

December 2 Sebastian demonstrated no fatigue nor uttered a breath of complaint as he trudged through a stagnant channel of the sewers, several paces behind his master, Doctor McMourning. The channel was narrow and fairly shallow. Intended as one of the thousand such drainage channels that fed excess water and the filth of the denizens of the vast city above them out of sight (and smell, of course), to be taken away to some unknown place beyond Malifaux's boundaries. In many places within the intricate waste removal system, those tributary channels all met, forming one great river of waste that coursed with the flow of any above ground river, sometimes even dropping in successive steps of elevation creating raging rapids. Here, though, the width was no greater than several long strides for a man such as McMourning, and a few more for the short-legged shuffling of Sebastian. The muck, here, did not move, locked, no doubt, by some blockage of filth further down its course. Although Sebastian uttered no complaint of the heavy burden McMourning had strapped to his back, the quickly packaged remains of the abomination and Death Marshal, in addition to numerous tools and scientific apparatus strapped randomly about his portly body, they did slow him down. As McMourning stepped around the vertical pipe that marked the last turn in the subterranean trek to their hidden lab, Sebastian was plunged into darkness. The illumination of McMourning's dented old brakeman's lantern cast a ruddy glow upon the oxidized patina around the thick bolts and joints of the pipe but could not bend around the corner to help Sebastian see his way. He tripped and nearly fell, creating quite a commotion as he struck the wall and his various tools clattered about his belly and waist. McMourning's head emerged from around the drainage pipe, and he lifted the lantern to examine what had befallen his assistant. Sebastian merely smiled, the soft rosy cheeks like apples on either side of his bulbous nose. McMourning chastised him saying, "Do be careful with my equipment!" Sebastian continued to smile rather vacantly, wiping the sweat from his brow and fleshy upper lip with the back of his sleeve. "And keep up. We haven't all day to linger in the sewers!" Soon, McMourning was at the top of the iron ladder cursing at Sebastian, twelve feet below, for not shining the lantern so that he could see the trick lock properly. To his credit, Sebastian did move the lantern as instructed, but McMourning seemed to always follow with a shift of his own torso, blocking the light shining from below. Finally, with a metal upon metal clang, the round portal swung open, and McMourning scampered out of the sewers and into the relative comfort of his apartments above. Sebastian licked his lips and began the arduous labor of climbing the iron rungs, one hand still holding the antique brakeman's lantern, two corpse remains strapped to his back, and the various equipment lashed about his robust form, catching against each bar as he climbed. Eventually, panting and sweating rather profusely, he emerged to see McMourning playing with the three large dogs he had reanimated to guard the building in his lengthy absences. A mastiff, a Doberman, and a bulldog, each scampered about his feet, now bootless as he had discarded them beside the open portal leading to the labyrinthine sewers below, showing all the playful loyalty a living dog might have demonstrated toward a master returning home. Save a heightened passion for killing, and patches of missing flesh (either through the natural process of fleshy decay or the necessary removal for McMourning's work), they could, indeed, pass for living companions. It was part of McMourning's greatest discoveries: while higher sentients were most often risen with a distinct lack of their passions in life, lower life forms retained much of it. Nicodem adamantly refused to wage war with an army of canine remains, however. McMourning, kicking away the zombie Chihuahua that had finally come into the old room, yipping and nipping at the big toe protruding from a hole in

McMourning's sock, had to agree that not all of his dogs were equally gifted. "Sebastian!" he barked. "Break's over. Clean up our footwear and meet me in the primary lab. We have much to prepare and little time. No dawdling now." Sebastian had already begun those preparatory steps

