humanoid monsters previously. They had seen me, growled amongst themselves and then waved at me as they continued along with their business. You never knew what might happen in this place.

It was definitely a voice. It was calling out. I could only assume it was for me since there was no one else to hear. What was it saying? *Wake up*. Wake up? Was I asleep? I could see it a little clearer now that I had moved closer. It wasn't humanoid. It appeared to have a snake-like body. *Wake up!*

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I had fallen asleep. Kom woke me and said, "I'm going for a walk up on deck. Want to come?" I asked him how long I had been asleep. He said he didn't know. He told me he had had a conversation with the porthole window (its mouth being the window) and he had decided that things should be starting to get interesting above decks. I asked him what they were talking about. He said, "We debated the existence of the Great Astral Eye. Don't ask me what that is, I didn't get to ask, though the ship thinks it exists in the Deep Astral. I didn't know what the Deep Astral was, so it told me." I wanted to ask more about what they were talking about but Kom gave me a look as if I had turned barmy on him. I motioned for the cabin door instead. We left the cabin and went up. I wondered which cabin Viera staying in.

The Silver Void was filled with imagery that drifted aimlessly around the ship. Images and recreations of life coalesced from the nothing, played out their roles and then dispersed into motes of fading twinkling light. I was mesmerised by the show. Over there, a scene of war, a battlefield filled with soldiers and cavalry waiting as their commanders eyed each other with grim intent. Over there, a gigantic clockwork automaton is being created by an army of engineers while members of an unknown priesthood chant their logic prayers. Kom mentioned that they were dreams or memories of the dead god. I asked him how a god can be dead if it can still affect reality. "No god's truly dead. As soon as they get a little prayer into them, they'll start stirring. Seems like this one's not long for the deadbook from the picture show we have here though you'd probably be a greybeard by the time it woke up." I asked Kom what kind of god it was as he mentioned it was one of laws or logic. Kom said, "Most prime worlds are magic happy. There's another art some primes call science though you rarely see those types on the planes. They seem more clueless than most and typically, once they stay long enough, they go home touched in the head. If they have enough in the brainbox left to get them home. On the other hand, divine magic is perfectly fine for them. If you ask me, those types are all barmy. This god probably went down to the science types convincing everyone else their religion was better. The Athar'd love them."

We watched the memories flit about in the Silver Void until I brought up Viera. I asked Kom if he could see her properly and not shrouded in shadow. He sighed when I asked. He replied, "Yes, I can." I was waiting for more elaboration. "I hope you know what you're doing. She has the face of a child, round and innocent, that is, if you can get past her pupilless eyes. She has lobeless ears that are pointy like an elf though narrower. If I were to guess, I'd say she was part fey and part something else. Probably from Unseelie Court. Other than that, she's pretty wrapped up in her hooded cloak. Can't say much more than that." I asked him how he could know so much about her with just a glance. Kom shrugged. I asked him what was so dangerous about her. I didn't know what the Unseelie Court was. He replied, "You watch yourself around her. She'll swallow your soul and you'll let her with a smile on your face." He looked at me a moment. "You're just a human after all. Here," he said giving me a ring he took off his own finger. "Put this on." I asked him what it was. "It's no protection, but it should let me get through to you if you get addlebrained by her." I thanked him with a slight hesitation and then asked him why he had it. "Just a trinket I picked up," was all he said in reply. There was a steely glint in his eye when he said it as if he was remembering something. "Go on," he said as he went back to watching the imagery of a dead god's memories. "Go find her."

I went back down to my cabin door and stood in the corridor. Then I walked to a door opposite the wall my cabin was on and three doors down. I stood in front of that door and wondered why I had picked this one. I knocked on the door. There was no answer. "Looking for someone?" asked a familiar voice from my left. I slowly turned my head towards the speaker, my own voice silenced by that same feeling of dizziness. "Looking for me?" asked Viera, her features clouded by shadows. I tried to see what Kom had told me he saw. A face of a child? Pupilless eyes? All I saw was shadow. I nodded. Then I was in her cabin. It happened again. I don't know how I got there or at least I don't remember.

She was standing in front of the door and I was sitting in a chair between the double bunks and the wall. The shadows flickered about her as if they were flame. Wisps of shadow would leap off her, twirl about as if mist and then fade away. I shook my head to try to clear out the fogginess. I think she was smiling. "Why were you looking for me?" she asked. I wasn't sure. I asked her where she was going. "That's my business," she replied. "But... you seem like a nice young man, so maybe I'll tell you." I waited. "You have to answer a question of mine first." I nodded. "Are you awake?" I was confused. The fog in my mind didn't help either. I told her I was. I was there talking to her, wasn't I? She seemed to ponder the answer for a moment. "I lost something. I am trying to find it," she said.

I asked her what it was she lost. "I lost myself." After several moments of silence, I asked her where she was from. "You mean to ask what I am. Is that not correct?" I felt embarrassed and nodded. "I am a woman of surprises." My head was spinning. I put my hand to my head as if to

steady the motion I felt inside my mind. I asked her slowly how she knew Kom was an angel though I did not name him. "You told me," she replied. I felt sick. I asked her if she had some water. "I have something better," she said and she moved towards me. It was so fluid and graceful. She reached out with both arms to me, the shadows dancing about her arms, and she put her hands on my cheeks. Her hands were cold. I looked into her shadowy face and thought the darkness brightened slightly. I felt a little better. I blacked out.

"Looking for me?" she asked, maybe for the second time. We were outside in the corridor again. I was still in front of the wrong door and she was still on my left. I felt sick. Could someone feel seasick in a ship that did not sail over a sea? I stammered that I had to get some air and apologised as I made my way back above decks using the narrow corridor walls to help me keep my balance. I was at the bottom of the stairs when I looked back. She was gone. I went up.

Kom was talking to the captain when I got to the top of the stairs. I felt better too. I hoped we could get out of the Astral soon and into something real. "We're almost at the rift," Kom said when I got to him. The captain had moved away to give some orders to the crew. "Shouldn't be long now. Still have that charm I gave you before? That charred bird leg?" I patted my pockets for it and took it out when I had found it. Kom nodded and said, "That'll let you stay up here and see the view as we go through. You can write that in your report." My head was clearing and I breathed deeply. It didn't feel as good as if we were actually out at sea. "You seasick?" Kom asked with a laugh. I shrugged.

The rift had an orange colour with swirls of brown where it was apparently cooler. Course adjustments were made so that we would go through the middle. Behind it in the distance was the large rocky thing that was a dead god. It was a misshapened body that had an avian appearance though chunks were missing. Small birds flew through the Void about it, leaving spiralling streaks of colour in their wake. I asked Kom about those birds. "You've got part of one in your pocket," he replied. I hoped that those birds were not sentient. The birds made great efforts to stay away from us as we moved closer to the rift. I couldn't help thinking that they were watching us.

The rift was large. It literally looked like a tear in the fabric of the Astral. A dozen ships could have sailed side by side through its widest gap. The captain stood behind the wheel, which was being operated by a crewmen, and began gesticulating and chanting loudly. The crew scrambled about the ship, securing and fastening. I could see an elliptical haze surround the ship which then faded out of sight. I could feel the heat from the looming rift. The few passengers who were above decks moved hastily down to their cabins. The ship's crew that were above decks, including the captain, were the next to go below as the ship was within a stone throw's away from the rift. I nervously asked Kom about this. "It'll be fine. Just watch." I decided to watch from the closed door that went below.

Kom stood in the middle of the deck and raised his arms, his head thrown back. Specks of blood could be seen on his back where the bandages covered his wound.

We entered the rift and everything was in flame in an instant. I didn't even have a chance to flee inside although I would later discover that the door had been barred. The ship burnt in flames that did not harm it. The fire gnawed at everything, but it was ineffectual. I stared at my burning hand, the flames dancing on my fingertips, but it was as if nothing was there. I patted the burnt bird's foot in my pocket just to make sure. Kom laughed at the fire. I thought I saw wings of fire sprout from his back and flex as if Kom was stretching. A golden aura seemed to form about him and he truly looked like an angel at that moment. Then the flames died as the warm glow of the ship's protective field became visible. Kom's fiery wings faded and he lowered his arms. He turned to me, grinned and said, "Great view, no?" The flames were gone and now held back behind a wall of invisible force.

I heard a bolt being pulled back from behind the door and the captain and the deck crew came out and continued their duties. Each crewman grinned at me as they came out. I must have been grinning too. The crew were different from what I remembered. They must have gone through a shift change. The ship suddenly slowed as the resistance of earth made itself known. Kom was next to me when he said, "It'll be two or three days to the City of Brass depending on the lava currents." The captain bellowed orders and the crew scrambled. The ship seemed to gain a little bit of speed. The ship was bathed in a gold and orange glow from the fire and the shield. It was bright, but the shield seemed to dampen the light. Kom asked if I was hungry. I suddenly realised that I was and that we were out of the Astral.

We went down to the food area. It was filled with people eating. I looked for Viera. I could not find her. Then again, she only seemed to appear when she wanted to be found. I followed Kom to where they were serving a simple stew. It was being passed out with bread and ale. I opted for water instead. Kom explained when he saw me staring at the meagre meal in front of me. "It isn't much, but it'll do until we reach our first destination on the way to the City of Brass. Hour or two away." I told him I was a little surprised that they offered meals to everyone. "PTC treats its employees and paying customers well," was his reply. "It's just good business."

I was thrown to the floor. We had collided hard with something on the starboard side. Or something had collided into us. Kom helped me up. He said, "It appears we won't be having a quiet journey." Another shudder, this time from above, though it sounded like an explosion. "Head for our cabin. I'll meet you there." I asked Kom where he was going. He told me he had to get the cargo and then he was gone. He moved faster than I thought. Another explosion. There was panic as people ran out of the eating area or hid under the tables. I fought my way through and out to the corridor. The corridor to the cabins was in flames. Charred bodies were burning. I walked into the fire, found the door to our cabin and entered. I shut the door before the flames could get in, but I had to slap some

away.

The cabin inside was not on fire. It was probably hot, but the charm I had was protecting me. Smoke was seeping from the top of the door. I was breathing fine. I did not know what to do so I sat down on the bed. Several more explosions rocked the ship. Kom entered soon after with two cylindrical tubes that were capped at each end with a waxy substance. I asked him what we were supposed to do now. "We have to leave." I asked him how we were supposed to do that. He asked me about my balls and said that it might be prudent to use them. I never got to use them though. At that moment, there was a massive explosion that threw me flat on to the bed and sent Kom flying towards the door with a terrible thud. I saw later that he had protected the tubes he was carrying. There was a loud cracking noise and then a low creaking. Then I blacked out.

The divine battle had been fought to a stalemate against the insurrectionists and armies of the Fifth, Sixth and Ninth Arms of the Jo Host found themselves embroiled in a war of attrition. The insurrectionists had routed the Fourth Arm the previous week causing heated debate within the Council of Seph. Am'Lok'Ra, Commander of the Inner Arms of the Jo Host had taken a stance of force against the enemy while Wy'Ba'Hok, Commander of the Eyes of the Jo Host had urged caution and more information gathering. In the end, Am'Lok'Ra had won the argument, but when the battle was joined, it was Wy'Ba'Hok who had won the war of words.

The insurrectionists was made up of the nine armies of the Outer Arms of the Jo Host and those who sided with their beliefs. Led by Te'Nom'Fa, Commander of the Tenth Arm of the Jo Host, they had disagreed with the Jo Decree that all but the Eyes and the Inner Arms of the Jo Host were to be sent down to earth to serve as spirits of nature to watch over the mortals created by Jo. That disagreement turned sour when members of the first group to be sent had killed themselves. The Council had debated over the right of the individual to choose their right to their existence, but in the end, it was agreed that the Jo Lord's decision was for the good of all. Events escalated until violence erupted though they were confined to small skirmishes. Eventually, the Council decided to end the troubles once and for all and called upon the Fourth Arm but they did not know the depth of the disagreement with the Jo Decree and the insurrection that they had inadvertently started.

Jo's Kom's Shal, Legate of the Sixth Arm of the Jo Host under the command of Ma'Shal'Ta, awoke. He saw a world was upside down and realised that he had been tied upside down to a pole. His arms were chained behind the pole and his bindings burned. His breaths came with exertion, his vision blurred. He wept at the carnage he saw before him. In what had been the battlefield were more like him though many were dead, their bodies mutilated and some who were not whole. *How had it come to this?* he thought to himself. *How is it we have come to do such evil?*

Dusk approached. The night would see the scavengers, those demons who would pick over the dead divine for their experiments or to entrap their weakened spirits. The war had not started like this, but it

had degenerated as the insurrectionists began justifying the means to an end. They had been corrupted and it was spreading. That attracted the demons whose whispers to end the pain and seductive promises of vengeance had lured many to evil because of the corruption that had taken seed in the hearts of the good. The Armies of the Host were too involved with their conflict with the insurrectionists to deal with the evil that came after dark.

Jo'Kom'Shal decided that that would not happen to him. His bindings seemed to tighten about him as he struggled against them. He could barely raise the strength to fight against them after the horror he had been through. He could only wait for something to free him. He would wait for the demons. He would do what he could to return to the Council and report that the nature of the war against the insurrection had changed. It was no longer about the Jo Decree; it was about stopping the spread of darkness that threatened the Jo Host.

The demons did come several hours after dark. They combed the battlefield, collecting souls, collecting pieces, and collecting those who were still whole enough for enslavement, torture or corruption. Jo'Kom'Shal knew of their approach because of the stench of acid burning through flesh, rock and metal. The demons came first and behind them came their beat of burden, a giant slug-like fiend who left a blackened stain behind it as it slowly consumed everything it moved over. It glowed with an unholy aura that made Jo'Kom'Shal cringe. He feigned unconsciousness when the first demon found him. The spiny demon muttered something to a shadowy presence in the sky that swooped over and wrenched him, pole and all, from the earth. The flying darkness took him over to the slug monster and threw him on to the back of it where there was a platform attached. He landed badly on his side, sending jolts of pain through him, but Jo'Kom'Shal did not think he sustained any damage that would cripple him for long. Smaller impish demons worked on the platform checking the captured angels and tagging them. If they were conscious, the demons would stab them with a thin stiletto that was coated with a poison that would drag them into a nightmarish daze. Jo'Kom'Shal had no choice but to comply.

Jo'Kom'Shal awoke screaming in agony. He was shackled and spread on the blood stained floor. His head was being held down by something. He saw clawed feet, booted feet and hooved feet about him. He screamed again as he felt the dragging of metal teeth on his flesh. They were cutting his wings off with a serrated blade. When he struggled, a hooved foot kicked him in the head and he saw only blackness.

He woke up to his own choking. His head was pulled out of the dark oily liquid and he drew in staggered breaths. The stench was terrible and he knew the liquid was mostly blood of several kinds of beings. When the torturer saw that his victim was conscious, he gave him roughly to an insectile demon who grabbed him and took him to another chamber. The torturer picked up another unconscious victim and continued his work. Jo'Kom'Shal felt the pain in his back. The vile liquid he had been choking on stung his wounds as they ran down his back in rivulets. The demon's claws burned his skin which were

marked with burns, lacerations and bruises.

Jo'Kom'Shal was thrown into another chamber. He lay on the ground catching his breath and coughing up evil. A female voice spoke to him. It caressed his mind. He head swam and he saw things in double. He blinked hard to regain his senses.

“Fallen,” it said. “You are Fallen.”

“No,” croaked Jo'Kom'Shal.

“You are. Your pride damns you now.”

Jo'Kom'Shal could say nothing. He tried to raise himself up to see who spoke with him. He could hardly move. He twitched as a spasm ran up and down in back. What he could see was a large chamber that had a red glow that seemed to come from the walls itself. There were eyes in the shadows that hugged the regions of the room that shunned the glow. Hungry eyes. He felt feverish and he shivered. The oppressive air burned his throat as he coughed.

“You are Fallen, angel. Accept it and the pain can end.”

Jo'Kom'Shal rolled on to his back and winced in pain. He wanted to scream but he would not. He gritted his teeth and bore the agony. He looked about, enduring the pain, to see who was speaking to him.

“The strangest thing, angel. You are not like the others which is why you are here now in this chamber,” she said. “The others... well, those who gave in to their hate and anger... the cause of their corruption is obvious.” He could hear her footsteps draw nearer. He could sense others in the chamber like her. “Yours is different. That is why you haven't fallen completely. Know though that you are Fallen compared to those you once called comrade.”

Jo'Kom'Shal tried to wipe the sticky liquid from his face. His arms felt like lead. He saw her. It was a female and she had batlike wings. She was beautiful and evil and vile. She crouched over him, his head closest to her. She reeked of lust and seduction.

“Let go and the pain ends,” she cooed.

Jo'Kom'Shal spat at her weakly. “I am Jo'Kom'Shal, Legate of the Sixth Arm of the Jo Host under the command of Ma'Shal'Ta. You shall not have me nor will you have my will, seductress. I am beyond your foul words and I will give gladly my essence to the Jo Trinity.” He breathed heavily with the exertion of his words.

His temptress stood up with a glare on her face. “Drain him.” The others, like her, fell on him and bit into him. They drank from him. Jo'Kom'Shal screamed.

Jo'Kom'Shal awoke. His muscles burned. He was still on the floor. He could not move. He felt many stinging pains all over his body that added to the pain he felt in his back. He was on his side facing into the chamber. She was there, several strides away, squatting and facing him. He closed his eyes at the sight of her.

“Do you want to go home, Fallen? Is that it? They will not accept what you are now,” she said. “You know it, don't you? I know you do. What will you do? Will you just die here? Why not spurn them? They did not even think of liberating you. Are they so good as to let you die in the arms of evil?”

Jo'Kom'Shal tried to speak, but he could only manage to breathe. *I can be saved*, he thought, but he doubted. At any other time, he knew that he would have been saved. At present, with a war happening, he knew he would die in the darkness. He knew it with certainty. *It is my sacrifice*, he thought.

“Maybe you think you can escape if you bide your time? Waiting for the right opportunity? For a sign from your pathetic Trinity?” she asked in a soothing tone. “You'll escape and do what? Tell those people who would not save you about what is happening here? What is happening to them as they fight for the greater good and let a few lesser evils pass? Is that something you really want to save?”

Jo'Kom'Shal mouthed the word, “Yes.” He coughed and the pain doubled inside him. Tears were in his eyes. Were they from the pain?

“Are *they* worth saving?” she asked. “Honestly, tell me, do you think you can make them see

what they are doing?â€•

Joâ€™TMKomâ€™TMShal said nothing.

â€œReally? Is that so?â€• she said. â€œThey fight a righteous battle!â€• she said loudly, standing up and raising her hands into the air. She laughed. â€œAnd *we* thank them heartily!â€• She walked slowly over to him, accentuating her every movement. â€œWhat a petty thing to fight for. Your pride. You would think that such beings as yourself would know humility, but you end up squabbling when some of you might lose some of your power. Are you proud, Fallen? Are you so proud as to believe you might lose your power?â€•

Joâ€™TMKomâ€™TMShal wanted to tell her he was not like the insurrectionists. He would have done the bidding of the Jo Decree. He knew though that she was referring to his own side of the conflict. Would they really have allowed the Jo Decree to be ignored, to be disobeyed? Joâ€™TMKomâ€™TMShal blinked away a tear.

She smiled and crouched down next to his head. He could smell her. He closed his eyes and tried to think of other things. He wanted her. *No*, he yelled in his mind. *No!* She patted his head and smoothed his matted hair. â€œForget them. Leave them as they have left you. In time, you will see them again and they will be just like you.â€•

Joâ€™TMKomâ€™TMShal wept. His body, his mind, and his spirit wept. Even if he could escape, even if he could somehow make it back home, how could he convince the Council especially since they would know he had been in this place? How could they listen to him without suspicion? Without seeing the darkness that he knew was inside him? Without seeing that he was missing his wings? What would be the point?

He could feel her lips kissing his. They moved to his cheeks, then to his neck and then to his shoulders. They lingered at his back where they gently touched around his wounds. *It would be so easy*, he thought. *To let it go*. He remembered when he was brought up to his angel rank and the tests that he undertook to prove himself. The tests had been difficult. They stripped away everything and laid bare the soul for judgment. He remembered that one test which he had been anxious about.

It was something that had always been in the back of his mind. He wanted recognition. He desired it. To be told he had done a good job. To be told that he was a good man. He would willingly stand up and volunteer for tasks to prove his loyalty and his piousness. He did it because he wanted to help. He

believed that. He pushed the thoughts that he did it because he desired admiration down deep and forgot about them. The tests dragged them back out and he had been forced to confront them. He had to do what he was asked because it was right and for nothing else. His desire was revealed, but it was like a dark iceberg floating in his soul. He had passed the test, but only the tip was conquered. He was proud. He had defeated his desire, his lust. He passed the test of lust with pride.

Joâ€™™Komâ€™™Shal rolled on to his back and kissed his seductress. The pain was gone. He gave in to the lust on the dark, blood stained floor surrounded by the hungry eyes of those who had drank his blood. Those hungry lustful eyes which soon joined him. Joâ€™™Komâ€™™Shal had fallen and he did not care. He had given up.

â€™œAwaken, Joâ€™™Komâ€™™Shal,â€™• she said. His eyes opened and he looked into her eyes. He sat up and saw many others like her about him. They were all lying on the ground and looking at him. â€™œWelcome to your home.â€™•

â€™œI am Joâ€™™Komâ€™™Shal no longer,â€™• he said as he stood up. His voice was devoid of emotion. He put a finger to his lower back and moved it down. It was covered in dry blood. The pain in his back had become a dull ache and the many bites he had made his muscles stiff. He stretched to try to loosen them.

He saw a window to the outside deeper in the chamber and he moved to it. His seductress stood up and followed him. The others moved back into the shadows they had hidden in. He looked out and saw night lit with bonfires in which bodies burned. Packs of demons marched to destinations unknown and winged things glided lazily in the sky. The occasional scream could be heard, low and muffled - his former comrades in arms.

â€™œWhat shall I call you then?â€™• she asked from behind him. He felt her arms slither around him. He felt her press her chest against his back.

â€™œI am Kom,â€™• he said.

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I awoke with a start. I was wide awake. I was still in limbo. I must not have slept for long or else I would have started suffocating. I was shivering. I had been remembering things, but then... Was that a

dream? Or was that nightmare? Kom was a fallen angel? No, it couldn't be. It was just a dream. Just a nightmare. I had to get out of this place. I reached into my pockets for the balls. They weren't there. I shook my head. "Of course not," I said to myself with sarcasm. I looked around to see if my situation had changed.

I had come to a stop. Where ever the current was taking me to, I was there. It didn't seem like I was anywhere at all. I spun about in place. I thought of a chair, a simple wooden chair, and stared at the matter in front me. It swirled and then coalesced. The blob of wood gradually morphed into the shape of a chair. I sat on it. I decided that I had better stop feeling sorry for myself and try to figure out what to do next. My balls were missing, probably lost in the soup of chaos, and I was alone. I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was calling out to me though. I thought I could hear a voice but when I tried listening, I would hear nothing. Then when I would stop, it would start up again. It was a distant calling and barely audible. I decided to ignore it.

I heard thunder. I definitely heard it. I looked in the direction I had heard it and saw a flash. Another clap of thunder rolled over me. I went to it in the chair that carried me. The chaos soup parted and I saw a small plot of land with tended gardens and a small cottage in the middle. A perpetual storm loomed over it with thunder and lightning, threatening to flood the tiny area with rain that never came. I landed the chair on the edge and got up. The cottage and its surrounds was elaborate. Someone must be living here.

I went to the cottage door via the neat brick path. Flowers of all sorts lined the boundary of the path. The door had a bell hovering in midair on its right. I took hold of the clapper and rang the bell. "Just a minute," came a muffled voice from beyond the door. It opened and I saw a young child who couldn't be more than ten years in age. She was probably a little younger. She looked up at me and said, "How may I help you?"

I said, "I'm sorry to bother you, but do you know if there's a city or some other place nearby where I could get off this plane?"

She replied, "I'm sorry. I can't help you with that. I only visit those places when my home decides to visit them."

I was confused. "Your home decides?"

She said, "Yes, I call her Irene." The child pursed her lips and tilted her head a little. "Irene says to invite you in for some tea. The weather doesn't look good outside, so maybe you'd like to stay

here until the storm passes.”

“Do you have cookies?” I asked.

The child giggled and let me in. The cottage seemed larger on the inside, but not by much. On the left was what appeared to be the sleeping area with a bed large enough for two people, a couple of floor to ceiling bookshelves filled with books and other items, a closet and a large burgundy sofa. On the right appeared to be the eating area with a kitchen, a large wooden table and another door which I supposed led outside to a vegetable garden. It was cosy. The child walked over to the kitchen counter and moved a small stool to where a large jar was placed. She was too short to get the jar and used the stool to give her a boost. The door I came through closed by itself.

She took the jar and brought it over to the table. She raised the jar to me. I remembered myself and moved to take the jar and place it on the table. “I’ll get the tea,” she said as she turned back to the kitchen. I pulled out a chair and sat down. I took the lid of the jar and peered inside. The aroma of chocolate, vanilla, coconut and banana met my nose. I took out a vanilla cookie and bit into it.

She moved the stool to the stove and stood on it to reach the kettle. She grabbed a nearby cloth and picked it up. I asked her if she needed any help. She declined. She came over and poured tea into my cup and then into hers. I didn’t notice it there before. She set the kettle down and pulled out a chair for herself. It seemed too large for her so she took the stool and placed it on to the chair. She then climbed up and sat down.

I took a sip. Chamomile. “Nice tea,” I said.

“Thank you. It’s Irene’s favourite. We have other kinds but I’d have to pick them from the garden.”

“Your cookies are good too,” I added while taking a chocolate cookie from the jar.

She smiled. She had a round face and dark brown hair that curled about her face. I thought her ears were pointed as well, but I wasn’t sure. Her brown eyes were large and bright. She had a slight pout and her cheeks dimpled when she laughed. She looked familiar.

“How did you come to live with... Irene?” I asked.

“Irene says she found me at her doorstep when I was a baby,” was the reply.

“Right.”

“How come you are here?” she asked me.

“That's a long story,” I replied.

“Irene says she would like to hear the story,” she said.

“What about you?” I asked her.

“Stories make me sleepy and I hate not knowing how it ends.”

“Well, you know how mine ends. I end up having tea and cookies with you and Irene,” I explained.

“Oh. In that case, I don't mind,” she said.

I thought to myself, *Why not?* “Well, we were travelling through a plane of fire and earth.”

“That's the *paraelemental* plane of magma,” interrupted the girl.

I looked at her. “Para... elemental plane?”

“I'm sorry. Irene said it was rude of me to interrupt you. Please, go on with your story.” She stood on the chair and reached over to pull out a coconut cookie from the jar.

When it appeared that there would be no explanation forthcoming about the *paraelemental* plane, I continued. “We were travelling when the ship we were on came under attack by something. I don't know what exactly, but there had been explosions and something had hit the ship hard. I suppose I was knocked out because when I came to...”

* * *

I woke up in a dark place but I could tell from the fiery glow from the cracks in the room where I was that I was still in the earth-fire junction somewhere. I was lying on the ground on some kind of furry

rug as far as my hands could tell when I ran them over it. I called out to Kom quietly but there was no reply. I was alone. I felt my pocket and found the reassuring lump of the charred bird's leg.

I saw the fiery outline of a flap ahead of me. I must have been in some kind of tent. I crawled over, lifted it up slightly and looked out. I saw a cave entrance where the fire and magma churned outside. I was inside a cave. The floor was black and sparkled in the firelight. I heard voices and I let the flap drop back into place. I could hear them outside. I recognised Kom's voice.

I manage to catch Kom say, "œ... salvageable. Even if the magma did not claim them, those efreeti certainly would have."

The voice I did not know said, "œIn any case, we have to figure out how to get off this forsaken rock. I don't know how much longer the captain can keep things up. We should have reached Angmar Rocks by now."

The unknown voice must have belonged to one of the crew. I had guessed it was the man I saw behind the ship's wheel. Kom would later tell me that it was.

Kom said, "œHopefully, they'll miss us. PTC was never one to just let it go."

The other man said, "œHoping you be right."

There was a moment of silence and the flap opened up to reveal Kom's kneeling form.

"œAh, you're awake," he said. "œHow do you feel?"

"œFine," I said, "œUm... what happened? Where are we?"

"œWe got hit by efreeti rebels. They didn't like the cargo we were shipping so they figured to hush us up real quiet like on this plane. We're currently holed up in a cave. The captain's maintaining the shield against the fire of this place."

"œRebels?"

"œCity of Brass has enemies. Sometimes it's their own looking for a different dictator. Not our business, but war is good for PTC business. Jink's jink, you know?"

“What about the others?” I asked. I really wanted to know if Viera was alright.

“Guess about half the crew got made one with the plane, a few of the rest got captured. I figure most of the passengers were also captured or are now slag. Efreeti'll probably make them slaves.”

“How many people do we have here?”

“Let's see,” Kom said, “You, me, the captain, his first mate, others... twenty seven.” Kom looked at me and sighed. “Viera's here too. Don't know where she came from though. We were abandoning ship and I didn't see her. Then when we were some way away from the ship, I saw that she was with us. Interesting little friend you've found there.”

“What happened to me?”

“You got knocked out by when those barmy efreeti rammed us with some crazy molten battering ram. Smashed a gaping hole in the front of the ship and the whole thing started to break apart. I grabbed you and got out. Managed to find the captain and the others down the back about to jump ship.”

“Your cargo?”

“Next to you there,” he said, pointing to the two tubes. They glinted in the firelight coming through the test gap. They must have been made of metal.

“We have tents?”

“Standard supplies for the escape pod,” he explained, “though the pod wasn't meant to hold off magma. It's blind luck we found this place. The efreeti eventually gave up on us too once they saw the ship break apart.”

We sat in silence for a while. “What are we doing now?” I asked.

“I don't know...,” replied Kom, “having an interrogation?”

“You know that wasn't funny,” I said.

Kom had gone to see the captain when I decided to leave the tent to walk off my rising despair. The cave was more a large tube that was probably carved by the magma at some point in time. I guessed that the chunk of rock we were in now floated upon the magma though in a plane of magma, I wasn't

sure how that was possible. I could see the other opening from where I stood. Most of the able bodied were there. I thought I could see the outline of Kom and the captain.

There were several other tents about. I was told that those who had been injured or hurt were inside when I enquired with a crew member who was trying to sleep. He said that it was too hot to sleep for him even with the captain's protective shell. I was glad for my charm. I took quick peeks into each tent to see if Viera was one of the hurt. No one seemed to mind. They probably thought I was trying to help, though I didn't know what I could have done to help. Of course, Viera only showed up when she wanted to be seen, but it gave me something to do besides sweat.

I was about to join Kom and the others when I heard Viera say, "I am glad you are feeling better."

I turned and stammered out, "Me too. I mean, I'm glad you're alright too." The shadows around her seemed to be fighting the light from outside. "So," I said, "it's pretty hot here isn't it?" I cringed inside.

"It's not too bad." She might have been smiling when she said that. It was just a feeling. "It's more of a dry heat."

"Good thing we have the captain."

"Why don't you just leave?" she said suddenly.

"What?"

"Your angel friend. He can just leave. He can take you. He can't take all of us, but he can definitely leave if he wanted," she explained.

I said, "Well, he's an angel, isn't he?"

She didn't say anything to that.

"I guess you won't be getting where you're going now, hey?"

"It doesn't matter. I found something more interesting."

My heart skipped a beat, but it was then that I noticed that I wasn't feeling particularly dizzy. Talking with Viera previously would have me in a daze, but this time I felt fine. Maybe it only happened when we were alone.

“Wha... what interesting thing have you found?” I asked.

“Your angel friend.”

I felt somewhat deflated. “Oh. Well, he's a good fellow to have around in times of trouble, I suppose.”

I thought I heard her giggle. It was like wind chimes dancing in the wind. Melodius in a chaotic way.

“He's more than he seems,” she said.

“Really? How so?”

“I am unsure how to put this...,” she said, “his shadow and his physical form are not the same.”

“His shadow?”

“Yes,” she said, “his shadow is... shackled. Trapped. Caged.”

“How do you know this?”

“I read it.”

“Oh,” I said. I wanted to ask her about my shadow, but she must have guessed what I wanted to ask.

“Your shadow, however, says interesting things. Right now, it seems to be dancing.”

“Dancing?”

“It's not the actual physical act of dancing. It's more one of... ah, I see. You have an interest in me.”

I blushed and stammered, “No, not like that. I'm just... ah... you just seem an interesting person.”

She raised her arms out to me. “Let me hold you,” she said.

I stood there frozen. "Wh... what?"

"Come and let me hold you. I promise not to bite."

"Here?" I looked around. No one seemed to be looking our way. The crewman I had spoken to previously had gone.

"Yes," she said softly, "Come to my arms."

"Hey!" yelled Kom. I jerked my head away from looking at her shadowy face and looked down the cave tube. Kom was approaching. He stopped when he saw I had noticed him. "Over here. Something to show you," he shouted. He motioned with both arms.

I looked back and Viera was gone. She was already several paces away and moving towards the other cave entrance. She looked back just as I was about to say *see you later* and asked, "Can you see my shadow?" Then she kept going. I looked for her shadow on the rocky ground. I didn't see any. I looked down and found mine. I had one for each entrance.

"Hey!" It was Kom. I ran over to him.

"What was that all about?" he asked when I reached him. We started walking towards the captain's group.

"I was talking to Viera."

"Looked like more than talking."

"We were just standing around and talking," I said quickly.

Kom shrugged. "Anyway, there's something I think that you'd like to see."

"What is it?"

"You'll see."

We got to the captain and his crew. A few of the passengers were there too. They were all looking out into the storm of magma and fire. Kom pointed out there.

“See it?” he asked.

“I’m not seeing anything.” I looked out into the bright molten rock and saw bright molten rock.

“Do you think it’ll come over here?” asked one of the passengers to no one in particular.

I saw it as my eyes adjusted to the light. At first, it was a slightly darker patch and then I could see the shape of it. It looked like a whale except the head was a mass of tentacles. “I think...,” I said, “I think I see it. What is it?”

Kom said, “Chasalythicar.”

I looked at Kom and was about to ask him what he meant when he answered.

“A god.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” I asked as I looked back out.

“Depends if it’s about to go home or if it just got here,” Kom said.

“So which is it?”

“Well, the fact that we can see it somewhat means it’s been here for a while. Though, the fact that you can’t see it straight away means it’s not about to go home just yet. Maybe.”

“Where does it live?”

“Limbo.”

“What’s it doing here?” I asked.

Kom said, “Who knows? Joy ride. Hungry. It felt like it. Only it knows.”

“So what are we doing now?”

“If we get lucky, it goes home and takes us with it. If not, we become charcoal. If we’re really unlucky, it decides to play with us.”

I looked out at it. It looked like it was moving towards us. *Maybe it was time to use the balls*, I thought,

They probably wouldn't be happy I kept quiet about them.

Kom said, "However, today I think we're getting unlucky."

The faint brownish outline in the magma grew suddenly darker. It shifted direction and came towards us, its tentacles spread out and reaching.

"Get deeper in and hold on!" yelled the captain as everyone started running deeper into the cave tube.

I made for the tent I had come from and quickly went in. Kom did not follow though I knew he had been behind me.

"Hello," said Viera from the darkness.

"Hold on," I told her. "We're about to be hit by something." It wasn't fazed by the fact that she was in my tent or how she knew this was my tent.

"Hold me," she said quietly.

I heard Kom outside say, "Hey, you sure you don't want to see this? Once in a lifetime!"

I could feel the nearness of Viera.

"Come to me," she whispered.

I embraced Viera. I felt sleepy and at peace. The tension I had melted away and I didn't care that we were about to be eaten by a large monstrous deity. I could feel the warmth from her body but there was a cold feathery sensation on my arms, my legs and the back of my neck.

"Shhh... sleep," she whispered as she stroked my neck with one hand.

I put my head on her shoulders.

"Sleep."

I held her tightly.

"Sleep."

I slept.

“You do a lot of sleeping,” said the little girl.

I shrugged. “Kom says the same thing,” I said. “I thought Irene told you not to interrupt.”

I couldn't be sure if she scowled at me, but it looked more like a pout. “It's supper time. And Irene thought that that was a good place to stop. She seemed quite firm about it too.”

“Right,” I said flatly. Then I smiled and said, “I'm sorry. You're right. I am a little long winded at times.”

“Well, at least you're polite,” she said. She hopped off her chair and took the stool. She went to the kitchen area, set the stool down, and used it so she could start preparing supper on the counter where vegetables and meat and various kitchen utensils had appeared. They had not been there when I had started talking.

“I don't suppose I can help?” I offered.

“You can get some water from the well outside,” she said. She was peeling something, possibly a potato.

I went out the back door and was on a small cobbled path. There was a small vegetable garden on my left and the well was on my right in the middle of a square patch of grass. A rope was tied to a bucket with the other end tied to a stake that had been hammered into the ground. There was another bucket turned upside down next to the roped bucket. Despite the domestic scene, I could see the chaos matter swirling about in the sky and at the edges of the back yard.

It was small well, suitable for a child. I looked down and could see that it went straight through to the other side. I picked up the roped bucket and let it down until it was lost in the chaotic mist below. Then I pulled it up and as soon as it reappeared out of the soup, I felt the weight of the water contained within. I pulled it up and filled the other bucket with the water.

“Here you go,” I said as I went back inside. “Where do you want it?”

“On the counter there,” said the child nodding towards an empty space on the counter next to her. She was handling some dough.

The aromas of something roasting filled the house and the cooked vegetables were already on the table.

The table had been set up with plates, spoons, knives and forks.

“That was fast,” I said as I looked at the table.

“Irene's faster than me at some things,” said the child. “My pies are better than hers though.” She laughed. “It is, you know,” she said, “remember that coconut pie you tried one time?” I realised she wasn't talking to me.

“Do you mind if I look at your books?” I asked eyeing the bookshelves.

“Sure,” she said.

The spines of the books were covered in spidery script. I had no idea what they said. I picked one at random and flipped through the pages. They were blank. I put it back and picked out another one. Also blank.

“Your books have nothing in them,” I said still staring at the empty page I had stopped at.

“Oh, they're locked,” came the reply. A moment passed. “They should be fine now.”

The pages were still empty. “Doesn't look like it,” I said.

“That's because the last thing you were thinking about was books with empty pages.”

I looked at the empty page and thought of strange little girls in cottages floating in Limbo. Nothing happened. I closed the book and put it back. Then the spidery script on all the books beginning moving. They wobbled and shook as I looked in surprise and then went back to being still once I recovered from the shock.

I took out a different book and the script immediately began twisting into something I could read.

ENCHANTED BOOKS: A SORCEROUS ACCOUNT OF THE CREATION PROCESS

I opened it at random and came to a page discussing the several ways on how to make a book into a library. It compared the finished product to a bibliographic bag of holding and noted that just like that item, a book will eventually run out of pages. I opened it up to another section and it was detailing the ingredients and procedure required to make some other magical book concerning food preparation.

I put the book back and took out another.

BIZARRE SIGHTS OF LIMBO: A TOURIST'S GUIDE, VOLUME IV

The book opened to what I had hoped it would open at.

THE COTTAGE OF THE IRENE

Not much is known about this rarely seen cottage. The Irene is said to be a lonely spirit who wanders Limbo looking for someone or something to talk to. The only thing that can be stated as fact is that everyone that has encountered the Irene have mentioned that someone they thought looked like someone they knew, but not quite, lived in the cottage. Since much of the information about the Irene is inconsistent and more often than not rumour, the Lonely Plane's Guide to Limbo suggests that those seeing it approach with caution.

Postscript: Those who have first hand accounts of the Irene are invited to contact the nearest Lonely Plane's Guide office to provide more information for the next printing of this tome.

I slowly slid the book back into place and looked behind me. The child was taking something she had baked out of the oven. I noticed the table looked ready for supper. I walked over and looked closer.

“It looks great,” I said. There was cinnamon flaked bread, a roasted leg of what I hoped was lamb, a bowl of chopped tossed vegetables, and a jug of milk. The girl brought over a tray of six puff pastries and added it to the tabletop.

“Go ahead,” she said.

I was a little hesitant.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“N... Nothing. It's just that... er...”

“You looked us up in the books, didn't you?”

“Uhhh...”

“Don't worry. Irene doesn't mind,” said the girl.

I wasn't convinced.

The girl put her hands on her hips and said, “Fine.” She closed her eyes and raised her arms.

“What are you...,” I started saying, but the girl vanished before I could finish.

I heard a deeper, more womanly voice say, “Most people are more comfortable when there's a child. However, there comes a point when conversing with a child becomes more frightening than conversing with a monster.” It came from the air where the girl had vanished.

“Irene?”

Then as sudden as the girl had disappeared, Irene appeared before me. She was a middle aged woman. Long black hair with dashes of white through it, grey eyes with a knowing look in them, slender in body and short in height. She was clothed in a dark purple robe with red trimmings at the sleeves and the hem. She looked completely normal and she reminded me of one of my professors back home. This helped put me at ease.

“Why the trickery, Irene?”

Irene sat down at the table and began to eat. “People are usually more open when with a child,” she said between mouthfuls of bread. “I'm not planning on harming you,” she added.

She didn't have to say that twice. I don't think I had eaten a full meal since before the trip to the Astral.

“Open about what?” I asked. The bread smelled great. I poured myself a cup of milk.

“Oh, anything in general. It's lonely out here in the middle of nothing.”

“Why *are* you here?”

“Exiled. It's a long story.”

“So's mine.”

She smiled. "Tell you what. I'll tell you mine if you finish yours."

"Deal," I said.

"Well?" she asked.

"Oh, I thought you were going to go first?"

"A lady does not talk with her mouth full."

"But your mouth is... never mind. Alright. Where was I?"

"You were about to get eaten by a god."

"That reminds me. Do you know what that god was?"

Irene explained, "It's a god of nightmares. More or less. On the physical planes and that includes the primes, it manifests in physical forms. It's a living nightmare. Out here where the physical isn't as important, it's truly a nightmare. They say even evil beings have nightmares and they say that it is the cause of them."

"Sounds nasty," I commented.

"Not as nasty as it's relatives though I believe those are locked safely away in the prison plane."

"Thanks for the explanation."

"You are welcome. Now, you were about to get eaten by a god?"

"Yes. Of course, I wasn't in much of a state to notice, but..."

* * *

When I woke up, I was lying on my back with my head on Viera's lap. Her hands were resting on my chest. The tent flap was open, but it looked like shadowy gauze was obscuring my vision.

"Good, you finally awake," said Kom, "I was about to leave you two here."

I sat up. Viera kept her hands on my shoulders. I couldn't remember what happened. I know I fell asleep since I woke up a moment ago. "Wh... where are we?"

"A few hours out of T'lakth'kor. We're in Limbo," Kom said.

"What's a T'lakth'kor?"

"Not a what. A where. City in Limbo," said Kom, "Now come on."

"What happened to that god? Did it attack us?"

Kom had been about to leave, his metal tubes under each arm. "It did. Luckily, it ate us whole. Well, most of us. Anyway, it seems it was about to go home because after it took us "surprise" it went home. It's not pokeable on the outer planes so once it got here, it dispersed into nothing."

Kom seemed quite nonchalant about the deaths of those who had not made it. Viera said he was an angel and I also thought he was, but sometimes, he did things which didn't seem angelic at all. One time I got into a little trouble back in the City of Doors. Kom happened to arrive to help me out with some would-be muggers. He pulled out a sword out of thin air which seemed to be made of liquid blood. It would drip when he held it still, but would hold together when he was about to hit someone with it. The droplets would never touch the ground though as it always vaporised quickly after leaving the blade. When the fight was over, he just let go and the sword vanished.

"Hey. Snap out of it. I want to get to the city and get some ale or something stronger into me," Kom said.

"Sorry. Just... slow witted at the moment," I said.

Kom flashed a look at Viera and then shrugged. "Maybe you're the one who needs the ale. Come on, I'll even pay for you. Besides, this hunk of rock we're on is beginning to break up." He got up and moved out of the tent.

"Viera," I said.

"I'm here."

"Could you help me out? I'm not feeling well."

It took me a while to shake off the constant feeling that I was about to empty my guts of whatever I had had to eat. I also had recurring bouts of dizziness usually just before I started retching. Whatever it was

I had caught, it was Viera who looked after me. I wasn't sure what had happened in that tent before I fell asleep, but there must have been something. I even thought the shadows that shrouded Viera weren't as dark as before and that I could almost see her face.

Outside I could see what Kom had meant. The cave tube had collapse where we had been standing before the monster god had decided to come get us. The opening nearer to where we were standing now was a lot closer than I remembered. If I had been a couple of tents further towards it, Viera and I would have been gone. I could see the chaos soup outside. The captain had gathered he crew and was loading whatever they had salvaged during the efreeti attack on to platforms. Kom was at the edge looking out into the chaos soup.

I walked with Viera's help to him. No one seemed to notice her presence although I know they noticed me. "How do we get to this city?" I asked.

"We walk," Kom said.

"On what?" I asked.

"Don't worry. I've done this before. Just have to concentrate."

"Done what before?"

"Putting order into chaos. Been a while though," he said, "Not sure if I still got it."

I watched Kom stand there looking out into Limbo for several minutes. Viera had her arm around my waist while her other arm held on to mine. She seemed genuinely concerned. *How did it end up like this?*, I thought. *Maybe she talked with Kom when I was asleep? Maybe he said something?* I wasn't sure what he would have talked about though.

"Ah! There we go," said Kom as he dusted his hands off.

I opened my eyes. I had had a dizzy spell and was sitting down with Viera. I was beginning to think that I was allergic to the chaos. She had been whispering something into my ear "a song perhaps" and it did make me feel a little better.

"About time!" grumbled the captain.

It had been about 20 minutes since Viera and I had arrived where Kom was.

“If you don't like it, you can make your own pathway, cutter,” said Kom.

The pathway Kom had created was more like a street and it appeared to be only about 50 strides in length.

“Doesn't that go seem a bit short?” I asked.

“I'm just making this up as I go along,” Kom said.

Everyone started walking forward and I got to my feet with Viera's help. I really I did feel better after Viera's song.

About halfway on to Kom's path, I saw the end in front begin to lengthen for every stride the front walker took. I looked behind and saw that same distance disappear from the path that we had walked on. Kom stayed roughly in the middle and he seemed preoccupied with making sure the path did not disappear from under us.

“Is whatever you are doing difficult?” I asked him.

“Can be,” Kom said, “Depends on how one's brainbox works. I'm making more than just something to walk on though.”

“What kind of brain do you need?”

“You got to be canny to the chaos. Know the fact that the only predictable thing about this place is the fact that it's unpredictable. You can't get lazy, but once you get it, you can be. That's the dark of it.”

“Can I try it?”

“Sure,” Kom said, “But are you feeling up to it?”

“I am,” I said and let go of Viera. She likewise let go off me but stayed close. I could see a vague outline of her through her shadow shroud. She seemed to be watching me and Kom closely.

Kom said, “First thing you have to learn is there's nothing here except the soup.”

“Right,” I said.

â€œNo, I don't think you do.â€•

â€œUm, how come?â€•

â€œI made the air you're breathing.â€•

â€œRight,â€• I said somewhat less sure of myself.

Kom spent most of the walking trip to T'lakth'kor teaching me. Occasionally, we'd have to stop to rest and Kom would let me try adding pieces to the path. He told me he was surprised that I learnt so quickly. I told him I was a fast learner, but he wasn't sure that was the reason though he accepted it.

During the time when Kom wasn't teaching me, he would spend it changing the direction of the path. Sometimes it was because of â€œsomething nasty aheadâ€•, but usually he did it because the â€œdamned chaos changedâ€•. Kom explained, â€œLike I told you, you can't trust chaos. Get lazy on it and it'll come back and bite you because it changed it's mind.â€•

By the time we saw the city of T'lakth'kor suspended in the soup, I could create a breathable bubble around me, simple objects and small patches of something normal to stand on. I also was feeling fine again. Viera still stayed close. Looking at her was like looking at someone in moonlight. Everything Kom had told me about her revealed itself. I asked her about this and she answered, â€œYou're waking up.â€• I asked her from what I was waking from and she said, â€œYourself.â€• I decided to stop asking her questions at that time.

The captain and his crew and the surviving passengers took it all in stoically. They knew the risks and seemed quite familiar with Limbo. I asked a crewmember during one of our rest stops about it and he said, â€œSure, been here before. Was stationed at one of the cities near the gate to Axos... Soax... Xaos... whatever they're calling it... about three years ago. The PTC's the lifeblood of business on the planes. It's got the resources and the know-how to handle competitors, enemies, and acts of gods. No one leaves the safety of an office or warehouse or other PTC safehouse until they're ready and then only if they want to.â€•

T'lakth'kor was a fortress city due to attacks from the inhabitants of the plane. Guards kept a constant vigil for trouble coming from outside or within the city. They'd never know when they'd see conflict. Last big attack from outside came about fifty or so years ago with periodic probings since. Last big mess they saw from the inside was from the result of the Kaleido Ban which lasted three days before the leaders of the city decided to rescind the law. At least, that's what Kom tells me. He said he'd been here once before a few years after that last big hit on the city. It had been for one of his early jobs when he was still working himself up the ranks to the level he is now where he can get asked to do a courier by someone in a high position. Trafficking illicit substances is dangerous when you have to deliver it to

a destination that frowns strongly on such things.

Kom's pathway led up to one of the docks in the city's bay. No one paid much attention to us as we stepped on to the stone platforms that stuck out of the lower city. The guards gave us a quick glance, but went back to their careful gaze outwards. There were probably snipers in the various towers about the city walls watching us anyway.

We made our way to a warehouse quite close to the docks that belonged to a PTC subsidiary. They were quite surprised to see us and once their diviner confirmed who we were, they immediately began making arrangements. Deliveries must get through after all. The salvaged cargo was stored and Kom added his tubes. The captain and his crew would stay at the warehouse where they had bunks for employees. Kom, who was more of a freelancer, had to find other accommodations as did the other passengers who were promised that they would reach their destinations. I asked Kom what the PTC would do about all the others who had been lost. He told me standard practice was to hire mercenary groups to go find them or to send PTC contracted adventuring companies to do a little search and recovery. Whatever happened, the PTC would ensure that its reputation was not harmed in any way.

The PTC subsidiary in T'lakth'kor was a githzerai trading company that handled the majority of trade in Limbo. They usually only visited the city every other week and we were told that the most optimistic waiting time required to alter the schedules was three days. Kom assured me that it was more due to the githzerai's nature than any direct result of the plane. So in the spare time we had, we decided to explore the city. Kom had always wanted to try Kaleido but did not have the time the last time he visited. Besides, he had been on the job.

I discovered that the city had two parts. There was an inner city, a roughly cubic structure carved from some ancient *thing*, separated by the chaos soup from the ring-like outer city. Three stone bridges spanned the gap which was about an arrow shot apart. The outer city was where the majority of trade occurred and had most of the warehouses. The majority of the hospitality industry was in the inner city. The inner city was where the majority of the population lived whether they were permanent or temporary.