before commanded but nodded toward McMourning nevertheless. Minutes later (though McMourning would chastise him for taking his time), Sebastian was quickly shuffling down the main hall in the upper level of what might have long ago been a mansion for a forgotten Neverborn aristocrat. Neither he nor the doctor saw what the building may have once been, for their dark arts, practiced deep within the Quarantine Zone, needed the open chambers that the ornate and well-crafted building provided. Thick dust had accumulated along the sides of the hall, but the center was well-worn by their regular footsteps, the stain upon the wood blackened over the ages. Sebastian rarely perceived the small eyes glowing at him from the shadows along the ceiling or behind the ribbed vaults and protruding buttresses due to the building's inherent menagerie of McMourning's creatures and original statues both standing alone or carved in relief on the wood and marble structure. "Clean out the vermin" was, to date, the only command he had not been able to fulfill. When he had gotten close enough to grab whatever small creature might be hiding in the shadows, his thick fingers would fall upon open air, perplexing him. He dutifully kept at it, throughout the mansion for days before McMourning chastised him for dallying. Of course, when Sebastian reminded him of the assigned task McMourning's response was, "What little eyes in the shadows?" and his own eyes darted back and forth in genuine paranoia. They came to ignore whatever mysterious creatures might inhabit the building with him. He arrived at the reinforced iron door of McMourning's experimental lab. It was secured, and the frame had been equally reinforced with wrought iron. He pulled the large lever that released the long bolts within that frame, and it swung open with a groan on thick hinges. Getting into the lab was easy. Once the great door closed, however, those iron bolts would clang into place and it would take several moments to navigate the strange locking mechanism to open it again to leave. Like so much of McMourning's attitude toward life, the appearance of security was a reversal of common expectation. He gave no concern in keeping anyone out of his research lab. It was designed to keep his experiments in and withstand their assault to the contrary. Sebastian nodded politely at one of McMourning's nurses that sauntered toward him as he entered the small chamber adjoining the larger lab beyond. In the dim lighting of the ante-chamber she might have seemed young and beautiful. Her outfit, a small dress designed more for a schoolgirl, was grimy, a stained mockery of the uniform of a proper hospital nurse. Her legs and arms were bare and struck him, as always, with temptation. He fought against it, turning from her and hurrying into the main chamber where he, unfortunately, collided bodily with another of McMourning's beautiful nurses, standing just within the final entry to the lab. Before she could turn to face him, he was struck by the sickly cloud of perfume she wore, mixed with the sweet scent of alchemical mixtures and formaldehyde. Her hair, long and thick, was cocked too far to her left; a wig, shifting upon the wrinkled flesh beneath. Her smile was as much an illusion as the rest of her beauty. The skin was pulled taut from either side of her mouth and pulled up toward her ears. Her forehead and eyes, too, were pulled by the flesh toward her skull. Her eyes, in fact, most quickly dispelled the illusion of youthful beauty. The flesh of her face was merely a mask, the skin of another woman, young and beautiful, removed and placed upon this venerable woman, desperate to retain a youthful beauty that

was now denied to her. The flesh around the eye sockets was drying quicker than the rest, treated perpetually with various concoctions designed to preserve the flesh and stave off the inevitable decay and rot of death. Her own dark skin beneath the mask was visible along the edges of her eyes, wrinkled in age. Not many beyond Sebastian had seen McMourning's nurses. One might suspect that he, like his counterpart, Seamus, surrounded himself by women he made beautiful. McMourning, however, took little notice of the women charged with the task of maintaining his creations. It was the nurses, themselves, desperate to preserve a beauty that had long since faded, that filled their own veins with the diluted formulas they used to preserve the flesh of McMourning's monsters. She stared at him, rather vacantly. Her grasp of reality was tenuous at best. Sebastian nodded at her and squeezed past. A large wheel window far above them offered the only light into the room and cast illumination upon the series of four tables bolted to the floor in the center of the room. Dim light fell upon animated creatures confined in cages within recesses along the periphery of the