As we crossed over to the inner city, Kom said, "Don't let that gap fool you. The bridges aren't really real. Anarchs can let go any time and then the city gets into lockdown mode." At that point, I didn't know what an anarch was, so Kom explained. I asked him if he was an anarch. He replied that he was just lucky before continuing. "The outer city has many gates linked to the inner city though they can only be opened from the inner city side. There's only one gate out of here but it's erratic in operation and switches between Xaos, one of two other cities and a few random places on the plane. It's not used often for obvious reasons."

Viera had been quiet the entire time. She walked near me and seemed ready to pounce if I suddenly decided to fall over. I was fine though. Kom always seemed to keep me between himself and Viera.

I asked Kom where we were going and he said, "Last time I was here, I stayed at the Party House. Cosy inn, nice food, good beer. Near to the Kaleido Bars if you know what I mean," he said ending with a chuckle.

"Where does the Kaleido come from?" I asked.

"There are rocky outcrops floating about near here that has the stuff growing on it like a fungus. The visible bits are poisonous. You have to dig into the rock to the bulbs under to get the raw material. Purplish metallic substance. Have to be careful you don't breathe it in."

"And they bring it here?"

"No, they have mobile factories that do that. Too dangerous to do it here. Dust gets out and you'll have a mob pumped with barmy juice up to the eyeballs. They bring the finished product here for packaging and trade. A little gets out to the people here."

"What do the people here do?"

"Mirrors. Lenses. Anything to do with glass. Whole industry here based on that. You do it right, Kaleido dust can be made into interesting things. Those things can make a nice magical ingredient as well. Also, a large number here are rich kids having fun and view this place as a one week resort though the paradise is all in their heads. And then there's the guards who do the guarding."

The Party House looked like a large warehouse outside. Inside, it looked like half a large warehouse. The back half were the rooms which I was glad to get to. I had an urge to find a real bed to lie on. We had a quick meal of bread and cheese. There was also a meat stew that Kom enjoyed. I gave mine to Kom when he mentioned that Kaleido was a popular seasoning in food here. Viera had hers and did not seem to exhibit any effects other than a somewhat fulfilling meal. I was pretty sure Kom had fleeced me of my stew, but he reassured me of his innocence on such things. I was too tired to argue.

We got one room that myself and Viera shared. Kom said goodnight to us and instead went looking for a Kaleido Bar, so it didn't make sense to get a larger room or even two rooms. I lay down on my bed which felt very comfortable after what I had been through. Viera didn't go to her bed instead choosing to sit at the end of mine. I sat up when she did this.

“Err... Viera. Your bed is over there.” I said with a tip of my head towards the other bed.

“You misunderstand. I just wanted to talk,” she said.

“In that case, I'll lie down and you can talk.”

There was a moment of silence between us despite the soft mutter of talk that carried through the walls from the commons area of the inn outside.

“Your friend Kom is not what he appears to be,” she said.

“He's an angel, isn't he?”

“Not at the moment.”

“I don't understand.”

“His shadow says that he is a fallen angel. One who has fallen into darkness.”

I looked at her. In the dim candlelight that lit the room, I probably saw her more clearly than I had ever seen her. Her skin had a golden tint. “Fall... he's evil?”

“No, his shadow doesn't say that,” she said.

“Well, as long as he's not trying to get me killed... at least, on purpose, then I'm not too fussy.”

She smiled. I could actually see her actual smile instead of the one I would see in my head. “He has something planned for you. I'm not sure what, but I don't think it is harmful.”

“Then everything is fine,” I said with wave of my hand.

“I don't think it's beneficial either. It's all very confusing. Your shadows seem to be... in a stand off and it's not clear what the outcome will be.”

I wasn't sure what to say to that. I sat up next to her and said, “And what about you? Why the concern?”

“I believe I have found something in the two of you that could lead me to what I had lost,” she said.

“How does that work?”

“I don't know. Your shadows dance as if they were watching each other in a fight, but your shadow in particular notices me.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I am unsure, but... it is a portent,” she said, “A portent that...” She broke off. A few tears rolled down her cheek.

“Viera...”, I said softly. I was going to put an arm about her shoulders, but I was found myself staring at her tears. They were red in colour. The colour of blood. It looked like she was shedding tears of blood.

“I'm sorry,” she said. She reached into her sleeve and took out a yellow kerchief and wiped away the bloody tears. The reddish liquid stained the cloth and then the colour faded leaving only a damp mark. She composed herself and continued, “A portent that I have been watching for.”

“Is it that bad?”

“No. It makes me remember and certain memories are tied with emotions.”

I didn't want to pry. “What kind of portent?” I asked.

“A shadow portent. It reflects the past, present and future. I read it in my own shadow. We are linked. In what way, I do not know.”

We sat there for several minutes. She seemed lost in thought and I jumped between contemplation and anxiety. Why was she telling me all this? What did Kom have in plan for me? Should I confront him about this? How are we linked? What have I gotten myself into?

“I hope you don't mind me asking,” I said breaking the silence, “but do you mind if I ask you... er... where you came from?”

Viera was quiet a moment longer before answering. “I come from a realm of night. It is filled with a magical revelry that enchants and ensnares the unwary.”

“Kom thinks you're from the Unseelie Court,” I said.

Viera chuckled. “No, I am not.”

“Right. What's the Unseelie Court?”

“It's a gathering of dark intent. The machinations of the Fey Courts are usually never direct and are almost always subtle. They enchant and ensnare out of ignorance and a lack of care for others not of their kind, but where the Seelie Court is careless, the Unseelie Court is malicious.”

“So you're from the Seelie Court?” I asked.

“I am from both worlds,” she said.

“So are you careless or malicious?”

“The Courts are such things.”

“Are the Courts as cryptic as you are?”

“Only when dealing with others.”

I was feeling more than a little tired at this point. Viera's mood had swung and I had no idea as to where the conversation had been going. I said, “I hope you don't mind, but I'd like to get some rest now, Viera.”

She said, “I need to finish something first.”

“Finish what?” I asked.

I was suddenly hit with a dizzy spell. I was glad I was already lying down. The world seemed to be as a dream and I saw Viera get up and stand over me. The shadows seemed to creep back over her, hiding her. My vision blurred. I felt her hands caress my face and then she placed her hands on my chest and pushed. I gasped and coughed. My eyes were closed. I felt feverish. I felt her lips kiss my forehead and then nothing. I opened my eyes and saw only a dark room. The candle was put out. I sat up and looked about in the darkness. With what little light there was that peeked out from under the room door, I looked over to the other bed. The silhouette of Viera's sleeping form could be seen. I shook my head. Had I fallen asleep and dreamt the conversation? I lay back down and went back to sleep.

I awoke to a dark room. There were no windows to the outside to tell me what time it was. I felt a little rested. I got up and fumbled with lighting the candle. Once lit, I noticed Viera was gone. Her bed looked like no one had slept on it. I lifted my shirt and looked at my chest where I had felt Viera push and saw a red welt though it appeared to be more of a deliberate marking. It looked like three hooks

stacked on top of each other and seemed like it had been caused by someone's scratches.

I was about to open the door to leave the room when Kom entered. He seemed anxious and he had his metal tubes.

“There you are. Look, we've got-,” he said before pausing. He looked quickly around before saying, “What happened to your girlfriend?”

“She's not my girlfriend, Kom,” I said.

“Whatever she is, where is she now?”

“I don't know. She was gone when I woke up.”

“That's... never mind. We have to leave right now,” he said. There was a sense of urgency in his voice.

“Did the PTC ship come in?”

“No. I'm going to deliver on my own. It'll be faster anyway.”

“All the way to the elemental planes?”

“Look, are you coming or not? We have to leave right now. I can fill you in once we're safely away from this place.”

“Fine, fine,” I said. I gathered my things while Kom waited. He had his head out of the doorway.

“Let's go,” I said when I was ready and Kom went.

“I've paid for your room. Keep up,” Kom said as we passed through the commons room and out of the Party House. I followed him.

It was raining outside. “It's raining,” I said, “How is that-”

Kom interrupt, “Keep up.”

We made our way further into the inner city.

“Wait, aren't we going to the docks?”

“No, we're going via portal,” Kom said.

“Didn't you say that the only portal out of here was highly unpredictable and that no one used it?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Kom.

“But Viera... we should try to find her!”

“She'll be fine,” he said, “or she'll turn up as usual. Don't worry about her. Worry about yourself.”

“Why... Am I in danger?”

Kom didn't say anything.

“Kom, I have a right to know,” I said.

“Sure, but not here.”

We walked quickly in silence on the streets and into a large building. I had long gotten confused in the mazelike layout of the city, but Kom seemed to know his way.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“The exit,” said Kom.

The interior made it appear to be some kind of gathering place. There were raised seats surrounding a flat circular area.

“Something like city hall,” Kom said. There were four guards inside and they saw us enter. The one closest to us approached and Kom said under his breath, “Just stand back a moment, could you?”

I did as he said.

“Excuse me, friend. The Speaker's Hall is closed to-”, was what the guard managed to say before Kom hit him with his bloodblade. He fell quickly and the others suddenly drew their weapons. One

shouted, "Maur! Alert the patrols!" The guard who was named Maur ran out a side passage while the remaining two advanced on Kom. Kom was on them before they knew it, moving with an unnatural speed. He blade made short work of them. I noticed that there was little blood from the bodies.

"Kom," I said, "perhaps you'd like to explain just why you killed the guards."

Kom released his blade and it disappeared. He walked into the centre of the hall with one of the bodies and dropped it in the centre. He then broke the dead man's arm.

"Kom...", I said a little louder.

There was a bright flash and a circular doorway opened near Kom. It spun slowly.

"Here! I'll explain once we're through. I promise," he said.

I remembered what Viera had told me the night before.

"Trust me," Kom said. I could hear the blaring of horns from the outside.

I reached into my pocket and found the reassuring shapes of my balls. "Alright, Kom," I said as I walked to the portal. "But if I die, I'm coming back to haunt you."

Kom said, "Sure, we'll have a beer. Now get in."

I nodded to him and stepped through when the portal was facing me. As I was stepping through, I wondered if the spinning motion affected where I would end up and was about to turn and ask Kom. I felt Kom push me just as the shouts from angry guards entered the hall.

"I ended up in the middle of nowhere," I said, "So I floated about and then ended up here."

Irene said, "And you don't know where the others are?"

I shook my head.

The table was clear. Irene had moved the empty dishes and leftovers with a wink during my tale. It was a good meal and was the first time in some time that I had felt full.

"You're in quite a fix then," she said.

I sighed. "I seem to have lost my balls, so I can't call for help, and I've lost my companions who

have a lot more practical knowledge about the planes than I do.â€•

â€œQuite a pickle,â€• said Irene with a nod.

â€œI don't suppose you could help me?â€• I asked.

â€œI'm sorry. I can't.â€•

â€œWhy not?â€•

â€œThat's why my story is a long one.â€•

â€œThat's fair enough,â€• I said. â€œDo I get to hear it now?â€•

Irene smiled. â€œYou don't seem particularly enthusiastic.â€•

â€œOh no, I don't mean to be rude. I'm just a little distracted by my problems,â€• I said.

â€œDon't worry. I'm tough. Have a listen though and forget about your problems for a little while. Try another cookie.â€•

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The summer had come early. It was hot that day and there had been little wind to speak of. Even when the wind did pick up momentarily, it seemed lethargic and unwilling as if the heat had sapped its strength. The air seemed to smother the land. When night fell, it was slightly cooler and the air felt heavy and wet. There was no moon that night. Starlight bathed the hills, the forests, and the mountains. The animals were quiet as if in anticipation or fear while the insects sang and chanted in staccato rhythms. An air of apprehension cloaked the land. There would be a conjunction that night.

In the early days when men had not yet peeled back the mists of their superstitions, the fey folk would walk the land. They would dance, frolic and play, living out their immortal lives with carefree abandon. They had first appeared out of the mystical weak points in the fabric of reality to explore. No one knew what was on the other side of these gates and no normal folk dared to go near one. Every gate could be opened through an act of passion though the exact nature of what that act was varied with each gate. Faerie rings â€œ“ growths of large mushrooms of various colours that grew around the invisible gate â€œ“ could be opened through the dance. It was a common story amongst the people of the world of sightings of sparkling lights that would dance about the mushrooms.

This night would see the first visit by a Faerie Court to the lands. The Faerie Court was seen by the rare scholars who studied it as some form of eternal dinner party, but these were purely from third party sources and other anecdotal evidence. No one at the time had the ability or the knowledge to visit the Faerie Court themselves though anyone who could have would never have returned. One such individual who tried was a young woman named Elaina.

Elaina had been fascinated by the fey folk ever since as a child she had caught a brownie stealing food from her home pantry. The next morning she had told her parents of what she saw and while they initially thought it simply a child's overactive imagination, they grew increasingly worried as Elaina kept talking about it. The simple fact was that the brownie would visit her usually on weekends and she would stay up talking to it and having a small tea party with it and her stuffed toys. They became friends and the brownie one night took out a satchel of powder which he wet with the tea and painted a mark on Elaina's wrist: a stack of three hooks.

After several months of this, her parents called upon the help of the local priest to exorcise what they believed was an evil spirit come to take their daughter away from them. The priest did his job well. The brownie never returned after he banished the apparent evil spirit from Elaina mainly because they kept her bedroom door locked so that she could not meet with the brownie. The brownie eventually got bored of waiting for Elaina to show up and left. It took months for Elaina to get over that event.

Years later when Elaina was a young woman almost out of her teenage years and living a normal life, she decided to go for a walk in the forest to see if she could find truffles. During her walk, she encountered a talking owl. It asked her why she had the brownie mark on her. Now after all those years, Elaina had forgotten about the mark the brownie had given her. Of course, at this point, she was much too frightened of the talking owl and ran back home. However, she did not tell her parents of this only saying she thought she saw a large wolf. The local hunter went out to see if this was true, but could find no sign so it was decided that Elaina had probably seen a bush in shadow and imagined the rest.

Elaina went back into the forest after a few days and tried to find where she had been spoken to by the owl. The owl found her and again asked her why she had a brownie mark on her. Elaina told the owl about her childhood friend, the brownie. The owl was sympathetic to Elaina's story and it took her to a large gnarled oak deeper in the forest. The trees grew thick in that section. While Elaina knew about the dangers from a wolf or a bear, she felt safe as long as she knew where the owl was flying. It would swoop from branch to branch and make sure Elaina knew where it was.

The oak tree was old. Elaina walked around it a couple of times at the request of the owl just to see how big it was. The owl seemed quite proud of the oak. Elaina did not know what the significance of the oak

was so the owl told her. It was one of the gates to the faerie world. It told her that if she wrote a message on the oak's trunk using her saliva, the next time a brownie came through it would see it and be able to pass her message on to her brownie friend. The owl told her that it was likely that the brownie who came through would be the same brownie she knew long ago anyway. Elaina did so and wrote a simple hello. Then she thanked the owl and returned home. The owl made sure she got home safely too.

A little over a week later, she heard a light tapping on her bedroom window just as she was about to drift off to sleep. She opened it after she saw that it was the brownie from her childhood. The brownie was its usual talkative self and they talked for an hour or so in hushed tones. When it came time for the brownie to leave, it gave her an invitation to a grand party being held at the next new moon. Elaina was delighted and said that she would go. The brownie told her to come to the oak where she had written her message once the constellation of the Archer was at its zenith in the night sky. The grand party the brownie had spoken of was, of course, the Faerie Court.

Elaina would practice finding her way to the oak during days when she was free of chores. She made note of small landmarks to guide herself through the forest. On that hot night, Elaina left through her window and made her way into the forest. She carried with her a lantern to light her way in the starlit darkness. The talking owl met with her as she retraced her steps, disturbed by the noise in the quiet night.

“It's quite late to-hoo be out, isn't it dear?” it asked.

Elaina replied, “I'm going to a grand party. The brownie invited me.”

The owl flapped its wings. “Have a care, dear. You aren't a brownie. You make sure you don't eat or drink anything there. Only the fey can eat fey food.”

Elaina asked, “How come?”

The owl said, “Fey food is fey food, young miss. Just promise you won't have any, alright?”

Elaina said, “I promise.”

When Elaina reached the oak with the Archer high in the sky chasing after the Hind, the air already had an electrical feeling. Elaina felt tingly and excited.

“Over here,” said the brownie from a top of centaur's back.

Elaina's eyes opened wide once she had raised her lantern to see.

“Good ev'nin', miss,” said the centaur with a deep baritone voice. “I heard you've been invit'd to a grand party.”

“Y.. yes!” exclaimed Elaina. She was excited indeed. Stories she had heard all her life were slowly revealing themselves to be real.

Elaina followed after the centaur deeper into the forest with the brownie chattering all the way.

Elaina knew she had reached the grand party when what she had thought were fireflies said hello to her. Faeries, no bigger than her hand, fluttered about in the air trying to see what new creature had arrived to the party. The brownie would jump up and down on the centaur's back trying to get the attention from one of them and hoping to steal a kiss. The centaur would smile and laugh as a faerie whispered into his ear. The owl would hoot and shoo any faerie that got too close and the faeries would oblige with pout or a stuck out tongue.

“He... Hello,” Elaina said to a faerie that glowed golden. “Hello to you too,” she said to another that shone with a purplish light. The night seemed to glow and up a head she could hear the sounds of a party - laughter, chatter, and music. Elaina wanted to dance too.

And then she was there. The forest seemed to glow in a faint half-light as if it were twilight. Satyrs danced and played instruments. Dryads hummed and sang. Faeries zipped about and waltzed in the air. Leprechauns laughed and unicorns pranced. All the characters in the stories about the fey folk that she remembered as a child, all the superstitions they had turned into when she came of age, were there revelling in the arrival of the Faerie Court. Tables of wonderfully aromatic food, sumptuous and rich, and barrels of drink to quench a dancer's thirst were present. They were placed such that they pointed towards a copse of trees deeper into the party area where the Faerie Queen sat and her consort stood by her side.

“This is wonderful,” she said. Everywhere she looked was a fairy tale.

“Quite a party,” said the brownie as it hopped off the centaur and raced off to find its friends.

“Will you be alright, young miss?” asked the centaur.

“Oh yes, Mister Centaur,” she said.

“Mis...,” laughed the centaur. “I’d never been call’d Mister before!” it said as it trotted off towards a gathering of dancing satyrs. “You have a fun time now, miss. Mister! Ha ha!”

Elaina stood and took in the scene before her. It was all too much and yet not enough. Her eyes however always went back to the Faerie Queen whose beauty had an ethereal quality as if she was looking at her in a dream. The voice of the talking owl brought her back.

“Watch yourself, young one,” it said, “the fey are more interested in their own revelry than in your own. Few here would care if you were singing as loudly as there are or lying unconscious on the ground.”

“I’m sure it will be alright,” said Elaina. “I’ll just watch from here.” Elaina wanted to join in though and it took a good amount of will to resist the infectious mood in the area.

While the unnatural party had its boisterous fun, the natural animals waited with bated breath for what they felt was about to happen. Even a few of the sleeping people from Elaina's home who were more in tune with such things than they realised tossed and turned in their sleep though in the morning they would blame the heat. The talking owl felt it too and while it had been a low buzz in its instinctive mind, as the party continued into the night, it felt the slow shift of the party mood.

It was subtle and slow. Any who had seen it would have blamed it on the intoxicating nectar, a sweet mead, that served as drinks. The party turned bad slowly and the light hearted fun turned into something more frightening for those who had not given themselves to it. This was the night which had happened before; a cycle that was simply repeating. The Faerie Court, also known as the Seelie Court, was becoming the Unseelie Court.

They fey would notice Elaina and goad her into dancing with them, singing with them, eating with them, and drink with them. She would refuse politely and with a smile and they would leave her alone, but as the party went on, their insistent invitations would become more sinister and filled with honey coated threat. “Just a little,” they would sneer, “it won't do you any harm. It's quite sweet. Truly, it is.” The first time this happened, the owl reminded Elaina of her promise. The second time this happened, a mischievous sprite caught the owl while Elaina was distracted by a drunken nymph and moved it out of earshot.

Many promises had been made in the past and many more would be made in the future. In the spur of the moment, in that split second, decisions can be made without fully thinking things through because they sounded like a good or fun idea at the time. Elaina would try a little just to please her hosts. “A little won't hurt,” she would say to herself and she ate a small piece of honeybread that had been

offered by the beguiling nymph.

No one knew what had happened to Elaina back home come morning. It was if she had vanished. Her family was distraught. They searched everywhere for a week and even sent riders to nearby communities to ask if they had seen a girl of Elaina's description. No one would know where she had gone. Most would have given up and grieved for Elaina, but not Elaina's mother. She blamed the fey folk and she remembered Elaina's childhood stories. Elaina's mother eventually drove her husband away with her obsession with the fey and the disappearance of their daughter.

She would eventually leave the community for the largest city in the land to learn all she could about the fey. She would hunt down those who had stolen her daughter away from her and she would take her back no matter the cost. When she had studied and learnt all she could, she returned to her old community and searched the forest. She found the oak and she knew it was a Faerie Gate, but it was closed. She waited for the brownie who would eventually come to open it and when it did, she ensnared it. As the Unseelie Court was in dominance, the brownie was a nasty little thing and was full of pranks and mischief. Elaina's mother had long lost patience and tortured the thing until it told her all it knew of the Faerie Court. Then Elaina's mother opened the oaken Faerie Gate with the blood of the brownie.

It was several months before she found the then location of the Faerie Court. She walked the planes and learnt all she could about the Seelie Court and its dark mirror, the Unseelie Court. When she finally tracked down its location, she discovered her daughter mad and dirty, living in squalor and in fear. It was a nightmarish place, full of dark mischief and terror. To survive, Elaina had to become like her tormentors. The experience changed her and her mother lamented and grew angry. She blamed the Faerie Queen and all her subjects. She lashed out with all her acquired power fuelled by her rage and driven to return what pain they had given to her daughter directly and to her indirectly.

But what mortal could ever imagine they could be able to confront the entire Faerie Realm? Elaina's mother was thrown out and cursed for what she had done. A faerie curse is a terrible thing as it's never direct. There is a story of faerie curse on some prime world that caused a young princess to fall asleep forever when she pricked her finger on a spindle. Elaina's mother was cursed to be lost forever and was thrown in chaos.

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“And you're Elaina's mother?” I asked Irene.

“No,” replied Irene.

“Then what... I'm not sure how your story tells off your predicament.”

Irene said, “I am Elaina.”

“I'm sorry, but I'm a little confused. Didn't Elaina stay in the Faerie Realm?”

“A few decades past, the malevolent Unseelie changed back into the Seelie. I was saved then by someone, or at least, I think I was. It seemed like a dream. In any case, I spent the following decade and a half putting my mind back together.”

“So you came here to try and find your mother?”

“Yes,” she said.

“So why the name change?”

“Elaina died the day I went mad. I chose a new name after I had recovered.”

“How goes the search?”

“I found her a few years after I started looking for her.”

“And she was fine?”

“She was. For a while. For all her abilities, when she could not escape this plane because of the faerie curse, she gave up. Went a little mad. She made this little cottage and in her mind, she was back home. Father and I were here in her mind. When I found her, her mind finally broke, but in her lucid moments, she was happy to have finally found me.”

“For what it's worth, I'm sorry,” I said.

“Thank you. I'm alright with it.”

“So why do you stay?”

“My mother said... things... in her less lucid moments. Most was truly nonsense, but there were a few things that bothered me.”

“She received the Sight?”

“If by Sight you been she could foretell events, then yes,” said Irene.

“Great. I never liked that class,” I muttered. “What kinds of things did she say?”

“Shadow and blood will follow the lost scholar,” she said.

“That's it?”

“It's something that I think is relevant to you.”

“I suppose it could be,” I said, “but such things could be twisted to mean whatever you wanted.”

“Perhaps,” Irene said, “Also, Mother painted your portrait.”

“Wha... who did what?”

“My Mother painted and it was of you. It's quite an amazing likeness. She also painted portraits of who I believe are your friends, Kom and Viera.”

“Can I see them?”

“Sure,” said Irene, “Look around. They're hanging on the walls now.”

The paintings were where Irene said they were. They had not been there before. The resemblances were good.

“They're very good,” I said. “I don't recognise the other two though.”

One portrayed a beautiful but androgynous being who at a quick glance might have been female while the other was a grim looking man who appeared to be an earth genasi.

“Perhaps you have yet to meet or maybe Mother had an inner eye on others as well as you and your friends,” said Irene. “In any case, it appears you have a destiny of sorts.”

I sighed. I hated fate and destiny. Anytime I encountered such in my studies, I always knew the outcome was going to be typically tragic. I was irritated that I had been one of those unlucky ones to have their fates already decided. Even when you tried to change it, it just ended up being exactly what you needed to do to fulfil one's destiny.

“Did your Mother say anything else? If I'm going to do something, it'd be nice to know what it was.”

“Sure,” said Irene.

“An abridged version would be nice,” I said as politely as I could muster. Talk of destiny really put a sour taste in my mouth.

“It was something like the shadows are seeking stability... and what was light once would be light again... but only at the price of redemption... and all would gather around the centre... some kind of centre of all. That's about the best I can tell you without getting spouting prose.”

“I guess it'll have to do,” I told Irene. “Now... I was wondering if you'd know how I find my friends and get off this plane?”

Irene said, “You should do that after you get some rest.”

“I feel fine.”

“You should rest.”

I did feel sleepy all of a sudden. I stretched and yawned. I felt a slight twinge on my chest. “Ow,” I said.

“What's wrong?” I asked Irene.

“Just a scratch,” I replied.

Irene looked at me and then said firmly, “Raise your shirt. Show me.”

I did it without hesitation.

Irene didn't say anything for a few moments as she saw the mark on me.

“Irene? Is something the matter?” I asked.

She blinked and said, “No... No, everything is fine. You have interesting friends and it would be good for you to find them again, I think, but for now, you should rest. Use the bed over there.”