chamber. Great bottles and beakers contained brains, hearts, and other organs collected from various animals, people, and Neverborn. They decorated the room and were found on every shelf and cabinet. Salted limbs from numerous creatures hung in rows as might be seen in a horrible meat cellar. The scene might disturb any man, even a seasoned Death Marshal like the corpse on the table before McMourning. But not Sebastian – he had prepared most of the macabre spare parts about the room. “Sebastian!” McMourning exclaimed, startled when his assistant cleared his throat beside him. “Well, it’s about time.” He pointed at the Death Marshal killed earlier at the morgue. “Do you think his brain will fare better than the one we have installed in Big Frank?” He hitched his thumb over his shoulder at the great flesh construct chained to the wall behind them. “I wouldn’t know, suh,” Sebastian admitted. Although eager to begin his quest for his old professor, McMourning’s facial twitch indicated his mind was exploring several full thoughts at once. McMourning had the singular brilliance that enabled him to carry on those unique thoughts a normal man could only handle individually. The doctor could juggle several at once, each with precise detail. His awareness of the tangible world, however, became unfortunately suppressed during these odd meditative visions, leaving it to Sebastian to look after him and protect him from any evidence that might implicate him in the narrow-minded view of others too enslaved by antiquated notions of morality that forever impeded the progress of science. At least that’s what McMourning said with fair regularity. “Hmm. We don’t have time anyway.” He turned from the corpse and faced the abomination remains on the next table, then hesitated and turned back to stare at the Death Marshal once more. “Good point,” he said in response to nothing Sebastian said and looked quickly over his shoulder to be sure no one else was there. “Hate to waste it. Only hours old. Surely superior to the criminal’s brain we’ve got in there now. Very well, Sebastian. You’ve convinced me!” He clapped his assistant on the back, violent enough to briefly imbalance him before he could step back and stand upright again. “Preserve the brain for later. Get the stem this time, too. You always cut too close to the base of the skull. Oh, just get the whole column right to the pelvis.” He turned to face the abomination then spun back to the Marshal. “Hate to preserve it, too, huh?” Sebastian spoke for only the second time since entering the lab. “I don’t mind, suh.” McMourning continued with a conversation Sebastian was only vaguely privy to. “Exactly! The preservation might actually impede the recall functions. Good point. You’ll help me install it into Big Frank while I

journey into the wilds!" He smiled broadly, wringing his hands, though his plan had him doing two things at once. Sebastian understood. Although absent-minded and often unaware of events occurring around him, McMourning's thoughts were perpetually on his anatomical sciences, working out the most obscure mysteries of nature. Sebastian had come to understand that part of his addled confusion came from the feverish attempt he made to have his experiments catch the fleeting thoughts cascading through his brilliant mind. "Will you be needing assistance in the wild, too, suh," he hesitated, pondering the strange thought in his mind before continuing, "or is it sufficient I should stay behind to assist ... you in the operation?" McMourning thought of both necrotic operations and believed he was in both places at once. Sebastian played along rather than engage in an inevitable argument about their reality. McMourning looked at him as if the shorter man were truly crazy. "Don't be so dim, Sebastian," he said. "Of course I need you to assist me here while I find the professor." "I see," Sebastian said, but he didn't. "Very good then. The wilds are fairly wild, suh. Cannot take Frank as you'll, well, you'll be working on 'im here. As it were. Should you be taking another to help out there?" McMourning got a gleam in his eye. "Oh, goodie, goodie. A field test of the chimera!" "Yes, but one 'ed don't seem to be working quite right yet." "One 'ed'? Oh, 'head'! Yes, well. So long as it doesn't fall off it'll suffice. It's just the ram's head. Not good for much." Sebastian nodded and spun the crank on his circular saw until it sputtered to life, black smoke pouring from the engine on his back, the gears spinning loudly in a roar that filled the room. He slid the quickly twirling blade into the back of the Marshal, severing the torso in a clean line. Blood, not yet congealed, sprayed upon