“Isn't that yours?”

“No, that's the guest bed. I only take it out when visitors come.”

I shrugged. “Thanks,” I said and headed over. I fell on to it and was asleep almost instantly. The memory I had was Irene walking over to the bookshelves and humming a soft tune as she looked for a book.

The being formally known as Jo'Kom'Shal had come to a prime world. It was the prime world his mortal shell had been born on so many centuries ago. He had come to do what his darkest desires had once wished for and what his once righteous soul had fought against. He would corrupt the empire that had ruled him and the religion that oppressed him. He hated them all and he wanted to rid existence of their presence.

Kom did not know why he hated. His mortal memories were gone once he had left his mortality behind and only his spirit continued on its journey. His spirit was all that was left and it was his spirit that defined him. He could remember when he had been called to serve the Jo Host, nominated as a potential for righteousness and purity. He could not understand how such events had occurred to him. It was inconceivable to him now. It felt as if he was remembering a bad dream which he could not shake from his head.

The Jo Theocracy, its militant arm known simply as the Divine Order and the empire ruled by these two powers were a source of irritation for Kom. The matriarchal Theocracy was ruled by the Silver Empress (She Who Speaks In The Name Of Jo, Heaven's Ambassador To The Empire) and she was advised by the three Grand Marshals of the Divine Order who each represented an aspect of the Empress' will. He wanted to bring them down and send the empire into anarchy, but he especially wanted to destroy the Divine Order, the group that he once had been a proud to serve.

It was in dreams that Kom would always begin the corruption of his victims. To ensure that his methods would remain undiscovered, he spread out his activities across centuries and eradicated any who sought to uncover the truth. In the times his plans were disrupted by the Divine Order, he would disappear until those who had foiled him were mouldering bones. Above all, Kom was patient and relentless in his pursuit of his one goal.

His first victim was an unimportant landowner's wife. He had seduced her having taken her husband's place. He puffed up her pride and vanity in her dreams and he fed it to her when she was awake. From such humble beginnings, Kom began the creation of a dark society that would see near complete annihilation many times, but Kom would always return to continue his work. Hidden caches were set up across the empire and the decentralised network he set up made it difficult for the Divine Order to stamp out. He would repeat his seduction on countless men and women and alter his methods enough to

avoid possible suspicion.

It was almost four centuries later before Kom would find Leeshara, one of the then three Grand Marshals of the Divine Order. It was only a matter of time before he found someone whose ambition outstripped their humility in such a position. He had seen it countless times before. He became her consort though their meetings remained only as rumour. He was the wealthy bachelor merchant who had holdings across the empire and whose piety had no end. He whispered darkness into her ears in a way that tickled her ambition. It was not unheard of for a Grand Marshal to ascend to the throne of the Silver Empress.

Through her, he appointed those who were loyal to his dark cause into positions of power at all levels in the Theocracy. His followers never knew who he was; most believed they were partaking in a crusade of liberation against the Theocracy. He used them indirectly as much as he used his victim directly. When these people were in place, Leeshara would begin the Roseate Inquisition and through the fear and anxiety caused, Kom would reach into the hearts of the other Grand Marshals. The inquisition was also used to silence any who would talk in prophecy of Kom. The fear of being branded heretic kept such dissenting thought suppressed.

The Roseate Inquisition endured for the lifetime of Leeshara, but it divided the Empire and the division gave Kom strength. The Silver Empress, who in the end, was left to fight the idealistic excesses of the Divine Order, drew strength from an unlikely friend. Kom had taken the opportunity to leave Leeshara and side with the Empress in another form. Leeshara was soon deposed for the good of the Divine Order. Simmering intolerance and quiet anarchy was seeded in the Empire, the Divine Order had been corrupted from within, and Kom now had the ear of the Silver Empress.

The Silver Empress loved Jo and only Jo. Groomed from birth with a group of other potentials for the throne, she remained pure and pious for Jo as it was believed that through her chastity and conviction to the belief of the Trinity, she would be a gleaming beacon to all in the Empire and to the neighbouring nations. In truth, the Silver Empress was a lonely figure at the top of a mountain. All would look up and wonder, but none would regard her as someone like them. Although, she oversaw the running of the Empire and she was the Eternal Marshal of the Divine Order, she was human and had human frailties.

The Silver Empress was young and barely into her reign. The inquisition had not only seen the end of Leeshara but the previous Empress as well who abdicated for the good of the people stating that she would remind all of the past. Kom was in the inner circle of the previous Empress and had access to the female children who were one day to take her throne. Kom was patient and waited.

He instigated rebellion using the society he had created centuries ago and still he waited. He caused the fragmentation of Divine Order through the Grand Marshals and he still he waited. He watched the young Silver Empress shoulders sag with the weight of the world and he still he waited. He was a good friend to her through the years of turmoil and in the end, he was the only friend she was left able to trust. He continued to wait as the Empire disintegrated and the fragments of the Divine Order chose sides.

* * *

The Silver Empress stared out over her capital from her palace with a heavy heart. Kom, who had called himself Malcom, stood behind her as if he were an attendant for the real attendants had long fled. It was the end of the Empire. The rebellion had shattered the Empire and the Divine Order was no more. The great city of Vici-Argenas, the shining beacon of the Empire of the once mighty Jo Theocracy was under siege. The white and golden flags were torn and burnt, the ruins of buildings broken by siege machines stood as if they were the exposed bones of the city itself.

“How did this come to be?” asked the Empress, “We who were once the centre of this world?”

“Your Majesty...” said Kom.

“We had a dream once. Long ago as a child. We told none about it for it was during the dark years of the Roseate Inquisition.”

“Your Majesty?”

“We dreamt of an angel, a messenger from the Trinity and from Jo. It said nothing to us. It smiled and we were happy to be with it. It showed rather than told a story. We thought it was a parable to teach us the meaning of being the Silver Empress. It showed us what we see now.”

“Your Majesty had a vision?” Kom wondered who was the messenger.

“It would have been a mistake for us to reveal this to anyone in those days. We would certainly have not been offered to be the highest servant of Jo. We regret that now. We failed Jo even when Jo gave us a sign of events to come.”

“Your Majesty should not blame herself,” said Kom softly. He moved to a few steps behind her, closer than tradition had once dictated. A tradition that would end once the Empire fell.

“The Empire is lost, Malcom. Thousands of years of history end now and it was foretold in our dreams. Not even the Empire stop prophecy and certainly not us.”

A thunderous crash followed by an explosion threw up stone and dust from a section of the city near the palace. The siege engines were being moved. The outer lines had been breached. The Empress could see the palace guards below in the lower terraces preparing for the enemy forces.

“Your Majesty should leave now. It is not safe,” said Kom.

“The Empire is lost. We prayed and consulted with the Holy Texts for other signs such as our dreams. The Texts predate the Empire. Many hours before this day, we spent in the vaults looking for answers and solutions. Has this happened before? Are there precedents to today's troubles? Questions only led to more questions. We believe Jo was testing the Empire and ourself to judge if we had become arrogant with our pride for this great civilisation of ours.”

Kom moved closer and was a step behind. “Your Majesty. Please,” he said, “the danger grows every moment you stay.”

“We will stay for as long as we are the Empire!” said the Empress in an imperious tone, loud and firm.

Kom bowed his head. “As you wish, Your Majesty.”

“We... we are sorry. These are trying times. You have been a fine servant to the Empire and a good friend to us. Our heart is heavy for one should never see the end of what they have been given to serve and protect.”

“Your Majesty need not say such things.”

The Empress was silent for a time as she looked out from her balcony. The air was still sweet with the blooming flowers in palace gardens and had not been choked by the acrid smoke that could be seen billowing from parts of the city.

“The Texts speak of a former son of the Empire who would return to destroy it,” she said after another explosion. It had struck the silver inscribed white walls of the lower palace, but the walls held. “It was in one of the earliest Texts. Perhaps one of those that were written near the beginnings of the Empire, before the first Silver Empress. It was such a small section written in the old script. The old

script was such a beautiful language. It is a pity its flowery verbosity was seen as unwieldy and cumbersome.â€•

Kom knew the old script. He had been mortal when it was still used.

â€œTranslations were dependant on the context of not just the use of word in a sentence, but also to the preceding and following sentences. It was always translated as 'The Fire of the Mother shall consume the Children of Jo' given the surrounding context, but there is another translation if one is to take the line just by itself. 'A Son of the Empire shall be reborn as the Destroyer'. How would anyone have known of the alternative translation? It would have been nonsensical in those times.â€•

Kom knew of the first translation. What the Empress said was true â€œ“ no one would have read the line as anything else given the surrounding context.

â€œWe wonder where this Destroyer is. Do you know, Malcom?â€•

â€œNo, Your Majesty.â€•

â€œWherever he is, he must be out there, somewhere behind that army that will raze this city and end this once glorious Empire of Jo.â€•

The Empress turned away from her dying city and looked at Malcom. Her eyes were sad though she stood tall as the Empress should stand with the hem of her gown spread out on the floor. â€œI had a dream last night,â€• she said.

Kom was momentarily shocked. The Empress did not use the first person.

â€œThe angel I saw as a child returned. She spoke to me. She said, 'Someone close to you is not who they seem to be.'â€•

Kom saw her sad eyes. Had she discovered him? The Silver Empress was a high priestess of Jo, but he had taken many precautions and was well versed in the counterspells.

â€œThat person will end it all, but they are also the resurrection of the new Empire.'â€•

Kom was still, but his mind raced. Who was the messenger? What was this New Empire? Had he been the unwitting pawn of Jo? Again?

â€œThat was when I awoke to this day. I would like to see this new Empire the angel spoke of, Malcom. She said that it would be stronger than ever. It would bring the teachings of Jo to all of the

world. It would unite us all.â€• She sighed.

â€œHowever, I do not believe I shall see that day. I am of the old way. I will leave this place, this title, and this Empire. May Jo forgive and bless the old Empire and may he forgive and bless the new Empire as well.â€•

The Empress raised her hand and looked at it. â€œWhat have I done in my short reign? I have only seen; I have not done.â€• She paused and then looked at Kom.

â€œI know who you are, Malcom. The angel told me. She told me that you would know who Sal is.â€•

Kom did not bother to hide his shock. *Sal!*

â€œAnd once you know this, you will also know who I am. You were a good friend, Malcom, and I loved you with all my heart. I always will. I forgive you for what you have done because in the end, it is the will of Jo and Jo loves the people of the Empire and Jo still loves you. I hope you will be able to forgive yourself as well.â€•

She removed one of her many rings from her hand and tossed it to Malcom who caught it with one hand. â€œA gift to remember me by,â€• she said. He looked at he ring he held and started saying, â€œBut this is the Imperial...â€• before he stopped when he looked back up at her. Her aura was different now and he recognised it.

The Empress had already turned and was walking out to the edge of the balcony.

â€œEmilina, what are you doing?â€• asked Kom suddenly alarmed. He used the Empress' given name, a name that she had not heard since her coronation. He held her ring tightly in his fist.

The Empress kicked off her slippers of silk, picked up her hem and got up on to the alabaster balustrade with a light jump. She turned slowly, shifting the bulk of the gown about her and then stood with her arms out and her back facing the city.

â€œEmilina!â€• Kom exclaimed as he rushed forward on to the balcony.

â€œI will find you again,â€• said Emilina.

The Empress fell backwards off the balcony.

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I woke suddenly and sat up with a yelp. I was sweating and my heart pounded. In the dream, I was falling... falling for a long time, but I woke before impact. I shook my head to clear my head. It was dim, but not dark. Irene was at the table with books around her and a couple of candles shedding a weak light. The other candles in the cottage had been put out.

“Are you alright?” she asked. “Was it a nightmare?”

“Uhh... yes. I'm sorry... to disturb you,” I said trying to calm myself.

“I'm sorry. I made you eat too much,” Irene said. She stood up and walked over to me. The candles in the vicinity lit up as she passed. She put a hand to my forehead and then said, “It must have been quite a nightmare.”

I nodded. “Is there still water in the bucket? I'd like a drink of water,” I said.

“Sure,” she said.

I got up and shuffled over to the bucket. I noticed the paintings by Irene's mother were gone.

“Would you like to talk about it?” she asked from behind.

“Cup?” I asked.

“Oh,” she said and hurried over. She opened a cupboard and took out a cup. “Here you go.”

“Thanks,” I said. I dipped it into the water and drank. It was cool and I felt better.

“Would you like to talk about it?” she asked again.

“No... I feel like... I feel like some fresh air. I don't think I'm going to find it here though, am I?”

“I tell you what. I'll run you a nice bath. That always makes me feel better,” she said with a smile.

I wasn't convinced. I looked around.

“Where would I have it?”

“In here, of course.”

“But...,” I said and looked around again. “Don't you have some place with some privacy?”

She laughed. “Oh, come now! I've seen it all before. But... if you're worried, I can hang blankets up to make a wall of sorts.”

“Thank you,” I said. I remembered the baths of Gale and Zephyr and I wondered if I would ever use their facilities again.

“Feeling better?” asked Irene through the makeshift wall of blankets. They hung in the air suspended by her magic.

I was soaking in a large wooden tub of tepid water that had been slowly filled through continuous use of the stove and the well outside. I was too tired to care about any nightmare I had had at this stage having been the one fetching the water. I really wished I was back at the Twin Airs.

“Not really, but better than before. Thanks,” I said.

“Now... about that dream,” she said.

“Why are you so interested?”

“Well... my mother would say that most of what she would say came from her dreams. Some say dreams are a personal line to certain powers.”

“And you think I've got one of these... lines?”

“Oh, no... I'm not saying that. It might be only a nightmare after all,” she said, “but go on, humour me.”

“Alright,” I said. So I told her about my dream though it was an abridged form that had no names. The memory was already fuzzy though I still remembered the final moments particularly a keen sense of Kom's surprise and the fall of the Empress. The fall wasn't as disturbing now as it was, but it felt slightly chilling to watch the ground approach so quickly.

When I had finished, I heard nothing from the other side of the blankets.

“Irene?” I said.

The sound of paper flipping. “Just a moment,” she said.

I waited.

“Ah.” Silence. “Oh.” Silence. “Well, well.”

“Irene?” I said again. I had had enough of the bath by now and got out. I reached for a towel Irene had left hanging on one of the suspended blankets after she had put them up.

“Your nightmare actually happened.”

“What?” I said as I dried myself.

“It happened. Looks like... hmmm... several centuries ago.”

“What exactly happened?” I asked as I discarded the towel and began dressing. My nose wrinkled as I put my shirt on. I needed a fresh set of clothes.

“Standard prime things. Some great Empire fell. Says the last Empress was murdered by being thrown out of her palace. The murderer was suspected to be her confidant at the time though he disappeared at the same time. Sounds pretty similar, don't you think?”

I pulled back the blanket and walked over to Irene. I read the same passage she had in the book she had used. “What book is this?”

“Great Empires of the Prime Material Planes,” said Irene. “A good reference on things historical on prime worlds though it isn't a definitive resource on such things.”

I saw what I had been looking for. *Theocracy... Divine Order were the protectors... Jo and the Trinity...* It jogged my memory. “Yes, I believe you're right,” I said as I sat in a nearby chair. “What happened after the Empire fell?”

Irene turned the page and then again, scanning for information. “It broke up as far as I can tell,” she said finally. “The book doesn't say much more.”

“In any case, I wouldn't worry. One nightmare could just be a coincidence and it was about the past. I've heard of such echoes happening to certain tuned in individuals,” offered Irene.

“I... I've had another one. Before, I mean. And there's a... character that's appeared in both.”

“Now that is interesting,” she said with a raised brow. “What happened in the other one?”

I told her what I could remember.

“Sounds like you've got the attention of a power,” she said. “Well, this changes many things.”

“How does... am I in trouble?”

“No, it seems like you've been marked. You probably aren't what you seem either.”

“I don't understand.”

“Usually, if I find anyone out here, I keep them.”

“Keep... them?”

“To be my personal... let's say... plaything. Slave could be used as a word too. Whatever I call them, they go into my collection.”

I had a sinking feeling. “But you're not going to do that to me?”

“No. What happened to my mother taught me to never meddle in the affairs of powers, even the small ones. I don't dare touch one hair on your head.”

I put a hand to my stomach.

“Oh, don't worry about that. That was simply the duty of a host. It's the polite thing to do after all,” she said.

“That's a relief,” I said though I couldn't stop feeling a little uncomfortable.

“Actually, there's been something funny about you ever since you arrived. Almost as if... you're cloaked or veiled maybe. I can barely see it. It's like... “well, whatever it is, you're lucky to have it. It's probably why you're still alive on this plane.”

“Why did you tell me this? You could have kept it to yourself and I might have done something to lift this... veil,” I said.

“Your fate does not end with me,” she said, “I could tell from the first time I saw you.”

“The paintings?”

“Yes... and other things.”

There was moment where we looked at each other. She was peering at me as if she were trying to understand what it was she saw.

“Well,” I said to break the silence, “I must thank you for your hospitality. I must be off. Somewhere.” I stood and bowed my head a little in appreciation. I wasn't sure whether I was thanking her for the meal, bed, and bath or for not turning me into her plaything.

“Already? Are you sure? You barely arrived here. You could stay a few more nights, you know, to regain your strength after your travels,” she said.

“Oh, no, thank you. I'm quite sure. I have to find my friends as we parted on somewhat abrupt circumstances,” I said. “Um... I don't suppose you know the nearest portal out of here, do you?”

“Well, if you must leave,” she said, “take some cookies with you.” She stood and walked over to the kitchen counter to retrieve a small pouch. She tossed it to me and said, “Now don't you eat them in one go, you hear.”

“Er... thank you,” I said as I caught them.

“We're a few miles out from of a small settlement and should be passing by in a few minutes,” she said, “so you better be ready to jump. I'm not able to stop.”

“Pardon my curiosity, but don't you have control of where this cottage is going?”

“A Faerie Curse doesn't just affect one person. It spreads so that it affects as many people as possible in the family.”

“Oh,” I said. “Is there a way for the curse to be removed?”

“Well, there have been cases where an act of true love has broken it. They say the Faerie Queen herself put in that little escape clause because she's a sentimental sort at heart. But... out here, there aren't a lot of chances of finding true love,” said Irene.

“Well... I best get ready to make the jump. Thank you again and good luck to you.”

“Take care now,” she said with a smile as the front door opened by itself.

I waved and left as quickly as I could without seeming to be in a hurry. The door closed behind me. I stood in the front garden and looked to the horizon. There was nothing out there. I moved to the edge where I had landed upon first coming here and waited. It would have been nice to be able to peruse more of Irene's library, but I didn't think it was wise.

It was a few minutes before I saw the settlement through the soup. It looked like a village and it was approaching quickly. Or was it, the cottage was approaching it quickly? In any case, I waited until what I guessed to be the closest the cottage was going to approach it and leapt off. I had some amount of momentum and discovered I was shooting straight for the settlement. Irene had been nice enough to help me out even at the end. *She couldn't be all bad, could she?* I wondered to myself. I looked back and saw the cottage speeding away and then it was lost in the soup.

When I had recovered from crashing into the upper branches of a tree (although I had managed to slow myself by clawing through water I had made in the soup for my arms and legs), I discovered the village was like something torn out of an idyllic prime world. The inhabitants were as tall as young children. I had seen people like these in the City of Doors when I had first arrived and Kom had said that there were plenty of short people across the multiverse. From what I could see up in the tree, they looked to be either kender, halflings, elwin, or feyfolk (no relation to the Faerie world).

Once I got out of the tree, I noticed that I had attracted a small group of these people and some of them seemed edgy.

“Hello,” I said. “Sorry about the tree.”

An edgy male said, “What's your business here?”

“I'm just a traveller,” I said with a shrug. “I got lost and so here I am.”

The edgy male eyeballed me for a while before he was bumped out of the way by a cheery female. The group was already dispersing once they saw I wasn't particularly interesting.

“Hello there,” she said, “Welcome to our village. Don't mind Harik. He's always suspicious of folk who don't arrive here normal like. So, lost are you? Well, consider yourself unlost. I'm Wendi.”

Wendi had light features and reminded me of one of my cousins. “Hello Wendi,” I said, “do

you know where the nearest portal out of this plane is?â€•

She gave me a wink. â€œMy, my. Already tired of this place? Well, between you and me, I'm tired of it too, but home's home and all that. Nearest portal is several days journey away from here to one of the larger githzerai cities though I don't suggest you travel out there alone. Best you stay here and wait for a caravan or ship or whatever else next comes along.â€•

â€œHow long is it between these other groups come along?â€• I asked noticing that the others had gone about their business elsewhere.

â€œWell, we're somewhat out of the way and all that, but occasionally, we see other travellers. Last batch was... let's see... just over a month ago. Grim looking bunch. But they kept to themselves and didn't cause trouble, so we have no quarrel with them. Before that, it'd have to be a few months. A bunch of githzerai monks came through for a night. Said they were on some kind of trek or some other gith nonsense.â€•

â€œSo... it could be a while,â€• I said dejectedly.

â€œAww... it ain't so bad here. The food's good, the folk friendly,â€• she said with a grin, â€œand the drink smooth. It'll feel like no time at all. The only bad thing is you don't have a bed so you'll have to either sleep in the open or try your luck with someone's barn.â€•

â€œEr... do you have a barn?â€• I asked Wendi.

â€œNo, no barn here. There's the village barn the village shares, if that's what you mean, and if you don't mind the smell, you could stay there. I'm the tailor slash seamstress slash dry cleaner here, so I've no need for a barn.. We make fine clothing, travelling clothing and normal every day clothing. We also can clean clothing though the only folk who do that are travellers who come. Sometimes I see a little bit of business with it when folk want their best cloths looking all fine and dandy, but no one wears those often. You looking for someone to clean some clothes?â€•

â€œEr... no. Just a place to sleep. Umm.. Do you by chance have baths here?â€• I asked as she was about to say something else, â€œI don't mean you smell... I mean, er... do you have like a place where someone can pay to have a bath?â€•

â€œPay to have a bath?â€• she said with a perplexed look on her face. â€œWho would want to pay for a bath? Of course, some folk should be paid to take a bath, if you know what I mean, but I've never heard of a place where you could pay to take a bath. Maybe you're meaning â€œâ€•

â€œNever mind,â€• I said interrupting her.

“Oh no, you don't. You've got me all curious now and I'd like to know what you're talking about. My paps always was one to talk about the wide world out there” though here I suppose it's the planes “and how it's good to expand one's horizons with other folk, although some folk here think we should keep mostly to ourselves. That's a tad unfriendly, don't you think, seeing as we offer a place to stay for travellers and such? So tell me, what's this about a bath you're talking about and how come you have to pay to be able to have one?”

I remembered a girl I knew back home when I had just arrived to begin my studies who would talk as much as Wendi. It made me feel a little homesick but it lightened my mood as well knowing that there were people of similar personality even out here. I sighed a little, but I couldn't help but smile a little.

I told her about the Twin Airs, about Gale and Zephyr, about the various kinds of baths they had, the masseurs, and the light snacks they provided that were meant more as a refreshment than as a meal.

Wendi seemed quite amazed. “Why that's a positively wonderful idea! A place to come to relax. Well! I know I've thought of such things after a hard day with the sewing and the cutting and all that, although I do have help from my sisters, Lena and Tamrin. (Oh, I should tell them about this.) I know I sometimes fill up a tub full of hot water and just soak, though I'd never thought of putting something like lavender or other such things into it. Do they really work to ease the pain? Oh, and I can't believe you have other people massage you! Usually, it's Lena or Tamrin who do it for me and I do it for them, but a stranger? That's just not done!”

“Right, right,” I said when I managed to catch her between breaths. “Look, I just was wondering if I could perhaps wash my clothes and myself and if there was some place I could sleep that wasn't like out in the open.”

“Why sure! Well, why not? I'll let you come and use our tub! Hey, maybe you can teach us some of those fancy massage things you got? How about it?” she said. She seemed ready to run off immediately.

“Would that be appropriate? Given, you know, that I'm some strange male, who crashed into a tree.”

“Don't be silly. You seem a nice person, though you're pretty tall, and you like to take baths and you know what they say about cleanliness. Anyway, you're the only person who knows about such things! It'd be no good letting you go to waste now, would it? Well, come on. We're just down here. The village is mostly under where you're standing now. You're in one the upper bits of this piece of rock. Come on!” Wendi proceeded to push me in the direction of where I supposed she lived. Or worked. Or whatever. I definitely felt a little homesick.

As we walked down the cobblestone path, I noticed that the tree I had entangled myself in was a branch of a larger oak tree. As I saw more of the village as I followed the path, it looked like it was holding the village together. Wendi seemed pleased that I looked impressed.

We eventually arrived at a large round door. The house had a sign above its front door that had a pair of scissors, needles and thread drawn on it in a colourful chalky strokes. Wendi opened the door and ushered me inside her underground home. I had to lean over to fit inside since the house had not been built for people my size. At least I knew why visitors ended up sleeping outside. While I was shorter than average back home, I felt rather tall here.

I noticed that part of the large root stuck out of the wall. In fact, it appeared to be the wall. "It's a load bearing root," said Wendi when she noticed me staring at it. "Holds that side up as we have an upstairs. When the place was built, we figured we'd save on the materials because... well, we're in the middle of nowhere. The place ain't big, but it's home."

I looked about the room as Wendi shut the door. Wooden beams at strategic points to hold up the second floor were surrounded with tables covered with cloth, and patterns, and other equipment a tailor would use. Rolls of cloth leaned against the back wall and a machine to make the cloth was next to them. "Lena! Tamrin! Where are you?" shouted Wendi. "Where could they be? Wait here," she said, "they must be out the back," and then she was through a doorway that was hidden behind a screen depicting an idyllic valley. I knelt down and waited while I listened to Wendi's voice come from behind the curtain.