Sebastian and across the lab. It was a clean cut but not exactly surgically precise. McMourning took no further notice of the operation, however, preparing the abomination for travel once more, and he carried it to the three-headed necromantic creation confined in the bowels of the lab, sure that he was also recreating Big Frank all the while. CCCThe wilderness north of the Bayou now cracked with a jagged scar that stretched far beyond the surveyor's expeditions, teemed with dangers both natural and strange. Those unexplainable dangers that sought to play upon his fears and anxiety were met with the strange and twisted mind of McMourning, lost, partially, in a strange dementia already, for he had done heinous deeds and had contemplated far more, enough that his grasp of reality was already stretched thin. In dealing with natural threats, McMourning and the great chimera, a necromantic monstrosity never imagined before, handled with relative ease. The creature's massive body was once a Sabertooth Cerberus, created by arcane magics unfathomable to McMourning, but the massive body had been further enhanced, augmented by his own perverse experimentation. Seeking to outdo its original design, McMourning had replaced the three heads of the beast, offering it new abilities to make it superior to the stock beast upon which it was based. One head, for example, now demonstrated his greatest mastery of anatomical science and necromantic art, for a towering Razorspine Rattler's head rose at its center; a perfect merging of reptilian and mammalian biology. To its left was the head of a rare Northern Ram, a beast found only at the highest point of the Northern Mountains. The rams stood as tall as a man at the shoulder and have been seen to pounce from at least a hundred feet to strike its prey with their colossal rack, breaking the skull or spine before the victim knew it was even being stalked. Like many species native to Malifaux, the Northern Rams were voracious carnivores. Unfortunately, despite the grand effort and expense McMourning put into the capture of the creature, the bounty hunters managed to bring him

only a hornless runt, seemingly abandoned by its pack, and not quite as clever as they were rumored to be. McMourning had still made use of it though it had a tendency to look at the surrounding landscape while the other two heads fought with the bestial ferocity they were known for in life. It also had the strange urge to bleat incessantly, but only when McMourning tried to sleep or ordered it silent to avoid detection. Its third head was the original Sabertooth's that had been removed so that a different creature's head could be mounted in its place. Naturally, no more ferocious creature could be found, so he put the original back on. He didn't realize it, and wouldn't have likely thought it an important detail, but he used the Sabertooth's original left head and mounted it on the right spinal branch so the entire beast had a habit of jerking the wrong way at the last second of a charge, forcing the Razor spine head to snap over the other until it could turn appropriately. The ram head would simply look on confused. Despite these oddities and setbacks, it was still formidable, and most predators gave them a wide berth, no doubt perceiving something supernaturally strange about the great beast. So he walked, unimpeded and without fear, through the woodland whose canopy far above blocked out almost all light. Other than the gray darkness making his steps uncertain, there was sparse undergrowth to slow them. Although frigid, the previous day's snow was soft and light and did not penetrate the wooded canopy to accumulate more than an inch. Like most of Marcus' prey, McMourning had no idea the muscular man traversed the thick branches above with the ease and quiet of a squirrel, despite the bulk and various hunting trophies of bone or tooth that decorated his body on necklaces and lashed to arm bands or woven into the knotted dreadlocks of his hair. He maintained the pace of the grotesque monstrosity below him, stinking up his woodland territory for many miles around, and its Resurrectionist creator was far worse, smelling of sweat, sewage, and acrid chemicals that had stained his skin too deeply to wash away. Marcus could smell them easily, even from his perch dozens of feet above. McMourning spoke to the zombified creature, complaining about its bleating though it was he who could not remain silent, his voice carrying over the still air of the forest floor. Marcus focused upon the power of the bear, his thick muscles swelling into dense knots, and he channeled the fast firing muscles of the serpent, twisting each fiber in his body. The process took but a second, although it was painful as his own anatomy bent into a new configuration of reshaped muscle and bone. He gnashed his teeth, suppressing the pain although he

couldn't help but growl gutturally with the unpleasant sensations and the rising anticipation of the hunt that was about to come to an end. He leapt from the branch, extending his body as he moved to the next tree some twenty feet away. His hands found the branch easily, and with a jerk he propelled his body forward toward the trunk. If McMourning had looked straight up he would have seen the predator stalking him and darting directly overhead. The Sabertooth's ears twitched and the head did look up, but too late, and caught only the trailing blur of Marcus' legs as he disappeared again in the foliage. It ignored it. Marcus ran lithely and with the surefooted movement of a hare upon the twisted and knotty branch. He focused again upon the power of the serpent as he dove from the branch, striking like an eagle from above. The hooked wooden staff upon his back was pulled from the leather strap that held it in place, and he felt the familiar twisting of the wood, dense and solid from his own arcane experimental perversion of the natural fibers so that it was all but indestructible although as light as a twig. It twirled at his side until he had the balance of it correct, and he held it firm as he dove. His body hit the ground in front of McMourning, and he grunted

audibly as the violence of his fall drove the wind from his lungs. One leg was bent below him, ready to propel him forward in attack. McMourning squealed, much akin to a young girl, Marcus thought, and jumped back. His repulsive chimera crouched quickly and prepared to spring, but Marcus' own Sabertooth Cerberus burst from behind a thick copse growing upon the forest floor beside McMourning's path. It was a perfect place for ambush, and McMourning walked right into the trap. The living Cerberus batted the head of its dead counterpart with a heavy paw, claws raking deeply into its dry flesh. The Razor-spine head reared back, hissing and prepared to strike, but the living Sabertooth's three heads howled ferociously, reverberating in a Doppler echo as each sounded identical to the other. The necromantic beast hesitated, which gave Marcus the chance to end it, or its master, Doctor McMourning. Instead, crouched in a striking position before him, Marcus laughed, deep and throaty. He rose before McMourning and said, "Did you wet yourself or is that the stink you bore into my woods?" "Marcus, damn you!" McMourning growled. "You scared the hell out of me." "You weren't being careful enough. Not out here. I thought I taught you better than that." "Yes, well, it's been a long time since I've sat through one of your lectures and the 'how to survive an attack by a crazy man in the woods' was likely as boring as any other lecture you gave, so I wouldn't remember it." Marcus snorted. "Boring? I remember you had found my lectures somewhat different than that." McMourning ignored him. "Look what your tri-rostal machairodont did to my masterpiece!" McMourning said sarcastically. "Tore the skin right off its cheek. That'll leave a mark, you know!" He shook his head. "Well, what's done is done. You're looking well. Beefing up, I see." He looked upon Marcus with unbidden jealousy. Although decades older than him, Marcus looked robust and young; more vibrant and virile than should be possible for a man of his advanced age. "Eating well, or something," he said with a sneer. "You have no idea." "I suppose not. How's my niece?" McMourning asked. "You still using her as one of your infernal lab rats?" Marcus was about to answer but an odd voice behind McMourning that sounded both familiar and foreign interrupted him. The words sounded as if they were made by the brushing of sticks and branches. It said, "I am no lab experiment!" McMourning turned just in time to see a dense tree and shrub change before his eyes as it moved, charging him, shifting into a wolf-like creature but made entirely of flora. He had no time to move, but his mind had just enough time to understand it to be a legendary Waldgeist, a woodland spirit beast. As it pounced, its form shifted again, and in the moment its hind legs left the ground she became the beautiful Myranda. McMourning smiled briefly, recognizing his niece, but saw at once she was not happy to see him. Her arm, human once more, twisted from her forearm to the end of each finger so that it became a sinister claw bearing thick and sharp talons. She clearly meant to kill her uncle. Marcus caught McMourning beneath the ribs with the curved hook of his shillelagh and pulled him aside. He leapt forward in a flash and caught Myranda's wrist and held it firm. She struggled to get free, but Marcus held her fast.

"Not doing any experiments on her?" McMourning asked sarcastically, rubbing his side. Marcus said, "None my mate doesn't want, herself." "Did you call her your 'mate'? What's next, a litter? Oh, Myranda, the family will not be happy with you. You know how they feel about our former professor, now living in exile. And he's old enough to be your grandfather." Marcus was unperturbed by his taunting, and even grinned wolfishly at his masculine conquest, but Myranda spat, "Go to hell, you freak! Like they'd welcome you back after what you did to me?" McMourning could see that the scar on her exposed midriff had