"Tamrin! Stop that. We have a guest! No, it's not Lukan" "look, he's already with Mia. Lena! What did you do with Miss Miriam's dress? She wanted this pattern; not this pattern. Honestly, Tamrin, get a hold of yourself. Here, take my handkerchief. Look, I know that a nice boy is a hard find here, but we've got a guest. No, he's not a halfling. No, he looks human to me. Lena, don't worry about that now. We'll get Miss Miriam's dress done in time. Now both of you, get a move on. Out, out!"

I was kind of glad that I would have to sleep outside even if it was on a pile of hay.

The three sisters appeared from behind the curtain with Wendi at the rear looking like she was herding sheep.

"This is Lena," Wendi said with her hand on the shoulder of Lena. She seemed to be looking at the floor and would take quick glances with her eyes at me. She was waif-like and had dark features. Wendi shook her gently. "Pleased to meet you," Lena said.

“And this is Tamrin,” said Wendi with her other hand on the shoulder of Tamrin. Where Lena was dark and Wendi was light, Tamrin seemed in the middle. I thought of honey when I looked at her. “Hello,” she said with a smile.

“Hello,” I said. “So, do you all live here by yourselves?”

“Seems like it sometimes,” said Wendi. “Paps likes to go fishing and Ma's usually with her friends in the day. They used to be the proprietors of this place but once we got old enough, they seemed happy to give us the business and go into retirement. Sometimes Ma helps out in the busy times though.”

“Alright. Now about cleaning up,” I said.

“In the back. Come on. I'll show you,” said Wendi.

I was taken into the back room which looked to be a kitchen and then further to a bathing area. There was a tub of water which seemed to be fed by a pipe that stuck out of the wall. A bucket was floating in the tub and soap was on a small stool next to the tub. There seemed to be a rocky drain on the floor which had a slight incline away from the door. A washing board was also present.

“Here you go,” she said as she pulled the curtain closed. “You need anything, just holler, you hear.”

“Something to wear while my clothes dry would be appreciated,” I said.

“Say no more,” said Wendi and soon a blanket was thrust through the curtain.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Anything else?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Alrighty then. We'll fix you up an extra portion for lunch. Lena, have you started lunch? Why haven't you? Isn't today your turn? Tamrin, Miss Miriam's dress isn't going to make itself. Stop trying to peek at our guest and get to work.”

After I had scrubbed my clothes and my skin clean, I gingerly walked out with the halfling sized blanket wrapped around me, my wet clothing in one hand, and my unwashable belongings in another.

When I entered the kitchen, Lena laughed, Tamrin blushed and Wendi was no where in sight.

“Er... hello. Is there some place I can hang these to dry?” I asked.

Lena said, “We hang them on a tree branch. It's up the ladder. Instead of turning left to get to the bath, turn right. No... wait. You're too big for it. Come along.”

“Where's Wendi?” I asked as I followed her.

“She went to give Paps his lunch bag. He loves his fishing.”

We reached the ladder and she climbed up. “Pass them up,” she said and I did.

When she was done, she came back down and led me back to the kitchen for lunch.

During my lunch of fresh bread, fine cheese, tea, jam, and other condiments, Wendi returned. When she saw me, she said, “Oh my. Let's hope Ma doesn't get home soon. She shouldn't though, so it should be alright. Now about that massage bath place, how about some tips to soothe aching muscles?”

I told them as best as I could given that I was on the receiving end when I had them.

Wendi said, “Well, that's interesting. Thank you for that. We'll try what you said sometime. Maybe tonight. Enjoying lunch? Now, why are you travelling out here? Seeing the sights? Did you really get lost? We don't see many travellers travelling on their lonesome. Well, actually, we don't see it at all. It's a dangerous place out there, so you'd be silly to just get up and decide to have a stroll by yourself.”

I told them about how I had stepped through a portal that sent me to the middle of nowhere and about how I didn't know where my friends were.

“Well, that was just silly of you, wasn't it? Going off and stepping through a strange portal on a strange plane. It's lucky that you managed to find yourself here at all. There was one time old Mr Thinglebump stepped through a portal he didn't know about and found himself in a really big pickle. Ended up in some strange place that snowed almost all the time and had lots of crazy folk trying to kill each other. Then those crazy folk would get up and do it again. Mr Thinglebump quickly came back and swore off going through strange portals from that day. Of course, that portal then got up and disappeared so it's not like Mr Thinglebump could have tried it again. Mrs Thinglebump gave him a tongue lashing that day, so I suppose he might have wanted to try again if he was given the chance.

Anyway, I hope you've learnt your lesson, young sir. Don't go stepping into some strange portal.â€•

I nodded. Lena saved me from further noise when she said she needed with preparing cloth for use. They went into the front room and left me with Tamrin.

I silently finished my lunch as I ate more than a halfling while Tamrin went about with her work on Miss Miriam's new dress.

â€œWhat's it like?â€• she said out of the blue. She was looking intently at what she was sewing.

â€œWhat?â€• I said.

â€œOut there? What's it like?â€•

â€œNot much to see. You haven't see it?â€•

â€œNo, I meant the planes. Travelling about seeing all the exotic places.â€•

â€œIt's... dangerous and a little... exhilarating.â€•

â€œOh.â€•

More silence. I could hear Wendi talking about something with Lena.

â€œDo you think someone like me could go and visit?â€• she asked suddenly.

â€œWhat? Oh... sure. As long as you find like a... tour guide or something.â€•

â€œLike you?â€•

â€œOh no. I'm no tour guide. I'm a tourist. I lost my tour guide. He was one of the friend's I was travelling with.â€•

â€œOh.â€•

I looked at Tamrin for a moment and then shrugged. â€œSay... how long does it take clothes to dry out there?â€• I asked.

â€œA few hours,â€• came Tamrin's reply.

“Ah... thanks.”

I heard a knock at the front door. Wendi answered and I heard a male voice. Then the door closed and Wendi came into the kitchen. “Well, if it isn't raining visitors today! There's another one who just arrived, though not like you. Walked up and no one even noticed him until he was past the trees on the outer limits. I'm going to go greet the new traveller. You want to come? Maybe you can follow him when he leaves?”

I pointed at my near naked form.

“Alright, maybe later. I'm off,” she said with a wave and then she was gone.

“Well, I'm glad she's gone,” said Lena. “She's sweet as sweet can be, but she talks enough to make even the deaf be glad they're deaf!”

“I wonder who the traveller is,” said Tamrin.

“You wonder who every traveller is, Tamrin,” said Lena.

I wondered as well. Instead, I waited for my clothes to dry while chatting with the two sisters about everyday life happenings, general planar knowledge and past travellers who had passed by the village.

The day was at its end by the time my clothes dried. I asked Lena about this and she told me how they darkened the sky to make it seem like night. They also surrounded the village limits with thick trees and had people awake to watch the sky for trouble. I thought the people of the village were organised and well practiced with living in the plane. Lena seemed quite proud when I told her this. Tamrin maintained her shy silence.

The sisters were preparing dinner by the time Wendi got back. She seemed less exuberant than usual. “I think you should talk with the newcomer,” she said.

“How come?” I asked.

“He gave your description. Says his name is Kom.”

“Kom! Where is he?”

“First tell me what this Kom looks like,” she said.

I told her. Kom usually went about bare chested so you could see his bandages. Sometimes he'd wear a

coat, but it was usually more a matter of style.

“That's not him!” Wendi said suddenly. “The man I saw doesn't sound like the Kom you know.”

“What does this man look like?” I asked.

“Oh... stocky, barrel chested. Skin seemed kind of grey. I think he's one of those half elemental folk.”

My mind flew back to Irene's paintings.

“Do you mind if I stay here tonight?” I asked quietly.

“Yes, I think you should,” said Wendi.

“Well, this'll be fun,” said Lena, “Wait till Ma and Paps get back!”

“Oh, shut up, Lena,” said Wendi.

“Leave me alone!” said Lena.

I could see Tamrin smile, but it disappeared when she saw that I had noticed.

When the sisters' parents returned, they seemed hardly bothered by my presence. Mrs Middledraught, for Middledraught was the family name, was a mix of Lena and Wendi. Mr Middledraught was like Tamrin though he opened up whenever the talk turned to fishing or to souping which was what he called the shaping of chaos matter into something solid. He even gave me a few tips. Wendi explained my situation to Mrs Middledraught and I ended up sleeping on the floor of the shop front.

I woke up to loud knocking on the door. I did not know how long I had been asleep, but it sounded from the birds that populated the trees that dawn was being created. Wendi came down with candlelight wondering who it could be as I shuffled into the kitchen. *I hate fate*, I thought to myself.

I heard the door open and Wendi said, “Hello there, Mr Kom. What brings you here?”

“The man in your home,” I heard him say in a baritone voice. His tone was slow and measured.

“Man? Do you mean Paps? It's a bit early, so maybe you can come by after breakfast. I'm sure you

can see him then.â€•

â€œNo, I'm talking about the man who slept on that floor overnight.â€•

â€œMr Kom, I don't know what you are talking about. Now if you don't mind, it's too early for this nonsense, so please leave,â€• said Wendi and then she closed the door.

She waited a moment to listen at the door. After she was satisfied that the man outside was gone, she came back to the kitchen.

â€œWell, you're in a right pickle, aren't you?â€• she said.

â€œI can't hide here forever. I suppose I should go talk with him and see what he wants,â€• I said with a sigh.

â€œAre you sure? He looks kind of serious. I wouldn't want to see you hurt. Neither does Tamrin for that matter,â€• she said.

â€œTamrin?â€•

â€œNever mind. So you're really going to talk with him?â€•

â€œWhat other choice do I have? He seems to be tracking me somehow.â€•

â€œMaybe it's because of something you have on you. Or something your friend Kom has but gave to you instead.â€•

I looked at the ring Kom had given me to wear. It looked familiar somehow although I remember it being not familiar when he had given it to me. â€œThat could be it,â€• I said, â€œbut I'm not about to drop everything I have and run away naked.â€•

â€œOh no, that'd cause a village scandal. Traveller runs away naked! Leaves clothes in tailor's house! No, I guess you'll really have to talk with him.â€•

I nodded grimly.

â€œThere, there. How about I make you some breakfast? If you're going to die, you don't want to do that with an empty stomach. It wouldn't be polite for a host to do that,â€• she said.

“Thanks,” I said.

“I’m just having fun. Cheer up,” she said and she proceeded to cook.

Tamrin was upset when she heard that I was going to go meet with the man who was searching for me. Lena thought it was a bad idea, but couldn’t think of anything else that could be done. Tamrin kept thinking up wilder and wilder suggestions on how I could escape as I ate the large breakfast Wendi had made for me. I thanked Wendi frequently between mouthfuls of wonderful food. Wendi had Tamrin eventually calmed her down by the time it was time for me to leave. I said goodbye to the sisters and their parents and opened the front door.

He was there. It was the man I saw in the painting. He was sitting with his legs crossed and appeared to be meditating. He opened his eyes and said, “Someone’s looking for you.”

I stepped out and closed the door behind me.

“Anyone I know?” I said.

“Maybe,” he said.

“Did they seem angry?”

“Not really.”

“So you’re not going to do anything bad to me?” He seemed unarmed though by his muscular build, I assumed his body was his weapon.

“Wasn’t planning to,” he said.

“So why is someone looking for me?”

“No idea, but he sent me to find you. Said to use this ‘Kom’ name of his.”

“Kom sent you?”

“Pretty looking guy? Bandages? Creepy sword?”

“That’s the one.”

â€œSure did.â€•

â€œWho are you?â€•

â€œYou can call me...,â€• he said before pausing for a moment. â€œYou can call me Charon.â€•

â€œIs that really your name?â€•

â€œNo.â€•

â€œBut I call you... Charon?â€•

â€œYes.â€•

â€œNot a man of many words, I see.â€•

â€œI'm efficient.â€•

From one extreme to the next, I thought to myself. â€œRight. So... Charon... what do you for a living?â€•

â€œI find things.â€•

â€œThings?â€•

â€œYes.â€•

â€œAnything in particular?â€•

â€œPeople. Pets. Objects. Words. Anything.â€•

â€œAre you good at it?â€•

â€œI'm still alive.â€•

â€œWell, that's a good sign. So... you've found me. Now what?â€• I asked.

â€œI take you back to Kom,â€• he said. He got to his feet in a slow controlled movement.

“Where's Kom?”

“Don't know.”

“So how do we get back to him?”

“We meet up in Discord.”

“Discord?”

“Yes.”

“Where's Discord?”

“A town near this place. Metaphorically speaking.”

“We're going now?”

“Yes.”

“Straight there?”

“Yes.”

“Scenic route?”

“Your humour is wasted on me.”

“Alright then”, I said, “So how do we get there?”

“Path's laid out. We follow the plan,” he said.

“What plan?”

“The plan that keeps you alive.”

“I don't understand.”

“You don't need to understand. I just follow what the jink says and the jink says to follow the path. This means you also follow the path.”

“Can I get supplies for the journey?”

“We travel light. Running may be required.”

“Great,” I said with some resignation. At least, I had some cookies. I asked, “Does this mean there's some danger involved?”

“Could be, but I'll be the cutter to solve those problems. Kom was very insistent on your safety.”

“That's nice of him.”

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“I guess so,” I said to be followed immediately by the door behind bursting open and the sisters and their parents bidding me a second farewell.

Charon didn't seem to notice so I said goodbye again.

We walked down into the forest near the edge of the village and onwards to the edge. Charon stopped, looked about, and then took out two small metal spheres that would fit in my hand.

“Are those...,” I said.

“These are yours,” replied Charon.

“Where did you find them?” I asked as I felt the familiar touch of my balls.

“They were from Kom. He said you'd miss them.”

“Did he say how did he found them?”

“No.”

“Alright,” I said with a shrug. “What do we do now?”

“We wait,” he said.

“For what?”

“My friend. I have difficulty understanding this place and as such, it is dangerous for me to try going out there. My friend can, but his presence may draw some... problems.”

“Who's your friend?”

“A feathered demon.”

“A what?” I said somewhat loudly.

“A feathered demon,” he reiterated.

“A demon?”

“Yes. A feathered demon.”

“Alright. I don't think you're understanding what I'm saying. It's a demon. Aren't they evil and dangerous?”

“Yes.”

“So...”

“This one is mostly reformed.”

“Mostly?”

“It is better if you speak with him about your prejudices in person.”

I didn't really want to speak about whatever grievances I had with a demon.

It was a few minutes before it came swooping up from below the edge of where the village ended. It landed and looked over me.

“This the delivery?” it said in a half squawked guttural voice to Charon.

“Yes,” was Charon's reply.

“Hey there, human. How's things?” it said to me.

“Er... fine, thanks,” I replied.

“Polite, ain't he?” it said to Charon.

“You can call me Styx. Like the river,” Styx said to me. “Any questions?”

“Are you evil?” I asked.

“What's your definition of evil?” asked Styx.

“I don't know. Killing for fun?”

“Who am I killing?”

“Does it matter?”

“If some goodie two shoes hero comes along as kills me because of the way I look, is he evil?”

“Alright. Innocents. Just say you're killing innocents,” I said.

“No one's innocent,” said Styx.

“Children are innocent.”

“I've met some pretty nasty children.”

“So you're saying you're not evil?”

“I'm reformed.”

“Charon says you're mostly reformed.”

“Charon?” he said to me. He looked at Charon and said, “You calling yourself Charon?” Styx started laughing. It sounded like a drowning crow. He turned back to me and said, “This here *Charon*, he's a funny basher. Funny ha ha, not funny strange. Well, he's funny strange too, but I think that's just the way his brainbox works. But yeah, I'm mostly reformed. Been evil free for almost thirteen years now.”

“So you haven't killed anyone for that long?”

“Hells no. I've killed plenty in the time. They all were thinking they're some top shelf cutter who thinks they know all about killing me. Can't even enjoy a drink without at least one trying to bob me for glory with his pathetic church. The one's that go for my jink, I understand, but those that go for faith, they're clueless.”

“We should be going,” said Charon.

“How are we going? Walking?” I asked.

“Naw, we're flying,” Styx said.

“How are we flying?”

“You aren't. I am.”

“You're carrying us?”

Styx flexed his claws in front me.

“Nice,” I said.

“Yeah, there's a great manicurist in the Abyss. If we get time, I'll introduce you to her.”

“Styx,” said Charon. The way Charon said Styx's name made me think that Styx wasn't Styx's actual name either.

“Has all the patience of a rock every other time, but now,” said Styx with an exasperated tone.

Styx was much bigger than I was and was slightly taller than Charon. He grabbed my upper arms with his hands and took to the air. Then he hovered and grabbed Charon's upper arms with the claws at the end of his legs.

“Damn the Gods, Charon. Did you gain weight while you were on that rock?” said Styx as we dove into the soup.

The trip went in silence. Styx seemed to be concentrating and whatever noises that came from him were mostly grunts or comments about how long it had been since he'd been so close to a tasty morsel. It might have been mortal he meant to say.

We eventually got to an island in the soup. It looked like a tropical island given the vegetation and the beach. The soup eventually would lap at the shores as water. The place where this happened shifted and moved.

“What's this place?” I asked.

“The way out of this boring place,” said Styx.

“A portal?”

“No, a vortex into madness,” he said.

“I don't get it.”

“Oh, you will.”

Charon remained silent.

We landed and Styx stretched himself once he had dropped us on to the ground.

“Is it inhabited here?” I asked.

“If so, I hope it's edible,” said Styx.

“Aren't you mostly reformed?”

“Mostly,” he replied.

“This way,” said Charon and he headed in to the vegetation.

“Can't we fly over it?”

“Portal's not in the sky, bob,” Styx said.

Charon seemed to pass through the dense flora without effort while I made slow progress. He would stop, touch the ground and then either keep going or change directions. Styx leapt from tree to tree

using his wings to glide over the short distance. He seemed amused at my efforts.

We stopped at a cliff face that had appeared as if from nowhere out of the trees. Charon tapped along the wall until it appeared he had found what he was looking for. He then took a deep breath and then vanished.

“There it is,” said Styx. “Go on, bob. Step through. Charon's gone and opened the door.”

“The portal?”

“No, a door. In the ground. Portal's underground, bob,” he said. He was perched on a tree above the area where Charon had disappeared.

“Why are you calling me bob?”

“You look like an easy mark,” he said.

“Mark?”

“For bobbing. Bet you've been bobbed before, right?”

I said nothing and found the open trapdoor heading under the cliff. Charon was waiting below, his arms cross and his back towards me.

“Charon?” I said as I stepped into the cool darkness.

The passage didn't go far. It opened into a shallow cave. I heard Styx's clawed feet clack their way down the stairs.

“We'll kill you now,” said Charon without emotion.

“What?”

“You're dead,” he said as his hand whipped out and grabbed my throat.

There was a flash and a I could here a low pitched howling. Charon let go.

“Apologies. I needed the key to open the portal.”

I rubbed my throat and said, "You scared the living daylights out of me."

"Exactly," Charon replied. He walked into the portal.

"Shoulda seen your face, bob," squawked Styx in his avian-like laugh. "Come on, step through now."

I stepped through and felt a tugging at my mind, as if I was being pulled down. I felt dizzy as if I had been kicked in the head and then I was through the portal. The low pitch howl I heard from the other side was louder. My ears hurt. The winds flapped my clothes about and I set myself against them. I felt the chill the winds carried in my bones. I blocked my ears to dampen the howl from the wind, but they seemed to pass straight through into my mind "a discordant scream that changed in pitch at random intervals.

"Where are we?" I shouted over the wind.

"Stone's throw from barmy, bob," I heard Styx say. His voice seemed to carry over the wind. He didn't seem affected and he used the wind to ruffle his feathers.

Charon motioned us to follow. We were in a relatively large cavern. The wind was about as bad as a good storm back home, but the constant screaming that it carried was getting to me. Charon seemed to be walking normally while I struggled. Eventually Styx picked me up.

"Too slow, bob. Your mind'll go before you reach shelter," he said.

The wind was getting to me.

The wind was beginning to really get to me.

A lot.

Shut up.

Shut up!

Why won't it shut up?

Do you know why it won't shut up?

SHUâ€“

And then it stopped and I felt warm. I realised I had had my eyes closed, so I opened them. We were in a dingy room that appeared to be some sort of common room for an inn. There weren't many people about and those that were seemed to be staring into the drinks or watching something only they could see. The howling wind had been muted somewhat, and had been reduced to a muffled scream.

â€œYou right, bob? You started talking to yourself back there,â€• asked Styx as he put me down.

â€œI... I'm alright,â€• I said.

â€œYou even got Charon picking up the pace a little,â€• he said.

â€œThanks for the concern,â€• I said.

â€œFeh. Concern nothing. Jink don't change hands if you go barmy,â€• he said.

â€œRight.â€•

Charon was talking with who I thought was the proprietor. I moved closer to see what was happening.

â€œHo ho. Been a while since I tried some Barmy Juice,â€• cackled Styx. He moved over to where the drinks were poured.

â€œSure, it's still there,â€• said the innkeeper, â€œBeen gathering dust since you left it here. Not much call for rooms this time of year anyway.â€•

â€œGood. This is the last night the room will be paid for,â€• said Charon handing over a pouch. It looked like it was full of coins.

“As long as you pay,” said the innkeeper taking the pouch.

Charon turned to me and said, “You must rest and prepare yourself. I will help you.”

“For what?” I asked.

“The journey ahead is perilous for one such as you. You must steel your mind against this place that wants to steal it from you,” said Charon.

“How are you going to help me?”

“I will teach you a sutra.”

“A what?”

“A chant to ward off that which would claim your mind.”

“Alright. Let's go,” I said.

Charon turned.

“Wait,” I said, “what about Styx?”

Without turning he said, “He'll be fine,” and then he was off to the room he had paid for.

Charon's room appeared to have not been used in some time. There were two backpacks on a bed and a metal staff leaning against the wall in the corner of the room.

“Your old room?” I asked.

“I was here before,” said Charon, “Sit here.”

I sat.

“Repeat these words,” he said and he told me the sutra.

I spent several hours practicing Charon's sutra until he decided that I had gotten it perfect enough to satisfy him. During that time, he first checked the contents of the backpacks, then he checked over the

staff and then he sat next to me in meditation. Towards the end of my practicing the chant, my mind felt clearer. The dull howl from outside sounded like a dull howl instead of a grating annoyance in my ears.

“Here,” said Charon passing me one of the backpacks. “Put this on.”

I put it on and felt the weight on my back. “This is quite heavy,” I said.

“The winds can blow hard. You need to concentrate on the sutra and not on standing up.”

“So it's a weight to keep me down?”

“Something like that,” he said. “Do you want to rest? We have some time.”

“Some time to eat would be nice,” I said. “Er... also... why are we going through such a dangerous place?”

“Makes it harder for others to follow.”

“Is someone following us?”

“They were,” said Charon.

After I had eaten half the cookies Irene had made for me while Charon continued his meditation, we went back down to fetch Styx who was passed out on the floor. No one seemed to care about the demon on the floor. Charon nudged him in the side.

“Wake up. Time to go.”

“Ooh... that's some good juice. Packs a kick in the head.”

I noticed a small glass in Styx's clawed hand.

“Styx. We must go now. Here,” said Charon. “Strap this to yourself.” He dropped the second backpack next to Styx.

“We going already? Feh. Ah well. Until next time my sweet, sweet juice,” sang Styx.

He got up slowly and then shook his head. “Just hold on a minute. Room's still shaking.”

“Styx,” said Charon slowly.

“I heard you, Your Highness,” said Styx with a mock bow. He picked up the backpack and strapped it on to his back under his wings.

We left again into the howling wind. I chanted my sutra, but after half an hour, Styx picked me up under his arm again and carried me. We followed Charon in the pitch black of the tunnels. I made great efforts to maintain the chant especially when I thought I heard voices in the darkness. The sutra became easier as time went by though I didn't think it was because of my chanting. We had passed through another gate of some sort at some point in time because the wind did not seem as loud after it. I had felt a momentary stretching feeling as if two giants had decided they couldn't share me when we went through. Of course, there were occasional scuffles in the darkness. At times, Styx would put me down and I knew well to stay where I was and to be as quiet as possible. The battles would always be short and we would continue on our way quickly. I guessed that it was because of something noticing the sounds of battle that would be carried by the wind.

Light began to filter into the tunnel we were currently trekking through though I could still barely see in the dim light. I could see the shape of Charon moving ahead of us. The wind was down to a breeze where we were so Styx had put me down and I had been walking.

“How much further is it?” I whispered to Styx.

“Ask Charon,” replied Styx.

I caught up with Charon who didn't even seem tired at the constant pace.

“It is close,” he said when I got to him.

“How did you know what I was going to ask?” I asked.

“I know,” he said.

“But how?”

“The Multiverse makes itself known.”

“Alright then,” I said and decided not to pursue any further information.

I travelled between Styx and Charon for the rest of the way until we reached the next portal. It was carved into the tunnel we were in and looked old. It was a sculpture of vines shaped into an arch.

“This goes to Discord?” I asked as I looked at it in the dim light.

“No,” said Charon. “That one is being watched. This goes to another just over a day's walk to that town.”

“At least I'll be able to move about more,” grumbled Styx. “This place really gets to you. If it's not that incessant wind chilling the bones, it's these tunnels that close in on you.”

“How does this one open?” I asked. “You're not going to strangle me again, are you?”

“This one takes a word,” said Charon. He said something that sounded less like a word and more like a gurgle.

The space within the arch shimmered blurring the rock that was there. The image of the rock wall quivered and then rolled down to show a black space. What appeared to be a winding staircase joined this side of the portal to another far away that shone like a beacon.

“I thought portals were instant?” I asked.