disappeared, likely a result of their work on reshaping the physical form. He had apologized and was only trying to help her anatomical studies after all. He thought she should be over all of that by now anyway. He had forgotten it. "Look at this thing," she jerked free of Marcus' grip and motioned to his necromantic beast. She stomped away, between McMourning and the creature, glaring at her uncle all the while. "It's deplorable," she said in a growl. "You're deplorable." The ram's head stretched out its dark gray tongue to lick her as she passed, and it bleated loudly when she jerked away. "Ugh!" she protested, and, not to be stopped this time, her powerful claw ripped down through its neck at the point where it was affixed to the body, nearly severing it completely before she turned into a black jungle cat and bound away. The ram's head dangled from the body by several thick cords of flesh and muscle. It bleated again but sounded choked as it dangled upside down. "She seems more difficult than ever," McMourning said, knowing that her anger was directed solely at him and not the beast he had animated. "I've noticed. A byproduct of the bestial changes her body's going through. I'm working on it." "I should never have introduced you two." "She's as devout a scientist as you ever were," Marcus said. "Perhaps more so." McMourning rolled his eyes. "Do you not question the ethics of your experimentation?" Marcus arched an eyebrow, silently accusing McMourning of hypocrisy. "You're right, you're right," McMourning admitted. "Fine. Look at this," he said, thrusting his open palms at the head dangling from his creation, turning in place, confused. "Do you have any idea how much work that took?" Marcus bent to examine the exposed anatomy, rare to see its cross-section in movement even in a condition such as this. "Interesting choice to connect the vertebral synapses from the inside of the ram's eighth vertebra to the Cerberus' third, along the outer perimeter of the tissues. Why did you do that?" There was no accusation in his voice, merely scientific curiosity. McMourning had no answer and didn't really know whether he was supposed to answer the question regarding the number of vertebrae or the connective tissue. He hadn't, honestly, thought either of those issues bore any significance to the operation of the beast. "Oh, you know, just allows it to behave more normally this way." He had no idea. Still, Marcus nodded. "I understand you must replace much of the living fluid with this foul necrotic substance, but wouldn't it be better to bypass the primary aorta, here, and pump it through the smaller vessels surrounding it? Seems that it would give it more longevity as well as more natural responses to external stimuli." McMourning had never considered that, either. "Still, the anatomy between the two creatures is so different that the head of the Razorspine should not function at all. I'd like to see your notes on the connectivity and functionality of the grafted union between species." McMourning beamed beneath the scrutiny and praise of his former professor. "Yes. It's my finest accomplishment. It's the best of the three, too!" Of course, McMourning took no notes on any of his work. It would implicate him too severely should anyone discover them, and he had near full recall of every experiment he had ever conducted, down to the most minute detail. "I wish I had the opportunity to study it in greater detail. Good work, Doctor."

With the rare praise offered by Marcus still ringing in his ears, McMourning gave a semi-mocking bow and gestured at his creature. With the flourish and bravado of a stage performer, he said proudly, "Just take it. It'd probably lose that head before I could make it back to my lab anyway." Marcus nodded, inspecting the two halves, genuinely confused and impressed by some of the connections McMourning had made. He shook his hand with a snap and a primal green flame erupted from within him to engulf it. He pressed the head against

the base of the Cerberus' body and where the organs met, he pressed the flame. The beast shifted uncomfortably, but Marcus held it in place, his bare arms flexing against the powerful movement of the creature, remarkably unable to resist him. He shushed it with a warm and reassuring glance and continued to rub the flame in the severed wounds like a balm. Soon he was done and shook his hand again, and the flames grew brighter so that McMourning had to shield his eyes from the brilliance. The head was firmly mounted again, and it bleated happily at Marcus. He pressed the flames against its forehead, above the eyes, pushing hard against it so that it was pushed backward. Within moments two horns pressed from its skull, growing before McMourning's disbelieving eyes until they curved around its ears and along its jaws, thickening, too, even as its entire head and neck grew, the muscles more defined and thick. "Why'd you use such a sickly specimen?" Marcus asked him as the fire dissipated. McMourning sighed, thinking of the months it took and the thousands of Guild script to bag this one. He just shrugged. Marcus stared deeply into the eyes of the Cerberus head, and with a wave and deep throated growl, the beast understood his command and it bound off into the woods to await the will of its new master. It moved with the more natural gait of the feline it once was, which irritated McMourning further. Marcus took a deep breath and turned toward him. "Why are you out here?" he asked. McMourning said, "Looking for you. For your lab." "You found me. And you're in it." McMourning looked around. Of course this was his lab. Gone were the days of the meek professor lost behind a mound of books for hours on end. He now lived and breathed those experiments that sought to stifle the processes of disease and aging, perhaps to abolish them altogether. Judging by his appearance, he may have unlocked those secrets. "You know I hate to ever have to admit it, but I have a problem that only you may be able to solve." He pointed toward the package containing the ancient abomination several yards away on the ground, where he had inadvertently hurled it when Marcus fell in front of him. Marcus crouched above the canvas bag where it was discarded and removed it to examine those remains the Ortigas had brought to McMourning months before. He explained his findings, that the strange humanoid was neither human nor Neverborn. Marcus needed none of the research apparatus McMourning had brought, not even the magnifying glass. He just squinted and stared at the smallest thing and seemed to understand it on a fundamental level. "I agree," he said after a brief examination. "I cannot tell what this poor creature might once have been. It does share many of the attributes of both species, which should not be possible. But, then, look at you and me," he said, rubbing at the rough stubble on his face. "Defying natural law is our bread and butter." He sighed and stood in a smooth movement. "Go back to your lab. I'll send a messenger when I've discovered something." "I can't." He explained how his crimes had caught up with him and how the Guild had more than a strong suspicion he was behind the missing bodies from the morgue. "You play such a risky game hiding amongst the Guild. Doing their work for them so that you can do yours right beneath their noses. You need to shift the blame or cut your losses and run." "I'm working on it. Of course, I could hide out in the woods and conduct my little experiments?" McMourning didn't know she was there, but Myra had perched in the tree above them in the form of a large raptor and quickly shifted back into her natural state, now much more in control than she had been minutes earlier. "The girl Kaeris asked us to examine," she said ambiguously. "What girl?" Marcus frowned. "I don't want to get involved," he said up to Myra, lounging against the trunk of the tree.



"You already are. They came to us because of her ability. To heal in minutes rather than days." McMourning nodded, impressed, and considered the changes to various glands and organs that might allow it, his mind working thrillingly to figure out the biological processes. "How does she do that?" "We do not know. I haven't studied her." Myranda said, "But you want to. And it might kill her. Or, if her ability's strong enough, she may live through the vivisection, and then you'll have to kill her or she'll rat you out to the Guild. Make her look like the Doctor's body thief and then have your way with her. Besides, you cannot ignore Ramos. He's given you this girl as a gift. It may provide answers to the last of your questions." "But is it a gift? Or a test of my loyalty? It's been a long time since he and I taught together at Vienna. He needs me more than I need him." Myranda didn't agree. "We need him more than you care to admit. Consider his funding. This girl he wants you to examine. You owe him more than you're admitting." Marcus considered her words. "Yes. Always in his debt. How do you know he does not simply want her as another warrior in his crusade?" Myranda laughed. "He wants you beside him much more than some girl with an over-active glandular problem." Marcus nodded reluctantly. He sought escape from the people of civilization, and the further he went to escape, the harder they worked to bring him back in. He sighed. Turning back to McMourning, he said, "So you cannot go back to the City until we clear your name. You cannot survive out here for more than a day, and--" McMourning cut him off. "I've been out here for two days already!" "I've been following you since you entered the wood, at Rook's Trail. Otherwise you'd have been dead." McMourning nodded. That was where he entered the woods. Marcus continued, "And I doubt you'll be able to keep up with us." "Where are you going?" "Down into the pit. I need to see where these things are coming from." "We're getting the girl, first," Myranda said matter-of-factly. Marcus scowled at her. "Field test."