“Still a clueless prime, hey bob?” chuckled Styx. He pushed past me and began walking the stairs.

“It looks far, but it is deceiving. A few steps is all it will take,” said Charon, “Just don't fall over the edge.”

“What's down there?”

“No one knows,” he said.

The width of the stairs began to look narrower than before to me.

“If you would please enter,” said Charon.

I took a breath and stepped on to the stairs. The first thing I noticed was the utter silence and the second thing was that I had moved about a third of the distance with one step. I looked back and saw Charon's form still on the other side of the portal. Styx was almost already to the other side but he looked like he

was frozen in place. I made myself not look over the edge. The darkness of the inner portal seemed empty as if it were a void; it probably was a void. I took another step.

Styx was gone. He had already gone through to the other side though I could not see him. He was probably flapping about in the air. I was just over half way. I took another step.

The other side was close now. I could see the other side and it looked like it opened on to plains. I looked behind and saw Charon frozen in time about a third of the way from the portal we had entered. I took another step.

I was out and felt as if something had come off my shoulders. The light was comforting and it was almost like back home on my prime world. Styx was indeed flapping about in the sky though when he noticed me he swooped back down.

Charon popped out and turned to the open portal which was within the arch of another sculpture of vines though this one was free standing. It was tilted forward slightly. Charon turned to face it and said the same gurgle he made to open it. The image within the arch shimmered, blurred and then rolled down to hold nothing but air within. The sculpture was again simply a sculpture.

“What now?” I asked Charon.

“We head for Discord,” he said.

“What about these backpacks?” I asked. I noticed Styx had already dumped his on the ground.

“Leave them here. The enchantment is spent.”

“What enchantment was that?” I asked as I took of the pack.

“It was anchoring you to the ground.”

Styx joined us from out of the sky and said, “I feel better already. Now, who's up for some thing to eat?”

“Just who is after us?” I asked Charon as we made our way towards Discord.

“It is you they are after,” answered Charon.

“Alright, who is after me?”

“You will have to take that up with Kom.”

“I'm sure they'll show up,” said Styx, “Can't have a chase without the final confrontation, right Charon?”

“So you know who it is that wants me?” I asked.

“I know only what I have seen so far,” said Charon.

“And what's that?”

“I see shadows that watch and follow. I see wings that sparkle with an iridescent sheen when the light is right. I see those who wish to keep a secret secret.”

“You're just not on the same level as the rest of us, are you, Charon?” I said with a sigh.

“Few are,” he said.

“Damned cryptic riddles,” said Styx, “That's what makes them so good at handling disputes. No one knows what's what with all that talk, but it sounds profound enough to be important. Poor sods.”

“I don't understand,” I said.

“Never mind you mind, bob. Prime brainbox can't handle the majesty of the planes, right?” said Styx with a snicker. “If it don't fit you world view, change it so it does. That's the prime way!”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

Discord had sprung up as a trade centre for merchants and travellers who didn't want to go near the influence of the gate to the tunnels of howling wind and insanity. While a town had grown about that gate, its inhabitants were not entirely together and it made dealings slightly unpredictable for business which preferred known rules of engagement. I knew this because Styx would not shut up. It was as if he was trying to make up for lost talk when we were kept to silence or quick whispers.

“Alright, Styx, alright. I'm a clueless prime who doesn't know the dark or the chant or whatever else I'm ignorant of. Alright,” I said.

“Settle down, bob. You make me think you spent too much time in those winds. You came out here

to see the planes, right? Just giving a bit of back story," he said, "No need to bite my head off."

I looked at him and pondered the ridiculousness of such action. If anyone bit anyone's head off, it'd be the other way around.

"So where are we going to exactly?" I said to Charon.

Styx seemed mildly amused at my snubbing.

"Scrambling Darkness," Charon said.

"Scrambling Darkness?" I said.

"It is a gambling house for those who wish to do business without other ears," explained Charon.

"Ever gamble with a barmy?" asked Styx with a hop. I ignored him and he snickered again.

"Kom is there?"

"That is where he said to meet," said Charon.

I was anxious to see a face I knew again. My mind cast back to thoughts of Viera. I wondered where she was and if she was alright. She had left without word and I had left so suddenly. I shook my head.

"What's wrong, bob?" asked Styx. "Not sure what to wear?"

"Just thinking about how I got into this mess," I said.

"Everyone says that when they're about to die," said Styx. "I know 'cause I asked them."

I gave him a look.

"That was before I got reformed, bob."

"So you feel guilty now?" I asked.

"Mostly nostalgic," said Styx.

"For killing?"

“For not caring about killing.”

“But now you do?”

“Mostly.”

“Because you're mostly reformed,” I said.

“Now you're lanning it,” said Styx with a laugh.

The journey to Discord was uneventful and at the pace Charon set, we reached there faster than I expected. It certainly didn't seem like a day's journey. Styx did pick me up and took to the air but it came with the price of his infernal chattering. I hoped Scrambling Darkness would offer me the chance to get some rest.

Discord was bustling though for what, I did not know. The influences of the plane nearest to it did not seem like a good source of business, but a good merchant always finds something to sell or trade. Mostly I saw arms dealers peddling their wares. Styx said something about some kind of Blood War and about how war was good for business, so it made sense from that point of view.

We found the Scrambling Darkness in the outer town so that those who wanted to leave really quickly could do so. Charon seemed quite nonchalant about this fact when he mentioned he had taken advantage of the gambling hall's location on a few occasions. Naturally, he was quick to mention that those few occasions were purely due to matters that required him elsewhere quickly and he had no time to deal with insulted locals. Styx snorted at this but did not say anything.

Charon said a few quiet words with the man standing at the door. He appeared to be some kind of bouncer. He let us pass and we went into the brightly lit building. People of all types were here gambling, whispering and generally trying to not be noticed. We went up to the dimly lit second floor where the less humanoid beings were mostly found. Styx laughed when I froze at the sight of what I thought was a floating eye with a large mouth and eye stalks. I had read about them, but didn't expect to see one without regretting it soon after. After the veiled lady with snakes writhing about atop her head, various fiends, and other strange sights apparently socialising with humans and more normal looking people, I began to relax slightly. Styx would say to anyone who got close that I was his pet human. I thought Styx looked quite fierce and the thought of myself being a treasured pet to him sounded like a good idea.

Charon found an empty table in a dim corner of one of the rooms and we took our places. He said it had been reserved.

“How long do we wait?” I asked.

“As long as it takes,” said Charon.

“Where's the damned service here?” grumbled Styx. He got up to find some one or thing in the hospitality business.

Charon said, “Could be a while. Your friend is usually fashionably late.”

I nodded and decided to try to find some sleep. My feet ached and my body was travel sore.

* * *

The world of Solr was drained of magic, or at least, something was actively draining any use of it. It was stronger in the populated areas, which made it difficult for those who practiced such things to gather. Such people would often study alone and almost always would also end up dying alone in failed experiments. Kom had come to this world to hide though he was hiding more from himself than from anything else. The world soothed his mind and calmed his inner thoughts that boiled with negative passion.

Kom had found Solr by chance. He had entered portal after portal without knowing where they went. The riskier the leap, the more likely he would jump. The nature of Solr resisted portals that tried to latch on to it. Those rare portals that actually did connect Solr to other places did so only when Solr let them and even then, it was for a short time. Kom did not know about Solr until he found himself in a world that was a dead end for planewalkers. Kom did not care.

Kom lived in a cave far from the lands populated by humans and located deep in the virgin forests that hugged the lower slopes of snow capped mountains. He would sit in the upper branches of the highest trees and bask in the sunlight or the starlight. He found a peace that he had never known during his time battling the forces the evil or during his time trying to satiate his darkest desires. In Solr, he simply was.

On a hot summer's night, Kom lay on a rocky slope that eventually met a river. He listened to the water move while he watched the stars above. He played absentmindedly with the ring on this middle finger that he had been given long ago and remembered things that no longer invoked any emotional response. It was as if he was a disembodied observer. He saw the ring tossed from a young woman dressed in extravagance flipping in the air towards a young man dressed like a fine clothes befitting the nobility. It moved slowly through the air, following an arc that was decided long ago. The Seal of Jo, the signet

ring representing the throne of the Silver Empress and the position of the highest level in the once mighty Jo Theocracy, had been passed to him. The Empress had given it to Kom.

Kom did not know why he still kept it. On many occasions, he had stood at the edge of a cliff that looked over a sea of acid or bottomless clouds or whatever else with the ring in his hand and ready to throw, but he would always stop and change his mind. During the time that he was working to destroy the Empire, he would have thrown it away without a thought. With the collapse of the Empire, Kom could not end it in his mind. He looked at the ring. It was the symbol of his desires, but he could not take the final step to end it once and for all.

Kom had fled his original home world and he had fled the planes as he knew he would be hunted. He did not know why he ran. He could have returned to the dark plane where he had been reborn and where he knew he would be safe from his pursuers if not from his ambitious co-inhabitants. Kom did not know what he wanted any more. At first he blamed the ring believing by touching such a holy relic of Jo that he had been corrupted. Deep down, Kom knew this was not true. His faith had wavered when he fell and his faith wavered again when he would make the final choice that would have been irredeemable. Kom was tired of it all. He had adhered to the tenets of Jo when he was mortal, he had been a warrior in the Jo Host, and he had been a vile and dark influence on others in his goal of destroying what he had once been a part of. Kom was tired of serving others.

He was broken out of his reverie by a falling star. It flared for a brief bright moment and then vanished. Kom had seen many such things in the past, but this falling star was different. The air seemed different. Solr had decided to let a little magic into the world. Kom sat up and he could hear a faint tune in the wind. He could hear everything a little more clearly and he could see things around him as if it was the middle of the day. Something had pushed its way into the world and had made Kom what he had been hiding from.

Kom stood and tried to gauge where the music was coming from. There was a glow in that direction. Kom's curiosity guided him into the trees in search of the music. It was a faint tune at first and then he could hear the music. Soon, voices followed with the music and then laughter. In the half light, Kom left the forest he had called home and entered into the glades of the visiting Faerie Court. The trees seemed to part to reveal the eternal revels of the Court. Dancers and singers and pranksters moved about the party eating, drinking, and laughing.

“Hello,” said a meek voice.

Kom turned and saw a young woman, dishevelled and dirty, with streaks under her eyes as if her tears had run down her face. She was curled up in the shadow of a tree. “Hello there,” he said.

“There's a party,” she said.

“Yes,” said Kom, “There is.”

“Are you going to go in?”

“No, I don't think I will.”

“They'll make you come in,” she said as she started rocking.

“Well, I'll just tell them no thank you.”

“They won't listen. They might get angry. You don't want them to get angry.”

“I'm very good at talking to people,” said Kom with a smile.

“Suit yourself,” she said.

“I'm Kom,” he said as he moved to sit next to her while he kept a watch for any one who might approach.

She remained silent.

“What's your name?” asked Kom.

“My name? My name is... E... Elaina. That sounds right,” she said.

“Elaina. Well, hello, Elaina. What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to go to the grand party,” she said, “But now I want to go home.”

“Where's your home?” asked Kom.

“I don't know. I tried to go back but I always come back here. Always,” she said.

“How long have you been here?”

“I... I don't know. You can't tell here. The sky is always changing. They are always changing.”

“Maybe I can help you go home?”

“You can try, but unless you go now, you'll probably be like me. Here forever. You'll see them change too. It's scary when they change. Scary.”

“When they change?” asked Kom. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, they look the same, but there's something... else. They're different. It's like back home... there was this girl who was always nice to me, but I heard one time, she said I was crazy and that no one liked me. It's like that, but you can feel it. You don't need to hear it.”

Somewhere deep in Kom, he wanted to save Elaina.

“I'll go talk to whoever is running the party,” he said. “Do you know who's in charge here?”

Elaina peeked around the tree and pointed into the party. “In there somewhere. The Queen. She's really pretty, but she's the worst. I don't think you should bother though. She doesn't listen to anyone who isn't important.”

“No harm in trying,” said Kom. He patted Elaina's arm and she jerked away from him.

“You're not real. Nothing here's real. I just want to go home. Go home,” she cried.

Kom stood up and walked into the party.

In the outer fringes of the party, the revellers avoided him. They would take a look at Kom and immediately would turn and move discreetly away. Kom would bow or nod or smile to folk who looked at him with an unwelcoming demeanour. He seemed to repel them. The deeper he got, the less they cared. They offered him drink and food and a few pretty females of some kind tried to get him to dance. He would politely decline and keep moving in. He saw the throne in the distance where the Queen sat as her consort stood watching over the party. When he was in shouting distance to the Queen, the consort made a signal to someone to Kom's left. Kom looked where the consort had signalled towards and saw a short figure approach him. The party seemed to push away from him. Kom knew that this being was a Power.

“What're you doing here, angel?” it asked.

“I was just wondering if I could get an audience with that woman over there,” Kom replied and

he pointed towards the Faerie Queen.

“You reek of evil, angel,” said the Power, “Your kind isn't much liked here. You haven't caused any trouble to warrant me throwing you out, but if you get any closer to her, you better watch out.”

“I don't want any trouble. I just want a quick word. Maybe you can give the message?”

“I am no errand boy, angel,” it said gruffly. The party seemed to quieten suddenly.

“What is going on?” said the Faerie Queen and the party stopped.

Kom turned to the Queen and bowed as the people about him suddenly moved far from him leaving Kom with the Power.

“Nothing a little strong arming won't fix, Titania,” said the Power as it glared at Kom. It looked like it was getting ready to throw Kom out.

“Oh, go drink something cold for that hot head of yours, Squelaiche. You too, Oberon. If you two weren't higher beings, I'd swear you were boys fighting over some stupid little quarrel about lost marbles,” said the Queen. “It's not like the angel can do anything here in *my* Realm.”

The being called Squelaiche seemed flustered for a moment and then stormed off. Oberon bowed slightly to the Queen before returning to watching Kom.

“You have my ear, angel. I hope it is something worth stopping a party for and the prank Squelaiche is going to pull on me,” she said with a smile.

Kom bowed again to give him some time to choose his words. Kom had dealt with Powers before though rarely with the more fickle ones as Titania was.

“Queen Titania, I apologise for interrupting your festivities,” said Kom. “I am here to ask permission to take young Elaina home.”

“Elaina? Oh yes, that human girl,” said the Queen. “Why do you interest yourself with the likes of her?”

“She wants to go home.”

“She has eaten at our banquet tables. She has drunk from our wine,” said the Queen. “She

could have gone home whenever she desired and yet she did not. Clearly, she wants to stay.â€•

â€œI have reason to believe she had no choice in the matter,â€• said Kom.

â€œAnd what reason might this be?â€•

â€œShe said things changed and your subjects would not let her go.â€•

â€œAll things change. She could have just said no. She chose not to. I tire of this, angel. It is her own fault. She knew what would happen and she ignored her own wisdom in favour of the party. Now, go away. I've a party to attend.â€•

The music began again and the partygoers started talking again.

â€œThen take me instead and let her go!â€• shouted Kom over the music.

The music stopped and there was silence.

â€œAngel, I grow tired of this. Leave now or I will throw you out,â€• said the Queen.

Kom moved suddenly to grab a satyr's goblet of wine and drank.

â€œWhat now, Queen Titania?â€• asked Kom wiping the sweet fruity liquid from his chin.

â€œAlright, angel. Whatever. I care not. She may go and you stay,â€• she said.

Kom bowed and said, â€œI thank you, Queen Titania.â€•

â€œBut... I know about you, angel. I will not have others disturbing my Realm just because of you. You will not stay. Instead, let's have us a little game.â€•

â€œA game?â€• said Kom with a quizzical look on his face.

The Faerie Queen smiled.

* * *

I awoke to a gentle shaking of my shoulders. I opened my eyes and saw the smiling face of Kom.

â€œKom!â€• I said a little too loudly.

â€œGlad to see you alive,â€• he said to me and he took a seat.

â€œWell done, Charon,â€• he said though he broke into a small chuckle at Charon's name.

â€œKom, I've got a few questions I have to ask,â€• I said.

â€œSure, go ahead,â€• he said.

I looked at Charon and Styx.

â€œDon't mind us, bob,â€• said Styx.

Charon got up and pulled Styx away. â€œWe're looking for food,â€• said Charon. Styx squawked indignantly.

I lowered my voice. â€œKom, what happened back there in the city? You pushed me in. How come?â€•

Kom nodded slowly and said, â€œI couldn't let you get caught. I had to push you through and hoped you could survive on your own. I guess you did.â€•

â€œCaught by whom?â€•

â€œBy the people chasing your shadowy girlfriend.â€•

â€œShe's not my- wait... they were chasing Viera? Is she alright? Is she here?â€•

â€œShe's fine. She's quite the catch, you know. I say this because she really is a hard person to track down if she doesn't want to be found. Even Charon would probably have a hard time.â€•

â€œWhere did she go?â€•

â€œShe was hiding as far away as possible from where you were,â€• said Kom, â€œAfter the little altercation with the guards, I jumped through the portal and ended up in the under city of T'lakth'kor. Wasn't expecting that. I knew no guard was going to risk getting stranded out in the soup, so that was the end of that little chase.â€•

“Kom, where is she?”

“Hold on there. So there I was, in the under city. You want to know who lives in the under city? No one. I was wandering about trying to find my way out for several days. Damn barmies just kept building on top of what they had before. Makes sense if the city got invaded, but makes life real hard for someone down there.”

“Kom...”

“And that's where she was. Pure chance. I found her hiding in the darkness. She was as surprised as I was. She ran away and you know what? She runs a lot faster than I expected her to. Had the damnedest time finding her, but I found her.”

“Where. Is. She. Now?” I said slowly.

Kom rolled his eyes at me. “At the moment, she's probably freshening up in her room waiting for you,” he said with a smile. Then he stared at me. His smile was gone. I felt as if I was being drawn into him. I thought I heard voices. They were voices from the past. People I didn't know. Then it was gone and Kom was smiling again. “Close. Not quite there yet.”

“Huh?”

“We'll visit her later.”

“Alright. By the way, Kom, did you steal my balls?”

“Your b- oh, those things. Yes, I did. I knew you'd use them wherever you were and I couldn't have that happening so soon.”

“I think I deserve a bit more of an explanation than that.”

“You use them and you go home. That's it. Doubtful I'd see you ever again,” Kom said.

“I'm touched, Kom,” I said in mock seriousness.

“Don't flatter yourself. I'm not done with you yet,” he said.

“Done with me? What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“You're one of the shipments.”

“Shipments? Kom, there's something you're not saying.”

“While you were missing, I did the deliveries without you. Had to move faster than I expected. Those metal tubes I had were partitioned in two. Each partition holds a sample of the pure element. You represent life.”

“Wha... Life? Me? I don't understand.”

“I sense something in you,” said Kom, “Something... that I haven't found in a long time. Don't worry. No harm will befall you. I promise you that.”

“So I'm some kind of fifth element?”

“Something like that.”

“Are you serious?”

“Quite.”

“So I'm this supreme being that represents life?”

“Oh, no, nothing as grandiose as that. You're just... well, it's hard to explain.”

“Kom, I think you're just playing with me.”

“We have to move now,” he said and he pulled me up by the upper arm. Charon noticed us and was upon us quickly with Styx behind him.

“We are going?” asked Charon to Kom.

“Yes,” replied Kom with a grim tone.

Charon nodded and led the way out of the Scrambling Darkness.

“Great! Gonna get us some jink and then I'm taking that vacation,” said Styx as he took up the rear position.

We practically barged into the room Viera was staying in. Viera's reaction was interesting. Cloaked in shadows that seemed to spin about her and wielding what appeared to be blades of shadow in each hand, she looked more than capable of looking after herself if she was not hiding. Once she recognised Kom and particularly me, those blades vanished and the cloak of shadows slowed their dancing around her. She rushed forward with her arms open. At first I thought she was going to hug me, but then she started poking and prodding me and saying, "Are you hurt? Are you alright?" I told her I was fine. Then she hugged me and I was shrouded in shadows.

Kom told her we had to go and there seemed to be some kind of communication between the two of them. She simply moved about the room packing her things for travel. Kom picked up two metal tubes from under the bed.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Viera, Kom and Charon remained silent. Styx was cooing softly.

"If I'm going to be subjected to something, I at least deserve to know what it is," I said.

Styx began chanting softly, "It's wakey, wakey time, bob." He started moving about as if he were dancing despite his legs being still. "It's wakey, wakey time."

Kom said, "We don't know what it is. All we know is that we have to get ready for it. Once it happens, you'll know the dark of it all."

"Great. One of those hindsight things," I muttered.

Styx interrupted his quiet chant with a chuckle.

Viera took my hand and held it. I was momentarily surprised, but I found myself holding her hand back.

The others began herding me out. Viera stayed close to my side, Kom took the front with the tubes under his arms and Styx and Charon took up places behind me.

"This doesn't look good," I said, "Everyone seems quite anxious."

Viera whispered into my ear, "I'll get you away. Be patient."

At this point, I was confused and unsure of what was happening. I didn't know what was going to happen next.

We were out into Discord when we were stopped. Dark humanoid forms surrounded us without warning surprising even Charon. They had appeared with an audible pop.

“Hold,” said one of the figures though its voice had a disembodied tone to it. They all looked like they were made of black nothing. The light seemed to dim around them and when one moved, it seemed to blur and distort the light. I heard a susurrations that seemed to be coming from all the void humanoids.

Kom said, “Viera. Make sure he stays safe.”

Viera nodded.

I was suddenly elsewhere and it was completely dark. I still felt Viera's hand in mine. I felt dizzy, not unlike the other times when strange things had occurred when talking with Viera.

“Where are we?” I asked once the dizziness had stopped.

“We are in shadow,” she said.

“That doesn't help, Viera.”

“We jumped to the plane of shadow.”

“You can do that?” I asked.

“It's draining to do so, but yes. I use shadow as a portal.”

“How? I thought we were in full light?” I asked.

“You cast a shadow. That's all that is needed.”

“What about Kom and the other others?”

“They were fully aware of the circumstances. They will be fine if that's what fate intends.”

“Well, what about us? Are we safe here?”

“No. We need to move. I will guide you,” she said and she let go of my hand. I felt her arm come

around my waist and her other hand take the one she had let go. "Come."

"Where are we going?" I asked as I took a hesitant step forward.

"Away from all who chase after you."

"Everyone keeps saying that and no one explains. Who, Viera? Who's chasing me? Why am I so special?"

"You are many things to many people."

"Kom said I was some kind of fifth element representing life. Was he telling truth?"

She laughed softly. "No, he wasn't. Though from a certain point of view, yes, I suppose it could be the truth."

"Well, it sounds preposterous," I said, "I've never been particular special or noteworthy, so what am I to these people?"

"You are what Kom wants you to be," she said.

"What is all this about Kom? Is he bad?"

"He is simply doing what he thinks he needs to do for his own redemption."

"Redemption?"

"Your friend Kom is a fallen angel. One who was corrupted by evil."

"Corrupted by evil? That can't be," I said.

"Believe it or not, it is true. However, Kom has some measure of self-doubt in him. Even in his darkest times, the longer a task he is given takes, the greater chance his own doubt about his own ability will stop him cold. He has always been like that," explained Viera.

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

"I am his reminder of a promise he made long ago. I follow him always."

“And how do I fit into this?”

“You are a part of the fulfilment of that promise. I am glad that I have found you. It means I'll be able to go home soon.”

“Then don't you want me to go with Kom?”

“I am the opposition of Kom. He knows he can not fight me directly. It is not the way of the Faerie Court.”

“Wait, I said and stopped walking. “You're the bad guy?”

“From a certain point of view, the same could be said of your friend, Kom. Nevertheless, to answer your question, I am an alternative,” she said. “There is no good or bad in this. You must understand that.”

“I don't understand anything. And where are we going exactly? Tell me or I move no further.”

I could hear her sigh. “This is a dangerous place to simply stop to have a chat,” she said.

“If I'm so important, you'd better start talking quickly,” I demanded though I was certainly not going to let go of her. I think she knew that.

“I know you've been having dreams,” she said. “Haven't you wondered about that?”

“You... you know about those?”

“They are all about Kom, are they not? Didn't that seem more than a coincidence to you?”

“It was getting disturbing,” I admitted, “Especially when they happen every time I sleep.”

“It's the ring he gave you,” she said, “The ring is telling you about Kom. It's speaking to your inner spirit; the metaphysical you that comes to the planes after you die.”

I touched the ring with the thumb on the same hand.

“The ring?”

“It's telling you about one of the choices you have to make.”

“Choice? What choice?”

“I am forbidden to tell you that. All I can say is that you must also learn of me.”

“So what is it I am supposed to learn about you?” I asked.

“I have already told you everything,” she said, “You just haven't woken up to the fact yet.”

“I am getting really tired of these riddles from everybody!” I shouted. There was no echo. I didn't know why I was expecting an echo. “How come Kom doesn't tell me these things himself?”

“We can not speak to you as you are. We must speak to your spirit.”

“So how come I haven't dreamt about you then?” I asked. Some where in my mind, I really wanted to dream about her. I pushed it down.

“You will know in one way or another. Dreams are simply a medium. It will come to you in time and in readiness of the final choice you have to make.”

“Fine. Whatever. Let's just... keep on walking to... wherever in the multiverse we are going. I'll just imagine I'm walking blind because I certainly feel like I've been missing out on everything else,” I snapped. I was tired of talking, so Viera and I continued walking in silence.

It was all so frustrating. I had come out to the planes for the extra credit to complete my studies and I get pulled into some elaborate scheme. There's a fallen angel whose supposed to be evil but has been nothing but nice to me although it might all be one big trick. There's a shadowy elf girl who's actually some sort of dark faerie who seemed quite nice at the start but I'm now having second thoughts about that. I'm having strange dreams about Kom which I don't understand and yet somehow I know the events really happened. I'm supposed to know about Viera but I have absolutely no recollection whatsoever. To top it off, some unknown party is after me and I still haven't used my balls to get out of this crazy predicament. The most insane thing is that I want to see what happens. Perhaps those howling winds really did get to me.

“We're here,” said Viera.

I had been lost in thoughts that cycled continuously as I tried to make sense of things.

“Where's here?” I asked.

“We're at the point where we can leave shadow.”

“Fine. Sure. Let's leave.”

I felt her stiffen. I probably had made her angry but at this point I didn't care. Maybe I would use those balls after all. I'm sure I'd have enough to write about in my final report. I sighed instead.

“Look, Viera. I'm sorry, but I've been under a lot of stress. I feel like I'm just a pawn in some elaborate game. I'm sure you're just as trapped as I am.”

I felt her relax a little and she said, “Let's go.”

We were in a forest and it was night. I could see a full moon in the sky and the noises of nature filled the air.

“Where are we?” I said softly. It seemed appropriate in this place.

“A plane where the animals rule,” she said, “We must tread quietly.”

“Where are we going?” I whispered.

“Some place safe,” she said, “We go to the town of Owl's Respite. By the way, you can let go of me now. We can walk normally from here.”

I jumped away from her and muttered an apology.

“Come on,” she said, “This way.” She chose a direction and started walking. I followed as best I could given her shadow shroud.

We walked in near silence for some unknown time. The moon above did not seem to move. I was beginning to think that the night would not end. She only spoke when I had taken a wrong direction having lost which shadow she was. The terrain started to climb and the trees got thicker. Their roots added to the difficulty of navigating the darkness. I could hear a river and maybe the roar of a waterfall far away, but after a while they faded as we moved away from them. I concentrated on following Viera in the darkness; she was the shadow that moved. I was glad we didn't encounter any other shadows that moved in the night.

It felt like hours after the sound of the waterfall when I saw the marker lights of Owl's Respite. I caught up to where Viera was and she pointed up into the trees. Owl's Respite was a town elevated.

â€œMakes it safer from night predators,â€• Viera said.

We moved quickly towards the marker lights. The tree roots and low branches continued to hinder our way. We reached the marker light which was a simple torch in a large basket made of some hard yet flexible reed. I could see the rope ladder leading up on to the platforms above.

â€œYou have got to be kidding,â€• I said.

Viera took to the ladder and scrambled up without comment.

I made my way slowly up. It was brighter up in Owl's Respite. There was a burning torch attached at regular intervals to the guardrails that ringed the platforms. The dwellings here were simple affairs of wood and thatching.

I lay panting as Viera talked with a rather furry humanoid guard. When she was done, she crouched near me and patted my chest.

â€œYou only need to move a little bit more to the hostel. Then we can rest for the night,â€• she said.

â€œDoes the night here ever end?â€• I asked.

â€œNo, it doesn't.â€•

â€œGood. I'm going to go to sleep for about a week if you don't mind,â€• I said as I pushed myself up.

She slapped me playfully on the shoulder as I did.

We passed the guard who nodded at us as we passed. It looked like a human possum and was armed with a long spear.

â€œWho lives here?â€• I asked.

â€œMostly traders making their way across the plane,â€• answered Viera.

â€œHow do traders manage the terrain? I didn't see a path down there that a wagon or caravan could move on.â€•

â€œThey use pack animals,â€• she said.

“Seems quite difficult for horses or mules.”

“They use lizards.”

“Lizards?”

“Yes. If your eyes are good, you might see them in the larger branches up here.”

I looked about but couldn't see a thing in the darkness beyond the torches.

“What about the people who live here all the time? You know, like that guard?”

“Humans mostly. The occasional elf. However, I believe you are referring to their appearance. It's something about the plane. It alters people; brings out their wild side in the literal sense. It's usually skin deep so it shouldn't be a concern,” she explained.

“And when it isn't?”

“We'll worry about that if it happens. Don't worry.”

“Right,” I said. Planar travel had a lot of catches. “Does Kom know where we are?” I asked.

“No,” said Viera.

I nodded and said, “Because he's your competitor.”

Viera said nothing.

“So where's this hostel?”

“On the next platform.”

We passed over a bridge to the next platform that was supported by another large tree. There was a level above and another below connected by stairs that were simply planks fixed in some what into the thick bark of the tree. The middle level was dominated by a large dwelling that wrapped the tree. I could see a torchlit sign above one of the entrances that showed a sleeping owl.

We entered into what looked like a communal sleeping area filled with bunks and hammocks. It was lit

like outside except the torches were mounted high on the wall opposite the tree trunk that served as the inner wall. Openings near the where the roof met the outer wall let the air in while allowing the smoke from the torch to escape. The place seemed empty and dimly lit.

“Not many people here,” I said to Viera as looked about for one of the hostel workers.

“It's not the season,” she said.

“Are there seasons here?”

“Of sorts.”

“Well, which season are we in at the moment?”

“Here, we are something that resembles spring. A more accurate approximation would be that we are in between the extremes. If we travelled in that direction,” she said as she pointed, “things will start to get warmer and wetter.” She pointed in the other direction and said, “If we travel that way, things will start to get cooler and drier. Most of the trade that passes through here has already happened. They usually try to stay ahead of the rain.” At that point, Viera located a feathered woman who was taking notes in a book. She seemed to be counting the occupants who currently stayed in the hostel.

I waited while Viera talked with the woman and when she came back, she guided me to where we were to sleep. The feathered woman continued about her business.

I said goodnight to Viera and lay on the utilitarian hammock.

“Viera,” I said. She was in another hammock next to mine.

“Yes,” came her reply.

“What is this mark you put on my chest?”

She was silent for a while before answering, “It's a seal.”

“Is it some kind of cursed seal?”

“Curse? No, nothing like that. It's more for myself. It lets me know that you are safe and free from harm. What gave you the idea that it was cursed?”

“It's been an uncertain time for me. I don't know who I'm to trust,” I said. I looked at the ring that Kom had given me in the weak light and decided to take it off. I pulled at it but it would not come off.

I sighed and closed my eyes.

Kom ran through the streets of the City of Doors. He had taken employment with a courier company and was its latest rising star as he was closing on Mercu the Quickling's record of total successful deliveries in a month. He needed the trust of the highups in the city to be picked for their special assignments and so here he was working his way up the ladder in the sometimes dangerous business of the courier. There had been times when someone did not want their competitor to receive a delivery and had sought to kill the messenger. Kom had gotten through those times which is more than could be said of Mercu the Quickling who couldn't run away fast enough. It was quite fortunate that most of the requests for Mercu had gradually shifted over to Kom.

Although Kom had come back to the planes with some anxiety, mostly at the prospect of being hunted down, he found that this did not eventuate and it seemed that no one cared about what he had done. Perhaps it was enough that he had had second thoughts. Kom remembered when the darkness took him and recalled clearly his frame of mind when he had done terrible things, but not it was an alien presence. He knew he was far from the pure being he had once been, but he was at least not outwardly evil. He felt that his time on Solr had calmed the anger, hate and desire in him and he wondered if that was because the world had drained some of it from him.

With the lack of righteous vengeance and the sad but opportune demise of Mercu, Kom felt buoyed with the feeling that he had found a new direction that he felt was right. It may not have been redemption, but it was a small step towards it. He had saved the young woman named Elaina from the Faerie Court and had brought her to the City of Doors. He admitted her to one of the many asylums in the city and helped pay for her boarding with the money he made. He visited her often in the early days but as her condition improved, he saw her less and less until he was sure that she saw him as if he had been a dream in her insanity.

Kom remembered the Faerie Queen and her challenge.

“The challenge,” she had said, “is to find a mortal's soul who is incorruptible.”

Kom had not believed that such a soul existed.

The Faerie Queen had laughed at him and had said, “Then the human woman stays here.”

Kom accepted the challenge after that.

“But I think the challenge is still too easy,” she had said, “The multiverse is infinite and we are immortal. I shall send one of my own to also find such a soul.”

Kom grew angry at the memory. It was like the fey to add conditions after the deal had been struck.

“You'll like her,” the Queen had continued, “She's just like you. I was wondering what to do with her and then you showed up. How lucky is that.”

A young woman with a childlike face and pupilless eyes had appeared from out of the party crowd at the Queen's silent summon.

“Viera, my dear,” the Queen had said, “Aren't you happy I've decided on what to do with you? You won't have to be a scullery maid any more.”

The young woman named Viera had curtsied and said, “I am happy, my Queen.” Kom had not thought she had sounded particularly happy.

The Queen had continued with, “Find and bring this soul to me. I have a little bet with Oberon that such a being exists. Oberon's such a cynic, but I'm a romantic at heart. It would be quite a novelty to meet such a soul.”

Kom had asked, “What happens to myself and Viera?”

The Queen had said, “I'll decide that when the time happens. In the meantime, your Elaina and Viera's Mari are under my... shall we say... supervision. Now begone from me!”

Kom had found himself back in Solr after that as he had been thrown out of Titania's Realm, but with him was the weeping and frightened Elaina who had slipped into insanity from the experience. He had looked after her until he found a portal that took him away from Solr and then he had brought her to the City of Doors where he could find carers for her and the location of her home. He had not known what had happened to Viera.

Kom looked at the book he held in his hand suddenly back in the present some twenty years later. The destination was written on a card stuck in the book as a bookmark. The address was some place in the Lady's Ward, probably a library of some sort. There were many libraries in the city; some private, some public. This book was headed for one of the public ones. It wasn't long before he was there. A book typically did not draw the attention of thugs or other unsavoury characters. The library belonged to a prime world organisation or something similar. Kom didn't care. A delivery was a delivery and this one was a quick and easy one which paid an average rate. It was the last one of the day and had been marked as extremely urgent. Kom figured he could have this done and be soaking in a warm bath at the

Twin Airs in under half an hour.

The library was small yet ostentatious. It was as if the architects had tried to disguise the size of the building with eye catching designs. Kom thought it fit right in with the rest of the Lady's Ward. He entered and drew the notice of the librarian almost immediately who came over and enquired of Kom his business. Kom flashed his courier badge and passed the book. The librarian nodded and took the book over to the counter where he had been sorting through books. He took the card out and began signing for the delivery.

Kom had little patience to stay and was wishing the librarian would hurry up when he saw a young man walking about the bookshelves. The young man seemed to shine from within. Kom knew instantly that after all these years, he had found what the Queen wanted. Kom had to meet this young man. Instead of going to the Twin Airs once the librarian returned the card to him, he waited outside for the man to appear. Even as this was happening, plans began forming in Kom's mind. Plans that would serve as a contingency in case the game with Titania went bad. Early after his fall, he had learned that trust and faith in fair dealings were concepts that had no place out on the planes.

* * *

I woke up from the latest dream. It had been the most vivid and it was the first where I had seen myself. I did meet Kom outside a library and he did say that he had just delivered a book. He seemed like a friendly fellow at the time and even took me to the Twin Airs. Now this dream was telling me that it was not chance.

I looked about the hostel and saw that not much had changed from when I had fallen asleep. I did not know how long I had been asleep for as there would be no sun to determine the time. I looked over to Viera and saw her fast asleep. The shadows that wrapped her looked like a blanket. My sleep must not have been very long. I got up slowly from the hammock and decided to stretch my legs as I felt awake anyway.

I walked through the hostel and tried not to think too much about what had happened in the past. I just focused on looking around and breathing deeply. The smells of a forest with a faint sense of a tropical storm was in the air. I walked through the hostel just to make sure that the hostel interior was one big ring which went around the massive tree trunk. In the darkness, I had not appreciated the size of the trees which had appeared as dark shadows to me, but in the torchlight and the time it took to get back to where I was sleeping, I found the size of the tree amazing. I went outside on to the platforms and tried to look up to the sky through the canopy. The moon looked like it was in the exact same location.

I found the stairs heading up to the platform above and went up. I wanted to see if I could get above the canopy to see what view there was to see. I was curious as to how big the forest was. The stairs rounded the trunk about one and a half times in a steady rise. I'd say it was almost three storeys higher from the platform the hostel was on. In any case, it was a good distance above and the canopy still loomed overhead although I could see more of the sky.

I looked about for a way to get higher and apart from two other bridges connecting other platforms and a lone guard who looked mostly human watching me with curiosity, there wasn't any. I went over to the guard and said good evening.

“Well met, sir,” he said. He leaned slightly on his long spear and adjusted his tunic. “Nice night for a walk?”

I shrugged and smiled. “It is somewhat refreshing,” I said. “Is there a way to get higher to get a better view of the forest?”

“Sure. There's the guard towers, but you'll not be allowed in there. You should try the launch pad.”

“The launch pad? Where's that?”

“Follow that bridge yonder,” he said as he pointed, “and follow the left rail until you reach another set of stairs going up. Go up and the platform you'll come to will have a lift that'll take you up to the launch pad.”

“Thanks,” I said, “I'll go check that out now. Good night to you.”

I followed his instructions and crossed the bridge. The next platform looked like a hospital of some kind. There were stairs going down, but since I was to follow the left rail, I did as directed. The left rail took me across another bridge to another platform. The bridge angled slightly back the way I came so I could see the hostel platform from where I was. On the other side of the bridge was a platform that looked to hold eating stalls though most of were closed at the moment. I wondered if they opened in some sort of shift arrangement such that those that were open now were closed later and vice versa. I noticed another guard that looked slightly reptilian and said good evening as I passed him. The left rail continued to another bridge that had an incline upwards to another platform. To its right was a bridge heading downwards. I took the left bridge.

At the next platform, I found what was one of the guard posts in Owl's Respite. There were stairs much like the others going up, but there was also a mechanical system of pulleys and cogs that was roped to something higher above. I looked up and saw another platform that was above the canopy. The canopy itself was close. If I had climbed on to the roof of the guard post building, I could have touched it. Although I could have taken the stairs up, it looked like it was a longer journey and I wanted to take the lift anyway.

There were several guards watching outwards over the forest town. I picked one and asked about going up to the launch pad.

“There should be no problem,” said the guard. She looked like a mouse. “I am required to warn you to take care, especially at the edge. Sometimes the wind can pick up suddenly. Also, you'll be in plain sight to anything airborne.”

“Alright. Do I use the lift to get up there?”

“If you want. Just tug the rope hanging next to the lift. It'll ring a bell above and the lift operator will haul you up.”

“Thanks,” I said. “By the way, who uses the launch pad?”

“Flying merchants mostly,” she said., “Sometimes we use it as a launching point for our aerial patrols though that only happens when someone gets lost or something dangerous gets near enough to worry about watching.”

I bid the guard a good evening and went to the lift. I got on to the lift and pulled the call rope. I heard a faint ringing bell above and then the lift suddenly jerked into motion. It was shaky at first but smoothed out quickly as whatever system ran it sprang into constant operation. I passed through the canopy and then I could see the moonlit landscape.

The lift stopped and I got off with a hop. There was no torchlight on the launch pad. The only light came from the moon. I saw the shadowy form of the operator who said, “Come to see the sights, mate?” It was a male voice and there was a deep growl in his voice.

“Yes,” I said looking around me. Although I wished there was sunlight, the night vista had an ethereal beauty anyway. There was another person though they were near the edge of the opposite side of the launch pad.

“First time here?” the lift operator said.

I told him, "Yes," and then asked, "Ah... Is that a guard?"

"No, no," said the operator, "Just another tourist like you."

"Oh," I said and walked towards the other person.

"Nice view, isn't it?" I said as I came to stand next to them.

"Yes, it is," came a female voice. She was taller than I was. She was probably close to Kom's height.

"So... what brings you to this place?" I asked.

"Are you flirting with me?" she replied. She sounded incredulous.

"No, no. I apologise if I have made you uncomfortable. I was just curious. I've come to the planes to learn and experience and all that other stuff you're supposed to do as a traveller," I explained.

"Well...", she said, "Alright. I'm here because I'm waiting for some people to arrive."

"They're coming by air?"

"No. I'm up here because I wanted to see the view. The people I'm waiting for will probably arrive here by portal. Maybe."

"Maybe? It doesn't sound like you know where you're meeting them."

She looked at me then and I knew that I had been a little rude. I was about to apologise again when she sighed and said, "I'm trying to find them. They don't know about me."

"It's a bounty, right? You're a bounty hunter?"

"No, nothing like that. I'm more of a... messenger. Maybe with a little intermediary thrown into the mix."

"Sounds... interesting," I said. I took a final look at the night sky and then said, "Well, I hope you find who you're looking for. Farewell."

The lift operator let me down and I backtracked back to the hostel.

Viera met me outside the hostel.

“There you are!” she said. It sounded both a little angry and worried. “Where did you go off to? I was scared something had happened to you.”

“Calm down, Viera. I went for a walk to the highest point I could find in town so I could get a better view of the land.”

“You shouldn't leave without telling me. If you had met those things we left back at Discord...,” she said leaving the rest unsaid.

“Alright, Viera. Safety tip noted. Everything's fine, so no more worry, alright?”

Viera put her hands on her hips and shook her head. “Fine. Let's go back into the hostel. It's almost morning... or at least, it's almost time that most people get up around here. They should be serving breakfast in an hour or two.”

I followed her back in and we found a table to sit at. There were many tables that could fit six people on either side at regular intervals around the hostel interior. A couple of thick candles burned at each one.

“Where are we going to next?” I asked Viera.

“We're waiting here for now,” she said.

“What for?”

“For a sign. I'll know it when it's close to happening.”

“I don't suppose you're going to tell me what that sign is?”

“It's more of a sense. The shadows will start dancing as if to music. When that happens, we move.”

“We're waiting for the Seelie Court.”

“How did you know that?”

“I... I don't know. I suppose I just did. Maybe it was the dreams and... other things.”

“You're waking up,” said Viera. “That's good. Soon, you'll know of me.”

I looked at her and she let the shadows in front of her face recede so that I could see her in the candlelight.

“What am I doing here, Viera?” I asked after we had exchanged a long silent look. “I'm not supposed to be here. I'm supposed to be sightseeing and slowly expanding my knowledge about the planes during this semester and I've probably done more these past few days than others like me would have done in a month.”

Viera said nothing, but her face softened. She smiled sympathetically or at least I thought she did.

I shook my head slightly. I took out my balls and placed them on the table. Their metallic surfaces glinted weakly the candlelight. I rolled them between my hands and then put them away. It would have been easy to call for help.

“Well, I've always been one to start, get deep into something and then not finish for some reason or another. I might as well try to finish this little adventure I'm on,” I said.

“That's the spirit,” said Viera. “I'll go see if we can eat a little earlier. It might help things if you have something to eat.” She got up and to find one of the hostel workers.

After a breakfast of fruit, bread and juice, Viera said she wanted to go to the central bonfire which according to her was the town centre. It was lower to the ground than the hostel and was fully suspended instead of being fixed to a tree for obvious fire safety reasons. Viera said that it had been burning since the creation of the town. At the middle of the night, it would burn the weakest and at the middle of the “day”, it would burn the strongest. Viera also said that certain native flora was burnt in the bonfire and you could tell what time it was by the scent. However, it was only detectable by those further away who had spent some time here to let their more primal senses develop. The more clean one was from the influences of the plane, the closer you had to get to pick up the scent and then only if you had the nose for it. It sounded interesting so I followed Viera as she led the way.

“So you can smell it?” I asked Viera as we made our way to the town centre.

“No, though I don't need to. The shadows tell me the time,” she said.

“You do seem to have a lot of shadow friends,” I said.

“In a way, they are though they are not to be confused with the monsters of the same name.”

“In a way? So they aren't alive?”

“Not if you mean sentient. When I deal with the shadows, it is through my own will that they become alive. They are simply shadows without me, but when I call, they suddenly gain purpose.”

“What kind of things can you do? Can you make shadow puppets?” I said trying to sound serious.

I tripped at that moment and fell forward. I caught myself before I hit the wooden floor of the platform we were on. I looked back and saw a blob of shadow matter waving at me with a dark pseudopod and then it flattened suddenly and was like the other shadows flickering in the nearby torchlight.

Viera was trying to keep a serious face when she asked, “Are you alright?”

I got up and said, “Where did you learn to do all those things with shadow?”

“From a teacher,” she said.

“Fair enough,” I said, “Hey, if you can jump out to shadow, how come you couldn't get us out when we were in trouble in the past?”

“It takes a lot of encouragement to convince the shadows to take someone who is not me. We've never had enough time and whenever we did, they refused to take whoever it was I wanted them to take. You're one of the few who I've ever managed to convince them to take.”

“Well, I suppose they aren't too bad,” I said looking back at where the shadow blob had tripped me. We continued on our way to the town centre. I couldn't help feeling that I was completely unprepared for the planes given that everyone had some special thing they could do except me. I suppose I should have been dead already if it hadn't been for Kom, Charon, Styx, and Viera.

I smelt the smoke of the bonfire that was the town centre before I saw it. The fire itself was large and I guessed it must have been burning already for some time. It wasn't until we were halfway down the bridge to the central platform that a subtle musk could be detected. Even on the central platform, the smell of smoke was stronger. The trees surrounding the platform formed a natural wind barrier that kept the smoke rising relatively steadily. After a certain point above, it angled in the direction the wind was blowing. A normal looking human guard and a scaly humanoid in a robe watched over the fire.

“Well, this is certainly not as exciting as I expected,” I said.

“It is a fire, after all,” replied Viera.

“The night seems to hate it,” I said noticing that despite the size of the fire, it seemed to be fighting for life. It would flare only for a moment before it retreated into its core as if the night had slapped it back.

Viera nodded. “None of the flames you see here are normal in the way that you know. That why they burn the scent instead of using the fire.”

“How do they burn?”

“That man there,” she pointed at the robed figure, “keeps them burning.” She put her hand into the bonfire quickly and then pulled it out. I was shocked by her action, but she wasn't hurt.

“How...”

“And they don't exactly burn. I wouldn't suggest you put your hand in there though. I don't think you believe enough.”

I looked into the bonfire that apparently wasn't a bonfire and thought about trying to convince myself that it wasn't hot despite the heat I felt from it. However, I shook my head in disbelief and said, “I guess we go back to the hostel now?” I asked.

Viera nodded and we turned and retraced our steps.

It was three long nights of tedium before Viera told me out of the blue that it was time to go. We had been playing a card game using a deck of cards I had bought from one of the local stalls. Previous to that amusement, she had shown me her various shadow party tricks and I had shown her my limited ability at juggling that I picked up during my college years. Other than that, I caught up on sleep and tried exercising a little in case we were suddenly attacked while Viera was in a trance. She called it her shadow trance and said that it was like scrying, but not as intrusive. I asked her who she was watching, but she didn't want to tell me.

“The Court's arrived?” I said after Viera had said that it was time to go. She had put down her cards to end the game.

“It's here. And... it looks like Kom's arrived on the plane as well.”

“How'd he know there we were?”

“I think it more likely that he knew when the Court would show up next at a location relatively nearby. Given the nature of most planar travel, this is the closest place.”

“So it's more like we'll see him in Court?”

Viera nodded. “Come on,” she said, “The Court's presence anywhere is by the whim of the Queen. Hopefully, it'll stay long enough for us to get to it.”

I gathered the cards and put them away. “Lead the way,” I said.

“Where is it?” I asked as we reached the rope ladder down to the ground. We were not at the place we came up.

“In that direction,” Viera said as she pointed in the direction that would take us towards the colder season. “It's a few hours journey.”

“Did the founders of Owl's Respite have the Court in mind when they set up here?”

“Yes and a whole lot more.”

I was starting to climb down the ladder first when I saw a woman coming down the bridge from a higher platform. She seemed to be in a hurry. In the torchlight, it looked like her skin had a golden tint to it and her hair was like silver.

“Wait,” she yelled out.

I looked at Viera and I saw the shadows dance about her. She seemed ready for anything. I shook my head slightly and looked back at the woman.

“Why?” I yelled back as I got back on to the platform.

She didn't say anything until she had reached us. Viera had turned to watch her approach.

“They say you're going to the Seelie Court,” she said.

Viera said, “Yes, we are. What interest do you have in that?”

“I was wondering if I could come with you. Safety in numbers, you see,” she explained.

The familiarity of her voice hit me. She was the woman who I had spoken to on the launch pad. Now that she was closer, she did look familiar. I knew the face from the paintings I had seen at Irene's. The

only difference was the hair.

“I know you,” I said.

“Pardon?” she said.

“You're the one who wants to deliver a message to people who don't know you're coming.”

“Wait... you're...,” she said as her eyes opened wider.

Viera interrupted our reunion and said, “If you want to come, then that is fine. We just have to get going now.” She pushed past me and made her way down.

“Er... after you,” I said to the newcomer.

She smiled and took to the ladder.

When we were all on the ground, I said to the silver haired woman, “I don't suppose your name is something along the lines of Sal, is it?”

Viera moved into the forest and we followed her lead. It became dark very quickly. Viera had said back in the hostel that having a light would attract night predators

“Why, yes, it is. Have we met?”

“Not personally,” I said.

“Then how do you know my name?”

“Your message is for Kom, right?”

She gasped. “You know of Kom?”

Things began clicking in my head. “We're going to meet him at the Seelie Court as well. Looks like fate is tying up loose ends,” I said as I climbed over a large root.

“Back to my previous question, how do you know my name?”

“Kom mentioned it one time when he was reminiscing,” I lied, “He described you a little and

I just took a guess.â€•

â€œDid he say that Sal was not my real name?,â€• she asked. â€œIt's a private name only Kom used.â€•

â€œNo, he didn't,â€• I said. I was beginning to think she suspected my fabrication.

â€œIt appears that we share a common goal,â€• said Sal.

â€œHow long have you been looking for Kom?â€•

â€œA few days.â€•

A few days ago, it was Kom who had the ring I now had. I was beginning to understand a few more things about Kom.

â€œQuiet,â€• hissed Viera. â€œWe're passing away from the patrolled areas of the town now so try to keep the noise down.â€•

After what felt like a long time later, Viera said, â€œIt should be safe to talk now. We're in the realm of the Seelie Court.â€•

â€œCan we rest for a little while?â€• I asked. I knew we had passed into somewhere else when the tree density decreased and I could see the night sky.

Viera said, â€œA little while should be fine.â€•

I saw down on what seemed to be grass and caught my breath. Sal sat next to me. Viera remained close and went into one of her shadow trances.

â€œAre you a friend of Kom?â€• asked Sal.

â€œI think we are,â€• I replied.

â€œYou don't see too sure,â€• she said.

â€œWell, the past few days have been busy. I learnt a few things about Kom.â€•

â€œDoes that knowledge bother you?â€•

“No, not really. Past is past is what I say. A person's defined by their actions right now. What's bothering me is that no one's telling me what's happening and Kom is one of those people not talking.”

“Maybe he thought you didn't need to know?”

I shook my head and said, “I don't know. I'm just going with the flow at the moment and hoping everything turns out alright.”

“What about your friend over there?” said Sal as she motioned in the direction of Viera.

“She's keeping quiet as well. Says I'll know when it's needed.”

“It seems you're quite a lone out here.”

“Believe me when I say that I have thought about going home.”

“But...”

“But... I guess it's curiosity that keeps me out here.”

“There's a prime saying I heard once regarding curiosity.”

“I've heard it too. I'm hoping the multiverse knows I'm not a cat,” I said.

“We move. Now!” Viera said forcefully and she ran deeper into the Faerie Realm.

I got up suddenly with Sal and rushed after Viera. I heard popping noises behind me and a susurration. I ran a little faster.

“What's happening?” said Sal. She didn't seem exerted by the fast pace.

“I think we're running for our lives,” I said in between breaths.

“Something's following us,” said Sal.

“I hadn't... noticed,” I gasped with sarcasm.

“I was only pointing out our situation,” said Sal. Her stride was graceful and effortless.

Viera was ahead of me a few strides and the shadows left streaks behind her. By the time I got to them, they had dispersed into the air.

“Have you... seen them... before?” I asked after each breath I took in. I did not think I could keep running for longer.

“They look familiar. If they are what I think they are, then it's been a while,” replied Sal.

“Do you... know how... to get rid of... them?”

“You have to outlast them. They are puppets of some unseen master. The longer they are around, the more it taxes the puppeteer.”

“How long... do they... last?”

“That depends on the puppeteer,” said Sal.

“Viera! I can't... keep this... up,” I shouted.

Viera stopped and turned. She said, “Keep going. I'll distract them.”

I was about to stop to argue this with her, but she shouted, “Go! Don't worry about me. The shadows will protect me!”

I passed her with a heavy heart and ignored the burning in my lungs.

“You go too! Keep him safe!” I heard her say behind me.

Then I was not running and I found myself in the arms of Sal who didn't miss a step when she swept me up.

“You look like you're about to fall over,” she said.

“Who... are... you?” I gasped as I bounced in her arms. I knew I wasn't going to be running again soon if I was put down.

I heard a cry of defiance. I knew it was Viera. I tried to look back to see if I could spot Viera in the gloom. The night hid her from me.

“For the moment,” said Sal, “I am your protector.”

“And that time is over, Lyn'Pak'Sal,” came a voice from the darkness ahead.

Motes of light blinked into life and lit the forest with a soft golden luminescence. They drifted lazily around the figure of Kom who held his bloodblade at his side.

“Jo'Kom'Shal,” said Sal with a smile. She stopped and gently let me down where I proceeded to roll on to my back. “It has certainly been a while.”

“Sal, what are you doing here and why are you with my friend here?” asked Kom. I looked at him and noticed that he looked slightly different. I glanced about for Charon and Styx, but all I saw was darkness and shadow despite the soft light from Kom.

“We were being chased,” replied Sal. “I am thinking you know what pursues your friend here.”

“It is none of your concern. I thank you for helping him, but it is time you went about your business,” said Kom. He looked about. “Where's Viera?”

“She stayed behind to hold them off,” I said weakly. “You've got to go help her.”

Kom was silent a moment and then he said, “Viera can look after herself. We have an audience with the Queen.”

“Kom!” I exclaimed.

“I have a message for you, Jo'Kom'Shal,” interrupted Sal.

Kom looked curious. “What is it?”

“Do I have to mention that those things are after us?” I said loudly.

“It is time the ring was returned,” said Sal apparently ignoring me.

Kom laughed. "I don't have it, Sal," he said.

"What? What did you do with it?" demanded Sal.

"I gave it to that young man there," he said as he motioned towards me.

"You gave it... have you gone mad? It is no wonder those puppets are after us!"

I heard a susurrantion from where I had come from with Sal. "Uh... I hear something coming," I said.

"The ring is in the hands of someone who can speak with it. That is all that is important," said Kom. He moved forward closer to Sal. His blade dripped but the blood turned into crimson mist before it hit the ground.

"Someone who can speak with it? Who?" she asked. Her eyes opened in shock. "No. The ring was crafted and enchanted to only speak with women. It is the symbol of Jo and of the Silver Throne!"

"Things change," said Kom.

The susurrantion was louder. I saw dark figures coming towards us weaving through the tree trunks. I thought of Viera. I said, "Things are changing to bad very soon if you two don't stop your melodrama and take care of those things coming towards us."

Kom smiled at Sal and raised his blade in salute in front of his face. "Dance with me, Sal. You have always been the light to my dark. I know what I have done and I know that I will never reclaim what I have lost. Dance with me for the last time."

Sal's face softened and she smiled back. "One more," she said, "one more." A blade of golden light sprang into her hand and she returned Kom's salute with it. A translucent shield that was also of golden light appeared on her other arm.

I scrambled forward to put them between myself and the advancing menace.

Kom and Sal were looking at each other, lost in each other's eyes. They seemed serene in their salute to each other. The blood from Kom's blade dripped on to his arm and ran off in rivulets that looked like dark streaks.

The approaching warriors of nothing was almost upon them when Kom and Sal exploded into action. I felt something grab me from behind and was about to shout out when a hand closed upon my mouth. I looked at the owner of the hand once it had dragged me to the base of a tree and saw Charon. He let go once I signalled that I was alright.

They fought in contrasting styles. Kom would stop and start from move to move while Sal flowed easily from one manoeuvre to the next. Their blades found their targets time after time causing a spray of sparks to erupt each time. The beings they fought would stagger backwards from the blow only to be replaced by another. Once the monsters' stopped sparking from where they had been struck, they would rejoin the fight. The beings fought without any apparent weapons. Their limbs seemed to extend to reach their target and whenever they found their mark, Kom and Sal would grimace from the blow.

“Charon, we need to help them somehow,” I said.

“We are. We have to get you to the Queen,” he replied.

“What?”

“They are after you.”

Charon put my arm around his shoulders and lifted me up.

“The ring?”

“No. You,” said Charon as he began running.

“They'll be alright?” I asked.

“If we don't stay where we are, yes.”

“Where's Styx?”

“He's around,” said Charon.

“Do you know who's after me?”

“No, but I think you do.”

“Given everything that's happen so far, I probably do,” I sighed.

We ran deeper into the forest and it seemed to brighten slightly as if twilight was coming. When the sounds of battle were gone, Charon said, "Can you hear anything?"

I listened. "No. I don't hear any fighting," I said.

"Not battle. Music."

"Music?" I listened and I thought I could hear the high notes of a piccolo. "Yes, I think I do. Over there." I nodded in the direction.

"Good," said Charon and we ran towards it.

We were in the midst of some kind of celebration before we knew it. We were running in the dim twilight and then we were not. Charon stopped and put me down.

"The Seelie Court," he said.

It was how I remembered it. Satyrs, leprechauns, unicorns, nymphs, dryads and many others danced, sung, drank, ate, and revelled. Was it my memory? Was it a dream? I blinked. The music was loud in my ears and my vision swam. I could feel myself falling though I was standing still.

Charon said something to me, but I only heard a garbled mumble. Party all night? Was that what he said. Is this a droll sight? The world swayed and I closed my eyes. I crouched down and put my hands on the ground. The world shook. I retched and coughed. What was happening to me? I heard voices all around me; chattering, shouting, laughing, crying. I saw a little girl; she must have been ten years old or maybe nine. She had a round face, blue eyes, black hair. She pointed at me and whispered something. I saw her whispered come out as a white mist that suddenly became an arrow that came at me. I jumped out of the way though I knew I was lying on the ground. It hit me anyway, in the chest. I looked down and saw...

It was a ship. It drifted in fire. Then I was inside the ship. A woman "I could see her clearly in crisp detail" was talking to someone. It was me. She was talking to me. Was this a memory? Was this a dream? She's telling me something. She wants me to remember. She is from a prime world, pristine and verdant. The people live in harmony with all life. They love the planet and the planet loves them back.

The Faeries were the first to discover their world. They came before the gods, before the angels and before the devils and the demons. The Faeries were the first to meet the people. The people welcomed them and shared their love of the world with them. The Faeries brought their magic that was attuned to nature and taught it to the people.

Then the Faeries changed. It happened overnight. They were fun loving and carefree in a benevolent way and then they became malevolent. At first, it had been misunderstandings and pranks gone too far. Then it was murder. A whole village lost in a sinkhole. Trees warped into shocking caricatures. Rivers diverted and people kidnapped. She said that she had been kidnapped. She with her sister. Taken from their bed in the middle of the night by cackling sprites who made it look like a rogue animal had taken them.

The people of the world decided after far too long and after far too much damage had already been done that it was enough. The Faeries had to go. Banished. The people went to war against the faerie world. The war was short. The Faeries were angered at first and they fought back. They thought that the people of the world could not take a joke. The people were sad at first and they fought with reluctantly. They were a peaceful people and thought that the Faeries could be made to see what they had done wrong. In the end, the people gained focus as the Faeries had no remorse and no sympathy. The Faeries denied any wrong doing and disavowed any knowledge of having stolen anyone, killing anyone, or doing anything that upset nature. When the world joined the war and fought with its people, the Faeries threw up their hands in disgust. A humourless people, they cried. Not worthy of what we could teach them. Backwater, primitive prime dwellers that deserved their mud and their trees. The Faeries lost interest and left the world. Peace returned to the world and most of the wounds healed.

Then I was high above the world. Further and further. Into the sky where the stars lived. Further. I saw the lonely sphere of green and blue and white that was the planet. Further. It was the size of a marble. Then I was in the arms of a woman. Was she my mother? My wife? My mistress? She stroked my hair and whispered into my ear. It was going to be alright. Everything is fine. I saw a monster approach, it lumbered and rocked the ground with each step. It's fine. Everything is alright. Its many eyes of red and yellow and black rotated quickly in their sockets, looking about, watching. It roared, it's mouth open and full of sharp teeth that looked like knives. It's fine. Everything is alright. She's telling me a story. A bed time story. Everything is alright.

There once lived two little girls who were sisters. They lived with their wicked stepmother and her scary boyfriend. They have lots of friends and they are always going out and having fun. They always left the girls to do the housework and they never let the girls have a day off. Do the dishes, they would say. Wash the clothes, clean the fireplace, dust the ornaments. The girls would wake up early and go to sleep late. They ate what they were allowed to have which wasn't much.

They would tell each other that their real mother still loved them. She would come and get them. Or a handsome prince would come on his magnificent steed and save them from their evil enslaver. When they thought of it that way, the tears didn't come and they did feel miserable. It helped a little. Nothing

they hoped would happen ever happened and they grew up as slaves. Whenever one made a mistake such that a plate was broken or a dress was torn, it was the other sister who would be punished. After the first caning, the girls tried their very best to do things as perfectly as they could. The sisters loved each other and neither wanted any harm to come the other.

It wasn't until they were almost adults that they could steal pockets of time for themselves. They would go out to the woods to collect wild flowers and pine cones and other things that they thought might brighten up the small room they had been given to sleep in. Once they had hatched a plot to escape into the woods, but they found that they were always turned around. When they had returned to their duties, both girls were switched by their stepmother. I am always watching you, she had said. I allowed you to go out, she had said. Do not try my patience again, she had said. They knew that they could not escape.

When the eldest girl turned twenty three, a change came upon their stepmother. It happened to everyone in the land. They became nicer and were not as mean. The sisters did not know what had happened and had decided that their stepmother would let them go. Then one night as the sisters combed the long hair of their stepmother, as they reached the thousandth stroke, the stepmother said, "Whatever shall I do with you? I grow weary of playing this game. I must stop listening to that Oberon." With that, she left the house. Everything faded slowly and then the sisters were left with only the rags they wore. They waved at me and had big smiles. I waved back. They giggled and then pointed to something behind me. I turned around to look and then I was in darkness.

The darkness was touchable. It felt soft and silky and left my fingers numb with cold. I was cold. Freezing. I shivered. There was a flash of lightning that illuminated my surroundings and then a crack of thunder. I thought I saw buildings. Another bolt of lightning. It was a city covered in darkness. I took a step forward and felt a pressure against me, trying to stop me from moving. A low whisper came to my ear and I turned to it though I knew I could not see anything. There it was again. Whisper. Whisper. Another flash of lightning. A dying world where the light of its sun had gone out. How did I know that? Whisper. Whisper. All that could flee had already done so. Only a few remained. They remained to die with their world as it froze to death. Whisper. Whisper.

I was in a room. An apartment in a tall building in a city of darkness. A man is here. He is sitting in the middle of three concentric circles, each one with a radius larger than the next by a handspan. Candles are placed at regular intervals along each circles' circumference. They flicker weakly with a feeble light that seems scared of the dark. Who are you, he speaks to my mind. Why have you come to this dying world. This was once my world, I said. But it has changed so very much. The man laughs and welcomes me home.

I stay with him and he teaches me about the world that I had once lived in. He told me that the people

of the world once loved it and lived in harmony with it. Then, like a troubled teenager, they cast off the love of their protector, the planet, and tried to forge their own destiny. The world was upset at first and then it decided that it would sleep. It had been awake for a long time and it was time for its children to grow up. And so the people who had once loved the world grew up. They conquered the world and made it theirs. What could not be theirs, they destroyed or enslaved for their own purposes. They were masters of all they saw and one day, they looked up and decided they would control the heavens too.

Whether it was scientific arrogance or divine vengeance that blacked out their sun, it was not known. Without it, their world as they knew it began to falter and fail. When the plants died, the people believed their technology would save them. When the animals died, the people believed their faith would save them. When the people began to die, they knew that it was too late. They fled.

Those who stayed called out to the planet. They believed that if they could awaken the planet, they could save their themselves. The only thing that answered them was the darkness. It told them that the planet would not heed their calls. The planet had decided to let the people decide their own fate no matter the consequences. The darkness that answered was a manifestation of the planet's will. Despite what it had said, the planet loved its people and wanted to help. Through the darkness, it called itself the Umbral and it taught those who remained how to manipulate darkness and shadow. It told them that once they mastered the craft, then they might be able to remove the darkness that had taken their sun away.

The umbral master sits in his candlelit circles and chuckles. He says that instead of working to find the light of their sun, the people fought and bickered and splintered into rival groups. They fought and bickered to this day even as more of them die from the ravages of time and the night insanity, a mental affliction that no one understands nor do they believe is natural. The man says that he will teach me the craft. Perhaps I can find the people who had fled, bring them home and relight the sun. He says it without hope or care. He has given up and sits in his shadow trance watching for those that would creep in the night to slay him for his alignment with a particular group. I blink and then I am holding my master. He has been killed.

I cry out and my sister answers me. I am back in a forest of celebration. It will be years before I find my umbral master. She says that our former stepmother wants to see us. We go quickly saying quick how-do-you-dos and fine-thank-yous to the revellers. We are there and she looks at us and laughs. "I have a wonderful game", she tells us.

"You know that you can not go for you have lived here far too long. You have eaten my food, drunk my drink and received my generosity. But, I tire of you. I want you to go home. You don't belong here and I'm feeling ever so generous at the moment. I'll tell you what. One of you will do me a favour while the other stays as insurance. If that favour is done, you both are freed from my service.

What do you say to that?â€•

I say thank-yous and you-are-so-kinds. My sister says the same. She smiles at us and laughs again.

â€œBut whatever shall I get you to find? Go away and let me think, children. Away with you, shoo!â€•

We go quickly. We know our stepmother's temper and mood.

One night there is a disturbance. A man who is not a man shows up to seek an audience with our stepmother unannounced. He reminds her of the game she promised us. Our stepmother calls for me; I hear her in my head. I come. The game is on. I will save my sister. I am in the world of darkness. I will save our world. I am in the City of Doors. I will find my saviour.

I opened my eyes and looked up.

Charon was above me. And Kom and Sal. And Viera.

â€œWhat... what happened?â€• I asked. Then I remembered who I was looking at. â€œKom! Viera!â€• I sat up quickly.

â€œSlow down,â€• said Viera. â€œAre you alright?â€•

â€œI'm fine,â€• I said excitedly. â€œWhat about all of you? What happened back there? Those things?â€•

Kom smiled and said, â€œThey've been thrown out. We outlasted them. They don't put up much of a fight when they are chasing someone else.â€•

Viera nodded. â€œThey just went around me. One of them tried to grab me, but I slapped him away.â€•

â€œWas that the same back in Discord?â€• I asked Kom.

â€œExactly the same. When you disappeared, they basically lost interest in us. We distracted them a little from their escape, but they got away.â€•

â€œWhat do they want with me?â€•

â€œThey want what you have. That ring I gave you,â€• said Kom.

I took it out and looked at it. "What's so special about this ring?" I asked.

"Not much. It's a symbol and it's the belief in that symbol that gives its wearer power," said Sal.

"Well, it's not as simple as that, but it's a good enough explanation," said Kom, "However, it was safe with me mostly because in the early days of my possession, they didn't know where to find me. Then I went to the City of Doors and they couldn't really enter without setting off a lot of contingencies I had set up."

"So why give it to me?"

"I thought Viera told you that," Kom said looking at Viera.

I nodded. "Right. So now I have a choice," I said, "Between saving Kom and saving Viera."

Kom looked confused and said, "No, not quite." He looked to Viera.

Viera told me, "If that is what you think it is, then yes."

Kom shrugged.

I mirrored Kom's look for a moment and then said, "Well, whatever happens, happens, I suppose. By the way, who's the master of those things that were chasing me?"

Kom said, "Err... one of my former... shall we say... employers. I pretty much resigned without telling anyone one day. They weren't happy especially since they knew that I had the ring."

Sal shook her head and sighed. "I need that ring back one day," she said.

"Can't I just give it to you?" I asked her.

"Not yet," interjected Kom.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Just a gut feeling," he said.

I shrugged. "What happened to Styx?"

“I think he's been partying in their somewhere ever since we got here,” said Kom as he waved towards the crowd.

I looked at each person then before saying, “Well... I'm getting a little impatient. When am I supposed to make this choice of mine?”

“Are you awake?” asked Viera.

I nodded at her and smiled. “Hey, show them that trick you do with the shadow puppets!” I said.

She smiled and showed them.

I knew it was time when the crowd suddenly became quiet. I turned to look and saw the crowd parting for the Faerie Queen who was being escorted by her consort. It was a different experience seeing her in person than when seeing her through the memories or dreams of another. I was filled with awe.

She stopped ten paces from where I stood and a throne of polished marble formed from the ground behind her. She sat and Oberon stood at her side.

“The angel returns and so does my sweet darling Viera. Welcome back. I hear that you have something to show me,” she said.

She looked at me and said, “Well, not much to look at now, is he? I was expecting someone... taller. He's not that handsome either. But... I can see something in him. Tell me, what is your name, boy?”

“My... my name?” I stammered. With everything I had experienced, I knew that although Titania was not a major Power, she was still a Power. I felt waves of power sweeping over me and I was in awe.

“I... I'm sorry, your... Majesty. I... can't seem to remember it at the moment as... I am captivated by your beauty and presence,” I managed to say.

She arched an eyebrow at me and pursed her lips. She turned her head to face Oberon and said, “Did you hear, Oberon? I think he's paying me homage.” She laughed softly and it sounded like chimes. “Well, Oberon? What do you think? Do I win the wager?” she asked Oberon.

Oberon said, “He's quite underwhelming, but... the wager is yours, my Queen.” He bowed towards her.

Titania smiled and patted Oberon's shoulder as she said, "Very well." She looked back at us and said, "Off with you. All of you. I've a ball to attend." She stood up and the throne sank into the ground. Then she and Oberon began to waltz away as the music restarted.

"That's it?" I said to no one in particular.

Viera said, "Excuse me. I have to go find someone," and then hurried off into the crowd.

Kom said, "Well, I guess I didn't have to be so worried after all."

Sal said, "About what?"

"Titania's not the most reliable of Powers. I had to prepare a contingency just in case I ended up as her footstool or something like that."

"That's it?" I said loudly. I spun to look at the others. "That's it? What about this choice thing?"

"You made it," said Kom.

"But all I did was stand there."

"Not you," Kom said as he poked me in the chest. "You," he said more forcefully and he pressed his palm on to my chest.

"So you're saying I'm not going to know until after I die?" I asked.

"Probably not," said Kom with a shrug and a grin.

"I can't help but feel a little cheated," I said.

"Welcome to the planes," said Kom.

"Can't you give me a hint?"

"I don't know what it was," Kom said with a shrug, "The only thing I can say is that a Power can see through you. Whatever you had to do, you did it and only the Powers know what it was. That's just a guess."

I sighed. "Well, what now?" I asked.

"If you've still got your balls, you could always rub them now to go home," Kom said cheekily.

Charon, who had been silent all this time, patted me on the shoulder and said, "You showed great oneness with the multiverse."

"I wish I knew what that oneness was, Charon," I said with a sigh.

I saw Kom point to something behind me. I turned to see Viera with all her shadows gone with another woman who looked like her. They were holding hands and smiling. I noticed Viera cast a shadow on the ground.

"This is Mari," Viera said, "My sister."

Everyone said a greeting. I said hello.

"I want to thank you for helping me and being patient with everything you've been through," Viera said to me.

"Thank you from me as well," said Mari.

"It's alright," I said. "What are you going to do now?"

"We're going to rebuild our home," said Viera. "You're welcome to come along and see more of what's out there," she added with a smile. There was another message in her pupilless eyes.

I stammered slightly and heard Kom laugh behind me. "I... Err... Uhh... I'm busy at the moment," I said, "Not that I don't want to. I have to finish my education first. There's another few months of it and then once I graduate, I'll be there." I grimaced slightly as I thought I had ended what I had said a little too eagerly.

Viera said, "I'll be waiting."

"How do I contact you?" I said.

"Don't worry. I'll be watching you," she replied. I remembered her shadow trance and blushed.

"Well," I said.

Viera's shadow leapt up and cloaked her again. She said, "Good bye everyone. May the shadows watch over you." They both bowed and then she and Mari were sucked into Mari's shadow which also flowed into itself until nothing was left. It was an instantaneous effect.

"Now that's a neat trick," I muttered.

"I knew she was your girlfriend," said Kom between chuckles.

"Shut up, Kom," I said. "And I'm giving this ring back to you."

"Wha- me? I don't want it," he said.

"Too bad. Here," I said and held it out to him.

Kom seemed to be fighting to stay still but eventually his hand came out and snatched it from mine.

"Oh, I'm going to make you pay for that," he said, "You owe me a bath at the Airs."

"This should be interesting," said Sal, "What's the Airs?"

"No. You are not coming," said Kom.

"I lost the ring once and I'm not losing it again," said Sal.

"Don't you have a reputation or something to keep? You'd be hanging around me, you realise?" said Kom.

"As long as we don't talk about politics or religion, we'll get along just fine," said Sal.

"Great. Now look what you've done. Give me a ring and then the ball and chain that comes with it," Kom said to me.

I was busy laughing at him.

"Why, halloo all," came a familiar squawk.

"Good. Styx is finally here. It is time to leave," said Charon.

"Styx! Wait... leave?" I asked Charon.

“We do not want to be caught here,” said Charon.

Kom nodded. “This is a nice place for a quick dance, but it's bad for you in the end.”

“So where are we going now? Back the way we came?” I asked.

Kom and Sal looked up at the sky from one horizon to the other then at each other. They nodded and Kom said, “No. Titania's shifted things on us. It's a bit different outside.”

“What's outside?” I asked.

“Land of twilight,” said Charon.

“We're going already?” said Styx.

“Didn't it take a long run to get here?” I asked as we started walking out to the edge of the Faerie Court.

“Things aren't always what they seem on the planes,” said Kom.

“What about those things?”

Kom sighed, “Yes, they'll be after me again. I'd like to make it to the Twin Airs as soon as possible, so if people would pick up the pace?”

“Do you think you'll ever be rid of them?”

“Well, there's only two ways I can think of.”

“What ways are those?”

“I die or the puppeteer dies.”

“I guess we walk faster,” I said.

“Good idea,” said Kom.

“Then we can get paid! I really got to stop doing these jobs that don't pay by the day,” said Styx.

“By the way, what's so funny about your names? You know, Styx and Charon?”

Styx cackled. “Well, due to certain experiments with Styx water by a certain former angelic being, I can't remember most of my apparently evil past. They say I'm supposed to be evil no matter what, but...” Styx shrugged and left it at that.

“And Charon?” I asked.

Styx giggled. “His old job was with the mining industry,” he cackled. “Selling ore. Get it? Ore. Ores Man. Oresman! And there's this fiend on the Styx called Charon who rows boats for a living! An oarsman!”

I heard Kom chuckling quietly to himself. Sal shrugged. Charon was as stoic as ever.

“Styx,” I said.

“Yeah,” he squawked.

“Shut up.”

“Feh. You had to be there, bob.”
